

“Not Good Enough” - City Handed First MLS Loss Of 2024

by Nathan Tucker, Sports Reporter
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SANDY, Utah - St. Louis City SC flew out west to Utah to take on Real Salt Lake in the shadow of the Wasatch mountains on Saturday night.

An early strike set the tone on the scoreboard, but despite leading for two-thirds of the 90 minutes, City gave up three second half goals en route to a 3-1 defeat.

Just over two minutes after the opening kickoff, a sublime strike from Indiana Vassilev would give City an early advantage. Vassilev dribbled from the right wing directly into the heart of the Real Salt Lake defense, pulled off a few fancy stepovers, and curled a left-footed shot around RSL goalkeeper Zac MacMath and inside the far post.

A goal down, Real Salt Lake were forced to push the issue and look for a tying goal to bring them back into the game. At times they found open spaces behind City's high-pressing defense, but occasionally frantic efforts by City defenders kept RSL from creating any real chances, not registering a shot on goal in the first half.

Vassilev's very early strike proved to be the difference going into the halftime break. While Salt Lake didn't create a clear goalscoring opportunity in the first half, City didn't look like adding a second to extend their lead.

Perhaps City's best chance to grab a second came after a lung-busting run from striker Joao Klauss, beating a Real Salt Lake defender on the right wing and rushing toward MacMath in the Real goal. Klauss couldn't keep his shot down, sending a rocket into the Utah night instead of the back of the net.

City's 1-0 advantage stood for roughly 67 minutes, before RSL's Chicho Arango showed exactly why he's become a star in Major League Soccer since his arrival in the league with LAFC in 2021.

Arango latched onto a pass just outside of City's 18-yard box in the middle of the field. With City's midfield stalwart Njabulo Blom closing in, Arango turned and fired a pinpoint and powerful shot to Roman Burki's left to give Real Salt Lake their first goal of the night.

With the goal, St. Louis City had lost all momentum late in the game, and a big crowd at America First Field was pushing Real Salt Lake onward. RSL is a good team, a legit playoff team, and MLS teams won't get away with letting them fight back into games. St. Louis City found that out Saturday night. City were spending more time defending, and having to defend in the box led to Real Salt Lake taking a late lead.

A cross flew into the City box, bounced off Tim Parker, and onto Chris Durkin, who played the ball unintentionally with his knee onto his own hand. While Durkin could do nothing about the position of his hand in that situation, leaping through the air trying to stop a cross, the penalty was awarded nonetheless.

"Not sure if that was a penalty or not," Bradley Carnell litigated after the match. "I think it hit his hip and deflected up to his arm, just unfortunate. That took the wind out of our sails."

Arango, sporting the Real Salt Lake captain's armband, stepped up to the penalty shot and froze Burki, rolling a shot to the Swiss shot stopper's left. Sandy, Utah was erupting.

If there was hope for City after going 2-1 down, it was given by the fourth official, who put up 13 minutes of stoppage time on his digital number board. That hope would be rather short lived.

A great run from Diego Luna through the City defense, and an even better pass from Luna set up Arango for a tap-in that he put his left foot through for good measure. Three goals for Real Salt Lake, and three goals for Chicho Arango, and despite leading for 67 minutes, City were staring down the barrel of a comprehensive away defeat.

Referee Drew Fischer blew for full-time, and City left Utah feeling disappointed in their second half performance.

“Not the result that we expected by any means,” said Carnell following the defeat.

“To go a goal up and win that first half, it’s a good indication that the game is 90-plus minutes. Unfortunately, we don’t win that second half, we don’t come out as energized. (RSL) come back in the game with a shot from distance, and then the penalty happens. We got caught chasing the game, nothing more really to say than that. A disappointing last 20 minutes of the game.”

“We just weren't good enough in the second half, plain and simple,” admitted a frustrated Indiana Vassilev on City’s post-match Zoom call.

“In the first half, it took us 35-40 minutes to start connecting passes and start looking like ourselves, which was frustrating, but we still got to halftime up 1-0. Then the second half wasn’t really us. Super disappointing.”

City center back Josh Yaro, filling in for the injured Joakim Nilsson who suffered a cracked rib in last week’s draw against DC United, echoed Carnell and Vassilev’s frustrations about the second half performance.

“I think we kind of lost our way a little bit,” Yaro acknowledged. “The way we play as a team, I think we didn't show that enough in the second half. When that doesn't happen, you know, it becomes really difficult for us, and we found out in the second half through the goals we conceded.”

As a new MLS team, St. Louis City is still achieving a number of firsts for the club. After Saturday’s defeat, City reached a first-ever low: their lowest-ever position in the Western Conference. With the loss Saturday night, City now sit in 10th place, with seven points with a record of 1-4-1.

“It's been a weird start for us, if you want to call it that,” said Yaro Saturday night.

“But as a team, as a group, we have full confidence in ourselves, in our coaching staff, and everyone around the club that we are going to get better. And that’s what we strive for, that’s what we work for every day. I think if there’s any group that can do that, it’s this group. It’s a group of guys that will fight. It’s a group of guys that will always give 100 percent, and when you have a group like that, you always have a chance.”