

Sporting KC Spoil City's Playoff Opener Party

by Nathan Tucker, Sports Reporter
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ST. LOUIS - St. Louis City SC hosted their first MLS Playoff game on Sunday night, taking on Sporting Kansas City in a best-of-three opening-round series.

There was a new intro for the playoffs, a new tifo in the supporters' end, but City's party was cut short by their guests, as Sporting KC put four past St. Louis City en route to a 4-1 win.

It was a miserably cold and rainy Sunday night at CITY PARK. Perhaps City were caught out cold, but they seemed to be a step behind all night.

SKC had a very clear strategy: force City to play through them and strike on the counter, where City have looked their most vulnerable this season. They executed that plan to perfection, City were flummoxed as they passed the ball around looking for an opening.

“We didn’t play brave enough,” said City head coach Bradley Carnell following the game. “Sometimes you have to will yourself into a positive action, and I thought we were too passive.”

Sporting KC opened the scoring by hitting City on the counter, where Logan Ndembe ran into acres of space at the edge of the City 18-yard box. Ndembe rocketed a shot to the top left corner of Roman Bürki’s goal to give the visitors the early advantage in the 27th minute.

It was a quality goal, a shot no keeper in MLS would stop, but it was a goal created by a breakdown in City’s defense.

“Collectively, we were not good enough,” said City captain and goalkeeper Roman Bürki. “Today we had a lot of problems, no pressure on the ball, not blocking enough shots.”

Sporting’s advantage lasted just a minute, as City won a quick corner. Indy Vassilev swung in the corner kick which bounced to Tim Parker, who slotted home from close range to level the score.

CITY PARK had been quieted a bit by the SKC opener, but Tim Parker wheeling away in celebration brought life back into the stadium. As the fans roared City on, Joao Klauss found space at the edge of the Sporting box, but keeper Tim Melia was up to the occasion and made a solid save on Klauss’s low-driven effort.

Despite 22,000 plus braving the rain and cold to support them, City just didn’t look like themselves Sunday night. Bradley Carnell’s team just didn’t seem to have the energy that has propelled them to the top seed in the Western Conference in their sensational inaugural season.

“We just lacked a little bit of urgency at certain times,” said Bradley Carnell. “We were just a little bit off the pace of the critical duels today and that's the result thereof.”

The visitors would retake the lead in the 36th minute. Again, City was caught tracking back in defense as Sporting broke toward goal. A few blocked shots resulted in the ball

falling to SKC midfielder Remi Walter, who smashed a left-footed shot beyond the reach of the outstretched Roman Burki.

Sporting made it three just three minutes later, when Gadi Kinda was given plenty of time to line up a shot, and given the time, curled a beautiful shot into the top left corner of Bürki's goal.

City was shell-shocked. The fans in attendance were left stunned, with more noise coming from the drum in the visitors' supporters section at the southeast corner of CITY PARK.

“We go a goal down, showed great response a minute later, and then two moments later got away from us,” Carnell explained. “I think all three of the goals are shots from range, and then we are staring 3-1 down in the bottom of the barrel.”

In the entire MLS regular season, St. Louis City only went into halftime trailing by two goals once. It was in their last regular season home game, an eventual 2-0 loss to the Seattle Sounders.

City played just two regular season games in October, after City had already clinched their position atop the MLS Western Conference. City lost both games, the Seattle loss at home just a week ago, and a 3-0 loss to the Vancouver Whitecaps back on October 4.

Conversely, Sporting Kansas City has had to fight for their playoff lives, and has had to play important soccer for the past month, culminating in a penalty kick shootout win over San Jose Earthquakes in the play-in round that brought them to CITY PARK.

This was a battle of two teams heading in different directions, and it sure looked like it on the scoreboard.

Sporting would score their fourth goal in the 61st minute. Gadi Kinda, the scorer of the third SKC goal, whipped in a corner that Alan Pulido flicked across the face of goal, right into the path of Daniel Salloi. Salloi had a short tap-in, and the visitors were up three goals in enemy territory.

Sporting Kansas City were in dreamland, and for the first time this season, it didn't feel like City had an answer. The team that prided themselves of never being out of games, often coming back from losing positions to win, was three goals down at home in their first playoff game.

Some late substitutions gave City a bit of late life, but ultimately the result had been decided. City's worst home defeat of the season came in their very first playoff game.

“It’s not a great result by any means,” said Bradley Carnell. “That didn’t take the occasion away from the fans. I want to thank the fans for coming out here, I thought the energy was electric.”

What’s next? It’s time for City to regroup, refocus, and come back stronger for game two on the Kansas side of Kansas City in a week’s time.

“As a group we have to really reset,” said City vice captain Tim Parker postgame. “Now we know it’s two games that we have to win. We’ll look at the film, but we have to take a hard look as a team at how we approach the next two games.”

Game two between St. Louis City and Sporting Kansas City is set for Sunday, November 5, with kickoff set for just after 4 p.m.