

City Heads To Salt Lake Looking For Three Points, Not Just One

by Nathan Tucker, Sports Reporter
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ST. LOUIS - St. Louis City SC closes out the month of March in Utah on Saturday night, squaring off with Real Salt Lake for the second time this season.

City kicked off the 2024 MLS campaign by hosting RSL at CITY PARK. A Sam Adeniran strike saved City a point that night, knotting the score at one apiece just five minutes after Salt Lake's star man Chicho Arango scored in the 74th minute.

That has become a bit of a familiar story for St. Louis City in 2024. While they are the first MLS expansion franchise in the league's 28-year history to start their first two seasons with five games undefeated, 2024 comes with the caveat of only winning one of those five games.

“They’re not losses, but some of them may have felt like losses,” said City midfielder Indiana Vassilev at the team’s pre-match press conference on Thursday afternoon.

“Some games we come out of, did we lose two points or did we gain a point? But I think we’re doing all the right things. It’s just a matter of time.

“In those small moments (where City gives up goals) we need to be a little bit sharper and less naive in those crucial moments. Once we get those going our way, I think we’ll be okay. The underlying point is that we’re doing the right things, and things will start to go our way.”

In fairness, if you’re comparing against an unforeseen perfect start in 2023, something unprecedented in MLS, something quite uncommon in the general world of soccer, everything else is going to fall short. The start of the 2024 MLS season may not live up to last year’s lofty standards, but no other team starting from scratch has ever reached those heights.

“We don’t like looking back at last year, but last year we started 5-0-0, it was a record-setting season,” noted Vassilev. “I don’t want to say it’s a bit of a slower start, because the league has grown. It’s really good to be unbeaten after five games. That does still feel really good, and the feeling from within is good.”

“We’re striving to be better and we definitely want to get some wins... A tie is better than a loss, having said that, even from within it is frustrating for us as well. We’d obviously like to win, but points are important in terms of week-to-week momentum... Farther down the line, deeper in the season, maybe these points will matter a lot,” Vassilev continued.

Last Saturday, St. Louis City collected another 1-1 draw hosting DC United, who spent much of the soccer game not playing soccer. So much so that City head coach Bradley Carnell opened his post-match interview with a heartfelt apology to the paying customers at CITY PARK.

“First of all, I just want to apologize to the fans,” Carnell started. “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. For me, I hurt for the fans because they deserve more.”

The game, especially the second half, was stifled and stymied by a DC United team that countered City's tempo by taking tempo out of the game. Last Saturday's referee, Amin Hadzic, had the ability to stop the time wasting as a match official, but instead asked City captain and keeper Roman Bürki what he should do.

Bürki, to his credit, has been the most vocal and critical City player regarding just about anything, befitting his captain status. Bürki said postgame that the referee should be controlling a match more with his whistle and his cards, as referees are the only ones on a soccer field to stop potential time wasting.

Hadzic was working last Saturday's game as a replacement referee, as Major League Soccer and the Professional Referee Organization (PRO) were still hammering out a new collective bargaining agreement with the Professional Soccer Referees Association (PSRA), a union for soccer referees, including all MLS officials.

Hadzic was only on the field at CITY PARK because the union refs at PSRA were locked out. Almost ironically, news broke Saturday night that PSRA and MLS/PRO were close to an agreement on a new CBA. Tuesday night, that agreement became official.

After six weeks of replacement referees who only had experience in the lower levels of soccer and the college ranks, union PSRA referees will be back putting in the hard yards on MLS turf this weekend.

Their return marks the debut of new rules that were agreed upon by the MLS Board of Governors in the winter, rules designed to limit time wasting and promote more ball-in-play time. Rules St. Louis City would have liked to see in action last weekend.

Substitutions will be told to get a move on instead of slowly trotting off the field, and players going down for cramps/injuries will now have 15 seconds before a referee will stop play for them to leave the field and receive treatment. Again, rules City would have loved last weekend.

While fans and intrepid journalists may wonder about how past results could have gone differently, City, as one would expect, has full focus on a Real Salt Lake team that sits just above them in the Western Conference standings. Both teams have seven points, but RSL holds a tiebreaker with two wins.

One of the stories of the MLS season so far has been the breakout of Salt Lake's 17-year-old starlet Fidel Barajas, a dual national who's played for both the US and Mexico's U17 teams, and is highly sought after by both countries for their national squads.

Barajas had two assists in RSL's comeback win in Vancouver over the Whitecaps last weekend, and was named to MLS's weekly Team of the Matchday.

The pass Barajas played for RSL's second goal in Vancouver last weekend showed why there's buzz around the young playmaker. His through ball to teammate Anderson Julio eliminated four Whitecaps from the play in a matter of seconds. There's an awareness on the field not usually seen for a player of his age.

All of that said, he may not even start this week with the return of RSL's Diego Luna and Andres Gomez, likely back in the lineup this week as they return from international duty with USA and Colombia respectively.

On the injury front, good news and bad news. First, the good news: Tim Parker returned to training this week and is listed as questionable for Saturday, and he could travel with the team with the expectation to play.

Now the bad news: Parker's fellow center back Joakim Nilsson cracked a rib last weekend, finding out the hard way just how strong DC United striker Christian Benteke really is. Eduard Löwen is still out as he deals with a hamstring problem but has been working out separately on the training fields in Downtown West.

St. Louis City looks to grab all three points instead of just one (or worse, none) Saturday night roughly 4,500 feet above sea level in Sandy, Utah against Real Salt Lake.

Kickoff is set for just after 8:30 pm, streaming on MLS Season Pass through Apple TV. Local radio broadcasts can be found at KYKY 98.1 FM in English and KXOK 102.9 FM in Spanish.