

St. Louis City Welcomes Real Salt Lake For MLS Kickoff

by Nathan Tucker, Sports Reporter
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ST. LOUIS - It's Opening night: part two for St. Louis City SC on Saturday, as they host Real Salt Lake in their Major League Soccer regular season opener.

The opening week of the season is always a busier week, as the day-to-day hubbub of the season begins to take hold. But with a [2-1 Concacaf Champions Cup win over Houston Dynamo](#) on Tuesday, City enters the MLS season with a win under their belt.

“Now we get a chance to get points on the board,” said St. Louis City head coach Bradley Carnell in City’s pre-match press conference on Thursday.

“Especially at home, and we’re looking to start on the best foot possible, get the result and move on from there.”

On the subject of “points on the board,” Carnell mentioned City’s ability to finish attacking moves in the final third, or rather, their inability to on Tuesday night. While they came out victorious thanks to Hosei Kijima’s 90th-minute winner, City can find room to improve and put games away.

“I’ve just been looking at final-third plays,” said Carnell on what he learned from Tuesday. “I know it’s very early in the season and there’s a bit of rust there, which is understandable, but we’d like to finish off more plays.”

“We’d like to finish the game early on, and I think we had many opportunities to do so. But Houston always had a lifeline, somehow, even though we don’t give up too much. I think we gave up one shot on goal over the 90 minutes, so I’m proud in that department, Roman (Bürki) wasn’t too busy, so proud of that as well.”

“Defensively, we stood in two transition moments that were kind of iffy on the midfield line, and transitioning from set pieces, and these are all things we look at. It’s a long season and a lot of work to do,” Carnell said.

Some of that work for City has been behind the scenes, where the club made perhaps its most important signing of 2024. It was announced Friday morning that Sporting Director Lutz Pfannenstiel had agreed to an extension to keep him steering the St. Louis City ship through 2026.

“Lutz established the team’s core values in relation to player development, and championed a pressing, team-first style of play that is seen at every practice and every match,” said St. Louis City SC President and General Manager, Diego Gigliani, in a press release.

“He’s attracted both established and high potential young talent from across the globe and, together with Bradley (Carnell) and the rest of the sporting leadership, brought them together to create a winning formula. With Lutz continuing at the helm of our soccer operations, it provides valued continuity as we bring City fans the thrilling soccer they have come to love.”

Much like the Bradley Carnell extension before it, extending Pfannenstiel was a no-brainer after 2023. Pfannenstiel reportedly had interest from clubs in Europe and Saudi Arabia, but turned those offers down to stay in St. Louis.

“I am very appreciative for the opportunity to continue in St. Louis and couldn’t thank Carolyn (Kindle), the ownership group and Diego (Gigliani) enough for their support,” said Pfannenstiel.

“When I arrived in 2020, I had a short, medium and long term plan as to how the future would pan out and this gives me the opportunity to further build on the foundation we have placed here.”

On the pitch, Carnell chose a fairly strong team to play against Houston in the Champions Cup Tuesday, with the only notable absences really being Eduard Löwen and Joakim Nilsson, who both missed the majority of preseason camp.

And with the second leg of the Champions Cup to come on Tuesday, you wouldn’t blame the team for resting some legs and rotating lineups.

“That’s always in your mind,” said Carnell, regarding selecting a team with another important game ahead. “You try to manage that, but it’s no different for Salt Lake. They played last night, so they’re in that boat now. But I just try to find a way to balance all of that from an emotional level, but from a physical level as well.”

As the head coach mentions there, Real Salt Lake come into Saturday’s match having kicked off their MLS season already. RSL lost 2-0 in Fort Lauderdale to Inter Miami, and while Lionel Messi didn’t find the back of the net, he waltzed through the Salt Lake defense on a few occasions, including setting up the second goal late that put the game to bed.

Admittedly, it’s hard to judge Real Salt Lake off a game against Messi and friends, but they were the better team in that game for the second half. They just couldn’t find a breakthrough to level the score before a bit of brilliance from Lionel Messi and Luis Suarez gave Miami their second goal.

RSL solidified a solid playoff team from a year ago, their biggest offseason acquisition being Matt Crooks, who was playing with Middlesbrough in England before heading stateside. Crooks didn’t feature in Wednesday’s loss to Inter Miami, but could play Saturday if his work visa paperwork comes through in time.

Salt Lake's front line is led by Chicho Arango, who made his triumphant return to MLS last season after setting the league ablaze during his time with LAFC, scoring 30 goals in 51 appearances in black and gold. The 2021 MLS Newcomer of the Year scored six goals in 11 games after joining RSL last season.

City and Salt Lake split their two games last season, with both teams winning away from home. Real Salt Lake won 3-1 at CITY PARK and City turned a 0-0 halftime score into a 4-0 win at America First Field in Utah last March, a game where Joao Klauss scored a brace.

On the injury front, Rasmus Alm is still dealing with the lingering effects of a sports hernia, and missed training this week due to a cold on top of that. Kyle Hiebert hurt a knee in training, but is believed to be good to go for Saturday.

Indiana Vassilev was seen after Tuesday's Concacaf Champions Cup game with a brace on his right wrist. Bradley Carnell confirmed what Vassilev figured: that the wrist was fractured and needed the brace, but said Vassilev has been training with no issue.

St. Louis City's Major League Soccer season kicks off Saturday evening just after 7:30 p.m. The game is streaming on the MLS Season Pass on Apple TV, with local radio broadcasts available on KYKY 98.1 FM in English and KXOK 102.9 in Spanish.