

St. Louis City SC Ramps Up Preparations For Regular Season

by Nathan Tucker, Sports Reporter
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ST. LOUIS - In one week's time, thousands upon thousands of soccer fans will flood Downtown West again, with St. Louis City SC's 2024 season officially kicking off on Tuesday, February 20.

If it feels like the offseason was a short one for City, that's because it was.

Their season ended in early November, and training camp was starting in earnest in early January. Now there's just one preseason game left, a closed-door scrimmage against Louisville City at CITYPARK this week, before the games really matter.

St. Louis City tuned up for the season with a camp in Port St. Lucie, Florida, not too far up the coast from the Cardinals' Spring Training home in Jupiter. They faced Nashville in a scrimmage while there, and drew 2-2 behind closed doors.

The first real look City fans got of the new squad was a friendly in Los Angeles, where City SC took on the LA Galaxy, and won 2-1 thanks to a late goal from Nökkvi Thorisson. There's optimism within the City camp that Thorisson could step into the role of the departed Niko Gioacchini in 2024.

"Six months ago we signed Thorisson," said Lutz Pfannenstiel in a January press conference.

"We didn't lose a player at that time, and we signed him particularly as a second striker or offensive player. That was always the plan, so there's no pressure on us now to replace Niko one-to-one."

This preseason has been a de facto audition for Thorisson to take Gioacchini's backup striker role. Thorisson has seen plenty of preseason game time as that second striker, and the team believes he can show the qualities of a player who led the Icelandic league in goals in 2022 before his transfer over to City.

Last week, the Californian leg of St. Louis City's preseason saw them play twice in the Coachella Valley Invitational, against LAFC and the New York Red Bulls.

They defeated LAFC 1-0, thanks to defender Kyle Hiebert corralling a bouncing ball in the box and arrowing a shot to the top-left corner of Hugo Lloris's goal. City drew with NYRB 2-2, giving up a late equalizer after a Thorisson penalty kick made it 2-1 with 15 minutes to play.

While results mean little in preseason, with many teams fielding second team players, trialists, and youth prospects, you can gleam a bit of an idea of what a City team could look like once the games begin to matter next week. With new additions to the team this offseason, these training camp fixtures give coaches and fans alike a chance to see those signings in action.

City have added defensive quality in the offseason, having signed Danish left back Nikolas Dyhr from perennial European qualifiers FC Midtjylland, right back Tomas

Totland from BK Häcken, and defensive midfielder Chris Durkin from DC United, who arrived in a trade that sent Jared Stroud and Lucas Bartlett to the nation's capital.

Dyhr arrived later to camp than Totland and Durkin, and saw his first preseason action last Wednesday in City's 1-0 win over LAFC. Dyhr and Totland fit the mold that Bradley Carnell wants in his full backs, pacey players who can defend in stride who also have the creativity to contribute on the offensive end.

Lutz Pfannenstiel and Bradley Carnell wanted to bring in Totland sooner, with Carnell saying Totland "was on our radar for a long time" before City finally acquired him.

"Tomas Totland arrived after what felt like an eternity of back and forth," said Carnell on the acquisition process of their new right back. "He's beneficial on both sides of the ball, but he's really good going forward. He has some real technical qualities, he's attacking, he's free-flowing."

"I think we have good competition in that position right now. Jake (Nerwinski) had a respectable role and did excellently last year... He adopted that magnificently and was a true role model and great teammate. Akil Watts is also one who can play that position very well. We needed to be a little bit deeper, and get stronger depth in our roster."

Durkin looks to slot into the holding midfield role, a place where City dearly needed depth in 2023. Njabulo Blom often played when not quite 100% due to the lack of true holding midfield options that Bradley Carnell could trust.

Durkin can give Blom a bit of a break, and even Eduard Löwen as well, depending on how lineups shake out any given week.

"Chris (Durkin) comes in, and he covers a ton of ground, he's physically combative, and he's brave," said Carnell. "He is a young leader, given the conversations that I've had with him and seeing him on the field. He's going to be a good fit."

One man who was seen as a good fit following the 2023 season was Bradley Carnell, who earned a contract extension as City head coach through the 2025 season.

"During his first full season as a head coach, Bradley quickly became one of the top coaches in the league," said St. Louis City SC Sporting Director Lutz Pfannenstiel in a press release.

"When we brought Bradley in to be City SC's first-ever coach, we knew his work ethic and unique blend of MLS and international experience would help us be competitive, but I can safely say no one predicted City SC to finish the regular season as the best

team in the Western Conference. When it came to developing a team of players, many of whom had never played together before, to execute a very challenging playing philosophy and style, Bradley over delivered every step of the way.”

Carnell’s extension comes as no real surprise. The team surpassed all internal and external expectations in 2023. If 2023 set the bar for making the playoffs, the goal for 2024 is taking another step forward.

“Last year was something new,” said Carnell. “Something we’ve never experienced before as a group. But this year, we’re still the ‘designated team’, we still believe in the collective. We still want to do things our way and believe in our way.”

“Last year we went on a very overarching scale about the game model, the identity of how our game model looks in the whole collective. This preseason, we’ve really taken a granular look at each department, how we can get better. We’ve been doing a lot of video work before and after training sessions, just solidifying each department, making each unit even better.”

Last season was Bradley Carnell’s first full season as a head coach. When MLS veteran and City vice captain Tim Parker was asked about Carnell’s coaching style, he led with “approachable”, which doesn’t always describe a high-level manager or coach.

“He’s willing to talk and discuss things that some other coaches in this league may not be willing to,” said Tim Parker. “His understanding, being a former player, really opens up the doors to players in general, being able to go to him with questions or problems like ‘Why am I not playing? What can I do better?’ He’s very open to that and he has an open door policy, which in my eyes makes him very approachable as a player.”

CITY2 Corner

While the first team roster has seen a little bit of turnover from last season, the second team, CITY2, will look almost completely different from last year. Only a handful of players who featured for CITY2 last season will be back for 2024: John Klein, Dida Armstrong, Wan Kuzain, Larsen Hackworth, and 2023 CITY2 captain Michael Wentzel.

Some City Academy products that featured in MLS NEXT Pro last year look to do so again this season, players like Carson Locker and Mykhi Joyner. Locker has also been featuring with the City first team during preseason, alongside Caden Glover, who looks to make the jump from CITY2 to the first team this season.

One new local addition to the CITY2 fold is goalkeeper Sam Gomez, the STL native who helped lead SIUE to their first OVC regular season title during their 2023 season.

“As a coaching staff, we couldn’t be more thrilled about the talented players we have on our roster and are looking forward to helping them develop into the best versions of themselves,” said CITY2 head coach Bobby Murphy.

“This season is about using the lessons we learned last year to grow and maintain the competitive edge that CITY2 has cultivated over the past two seasons.”