

City Shuts Door On Sporting KC Late, Wins Western Conference After LAFC Loss - CITY2's Season Ends Against San Jose

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ST. LOUIS - For the final time this year, St. Louis City SC and their neighbors to the west Sporting Kansas City squared off in MLS regular season play Saturday night.

A game that was tense, a game that was edgy, a game that could have gone either way until late, went City's way in a big way, with the hosts putting four second half goals past their rivals from Kansas City, winning 4-1.

Indiana Vassilev had City's first chance on goal a little more than six minutes into the match. Vassilev volleyed a bouncing ball right into the body of Sporting KC goalkeeper Tim Melia, who deflected the shot behind for a corner kick.

In the 30th minute, Melia used every inch of his 6'1" frame and a bit of goalie glove to stop a Joao Klauss shot on the ground from close range.

Just a few moments later, Roman Bürki was up to the challenge on a Daniel Salloi shot from the left side of the box, lunging to his right to deny the Sporting midfielder.

If the first half lacked goals, it didn't lack physicality. Heavy tackles were flying both ways, and toward the end of the opening 45 minutes, those tackles were turning into shoving matches between those in CITY Red and Sporting Blue.

A crunching slide tackle from Sam Adeniran, and a bit of a shoulder shove after, drew the ire of SKC players, and team captains on both sides had to separate their teammates.

"I think the rivalry is budding," said St. Louis City head coach Bradley Carnell. "It needs the experiences, it needs edgy moments, it needs that energy... Sam Adeniran's tackle in the first half gave us that energy."

Moments later, Jake Davis put in a similarly rough tackle on City left back Anthony Markanich, much to the chagrin of the latter, who got up from the foul and shoved his aggressor. Markanich saw a yellow card for his retaliatory effort.

Maybe it was the intensity or the edginess displayed, but the first half flew by, and the story of the game was left to be told in the second half.

In an ever-growing catalog, Roman Bürki had two stunning saves in the second half. The first came in a frenetic few seconds in front of the CITY goal, where a shot from Sporting KC striker Alan Pulido went haywire, and Daniel Salloi smashed a shot off the crossbar, and off of the chest of a leaping Roman Bürki.

The second was a diving save on a header from Logan Ndenbe, one that Bürki pushed off the post to his right. The only thing missing in this intense match through 73 minutes was a goal.

In the following 11 minutes, City scored four.

The first, from a set piece: a perfectly placed free kick from Eduard Lowen, as St. Louis fans have become so accustomed to this season, that the 6'5" Sam Adeniran rose highest to meet. Tim Melia in the SKC goal got a finger to it, but couldn't stop Adeniran's header from finding the back of the net.

"It's always great to score in front of the City fans," said Adeniran on his goal. "Because they get so loud. It was a surreal moment."

CITY PARK erupted, the goalless deadlock broken. As Bradley Carnell said postgame, "When we score the first goal, it's tough to contain us at home."

The second goal was a product of City's second half subs. Jared Stroud was brought on for Azriel Jackson, as Bradley Carnell noted that City was "getting tired in the 10s", and Stroud's fresh legs changed the game.

In the 75th minute, Stroud pounced on an errant SKC pass in their box, made a defender miss, and slotted a shot to Tim Melia's left.

CITY PARK, still exuberant from Adeniran's first goal, got even louder.

Joao Klauss, for all his graft in the match, had a number of "almost" chances in the first half. He was rewarded for his work in City's second half goal spree.

The third goal, a truly "vintage" St. Louis City goal. On the counter attack, the ball came to Eduard Lowen running upfield.

Lowen spotted Klauss, making a run wide to the right of goal to stretch the defense. Lowen clipped a pass over the SKC defense into the path of City's Brazilian striker, who hit a side-footed volley beyond an outstretched Tim Melia.

"That's just how it is at CITY PARK," said Sam Adeniran. "When we get one, the floodgates just open. Credit to our team and our staff, our style of play is a difficult style. Once we get the first goals, (Sporting KC) had to start taking risks."

CITY PARK, still reeling from the first two goals, was becoming a madhouse. City had put three beyond their arch rivals in 10 minutes, and they weren't done.

The fourth goal, another wonderful effort from Joao Klauss, came in the 84th minute. City forced a turnover high up the pitch, right at the edge of the Sporting KC box. Jared Stroud passed to Klauss, who played one touch to beat the Sporting defender, and caught the ball in the air with his next touch, toe-poking a shot to the top corner of Tim Melia's goal.

Melia, and Sporting Kansas City, were absolutely shell shocked. 12 minutes prior, it was goalless, and they had the chance to take a point, or maybe even three on the night.

“Klauss is a winner by nature, his heart beats for points and goals,” said Bradley Carnell. “We kept him on the field with Sam (Adeniran) and you see that (Klauss) is a good teammate as well.

After the City onslaught, Sporting took no points back to Kansas City. They did take a consolation goal, the last action of the game, on a play that the City defense fell asleep on.

After the game, City head coach Bradley Carnell, as well as multiple players voiced their displeasure over giving up the clean sheet so late.

“Even when you’re four goals up, it’s unnecessary to concede,” said Roman Bürki postgame. “We give up a goal with the last action of the game, we need to be smarter. We need to keep going and keep up our mentality.”

“It hurts to concede late, especially as a defender,” said City center back Joakim Nilsson. “I think I gave up the ball late on... It was just annoying to concede, but we still got the three points.”

Three points that are all-important, even at this phase of the season with City having already clinched a playoff berth. A win on Saturday for City put the ball in LAFC’s court to defend their Western Conference crown.

LAFC faced Real Salt Lake Sunday night to cap off the MLS weekend, and fell to a header from former LAFC forward Chicho Arango in a 1-0 loss at home in LA.

That result made it official: St. Louis City SC tops the Western Conference, the first MLS team to do so in their expansion season.

While the top seed in the conference has obvious playoff implications for the upcoming MLS postseason, it also officially qualifies St. Louis for the 2024 CONCACAF Champions Cup. The Champions Cup pits the best teams from across the continent and the Caribbean against each other in a 27-team tournament.

St. Louis City goes international in 2024, and plays their second MLS match outside of the US on Wednesday night, when they head to Canada to take on the Vancouver Whitecaps.

CITY2 Corner

St. Louis City's reserve squad, CITY2, were in MLS NEXT Pro playoff action on Sunday evening at CITY PARK, hosting San Jose Earthquakes II in an opening round matchup.

A CITY2 team that came into Sunday undefeated in their last 10 would unfortunately have that run, and their season, come to a close after a 2-0 defeat to Quakes II.

CITY2 just couldn't create the chances in front of goal in front of a healthy crowd that mostly stayed in the shade on a rather warm October afternoon.

San Jose's goals were scored by Will Richmond, who redirected a rocket of a cross past Christian Olivares in the CITY2 goal in the 63rd minute of play, and Ousseni Bouda, who rocketed home a shot in the 87th minute to seal the deal.

It's a different tale for CITY2 than their 2022 season, where a team sprinkled with future MLS regulars went to the MLS NEXT Pro Finals. CITY2 in 2023 was more about the future talent pool for the big club, young players trying to make their presence felt within the St. Louis City setup.

CITY2 finished fifth in the MLS NEXT Pro Western Conference, with 47 points in 28 games played.