

Banged Up City SC “Not Looking Back” Ahead of New York City FC Matchup

by Nathan Tucker, Sports Reporter
March 2 2024 9:00 AM



ST. LOUIS - It was a disappointing week for St. Louis City SC.

A draw in the MLS home opener against Real Salt Lake and a frustrating 1-0 defeat in Houston, where the Dynamo knocked City out of the Concacaf Champions League.

“We’re not looking back,” said City head coach Bradley Carnell in the team’s pre-match press conference Thursday. “In the Houston game, we let ourselves down. We didn’t show the signature of our team, and that’s what we’re most disappointed about.”

A disappointing week in St. Louis Soccer continued on Friday when US Soccer officially announced the reformatted US Open Cup, a format that will only include eight MLS teams, not including St. Louis City SC.

The new format has been widely panned, and many have voiced their frustrations over Major League Soccer’s decision to pull the majority of the league out of the tournament.

“We are furious and disappointed in the decision of MLS to reduce participation in the US Open Cup,” reads a statement from the St. Louligans, the longest-running St. Louis soccer supporters group. “To not have our club participating is an insult to the St. Louligans as longtime supporters of soccer in St. Louis.”

“The excuse of “schedule congestion” that they created with a cash grab tournament (the Apple TV exclusive Leagues Cup) is MLS trying to erase the strong history of St. Louis in the national soccer landscape. As a result, leadership is not attending and advising a boycott (of Leagues Cup) in support of the Open Cup.”

Strong words but expected words from a supporter’s group that’s followed multiple St. Louis soccer teams in Open Cup play. As far as the team’s perspective, they wanted to play.

“Our perspective is we understand the decision made by MLS and US Soccer,” said City president and GM Diego Gigliani, speaking to Tom Timmerman of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

“At the same point, our preference would have been to be able to play in this competition.”

“This competition already had its own rich history in St. Louis, and teams from St. Louis have a rich history with that competition, ranging all the way back to the beginning of last century, and more recently with the USL team (Saint Louis FC) that was here.”

“So we would have liked to play in that competition, that has been our consistent position with MLS throughout this negotiation period.”

Under the 2024 US Open Cup format, City is excluded from the tournament because they qualified for the Concacaf Champions Cup. A tournament they saw themselves eliminated from Tuesday night.

Tuesday's loss in Houston was not a pretty watch, to say the least. City created very little offensively, spending the majority of the game defending their own box.

Defending they had to do with a makeshift backline, especially after the substitution of Joakim Nilsson after he went down with an apparent injury. Jake Nerwinski had to fill in as a center back, as injuries have thinned the heart of City's defense.

Tim Parker, center-back A1, had "a tight muscle" and left last Saturday's MLS opener after about a half an hour of game action. According to Carnell, the team is still monitoring Parker for starting on Saturday.

The aforementioned Joakim Nilsson would likely be A2 in the center-back depth chart. The good news for City is that he won't miss any time following his substitution on Tuesday.

"(Nilsson) came out of the game, but he's responded well to treatment," Carnell said. "There was nothing wrong there, we've just expected a lot from him. He's done an admirable job, getting his body turned around on short notice. Credit to the medical team and credit to him for giving us the option of having him."

Josh Yaro, who has become a super-sub at center back, did exactly that last Saturday when Tim Parker went down. Unfortunately, Yaro sustained two separate blows to the head over the course of about 10 minutes of game time. While he underwent concussion tests on the sideline, he is questionable for Saturday, and Bradley Carnell said that Tim Parker would be more likely to start.

Kyle Hiebert, who would also be a candidate to fill any potential void at center back, injured his knee in training last week and hasn't been a part of the squad for the last two fixtures. His status as of Thursday was questionable as well.

One man who looks to make a name for himself because of these questions is Michael Wentzel. Wentzel is the captain of City's MLS NEXT Pro reserve team CITY2, but found himself making his first team debut on Tuesday night in Houston. His performance on debut was a bright spot on a rather drab late night in Texas for the team.

Unfortunately for Wentzel's aspirations, he is on emergency loan to the first team from CITY2, which will end if he plays another competitive fixture. The only way for him to

stay with the team further is for City to sign him to a full-season contract. One assumes the status of other defenders will affect City's willingness to sign Wentzel to a first team contract this season.

One defender who has been signed to a first team contract is looking to make his debut Saturday. Danish left back Nikolas Dyhr was a full participant in training this week, and is "in contention" for selection according to Bradley Carnell.

"He's given a good account of himself over the last two or three training sessions," Bradley Carnell noted. "I think he's getting up to speed. First of all, you have to get up to the speed and intensity we play with. Then, you have to get up to your own fitness levels to contribute in ways we are looking for. I think in his last two or three (training) sessions, he's done all of that."

Speaking of speed and intensity, Rasmus Alm was described as "flying" in returning to training this past week.

"We actually had to break him a little bit in terms of intensity," said Carnell. "We had to tell him to calm down a bit. But that's just Rasmus, he empties the tank every time he steps on the grass he's chasing the ball like it's the first day we had him. It's good to have him around the group because he brings a certain energy and a different type of aura. It's the energy we need right now."

City will need a new energy, a new vibe, as they look to turn the page after an unsavory start of the season against New York City FC Saturday night. NYCFC comes to CITY PARK after losing 1-0 in front of over 60k fans in Charlotte last weekend.

It's the first-ever meeting between City and, well, City. While there's no head-to-head matchup history, NYCFC have struggled mightily away from the five boroughs, winning just once away from home last season. That didn't help their playoff push, which fell short by just two points, NYCFC finished 11th in the Eastern Conference in 2023.

It's a New York City team that's improved over the one that failed to qualify for last year's MLS Cup Playoffs. They recently signed 18-year old Serbian youth striker Jovan Mijatovic from Red Star Belgrade to bolster the attack, and he came on as a substitute in their defeat in Charlotte last weekend.

Still the straw that stirs the drink for NYCFC is Santi Rodriguez. Rodriguez can dictate a game with the ball at his feet, he led the team in assists in 2023 but was also among the leading goalscorers for the New York side.

City look to hit the refresh button on the start of their 2024 Saturday when New York City FC make their first trip to CITY PARK. Kickoff is just after 7:30 p.m., streaming on MLS Season Pass on Apple TV. Local radio broadcasts are available on KYKY 98.1 FM in English and KXOK 102.9 in Spanish.