

St. Louis City Hosts Vancouver in Western Conference Clash

by Nathan Tucker
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ST. LOUIS - St. Louis City SC made a big statement of intent last week, shutting down the cross-state Sporting Kansas City 4-0. On Saturday, City welcomes a team in the Western Conference playoff hunt, the Vancouver Whitecaps.

The big win last Saturday felt as if it was a long time coming, following a string of poor results for the St. Louis side after their barnstorming MLS start. But now, coming off a strong rivalry week performance, how does City replicate the formula to get a result against a Vancouver team that's growing stronger as the season continues?

Perhaps that formula lies in the play of Indiana Vassilev.

Vassilev played as a "10" last Saturday, a more advanced midfield role than he's usually been featuring from this season. Vassilev has pushed for more time playing in an advanced role, and scored two goals last Saturday to reward Bradley Carnell's decision.

"We know that Indy's a '10' by trade," said Bradley Carnell this week. "He likes to be higher up the field, he feels more at home there, but I feel that he has a really good passing range from deeper areas of midfield too."

St. Louis City has been fluid with its lineup construction, especially in recent times. City's starting eleven has taken new shapes and iterations primarily at the top end of the field, as the team deals with injuries to striker Joao Klauss and midfielder/winger Rasmus Alm.

It seems a return for City's Brazilian striker Klauss is now being put on the back burner as he seemingly suffered an injury setback in the past week. Bradley Carnell said Klauss is "week to week now" and won't feature in the squad against Vancouver on Saturday.

It's better news for Rasmus Alm, who is "trending in the right direction" according to Carnell.

"We'll see where he's at on Friday, I don't want to get my hopes up," said Carnell at Thursday's pre-match presser. "We have to see where he's at medically and how his body responds."

'(Klauss) has some good days and some bad days,' Carnell explained his star striker's injury situation. "We're not dealing with robots, we're dealing with feelings, with pain, with emotions, we're hoping he's back sooner rather than later. There's no guarantees."

We'll have to wait for Saturday to see how City addresses their absences when it comes to a game plan and starting eleven. Throughout their professional existence, Bradley Carnell's team has yet to repeat a starting eleven, each week constructing a different squad than the last.

“The obvious and easy way would be to just roll out the same lineup, right?” Carnell noted. “We assess every opponent, every observation.”

“We know Johnny Nelson comes back into the team this week and that gives us depth, it gives us quality, it gives us competition. The best thing for any team trying to be successful is competition off the field. We’ll see who’s fit and ready and healthy.”

Whoever makes the team will have to be prepared for a Vancouver team that’s hitting its stride in and out of MLS play. The Whitecaps shut out the Seattle Sounders at home last week 2-0 and made a short ferry ride to Vancouver Island to beat Pacific FC 3-0 in the Canadian Championship Cup competition on Wednesday.

Many Whitecaps players pulled double duty this week, playing in both victories on Saturday and Wednesday. It’s been a busy time period for Vancouver, Saturday’s contest will be their sixth in a 17-day stretch. It will be City’s fourth.

While I’m sure the team and its fans would love a US Open Cup run during St. Louis City’s inaugural season, bowing out a few weeks ago has kept them from the schedule congestion other teams involved in cup competition are having to work with at this time of the season.

Vancouver will likely run out many of the same players who featured in Victoria, BC on Wednesday night, hoping to continue to squeeze as many minutes out of their best lineup possible. While City’s lineup, as previously mentioned, is quite fluid, one man that will likely feature will be former Whitecaps defender Jake Nerwinski.

Nerwinski played the first six seasons of his professional career with the Whitecaps, from 2017-2022. They declined his option for 2023, and Nerwinski signed with City last November.

Vancouver played Nerwinski in a number of defensive roles that weren’t his preferred right-back position, where he’s thrived this season with St. Louis. But Nerwinski played down any potential “chip on the shoulder” from his time with the Whitecaps.

“Am I glad that I’m not playing left center back? Maybe just a little bit,” said Jake Nerwinski on Thursday. “I’m a bit more comfortable playing on the right, but I’m not trying to hype this game up too much and get my emotions all messed up in my head.”

“But would it be great to beat them? Of course,” added Nerwinski. “We want to get three more points and get to the top of the league.”

City will look to take the three points and make their charge back up to the top of the table Saturday night. Kickoff is set for just after 7:30 pm, streaming on Apple TV. Local radio broadcasts can also be found on KYKY Y98.1 FM in English and KXOK 102.9 FM in Spanish.

CITY2 Corner

It's been potentially the best week of 2023 for CITY2. Last Saturday, CITY2 regular John Klein made his MLS debut for the big club in their 4-0 trouncing of Sporting Kansas City.

On Sunday, CITY2 erased a two-goal deficit with two second-half goals, including MLS homegrown Caden Glover's first as a pro, to tie the game at 2-2 and win in the overtime penalty shootout.

And on Thursday night, CITY2 passed their midweek examination against Portland Timbers 2 with flying colors, once again coming from behind to win, this time 2-1 in regulation time. Faysal Bettache scored the equalizing goal with a sublime shot off the outside of his left foot, and John Klein scored his fourth CITY2 goal in as many games to give the team the win.

The two results see CITY2 beginning to climb out of the MLS NEXT Pro Western Conference basement following a tough start to the season for the side managed by Bobby Murphy.

After losing four straight to start the campaign, the reserve side has claimed points in five of their last six matches.

The only hiccup in that stretch came against Sunday's opponent, North Texas SC. On the road in Arlington earlier this month, North Texas put four goals past a 10-man CITY2 after Ezra Armstrong was red carded with roughly 40 minutes left in the second half.

CITY2 will look to right their wrongs in the rematch on Sunday, this time in the friendly confines of CITYPARK.