

City Hosts SKC In Rivalry Rubber Match

by Nathan Tucker
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ST. LOUIS - Major League Soccer has a number of heated rivalries that have sprung up as the league continues to grow. Rivalries like “Hell is Real” (FC Cincinnati vs. Columbus Crew), “El Trafico” (LAFC vs. LA Galaxy), and the “Hudson River Derby” (NY Red Bulls vs. NYCFC) have all become staples of MLS Rivalry Weeks in the past decade.

There might not be an official catchy name for the budding rivalry between St. Louis City SC and their cross-state neighbors Sporting Kansas City just yet, but both cities have a soccer history beyond MLS, dating back more than a century.

While the teams and fans may squabble over which city is the “Soccer Capital” of the U. S., there is no doubt that St. Louis and Kansas City have been at the heart of the sport’s growth, right in the middle of the country.

On the field in MLS action, the St. Louis vs. Kansas City rivalry is currently knotted up, with each team winning on home soil earlier this season. City won 4-0 in emphatic fashion at CITY PARK back in May, and SKC avenged that defeat with a 2-1 win at Children’s Mercy Park four weeks ago.

City was incredibly well-represented at that road game in the shadow of Kansas Motor Speedway. Thousands in CITY Red took over a corner of Sporting KC’s “Blue Hell”.

“The amount of fans that showed up in KC for us was incredible,” said Jake Nerwinski, talking about the last meeting on the STL Soccer Talk podcast this week. “I think for us to win this rubber match would be huge, not just for us, but for the fans as well, and the city.”

Winning rivalry games is never easy. Winning games at this point of the season, when everyone is fighting for something, is even tougher.

“It’s going to be an edgy game, for sure,” said City head coach Bradley Carnell Thursday at the team’s pre-match presser. “The teams that we’ve faced over the last couple of weeks have been fighting for their lives, and this is another one of those games.”

Wins are tougher to come by as games become more important throughout any season, regardless of sport.

“Games are more competitive, there’s a lot more on the line,” said Carnell. “Teams figure out other teams as the year goes on, and you have to come up with new ways to be consistent and pick up points.

“We’re not interested in how many goals we score, we just want to score one more than the opponent.”

In their last meeting with Sporting Kansas City, it was SKC scoring one more goal than City, winning 2-1 thanks to a first-half brace from star Mexican striker Alan Pulido.

Pulido leads SKC with 13 goals, the fifth-most in MLS this season. When he was injured, Sporting looked like a shell of themselves, and were cellar-dwellers in the first half of the MLS season, with playoffs seemingly out of the picture.

Behind Pulido, SKC has fought their way into playoff contention, and currently sit 10th in the MLS Western Conference, one place out of a playoff berth, and two points behind FC Dallas in 9th.

Pulido missed Sporting KC's last game, a 2-1 win over the Houston Dynamo, with a quad injury and is officially ruled as questionable for Saturday night's game at CITY PARK.

SKC played the majority of that win shorthanded after their captain Johnny Russell was given a straight red card after a rough tackle he made on Houston's Nelson Quiñones. Originally given just a yellow card, the VAR intervened, and now Russell will serve a one-game suspension Saturday night.

While Alan Pulido isn't ruled out officially and may make the Sporting KC squad still, missing Johnny Russell and having a less-than-fit star striker is not the ideal situation the visitors wanted fighting for their playoff lives.

"I think it's an enjoyable (game) because we just faced a Minnesota team fighting for their life," said Carnell. "So we've got that kind of vibe in us already, and we push the buttons every day in training, we push them hard, and the boys have worked excellently this week."

While SKC might be missing a star striker due to injury, this is the first time Bradley Carnell has had a fully-healthy lineup of strikers to choose from to take on SKC. Klauss missed the first match, and Niko Gioacchini scored. Gioacchini didn't play on the road in KC four weeks ago, and Sam Adeniran scored.

"I think we've seen many times this season where players have made massive contributions for us," noted Carnell Thursday. "Without those experiences, we would never have known if those players could have contributed at some point this season."

"(Having a full squad fighting for minutes) makes my life a headache, which is awesome to have. I love this challenge that I'm faced with right now, it's about the betterment of our team collectively, how we stick together and support our teammates."

On the injury front for St. Louis City, center back Josh Yaro has been out of practice this week, dealing with “a bit of a tight back”, but will be in the squad Saturday. Vice Captain Tim Parker missed some practice time this week, but will be in Saturday’s squad and presumably starting per usual.

Rasmus Alm is once again listed as questionable, but traveled with the team to Minnesota for last week’s 2-1 win. The only City players 100% ruled out are homegrown midfielder Miguel Perez, dealing with an ankle injury, and defender Lucas Bartlett, who suffered a shoulder injury in the last CITY2 home game.

City and SKC renew MLS’s I-70 rivalry Saturday night at CITY PARK. The game is free to watch on Apple TV with an Apple login, and local radio broadcasts are available on KYKY 98.1 FM in English and KXOK 102.9 FM in Spanish.

CITY2 Corner

After not being selected in the “pick your opponent” draw earlier this week, St. Louis City reserve side CITY2 will host San Jose Earthquakes II in first-round play of the MLS NEXT Pro Playoffs this Sunday evening at CITY PARK.

CITY2 finished their MLS NEXT Pro season on a heater, going undefeated in regulation in their last ten matches. It’s a streak that started back on July 23, against the very same Quakes II team they take on Sunday evening.

Fans have flocked to CITY2’s matches as of late, in the past two months the team has set two MLS NEXT Pro attendance records. 9,489 folks saw them take on Tacoma Defiance in August, and that record was broken by the 9,626 who attended CITY2’s 4-1 thrashing of LA Galaxy II on September 17.

In that game, striker Johnny Klein scored a bicycle kick goal from close range that was voted as MLS NEXT Pro Goal of The Year this week on Twitter. It was Klein’s 13th goal, leading CITY2 for the season.

Kickoff for CITY2’s playoff match is set for 5 p.m. on Sunday. The game will be broadcast on Apple TV.