

City Steals A Point In Houston - CITY2 Clinches Their Place in MLS NEXT Pro Playoffs

by Nathan Tucker, Sports Reporter
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HOUSTON - St. Louis City SC hit the road again on Saturday night to take on the Houston Dynamo in a match with MLS Playoff implications going both ways. City fighting to stay clear atop the MLS Western Conference, and the Dynamo fighting to climb up the Western Conference standings to secure a home field advantage in the best-of-three first round of MLS Playoffs.

City came out of the dressing room on a not so humid Houston evening with their tails up. Celio Pompeu and Azriel Jackson were especially active for the visitors clad in “Arch Steel Gray”. The pair were running right at the Dynamo defense, winning a number of free kicks early on.

As you’d expect, Eduard Lowen stepped up to take those free kicks, but couldn’t quite strike gold with his right foot.

The first meeting between these two teams, a 3-0 City win back in June in St. Louis, was a tough and chippy affair. The second meeting didn’t feel as physical in the first half, but plenty of yellow cards were shown, three to the Dynamo and one to City’s Njabulo Blom.

Blom’s yellow card, a foul near the top of the City box, set up a golden free-kick opportunity for Houston, but the effort was rather tame. City had a number of long shots in the first half that were also fairly simple stops for veteran Dynamo keeper Steve Clark.

The goalless deadlock was broken just before halftime with a moment of team brilliance from the hosts. The Dynamo played a series of intricate passes in and around the St. Louis box, finishing with a cross from star midfielder Amine Bassi that found Dynamo striker Corey Baird at the far post.

Baird headed home and Houston grabbed the first half advantage. While City showed plenty of endeavor going forward and outshot the Dynamo, they lacked the quality at the end of the attack to put a tally on the scoreboard.

Usually, when St. Louis City SC gives up the first goal of a match, the evening doesn’t go their way.

City head coach Bradley Carnell’s task at halftime was turning City’s positivity going forward into goals. He brought on an extra striker in Niko Gioacchini, and an attack-minded winger in Nökkvi Thórisson in the second half to try to find a result in the second half.

Substitutes were needed, as City’s starters just weren’t quite able to break down Houston in any meaningful way. To their credit, neither has basically any team Houston has played since the Leagues Cup, having kept four straight clean sheets in MLS action, five straight dating back before the break from league play.

“We failed to get around (the Dynamo) in the first half,” City head coach Bradley Carnell said postgame. “We had to bring fresh legs in. Credit to the guys who came in, everyone is fighting on this team.”

Much of the second half was stretched, both teams taking turns running at the other, but with no real end product either way. Houston only had a few shots on target, and other than their goal that had taken Roman Bürki out of the play, they didn't really challenge City's shot-stopper.

“At one point tonight I looked at Klauss and said ‘I think they’re getting tired’,” Carnell remembered of the back-and-forth second half.. “And (Klauss) said ‘But coach, I am too.’”

City's stars, Joao Klauss and Eduard Löwen, were largely kept quiet for most of the proceedings Saturday night. Löwen had a few free kick opportunities in the first half to no avail, and Klauss really didn't get enough touches on the ball to effect play.

Until the 88th minute.

Second half City sub Indiana Vassilev drug a pass back to his fellow second half sub Tomas Ostrak, who fired a shot on Steve Clark's goal that the Houston keeper parried away. That parry went right to Joao Klauss standing unmarked in the Dynamo 6-yard box.

Klauss had an easy header, and City looked to have stolen a point on the road, breaking Houston's clean sheet run in the process.

Two starts for Klauss since returning from his quad injury, and two goals that helped provide points for City on the road when they needed them.

“You see the qualities (Klauss) possesses,” admired Carnell. “His skill, his speed... He's able to drop deeper, he's able to run the line. I'm really happy with a lot of what I saw tonight, and I'm sure he's happy with his performance tonight as well.”

While Bradley Carnell did state a desire to turn these away matches into wins, turning a loss into a draw late can be considered a job well done for City on Saturday night.

“I think the players are still frustrated because we demand three points from ourselves,” said Carnell. “We were able to pick ourselves up and get going again and get more wind in our sails. It's one point gained, and one point closer to our target.”

With the draw, City climbed to 49 points, a six-point lead over LAFC, who jumped back into the second place spot in the West with a win in the “El Trafico” rivalry match against LA Galaxy.

Up next for both St. Louis City and LAFC is a top of the Western Conference table clash at CITY PARK on Wednesday where City will look to avenge the 3-0 defeat they suffered in Los Angeles back in July. With a win, City can officially clinch their place in the MLS Playoffs.

CITY2 Update

ST. LOUIS - While the MLS club was busy on the road this weekend, CITY2 was in MLS NEXT Pro action at CITY PARK Sunday. An MLS NEXT Pro record crowd of 9,626 saw CITY2 clinch a playoff berth with a 4-1 win over LA Galaxy II.

This is a CITY2 team that's been riding a rocketship up the MLSNP Western Conference over the past few months. Sunday's win takes them to nine games unbeaten, winning seven and drawing two in that span.

It's the fifth win in a row for Bobby Murphy's CITY2 team as well.

Wan Kuzain, at this point a CITY2 veteran, opened the scoring Sunday in the 8th minute, getting his left foot on a low Ezra Armstrong cross and beating Galaxy II goalkeeper Simon Jillson.

CITY2 added two more goals through lovely passing moves that were capped off by Caden Glover and Faysal Bettache. Their passing was quick, intricate, and caused LA fits for most of the evening.

If there was anything notable about this performance, it was the ruthlessness of CITY2 in attack. They ooze confidence, and feel comfortable making passes and runs that just weren't there earlier in the season when the team was struggling.

The visitors broke up the clean sheet with a consolation goal late, but it didn't break up the party. CITY2, for the second time in as many years, punched a ticket to the MLS NEXT Pro Playoffs.

Those playoffs will look a bit different this year. MLS NEXT Pro is trialing an expanded playoff format, one that includes a "pick-your-opponent" structure in the opening two rounds.

In each conference (Eastern and Western), the two division champions and the five clubs with the next-highest points will clinch a playoff place. That's seven playoff teams per conference, so 14 of the league's 27 clubs reach the postseason.

The No. 1 seed in each conference gets a first round bye, the No. 2 and No. 3 seeds will host their match and choose their opponent from the lower seeds, and the two teams not selected will play each other in the first round.

In the second round, or conference semifinals, the No. 1 seed enters, and will choose their opponent from the remaining two lowest-seeded teams and host their match. The second-highest seed will host the team not chosen by the No. 1 seed.

The Conference Final round is luckily a bit simpler, where the highest seeded team will host the lower seed. The MLS NEXT Pro Cup Final will be hosted by the team with the most total points.

Since CITY2 are currently the 5th seed, and more importantly, won't be one of those teams "picking their opponent", CITY2's schedule will be at the mercy of whoever wants to play them.

CITY2 can climb up to the fourth spot in their regular season finale, taking on Sporting Kansas City II away from home next weekend. SKC II currently occupy that fourth spot with 47 points, one point ahead of CITY2 on 46.