

St. Louis City Shutout In Houston, Eliminated From Champions Cup

by Nathan Tucker, Sports Reporter
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HOUSTON - St. Louis City SC's very first continental away day didn't take them too far, as they traveled to Houston to take on the Dynamo in the second leg of their Concacaf Champions Cup first round matchup.

City won 2-1 at home last Tuesday evening, putting them in the driver's seat to advance on aggregate. City coughed up their 2-1 aggregate advantage by losing 1-0 Tuesday night, and lost the two-legged tie by the away goals tiebreaker.

Bradley Carnell changed up the team that played Real Salt Lake to a 1-1 draw on Saturday. Last Tuesday's match-winner, Hosei Kijima, earned his first City start, playing in the midfield alongside Chris Durkin and Tomas Ostrak.

The first half was mostly spent watching the Dynamo pass the ball around, looking for an opportunity but mostly failing to truly crack the City back line. However it was City with the first big chance of the game.

Joao Klauss found his strike partner Sam Adeniran breaking toward goal, but Adeniran's shot was saved by Steve Clark in the Houston goal.

Houston's big chance of the first half came from a long-range shot by Ján Gregus, forcing a sprawling save from Roman Burki. Sebastian Kowalczyk rushed in to try to put the rebound home but once again Burki came up big to keep the Dynamo off the scoreboard.

Burki's double-save was by far the most entertaining bit of the first half, one that was more about Houston's deliberate possession than their willingness to attack.

With moments left in the first half, City center back Joakim Nilsson went down with an apparent leg injury, and was immediately substituted for left back Anthony Markanich. This meant that Jake Nerwinski, who started the game as a right back, had to slide over to fill Nilsson's vacant center back spot.

A potential injury to Joakim Nilsson further exacerbates a worsening situation for City in defense, where numbers are getting thin if Nilsson has to miss any period of time. Speaking to the media postgame, Bradley Carnell played down major concerns.

"It's just a tight glute," Carnell said. "I haven't talked to the trainers yet, but it shouldn't be a major concern."

With a makeshift defense in place, City went back out for the second half, but Houston were the aggressors, and the huffing and puffing of the Dynamo eventually paid off.

Erik Sviatchenko, a halftime sub for the Dynamo, found space in the box off a corner kick, and settled a bouncing ball before placing it beyond a diving Roman Bürki's outstretched right hand.

As the ball was still bouncing in Bürki's goal, City's makeshift defense and those tasked with marking the set piece argued with each other, wondering who missed their man that gave Houston the goal.

That 60th minute goal was enough to flip the tie. Based on the away goals tiebreaker, a 2-2 aggregate scoreline would send Houston to the Concacaf Champions Cup Round of 16. City couldn't muster much of any offense at Shell Energy Stadium

Without a goal, it was the abrupt end of City's time in continental competition, a place that Bradley Carnell called "a celebration" of what his team has done in their existence to date.

While making the competition is an accomplishment in itself, Carnell and City will feel disappointed that they couldn't make more of their time in the Champions Cup.

"Obviously disappointed that we didn't go through," Bradley Carnell said following Tuesday's loss. "Just one of those days where, you know, you defend for your life and then you get the moments that you need in transition, and we let a few of those chances get away from us. So, you know, disappointed about that."

"Upset for the fans that we don't bring another Champions Cup game to CITY PARK. We'll have to delay that for another time."

If one wants to find a bright side to Tuesday's defeat, with City's potential depth issues, exiting the tournament might be a blessing for the team for the fate of their season. A potential chance to rest some tired legs instead of running out for midweek matches.

City, now fully focused on MLS action, returns to league play on Saturday evening. They'll welcome New York City FC to CITY PARK for the first time.