

City Steals A Draw in Six-Goal Thriller Against Sporting Kansas City

by Nathan Tucker, Sports Reporter
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KANSAS CITY, Kan. - St. Louis City SC traveled West on Interstate 70 to renew their cross-state rivalry with Sporting Kansas City on Saturday night.

Whatever you may call the matchup, the “Capital Classico”, the “Derbycue” (with varying alternative spellings), or as Joey Zanaboni of the City radio broadcast termed it, the Border Clashico, in a short time, a real rivalry is budding between the two midwestern MLS teams that never played each other until last year.

Saturday’s match was no different. Hundreds if not more than a thousand clad in City Red filled the southernmost corner of Children’s Mercy Park, and they were treated to a thrilling, topsy-turvy tussle. In a game that City looked like they had won, and looked

like they had lost, a late moment of magic from a potentially unexpected source saved City a draw in a wild 3-3 game.

City looked up for the challenge and came out of the tunnel looking like the sharper of the two teams. A few early chances for João Klauss and Célio Pompeu flew wayward, but City were creating looks at the Sporting goal.

Somewhat against the run of play, it would be the hosts opening the scoring. City center back Tim Parker tried to catch SKC off guard with a quick outlet pass to right back Tomas Totland on the right wing, but his pass was intercepted by Sporting's Tim Leibold.

Leibold ran right into the City defense, drawing in Tim Parker before laying off a pass to Alan Pulido. Pulido played a little one-two with fellow SKC attacker William Agada and finished a gorgeous Sporting move with a cool finish to Roman Burki's left.

Undeterred by the deficit, City, and most importantly, Klauss, kept pushing for a goal to square the game. Klauss got a head on a long free kick that was unfortunately right at the feet of Tim Melia in the SKC goal.

Klauss had another opportunity where he took on what felt like all of Sporting Kansas City's defense, beating multiple men on the dribble, but couldn't get a shot away before the final tackle came in. After his goal last week, it looked like the Klauss City fans became accustomed to in 2023, using his strength in pace to win battles all over the pitch, and creating numerous scoring chances.

In the 31st minute, Klauss would be rewarded for his graft and determination. City's Chris Durkin shoulder tackled Tim Leibold, one of the creators of the Sporting goal, winning the ball back for City in the attacking third. Durkin played a short pass back to Rasmus Alm on the right wing, who played a first-time low cross that sliced the SKC defense with the precision of a paring knife, and found Klauss in stride who tucked a shot underneath Melia.

"I think you can see the trend and the curve line going over multiple weeks now in the right direction with Klauss," said Bradley Carnell following the game. "Not just his work right now. Today, he's the creator, he's the finisher. And he's shown a lot through the weeks. We know Klauss is a special player, we know he enjoys these types of games, and he gets up for these games."

Parity restored, Klauss's confidence in front of goal seemingly restored. City were flying. The turnover that led to the Pulido goal could be pointed at as their only real moment of weakness in the opening half. They had all the momentum to grab another goal before halftime and really take control.

In stoppage time of the first half, Celio Pompeu would find that goal to give City the lead in enemy territory. Really, calling it just a goal is doing a disservice to the strike that City's left winger put on the ball to beat Tim Melia, a goal truly worthy of being considered a "golazo", a Spanish term for a "truly spectacular goal in soccer".

It was an attack that was, once again, created by the physical defending of City in the SKC half of the field. This time, it was Joao Klauss really putting the body to opposing attacker William Agada, sending the Nigerian flying, but the referee deemed it a legal challenge live.

Klauss then picks up the dribble, dances around Sporting defensive midfielder Nemaja Radoja, and spots Celio Pompeu flashing down the left wing. Importantly, Klauss makes an overlapping run behind Pompeu that forces the SKC right back Jake Davis to keep an eye on Klauss, and take a step off Pompeu. That gave Pompeu the extra yard of space he needed to get the ball out from under his feet and put all of his might into a shot from outside the 18-yard box.

What followed was a rocket that may still be traveling through space had it not been stopped by the netting inside the Sporting goal. An absolute laser off the boot of Pompeu crashed into the side netting, leaving Tim Melia flailing at air, diving for a shot he had no chance of stopping.

"(Klauss) did his run to open up space for me," explained Celio Pompeu postgame. "So, when he did that run, I went to the middle and I did what I did in practice. The whole week I was practicing my finishing, so my good work got rewarded."

It's not the first time Pompeu has scored a fantastic long-range goal in Kansas. Those who haven't tried to forget City's MLS Playoff defeat at the hands of their rivals last year may remember his ultimately futile goal as City crashed out of the playoffs at Children's Mercy Park.

It was the best half of soccer City's played all season. They were attacking, they were creating chances, and they were defending from the front, just about everything Bradley Carnell asks of this St. Louis City team.

One would assume that the Sporting Kansas City players got an earful from manager and team sporting director Peter Vermes. Vermes has been a part of the Sporting fabric since they were known as the Wizards and played at Arrowhead Stadium, helping lead the then-Wizards to the MLS Cup in 2000.

In the other locker room, perhaps the message from Bradley Carnell to his City players was to try to protect their lead. Wins have been hard to come by for Carnell and City, and it felt as if the team was flipping the script from the first half, letting SKC dictate the play as long as they could protect Roman Burki and the City goal.

When you play a defense-first game, you risk being caught out by a momentary mental lapse, a free-kick, or maybe just a funny bounce. In the 65th minute, City fell victim to all three.

Sporting won a free kick inside the City half of the field, but too far for modern SKC legend Johnny Russell to try a shot on goal. He chipped a free-kick that would have gone behind for a goal kick had Joao Klauss not put a head on the ball. The kick deflected off Klauss's dome and right to Sporting's Daniel Salloi. Salloi tried to toe-poke a cross into a chaotic six-yard box, and Roman Burki got a fingertip to the cross that saw it loop right inside the near post.

A foul that could have been avoided, a flicked header that could have been avoided, and ultimately, a goal that could have been avoided had City been playing with the intensity and endeavor they played the first half with.

As City tried to change the complexion of the game with substitutes, they still played most of the second half without the ball, and as the clock ticked, it seemed only Sporting Kansas City would get a win from the match. In the 77th minute, Erik Thommy, once scouted by Lutz Pfannenstiel and St. Louis City, used his pace to beat the City defense and beat Roman Burki to give Sporting a late lead.

It's Thommy's third goal in two weeks, as he scored two at Arrowhead when SKC hosted and lost to Lionel Messi and Inter Miami in front of 72,000-plus last weekend. Given the momentum of the second half, it seemed he had grabbed all three points for the sky blue-clad Sporting.

"I think from the 60th minute we gave up the ball and then we started to chase," said Joao Klauss on City's second half performance. "When you start to chase, you get tired and then we didn't keep the ball enough as we did in the first half, and then we didn't find the spaces anymore. Then we were just defending so I mean, I think this is also what we have to learn, how to manage these games."

City may have brought on the likes of Nökkvi Thórisson and Aziel Jackson to try to add firepower, but it was Tomas Totland, the hard-working, harder-running right winger, who found himself with the golden opportunity to save the game for City.

Totland, as he so often does, was running up field to join the City attack, providing an outlet on the right side. In the shadow of Kansas Speedway, Totland found an extra gear and latched onto a loose ball in Sporting's half of the field. Bearing down on the SKC goal with a full head of steam, all he needed to do was keep calm and beat Tim Melia.

With the composure of a seasoned striker, Totland waited for Melia to run out of goal to meet him before dispatching a shot to Melia's right and into the back of the net in front of SKC's supporters section known as "The Cauldron".

The Cauldron, and those in attendance in Sporting Blue, were silent. The City Red corner, and the smatterings of City Red throughout Children's Mercy Park, were jubilant. An equalizing goal worthy of the occasion, and the best matchup between these two teams yet.

"I would say that the last goal was a lot of relief more than joy," Totland admitted. "Coming back to 3-3, it felt like the game was going away from us, giving up the two goals in ten minutes. We showed again that we don't give up and we'll take the one point back."

It's a point, but perhaps two points dropped after the great first half from St. Louis City. Bradley Carnell mentioned that it's "back to the drawing board" for City with regards to conceding easy goals, after a few stout defensive performances at CITYPARK against Austin and Dallas in recent weeks.

City will take heart in finding the third goal to take something back across I-70 after such a breathless battle with their cross-state rivals.

"I think we just never stopped fighting, we never gave up, that's what I love about this team," said Celio Pompeu after the 3-3 draw. "We won't quit. We always keep going, we can be losing games but we never put our heads down, we always keep fighting and that's what happened (Saturday)."

Of note once again was the absence of Sam Adeniran from the City team sheet, who is being held out of the team "until further notice" by Bradley Carnell and the coaching staff. Carnell made pointed comments regarding Adeniran's absence both after the Austin game and to the media this past week, essentially saying that Adeniran wasn't putting in the effort behind the scenes to make the City team anymore.

After the draw to Sporting Kansas City, St. Louis City SC now sits 8th in the MLS Western Conference standings with two wins, six draws, and a loss. The team now gets a week off but returns to action on May 4 when they head to Houston to take on the Dynamo.