

City Controls Own Destiny Heading Into Road Matchup With Minnesota

by Nathan Tucker, Sports Reporter
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ST. LOUIS - Where were you when St. Louis City SC clinched their first-ever MLS Playoff berth? City head coach Bradley Carnell hadn't even left CITY PARK.

“I was still here, up in the office having a look with a few staff members,” said Carnell, of his Wednesday evening after City’s goalless draw against LAFC. “When John (Gasparoni, City PR Director) sent over the message that (we’ve) clinched, there’s this moment of belief and confidence that’s been growing throughout the season.”

“It’s been chipping away at the block, point by point, win by win, and all of a sudden here we are with 50 points. It’s in our hands and we control our destiny,” Carnell said.

Entering Wednesday night, there were a number of varying results that would push City over the playoff line. One of them was a City draw and a Minnesota United loss.

Minnesota was on the road, facing a desperate LA Galaxy team needing a win to stay in the Western Conference playoff hunt. Minnesota took a 3-1 lead into halftime and looked to doom the Galaxy’s season.

The Galaxy stormed back in the second half, with two of LA striker Billy Sharp’s three goals to level the score at three apiece. Substitute attacker Diego Fagundez scored the Galaxy’s fourth in a 4-3 comeback win that kept his team’s hopes alive, and, not that it matters to Fagundez or LA, punched St. Louis City’s ticket to the playoffs.

Minnesota United are just as hungry as their opponents were on Wednesday night. Their midweek defeat sees them on the outside looking in, a point behind FC Dallas in the ninth and final playoff spot.

Minnesota has hit a rough patch at an inopportune time for a team fighting for a postseason spot. Their last win was nearly a month ago, with two draws (to San Jose and New England) and two defeats (to Sporting Kansas City and the Galaxy) since.

At the most crucial point of the season, the energy just hasn’t always been there for Minnesota United, as exhibited when they took their foot off the gas Wednesday night and saw three points slip away in Hollywood.

And if there’s one team that can exploit a lack of energy, it’s St. Louis City, but Bradley Carnell knows that Minnesota United can be a very different, and very attacking team in their own right.

“There are two tales to this Minnesota team,” said Carnell Thursday. “It’s been a different sort of pattern with them, how they set up at home and on the road, and we’ll have to see who starts for them and how they come out.”

One name you can probably write in permanent marker in the current MNUFC team is striker Teemu Pukki, who joined Minnesota on a free transfer from English Championship club Norwich City in July.

Pukki came to the Loons with a decent degree of fanfare as a player who made a name for himself internationally when Norwich City was recently in the Premier League. In two seasons of Premier League action (2019-20 and 2021-22), Pukki scored 22 goals for Norwich teams that were relegated in both seasons.

Despite Minnesota's tough defeat Wednesday night, it was potentially Pukki's best game since coming stateside. The Finnish striker scored a great goal, turning and firing a shot off the crossbar and in for Minnesota's first, and created Bongokuhle Hlongwane's tap-in third goal with an assist that cut through the box and the Galaxy defense.

Unlike his team's recent form, Pukki seems to be heating up at the right time. Including Wednesday night, he has three goals in his last four games after scoring just one in his first five.

As Bradley Carnell noted, Minnesota likes to play a very different, more offensive-minded style of soccer when they're at home in the comforts of Allianz Field. Teemu Pukki will be looking to add to his goal tally and to push his team to a playoff seed.

City's season as a whole has been surprising to outside observers, but inside the club, expectations have grown throughout the long MLS season. The team started, largely, with no expectations, just some personal goals and self-belief, and those goals have expanded as City's success continues.

"From day one, we just spoke about being competitive, and I think we proved that," said Bradley Carnell. "Then we start thinking, 'Alright, if we can reach that eighth or ninth spot (in the Western Conference) that'd be awesome too'. Then we just continuously kept picking up points and stayed consistent."

"Then expectations become making the playoffs, and now we've made the playoffs. We check that box, and what's next for us, can we now get a top-four finish? Once we can check that box, can we win the Western Conference? So we take everything in baby steps and stages," Carnell said.

Baby steps would be a good way to describe Rasmus Alm's potential return from a lingering groin injury that has recently become more serious, forcing the winger to miss game time. Alm is questionable for the weekend after missing City's last three matches.

Other injuries of note include Lucas Bartlett, who hurt his shoulder playing for CITY2 in their own playoff-clincher last weekend at CITY PARK while City homegrown midfielder Miguel Perez is dealing with an ankle injury. Bartlett and Perez are the only City players officially ruled out of Saturday's contest.

City heads north to take on Minnesota United just after 7:30 p.m. Saturday night. The game can be watched on Apple TV, with local radio broadcasts available on KYKY 98.1 FM in English and KXOK 102.9 FM in Spanish.