

City “Starting From Zero” For Inaugural Playoff Run

by Nathan Tucker, Sports Reporter
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ST. LOUIS - Not many expected St. Louis City SC to be here. Very few predicted the expansion side would be a playoff team, let alone come into the playoffs as the number-one seed in Major League Soccer's Western Conference.

“I think we drew the line after last weekend,” said City Sporting Director Lutz Pfannenstiel on Friday. “We’re starting now from zero, it doesn’t matter if you’re the one seed, or eighth, or second, or seventh, you have the same opportunities to win the Cup and go as far as possible.”

With that top seed, City gets to host their very first MLS Playoff game. As destiny would have it, their first playoff game in club history will be against cross-state rivals Sporting Kansas City.

Admittedly, while the fans on both sides have bought into another installment of the rivalry between St. Louis and Kansas City, there likely hasn’t been a true catalyst to create a rivalry between the two sides. As City head coach Bradley Carnell has pointed out multiple times, a rivalry doesn’t just happen, it grows from moments.

A playoff series, where the wily veterans of MLS in Sporting KC take on the new kids on the block in St. Louis City is just the catalyst the rivalry needs on the field.

“Playing against Sporting Kansas City which is our rival, it’s a lot of action, a lot of excitement,” said Pfannenstiel.

Playoffs are something that’s familiar to the average American sports fan. It’s something that’s not necessarily familiar to many of City’s players.

“I think it’s something special,” said Pfannenstiel on the playoff system. “We have lots of guys here who’ve taken to the American experience, the lifestyle, the league, they just love it. Looking at Roman (Burki) for example, he’s so happy here and he just enjoys American sport, American culture. I feel belong to sports in general in the U.S., that you really feel that playoff hype.

“Our players are not nervous, they’re not worried about the unknown. I think they know exactly that it’s crunch time now, and we have to deliver.”

In Major League Soccer, specifically, the first round of the playoffs is a best-of-three series. City will host SKC on Sunday night, travel across the state to play game two on Sunday, November 5, and if necessary, host game three of the series on Saturday, November 11.

Even further, in the play-in round between the eight and nine seeds and the opening round this weekend, if the score is tied at full time after 90 minutes, games go straight to a penalty kick shootout.

Fans and experts alike have criticized the current MLS playoff format, arguing that going straight to penalties after 90 minutes incentivizes a team to play very defensively or negatively in hopes of grinding out a 0-0 draw that they can take to penalties.

On Wednesday night, in the Western Conference play-in game between Sporting Kansas City and the San Jose Earthquakes, the Quakes largely rejected the idea of playing offense. They put ten men behind the ball for most of the night, and dared Sporting KC to play through them.

San Jose successfully bored the neutral viewing audience, but got the job done, taking a 0-0 game to penalties. Unfortunately, they didn't execute step two of this plan, and lost the penalty shootout. Credit has to be given to Sporting goalkeeper Tim Melia, who is an MLS all-time leader at saving penalties, who made big saves in the penalty shootout to see his team through.

Tactically, it might benefit SKC to play that ugly, defensive way against City on Sunday. City have one of the highest-scoring offenses in Major League Soccer, but have struggled to break down a low block of defenders at times this season, and have been caught out on the counter attack.

"They have some big game changers," said City head coach Bradley Carnell of Sporting Kansas City. "Like every team in the West, many different game changers at different positions. They can manipulate the game in certain ways, we just have to be one step ahead of them. We have to be proactive in our thoughts, not just individually, but collectively.

"This is not a game that we feel we can just dominate. Our domination has to start against the ball first, with our defensive principles. Once we start doing that, I think we've shown the success we can have against (SKC)."

The only real injury question for St. Louis City as of late has been Rasmus Alm, who's been dealing with a lingering groin problem throughout the season according to Bradley Carnell, but has missed more time recently with that groin issue seemingly becoming more debilitating.

"We've been trying to get Rasmus (Alm) ramped up," Carnell said, of Alm not joining the team in full practice sessions. "We know we're better with (Alm) in our team, in contention, in lineups and coming off the bench. We've tried to get him ready to a certain point, but just isn't responding in a way that we would like."

"I've had a similar injury myself, and they just don't want to go away."

Alm has been officially ruled out for Sunday's match at CITY PARK, but Carnell didn't rule out a return for the game at Children's Mercy Park next Sunday, or perhaps a later return if City progress. Other than Alm, City boasts a fully fit squad for Sunday night's matchup.

St. Louis City SC makes its MLS Playoff debut Sunday night when they take on Sporting Kansas City in Downtown St. Louis. Kickoff at CITY PARK will be at 9:20 p.m., a late start for national television. The game will be televised on Fox Sports 1/FS1, with the broadcast starting at 9 p.m. Local radio broadcasts are available on KYKY 98.1 FM in English and KXOK 102.9 FM in Spanish.