

St. Louis City SC Makes Handful Of Off-Season Moves - Ready For An Improved 2024

by Nathan Tucker, Sports Reporter
January 1 2024 4:07 PM



ST. LOUIS - It's been over two months since St. Louis City SC was eliminated from the MLS Playoffs at the hands of their geographical rivals Sporting Kansas City.

During those MLS Playoffs, City Sporting Director Lutz Pfannenstiel noted that he was a busy man, planning for 2024 while watching the 2023 side. An admittedly tough task,

to improve upon the team that stunned so many on their way to the top spot in the MLS Western Conference during the regular season.

With the MLS postseason falling short of expectations, the job of Pfannenstiel and head coach Bradley Carnell is to get back to the playoffs in 2024 and right the wrongs of 2023. That work started in earnest last month.

First came the end-of-season roster decisions on players who were on deals that ended after the 2023 season. City exercised their club option on eight first-teamers: Striker Sam Adeniran, midfielders AZ Jackson, Célio Pompeu, and Akil Watts, and defenders Anthony Markanich and Josh Yaro.

Max Schneider and Michael Creek saw their club options declined, both were a part of the 2023 CITY2 team in MLS NEXT Pro. Defenders John Nelson and Jonathan Bell's contracts came to an end, and both have already found homes elsewhere. Nelson signed with the LA Galaxy, and Bell was picked up in MLS's year-end waiver draft by the Seattle Sounders.

Midfielder Jared Stroud and defender Lucas Bartlett had their options picked up by City, only for them to be traded one week later to DC United in exchange for midfielder and former USA youth national teamer Chris Durkin.

Stroud was an ever-present early on in the 2023 season for St. Louis City, but as tactics slightly altered, and midfielder Eduard Lowen started playing more on the left side, Stroud became more of an impact sub/rotation piece.

Lucas Bartlett filled a center-back role early on for Bradley Carnell and City, but once Joakim Nilsson was healthy and ready to step into the role he was expected to, Bartlett struggled for minutes, his last senior game was in the Leagues Cup in July. Bartlett was playing for CITY2 just to get playing time towards the end of the MLS NEXT Pro season.

In trading for Chris Durkin, City gets an up-and-coming defensive-minded midfielder who figures to add depth to the midfield that often relied too much on Eduard Lowen and Njabulo Blom in 2023. Durkin made 31 appearances for DC United last season.

With midfield depth addressed, Lutz Pfannenstiel made a move to bolster the City defense by signing full-back Tomas Totland from Swedish Allsvenskan club BK Häcken, which has also been playing in the UEFA Europa League during the current European season.

Being a Norwegian-American who holds a US passport, Totland won't take up an international slot on the City roster, as teams have a limited amount of roster spots for full international players. On the pitch, Totland has played on the right and left for the BK Häcken defense, proving versatility in roles that City has been looking for quality in.

Totland is a speedy full-back who's comfortable on the ball and looks to be a solid fit in Bradley Carnell's system that asks so much of its wide defenders. Left-back was often seen as the spot of weakness for City in 2023, with center back-by-trade Kyle Hiebert taking over the left-back role for much of the season.

Speaking of Kyle Hiebert, the Canadian international signed on for an extension that keeps him in CITY Red through 2026, with a club option for 2027. Hiebert's versatility proved vital for City in 2023, and he was often praised for his work at left-back by Bradley Carnell and his teammates.

Only one player on a CITY2 contract will make the jump to MLS money in 2024, and that's goalkeeper Christian Olivares. Olivares became the top keeper for the reserve side in 2023. While he won't be challenging team captain and MLS Goalkeeper of the Year Roman Burki for game time, he'll likely be battling Ben Lundt for the top backup role behind City's No. 1.

Reserve side CITY2 let just about everyone go from the 2023 season, and looks to bring in a fresh crop of players from the City academy for 2024. The only CITY2 players from 2023 who will be with the team in 2024 are captain Michael Wentzel, midfielders Larsen Hackworth and John Klein, and forward Dida Armstrong.

One name that might be joining the CITY2 fold, or the City fold, based on how the preseason goes, is City's MLS SuperDraft pick Hosei Kijima. City traded their second-round SuperDraft pick and sent \$75k in 2024 allocation money to Nashville for their 17th pick in the first round to pick up Kijima. City also drafted Providence striker Brendan McSorley in the third round.

Kijima has played all over the field for Wake Forest during his college career. He's played as a central midfielder, a winger, a holding midfielder, and a fullback in college action. Kijima also has plenty of pace and energy, perfect for a player who could slot in as a fullback in Bradley Carnell's system.

In his profile for the MLS SuperDraft broadcast on Apple TV, Kijima was praised for his "tactical IQ", and even brought his own tactical breakdown to each team he interviewed with in the draft process, identifying each team's structure and how he could help each MLS club he talked to.

Kijima could very well break into the City first team but might get some playing time with CITY2 just to get him up to speed in a professional league. Brendan McSorley will likely slot into a striker role for CITY2.

In non-City-specific news, shockwaves were sent around the American soccer landscape last week when MLS decided to pull its clubs out of the US Open Cup, the most historic soccer competition in the country.

That move was met with widespread criticism and anger by the vast majority of soccer fans in the US and beyond, seen as MLS spitting in the face of the sport's history. Major League Soccer said the move was to "address schedule congestion" and offered that some lower-tier teams play in facilities that aren't up to MLS standards.

Those explanations were fiercely shot down by fans and official supporters groups across the US's soccer leagues. Many pointed out that "schedule congestion" wasn't as much of a problem before the Leagues Cup, which was created by MLS and Liga MX and expanded in 2023.

Fans and supporters groups of USL franchises balked at the notion that their stadiums weren't up to "MLS standards" when an MLS team in New York City FC currently plays in two different MLB stadiums using temporary sod on the playing surface at both Yankee Stadium and Citi Field.

Following the widespread backlash against the decision, US Soccer announced that it would reject the MLS proposal to pull its first teams out of the US Open Cup. As of now, it's officially undetermined what the 2024 Open Cup will look like, but notable that the recently released 2024 MLS schedule has no overlapping dates with scheduled Open Cup rounds.

The US Open Cup was St. Louis's first taste of MLS competition. The now-defunct USL team Saint Louis FC won Open Cup games against the Chicago Fire and FC Cincinnati in the tournament, and also traveled to Children's Mercy Park to take on Sporting Kansas City eight years before St. Louis City ever called SKC "Kansas".

While it was just over a month ago that the MLS season came to an end, training camps for the 2024 Open Cup in just a few weeks' time, and before you know it, CITY PARK will be buzzing again as St. Louis City SC takes the field for their second season.

St. Louis will officially kick off the season on Tuesday, Feb. 20 against Houston in the CONCACAF Champions Cup. City will begin its MLS action that weekend on Saturday, Feb. 24 when it hosts Real Salt Lake.

City's entire 2024 MLS schedule can be found [here](#).