

Free-scoring St. Louis City Hosts Stingy FC Dallas Side

by Nathan Tucker, Sports Reporter
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ST. LOUIS - St. Louis City SC looked to “tighten things up” after a chaotic 6-3 win at home last week. The result of that approach was a 2-1 defeat in Orlando, but one that head coach Bradley Carnell took many positives from.

“Playing on the road against high-caliber teams, they’re one point behind us in the Supporters’ Shield standings,” said Carnell at City’s pre-match presser. “(Orlando) is a good team, a competitive team, a team that’s really good at home.”

“We didn’t give up a ton, we didn’t create a ton. But it was one of those tight matches of high quality.”

The numbers bear that out as well. Outside of the game-deciding penalty kick goal from Facundo Torres in stoppage time, City held Orlando under 1.0 xG (expected goals).

“We take that into account, high-level games, games that mean something,” Carnell said, of his defense’s performance Saturday. “6-3 games are nice for the neutral, but we want to tighten things up and I think we saw a step (towards that) tightening up.”

On the list of positives for City and Carnell is Joakim Nilsson’s 72 minutes of action. In his first MLS start, Nilsson showed the quality that Carnell and sporting director Lutz Pfannenstiel saw in him, despite his long-term injury.

“Getting Joakim (Nilsson) over the line, over 65-75 minutes, that’s progression,” Carnell noted. “I saw commitment, I saw confidence, I saw courage.”

“Although he’s had CITY2 minutes, you can’t replicate MLS demands, physically and mentally. Just thinking about the one moment at midfield where he steps in and really wins a tackle but its really hard on the man on the ball, we (force a turnover) and have a really good moment. I think that’s when the penny dropped and we could say ‘Okay Joakim, we can really count on you working moving forward now.’”

Nilsson’s performance on Saturday came with the absence of co-captain Tim Parker, who was away from the team awaiting the birth of his son, Rory. Many have wondered if City’s central defensive pair will be Nilsson and Parker for the MLS stretch run.

“It’s always a balancing act,” said Carnell on how his defensive line will look for the rest of the season. “We’ve proven that we can have this hybrid system, and plug and play and still get results.”

Speaking of getting results, City’s midweek opponent FC Dallas has been doing exactly that in recent MLS action, and even almost pulled off a shock win over Lionel Messi and Inter Miami in the Leagues Cup earlier this month.

Just like City, Dallas took a win over Austin FC last week, but Dallas’s wasn’t quite the 6-3 goalfest we saw on a muggy evening at CITY PARK. Dallas took advantage of a ten-man Austin FC en route to a 1-0 win.

That stinginess in defense has been a key to Dallas’s fight to clinch a playoff berth in the Western Conference. Dallas leads the west in goals allowed, with just 26 conceded in their 25 MLS contests to date.

That's a defense that has been bolstered by Dallas's signing of Asier Illarramendi. Fans may remember the name from his time with Spanish giants Real Madrid where he lifted the 2014 UEFA Champions League trophy.

Illarramendi spent the majority of his La Liga career with his boyhood club, Real Sociedad. He was the captain of the White and Blues in Basque Country until his contract expired this summer.

For those who might not be familiar with his style, he's a defense-first holding midfielder, and at his peak was one of the best at that trade in the world. For Dallas to pick up a player of his experience and quality as a free agent is a huge get for any club, but especially for one pushing towards a place in the MLS playoffs.

Illarramendi made his debut in Dallas's match against Austin at the weekend, notching 32 minutes coming on as a substitute. He even picked up his first yellow card for good measure.

"I played all of my career in the Spanish league and I wanted to try another project, a new experience," said Illarramendi in an FC Dallas team statement. "As soon as I heard about Dallas' interest, I didn't think twice about it."

With their new highly-decorated addition, FC Dallas has improved one of the best team defenses in Major League Soccer. It will be a major test for the usually prolific offense of St. Louis City to beat Dallas at CITY PARK on Wednesday.

It's a test that City will likely have to take without leading goalscorer Niko Gioacchini. Gioacchini suffered a "little knock" in training to his shoulder last week, and took a tackle and landed hard on that same shoulder in the game in Orlando. Gioacchini was subbed off at halftime, and came back to the bench wearing a sling.

"It seems better than initially expected," said Bradley Carnell on Gioacchini's hurt shoulder. "Is it a quick turnaround for Wednesday or do we get him ready for the weekend?. It's something we have to monitor, it's pretty much a judgment call on game day."

We had one good week without an injury update, and a fully-healthy squad. But as one striker rejoins the City fold in Joao Klauss, Gioacchini might need at least Wednesday off for recovery.

Klauss at Monday's presser admitted the struggles he's had being away from the team, or at least being unable to play. He also explained why it seemed like his injury

/recovery diagnosis seemingly stayed fluid, a string of “almost there” moments, where he was trying to resume normal training, but his body kept him from performing to his best.

Klauss also detailed his own struggles that he faced, being stuck watching his team on the road or from a suite at CITY PARK. “I put a lot of pressure on myself (to come back), That was the worst part for me, it wasn’t about if the team was doing well or not, but a tough part for me was the fight against myself.”

Klauss saw his first game action since the injury he suffered in suburban Denver earlier this season in Saturday’s loss in Orlando, but depending on a week of training, could be City’s starting No. 9 yet again on Wednesday night.

St. Louis City hosts FC Dallas in a MLS Western Conference clash Wednesday night, with kickoff just after 7:30 at CITY PARK. The match is available on Apple TV, with local radio broadcasts on KYKY 98.1 FM in English and KXOK 102.9 FM in Spanish.