

City Hosts DC United For Inaugural Cross-Conference Clash

by Nathan Tucker, Sports Reporter
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ST. LOUIS - After a few weeks away from home, St. Louis City SC returns to CITY PARK on Saturday night to take on longtime MLS veterans DC United.

No longer the inaugural season, but the matchup against DC is another first for City. It's the first time one of Major League Soccer's most storied clubs has come to Downtown West. While some of their history is, indeed, history, the DC United CV is quite impressive:

Four MLS Cups, four MLS Supporters' Shields, three US Open Cups, one Concacaf Champions Cup, and they won the very last Copa Interamericana, which was a cup final between the winner of the Concacaf Champions Cup and the CONMEBOL Copa Libertadores.

But those trophies are now more than a decade in the past. DC United's last trophy was the 2013 US Open Cup and the club has spent the better part of the past 15 seasons struggling to find a true identity.

In 2022, DC hired England and Manchester United legend Wayne Rooney as manager, hoping his playing-day success would translate into on-field progress. At the time, Rooney had just kept Derby County up in the EFL Championship (second tier of English soccer), but the club entered administration, and was handed points deductions that relegated them to the third tier League One. Rooney resigned, and less than three weeks later, he was unveiled as the new boss in our nation's capital.

DC United stuck by Rooney after a not great 2022, and 2023 saw their fortunes improve, but only just, once again missing the MLS Cup Playoffs. The club and Rooney mutually agreed to part ways, but rumblings were that Rooney was actually leaving for another job back in England.

Sure enough, three days after he left DC, he was named the new manager of Championship side Birmingham City. With Rooney out, DC United turned to Troy Lesesne, who spent 2023 as a caretaker manager for the New York Red Bulls after NYRB and Gerhard Struber went their separate ways.

Lesesne's record at the helm of the Red Bulls last year was solid, guiding the team to 14 wins in the regular season, three of which came consecutively to make the MLS Cup Playoffs. Getting back to the playoffs, or at least that conversation, is likely the goal for DC in 2024.

The Red Bull background of Lesesne means that there's a specific style that DC United are utilizing under his watch. It's a style that might be quite familiar to those who've watched St. Louis City, and their similarly Red Bull-trained head coach Bradley Carnell.

"Style-wise, I think we're pretty similar," said Carnell on Thursday, at City's pre-match press conference. "I think both teams bring a lot of energy, there's a lot of intensity, there's a lot of turnovers high up the field within the game model. Even the neutral can see (how similar the teams play)."

So what makes the difference on Saturday night when two teams are playing, roughly, the same game?

“It becomes about mentality, about willingness,” Carnell explained. “It’s ‘What are we willing to do to get the better of our opponent?’ It’s playing the game within the game to see who comes out on top.”

While it’s the first time City takes on DC United, it will be a reunion of sorts for Jared Stroud and Lucas Bartlett, who were traded to DC over the offseason for Chris Durkin. While Durkin played with DC for the past few seasons, there’s not a whole lot of inside info to be gained about this new DC team.

“Obviously they have their ways, but I don’t think it necessarily worked out (last year),” said Carnell, when asked if Durkin could offer any scouting help. “With Troy (Lesesne), it’s a different coach, a different animal, a different nature of the game.”

“Last year their style of play was totally different, so you can get bits and pieces of information on individuals, character traits and everything like that, but that’s focusing too much. You have to look at the overall picture, passing efficiency, long ball percentages, you look at all these things, that’s the DC of this year.”

The DC of this year added a few pieces in the offseason hoping to build around striker Christian Benteke, but will be without their most impactful addition this weekend. Right back Aaron Herrera is on international duty with Guatemala, and will be a big miss for Troy Lesesne’s DC team.

On the injury front, there is still no Eduard Löwen or Tim Parker for St. Louis City, but Njabulo Blom is said to be ready to go, and is officially off the injury report. Parker and Löwen are the only players with any injury designation, everyone else on the roster is fit and available.

St. Louis City SC squares off with DC United for the very first time on Saturday night at CITY PARK. Kickoff is just after 7:30 p.m. and the game is available for streaming on MLS Season Pass on Apple TV. Local radio broadcasts can be found on KYKY 98.1 FM in English and KXOK 102.9 FM in Spanish.