

City Snaps Winless Streak With 1-0 Win Over Austin

by Nathan Tucker, Sports Reporter
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ST. LOUIS - St. Louis City SC have been needing a positive result, especially at CITY PARK in front of their rambunctious fanbase. On a warm and sunny Sunday, they hosted a similarly stagnant Western Conference side in Austin FC.

City looked the more energetic team in the St. Louis sun and scored a goal for the first time in a long time. That turned out to be all they needed, winning 1-0 Sunday afternoon.

If you thought about rewatching this one, perhaps if you didn't catch the game live, I might suggest skipping the first half. While City was by and large the better team, there wasn't much action to speak of in the opening 45 minutes.

Austin FC, with star No. 10 Sebastian Driussi back in the starting eleven, looked like they couldn't string passes together. Their struggles are both a credit to City's pressing on defense, and their own struggles to find cohesion early on in the MLS season.

City's best scoring chances of the first half came thanks to Indiana Vassilev, who was playing in the “10” role as a more central attacking midfielder. In the 14th minute, Vassilev took charge of a free kick from about 25 yards away, but Austin goalkeeper Brad Stuver made a routine save.

Three minutes later, Roman Burki played a wonderful pass to Tomas Totland, flashing down the right wing. Before Austin FC knew it, City were barreling down on their box. Totland found Vassilev in the box, but he couldn't get anything on his shot attempt, which was easily blocked.

That Vassilev free kick was the lone shot on target in what City head coach Bradley Carnell called a “cagey” first half. Austin attempted one shot, but a shot that was blocked. The visitors were playing a very patient game, content to pass the ball amongst their backline, not pushing up the field.

If there was a message during the halftime break, it might have been that the game was there to be won for Bradley Carnell's team. In the early stages of the second half, City were running right at Austin's defense with regularity, usually after forcing turnovers from ATX midfielders.

In the 57th minute, one of those City attacks paid dividends. Tomas Ostrak, once again starting in the typical Eduard Löwen role, pinged a pass across the field in City's own half to fellow Tomas, Tomas Totland. Totland, as he so often does, busted a gut with a run up the middle of the field, reaching the edge of Austin's 18-yard box before passing to Rasmus Alm on his right. Alm cut a pass back into a crowded box that found Joao Klauss with a yard of space, and Klauss turned a shot into the bottom corner of the goal, freezing Austin keeper Brad Stuver.

It had been approximately 233 minutes (plus stoppage time) of MLS play since City last scored a goal. The roar around CITY PARK was as much relief as it was a celebration. For Klauss, the goal was his first from open play since last September, despite turning in solid performances on and off the ball week in and week out.

“He should be on 15 goals for the amount of work he puts in,” said Carnell following the game. “Because that's the reward he deserves. Everyone's really happy to see him getting on the score sheet. You can see he invests a lot. The staff invests a lot in the individual, and it's nice to see it when it all comes around.”

“We know his value, we saw it last year in Klauss. It's just a matter of time, he got the PK goal a couple of weeks ago and now he's in the run of play scoring goals in the 18-yard area. It's progression, good players might have a rough patch here and there, but quality will always shine through in the end.”

A reward for Klauss, and a reward for City's attacking approach that has been questioned during their more lackluster run. The chances came against Dallas, but the finishing touch wasn't there. On Sunday, City had more than solid defense, were creating chances, and most importantly, got the goal that would eventually prove to be the difference.

Now well into season two of MLS play, City had another first on Sunday afternoon: Bradley Carnell picked up his first yellow card as a manager. In a playing career that spanned from 1998-2011, Carnell picked up 46 yellow cards, but this was his first from the technical area.

“Sometimes, you know, if I can't play the game, if I put it in my hands and I can play,” admitted Carnell. “I can put it in my hands and try to help the boys out. But I can't play. So what am I doing to try and help the boys with that performance and try and help off the field to get us in a winning position? I ask questions. I pose situations and I poke holes.

“And we've seen it over time now, how teams manage the game here at CITY PARK. So it's always just a reality check to the officials to just keep a little bit of accountability, and yeah maybe I pushed it too far, and for that, I apologize. But yeah, it's all in a competitive day's work.”

For a team that was down a goal and struggling to create chances, Austin did not play like a team desperate to fight back late, and it was City dictating the latter stages with their fresh substitutes. Austin's main man Sebastian Driussi made a return to the team but was largely a non-factor. The visitors didn't register a single shot on target and attempted just two the entire game.

The likes of Aziel Jackson, Nokkvi Thorisson, and Hosei Kijima provided a bit of a spark late for St. Louis City, with Jackson and Kijima both having good chances to score. Jackson's attempts on target were both directly at Brad Stuver, and Kijima got

through the Austin defense late but poked his shot about a yard wide of the goal on the south end of CITY PARK.

When referee Ted Unkel blew his whistle for full-time, City were still charging forward looking for a second goal, even if Bradley Carnell would have rather someone taken the ball to the corner flag to kill the game.

“I was saying ‘Got to go left, not straight through the middle, just left or right to the corner flag.’” laughed Carnell postgame. “We have a hungry group of guys, and we want to not just win the game, we want to score goals. We want to put ourselves in the best position to succeed.”

A comprehensive win for St. Louis City, and one that shows that the blueprint might not be flawed. City is trying to win games in a different manner than what was often referred to as “thriving in chaos” last season. City controlled their previous game, but couldn’t find the breakthrough. On Sunday, they controlled the game, found the goal, and played air-tight defense.

Keeper and captain Roman Burki said this clean sheet was a bit different than the one from the goalless draw against Dallas last week.

“Yeah, it was way hotter,” joked Burki after the match. “Not that much physical work, I would say, on the field, but it feels good. I think it's a big, big step forward from the team. I can't remember that we conceded one shot. If we're a little bit more clinical upfront, the game would have been decided earlier. But very well done by the team.”

Good vibes all around the post-game presser from just about all parties representing City Red, and a confidence boost heading into one of the biggest matchups of the season, the first of three against cross-state rival Sporting Kansas City.

“It gives us confidence, I think we already proved that we can play good games away from home,” said City striker Joao Klauss. “We know Kansas, they have a great, great team. We played them a lot last year. It's a special game for us and for them so yeah, very excited to go there again. And yeah, I am sure it will be a great game again.”

Some housekeeping notes to close on here:

Eduard Löwen returned to training this week, but potentially pushed himself a bit too hard trying to get back to game fitness, from what Bradley Carnell said postgame.

“Edu always wants to, and sometimes he's just such a great character, good guy on and off the field and sometimes he puts his body in harm's way, and all of the sudden he has a setback. We are just trying to manage him wisely in the right way.”

City striker Sam Adeniran was not a part of the team sheet for Sunday's game, despite nothing being said regarding his status in City's pre-match press conference on Friday.

“For me, the focus today was on the players who were here on the roster, and the guys who emptied the tank for each other.” said Carnell on Adeniran's absence.

City will travel west to take on de facto rival Sporting Kansas City this Saturday, April 20.