

# City Salvage A Draw In Frustrating Game Against DC United

by Nathan Tucker, Sports Reporter  
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ST. LOUIS - St. Louis City SC returned to the friendly confines of CITY PARK on Saturday night to host Eastern Conference foe DC United.

It was a game that, by design, never really developed a flow or rhythm. DC United's game plan of stifling City's tempo largely paid off, but City managed a 2-2 draw to remain unbeaten in MLS play.

Both teams rely on a high-pressing, direct counter-attacking style. City head coach Bradley Carnell said in the buildup to Saturday's match that the game would be decided by intensity, and capitalizing on the opportunities provided.

The first opportunity to open the scoring came to St. Louis City about 10 minutes in, Sam Adeniran found space running behind the DC back line but chopped a shot with his weaker right foot just wide of the DC United goal.

On the ensuing play, DC keeper Alex Bono made a mistake trying to kick the ball clear, slipped, and the ball bounced to a lurking Joao Klauss. Klauss tried to chip an outside-of-the-box shot over Bono but the visiting keeper recovered in time to intercept the effort.

City looked the better team in the opening stages, if not the most direct team. Many of City's chances came from their strikers and wingers finding space in DC's defense, and City playing long passes to find those aforementioned strikers and wingers.

The hosts won a corner in the 19th minute, where Josh Yaro would open the scoring for City. Indiana Vassilev smashed an outswinging corner kick and Yaro powered a header into the CITY PARK turf and to the left of Alex Bono.

Before Josh Yaro and City could truly celebrate the center back's first MLS goal, DC United equalized. Approximately 90 seconds after Josh Yaro's shot went in one goal, Ted Ku-DiPietro cleaned up a rebound at the other end to level the score at one apiece.

The DC goal was set up by former St. Louis City man Jared Stroud, playing as a wingback for DC United Saturday night. Stroud sent in a long cross from the right side and DC's star striker Christian Benteke thumped one of the fastest headers you'll ever see towards Roman Bürki's goal.

Bürki made the initial save on Benteke, but the loose ball following was tapped home by Ku-DiPietro while City's defense looked at each other and wondered who was supposed to cover him.

"When you score your first goal, it's always very special," said Josh Yaro postgame. "A bit of it was taken away once (DC) scored so fast."

City captain and goalkeeper Roman Bürki was clearly frustrated by the effort City put in that led to the first goal.

"I think if you look at it, the most dangerous players that it's played to (Christian Benteke), they have nobody with him," said Bürki postgame. "After the cross, yes, we try to find (Benteke) and defend. That's something I mentioned earlier in the season to

the guys in the video (training/scouting sessions), that we have to actually track the guys... (Benteke) was all alone. (Josh) Yaro came late to try to defend a little bit, but that's not enough."

Bradley Carnell, as you'd expect, was also less than thrilled with his team conceding so quickly after opening the scoring.

"Not so proud that we conceded straight away in two games," Carnell admitted. "Where we give away these moments from a kickoff, it's something to reflect on, something we're going to have to get better at, and something we have to look at a little bit more intensely."

DC would add a second in a similar fashion, and this time, they wouldn't need a rebound. City's defensive line played up, trying to force a turnover from the attacking DC United. This left Jared Stroud running behind the City defense down the right wing. Stroud served up a low pass on a platter for Christian Benteke, and the former Premier League striker had a tap-in to beat Roman Bürki in the 38th minute.

"The second goal, I think, was two players of ours trying to go out to pressure the pass, the ball gets played in between them," said Roman Bürki "Jared Stroud, again, can shoot, but he plays it across the goal and it's just too easy. We make it too easy for our opponents."

City went into the halftime break down a goal, needing to create a moment of magic to make something out of a game where they were struggling to really threaten DC's goal from open play.

It's awfully tough to create a moment of magic when the pace is sucked out of a game, when one team, usually leading, tries to take the air out of the match by slowing everything around the game down. Some call it gamesmanship, some for City plainly called it time-wasting.

DC's plan to intentionally slow the game to a crawl really came to the fore in the second half, as the 90 minutes and City's chances at a victory slowly wound down. Very, well, let's just say "patient" throw-ins, Alex Bono spending upwards of 20 seconds at a time holding the ball, any time DC had a chance to stall for time, they took it.

There's no rule against it, the referee in charge has to force teams to not slow the game down for the game's sake. Fans grew frustrated, and could be heard counting out the seconds each time DC United goalkeeper Alex Bono would take his time with goal kicks and long clearances.

“I just want to apologize to the fans,” Bradley Carnell said to open his postgame availability Saturday night. “It frustrates me a little bit when fans pay hard earned cash to get tickets and watch a soccer game and there's no rhythm to the game and there's no real action. We pride ourselves on action and unfortunately, yeah, it was a little bit of disruption of rhythm tonight.”

While there was little true action in the second half, substitute Célio Pompeu provided a spark off the bench, and ultimately created City's second goal. Pompeu, playing on the left wing, took on the DC United defense and ran at the backline towards the edge of the 18-yard box in the 66th minute.

Pompeu was clipped by DC defender Conner Antley just inside the box, but referee Amin Hadzic didn't immediately call a penalty, allowing the play to go on. A few minutes passed, inside CITY PARK there was no sign of a VAR check, or at least one was never announced.

Sure enough, Amin Hadzic did go to the VAR monitor and verified that Antley did clip Pompeu on his way into the box. DC United continued to protest, but Joao Klauss stood ready at the penalty spot waiting for his chance to score his first goal of 2024.

Joao Klauss jogged up, took a stutter-step, and sent Alex Bono the wrong way to give City their second goal of the night.

“Célio (Pompeu) is our only player who has that ability to go one-on-one when he's on the ball and he opens space for other players,” said Joao Klauss, on the play/player leading up to his penalty. “I think he's done a great job, he's shown his quality. He deserves the minutes he's getting, everyone in the team is happy for him.”

In the late stages, there was probably more arguing with referee Amin Hadzic than there was open play. “My focus was not on the soccer match, no real soccer rhythm tonight,” said a clearly frustrated Bradley Carnell.

“We play an aggressive game, and there's usually a lot of stoppages, corners when we play because we are forcing things out of bounds,” explained Carnell. “We are forcing interceptions. But yeah, just to see the ball-in-play time diminish becomes really frustrating when there's no rhythm to the game.”

When asked about the frustrating nature of the game, Bradley Carnell offered a pointed response. “You'll have to evaluate who was trying to speed up play, and who wasn't trying to speed up the play. I think that's a question for your observation.”

These feelings started to boil over during the more than 10 minutes of stoppage time, where DC goalkeeper Alex Bono was taking time to stretch his legs, watching seconds tick away as DC fought to hang on to a 2-2 draw.

“I’ve never seen a team wasting time so much,” said Roman Bürki, rather bluntly. “Just the referee not doing anything (about time wasting). I had thought (Alex Bono) lost a leg, but all of the sudden he was able to kick a ball all the way to my box. So I told (the referee) ‘this (time wasting) is obvious’, and he asked me ‘What can I do?’. And I felt like, ‘you have two cards in your pocket man’. Use them if you have to. The referee has to control the game, not let the game control them.”

City were stifled, frustrated, and left with a sour taste in their mouth despite claiming a point late. When they had chances in open play, they couldn’t convert. While frustrated with time-wasting, Bürki pointed to his team’s inability to convert chances as the difference.

“Like I said, DC United wasted time. They knew that when they do that, we will never find rhythm,” Bürki elaborated. “That’s also where the frustration comes from. But still, we had chances in my opinion, we just didn’t score out of open play.”

With the draw, City extended their unbeaten run to start the season, although it’s a bit different than the first five games of the inaugural 2023 season. Undefeated through five, but this time, with just one win and four draws.

City are also the first MLS expansion franchise to start their first two seasons undefeated through five games, a stat that seemingly amused head coach Bradley Carnell postgame.

City hit the road to Utah next weekend for a high-altitude meeting with Real Salt Lake.