

Sporting KC Ends St. Louis City's Inaugural MLS Season

by Nathan Tucker, Sports Reporter
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KANSAS CITY, Kan. - St. Louis City SC, and thousands of their fans and followers, made the roughly four-hour trip on I-70 to see City try to keep their dream inaugural season alive.

The Sporting Kansas City supporters end at their stadium, Children's Mercy Park, which is called "The Cauldron", but the description fit the whole of the park Sunday. It was a raucous atmosphere, worthy of the fledgling rivalry on the field itself.



On that field, it was a playoff game that was slow to get going but started to pick up the pace late in the first half. That's where the hosts found the first goal of the game, capturing momentum on their way to a 2-1 win that knocked City out of the MLS Playoffs.

City head coach Bradley Carnell made a few tweaks to the team that was “punched in the face” last Sunday, as he put it. Only vice captain Tim Parker was kept in the City defense, where Akil Watts, Josh Yaro, and Kyle Hiebert replaced Jake Nerwinski, Joakim Nilsson, and Anthony Markanich.

Instead of a lone striker, Joao Klauss last game, Carnell went with two attackers from the start, with Sam Adeniran starting up top alongside Klauss Sunday afternoon.

Those changes, and perhaps a bit of an “all or nothing” attitude with the season on the line, saw City show a bit more desire, especially in the early going.



“All we wanted today was to see our signature, and I think that's what we saw,” said Bradley Carnell postgame. “To go fighting in this last game, to show commitment and belief.”

In the first half, City had more shots than Sporting KC but didn't have a shot on target. As SKC grew into the game, spaces opened in the City defense, and the hosts had the confidence to shoot, after putting four goals past Roman Bürki in game one.

Logan Ndembe opened the scoring and lifted the roof off of Children's Mercy Park on the stroke of halftime. Ndembe took a pass from Alan Pulido, dribbled into open space at the top of the City 18-yard box, and curled a shot beyond the diving Roman Bürki in front of The Cauldron end.

Just as City was looking to head into halftime and make the necessary changes to attempt to regain a foothold in the match, they were a goal down and now had to start thinking about throwing the kitchen sink at Sporting just to keep their playoff hopes alive.

What came at halftime was the substitution of a striker, Sam Adeniran, for Célio Pompeu. An incredible moment for Pompeu, someone who proved his value to St. Louis City during the 2022 CITY2 MLS NEXT Pro season, now playing the most meaningful soccer of his life for City in the MLS Playoffs.



When asked if he felt any pressure coming into the game with his team's season on the line, Pompeu played it cool.

“To be honest, there was zero pressure,” he said postgame. “I have done this my whole life, played soccer my whole life, in front of ten people or ten thousand people, it doesn't matter. I just play soccer.”

City was behind the proverbial eight-ball, down at half and only 45 minutes of soccer to save their season, and the opening half-hour of those 45 minutes didn't inspire confidence. City looked better, but really couldn't test Tim Melia in the Sporting goal.

Sporting KC had only one shot through the second half. It was a goal, scored in the 73rd minute by Daniel Salloi when he and Gadi Kinda were beyond the City defense with only Roman Burki to beat. Kinda slid a pass across to Salloi who side-footed a shot into an empty net.

It was 2-0, and for their attacking endeavor, City wasn't looking likely to respond with two goals in 20 minutes. In the 86th minute, Célio Pompeu gave the visitors hope.

Pompeu, brought on to add a bit of hustle and heart to the City attack, curled a shot from the right wing, outside of the box, hoping to just force Sporting goalkeeper Tim Melia into a mistake.

Instead, his shot kept curling, beyond Tim Melia and into the top-left corner of the Sporting goal. City were back in the game, and the hosts went into a defensive shell to protect their one-goal lead.

“It was a shot,” Célio Pompeu clarified following the game. “It was my best goal so far, but we didn't win the game. So for me, I'm happy, but at the same time, I don't know, it's a mix of feelings.”

City huffed and puffed but couldn't blow the Sporting wall down. Even with 12 minutes of stoppage time, caused by a second-half injury to Daniel Rosero, City tried to throw the kitchen sink at SKC but couldn't create a clear chance in stoppage time.

The final whistle blew, the Sporting Blue fireworks shot into the sky, and St. Louis City SC's inaugural Major League Soccer season ended in Kansas, on the home turf of their noisy neighbors. It's not the way the team, or the thousands in CITY Red in the crowd, wanted the season to end.



Goalkeeper and City Captain Roman Bürki didn't mince words postgame.

"I think we definitely lost a little bit (of intensity) when we first clinched," said Bürki. "It's definitely our fault, we calmed down a little bit. The training sessions weren't as aggressive, we didn't have as much fire in (training) like how it was before. You can definitely see that in the games, we weren't that dominant or aggressive on the field as well."

"Our pressing wasn't good enough. Small details were missing, because we didn't do that in training. As always, I tried to tell the guys that, in my opinion, you play how you train. If the training intensity is not high enough, then you will never reach the intensity that is needed to win a regular season or playoff game."

Bradley Carnell was a bit more diplomatic following the defeat.

"Congratulations to my team for emptying the tank for me every single day," said Carnell. "The staff that you guys don't get to see behind the scenes, it's a culmination of a body of work that countless hours go into. It hurts now. We'll be sad for 24 hours, and then we'll get back together and make sure we come back stronger. This is a nice growing moment for us as a group and we know where we need to improve. In life, things don't go your way all the time. So, for us, we have to look forward."

Looking forward, City's season comes to an end, but Sporting Kansas City now heads to the Western Conference semifinals. They'll take on the winner of the round one series between the Houston Dynamo and Real Salt Lake.

[Bradley Piros also contributed to this story.](#)