THE DAILY WAVE RAPIDS BACKPASS

Backpass 7-18-15: Sweet Silence at CenturyLink

There's a special rabidity to Sounders fans, and a bit of arrogance. Which I suppose is deserved when you have a history of beating the Rapids like a rented mule since forever. In Backpass, we'll ask whether it's crazy to start thinking about the playoffs (maybe?) and whether Baldomero Toledo should invest in a toupee (he should).

By rapidsrabbi | @soccer_rabbi | Jul 21, 2015, 8:00am MDT

Joe Nicholson-USA TODAY Sports

There was a lot to get excited about Saturday night for Rapids fans coming out of CenturyLink Field. The Rapids won in Seattle for the first time since the Sounders began playing in 2008. It's a sweet victory to defeat the Sounders. They're the current holders of the Supporters Shield, so it feels momentarily like the Rapids can beat anyone, anytime (note: our first win of the year came against **FC Dallas**, who is currently 10-5-5 and atop the Western Conference). The win was the Rapids third in a row, going into the All-Star break. It was again achieved in the 4-3-3. The Rapids did it without their big unit defender, Axel Sjoberg, or talented Left Wing, Luis Solignac, or former-DP and leading goal-scorer Gabriel Torres.

It's also special because it sent Sounders fans, who can be a bit, mmmm, irritating, into a tizzy. Just go over to Sounder At Heart (an excellent SB Nation Blog, mind you). The comments section is hysterical. No, not 'hysterically funny.' More like 'chicken-little-sky-is-falling' hysterical. Fans blamed referee and staunch comb-over advocate Baldomero Toledo. They blamed the slippy pitch. They flipped out at Sigi Schmid. They flipped out at Andy Rose and Chad Barrett and Erik Friberg for not finishing some clear chances. That, along with silencing the biggest crowd in MLS each week, was just wonderful.

But, all the excitement leaves Rapids fans with a conundrum: just how excited should I get? Is this all smoke and mirrors before the let down? Is that sixth playoff spot possible, or another mirage in the desert?

So, without asking the unknowable 'Can these players win enough games to get into the playoffs?', let's instead ask the more answerable, 'What do we need to do to make the playoffs?'
The Rapids sit on 24 points with 14 games left to play. Before this season, there were five playoff spots per conference, and since 2012, teams generally needed 49 or more points to get that last spot (the Whitecaps got in on 43 points in 2012). Even though there are six spots this year, the Western Conference is far more competetive than the East, so let's keep the points-to-qualify number the same. On that basis, the Rapids need about 25 points from 14 games, or 1.78 per game. Can that happen?

Last year, the **Portland Timbers** had a very slow start. Observe:

MLS Regular Season [edit]

MLS 1	March 8, 2014	Portland Timbers	1–1	Philadelphia Union
MLS 2	March 16, 2014	Portland Timbers	1–1	Chicago Fire
MLS 3	March 22, 2014	Colorado Rapids	2–0	Portland Timbers
MLS 4	March 29, 2014	FC Dallas	2–1	Portland Timbers
MLS 5 Cascadia Cup	April 5, 2014	Portland Timbers	4–4	Seattle Sounders FC
MLS 6	April 12, 2014	Portland Timbers	1–1	Chivas USA
MLS 7	April 19, 2014	Real Salt Lake	1–0	Portland Timbers
MLS 8	April 27, 2014	Houston Dynamo	1–1	Portland Timbers
MLS 9	May 3, 2014	Portland Timbers	3–2	D.C. United

That’s 8 points in their first 9 games. They were all but dead.
The Rapids started almost as badly, getting only 9 points in 9 games.

1	March 7, 2015	Philadelphia Union	0 – 0	Colorado Rapids
2	March 22, 2015	Colorado Rapids	0 – 0	New York City FC
3	March 28, 2015	Houston Dynamo	0 – 0	Colorado Rapids
4	April 4, 2015	Colorado Rapids	0 – 2	New England Revolution
5	April 10, 2015	FC Dallas	0 – 4	Colorado Rapids
6	April 18, 2015	Colorado Rapids	1 – 3	Seattle Sounders FC
7	April 24, 2015	Colorado Rapids	1 – 1	FC Dallas
8	April 29, 2015	New York Red Bulls	1 – 1	Colorado Rapids
9	May 2, 2015	LA Galaxy	1 – 1	Colorado Rapids

Starting in game 10, the Timbers then went on a tear, getting 41 points in their next 25 games to end up one point shy of the playoffs, when the Whitecaps squeaked by the Rapids 1-0 on the last day of the season. The Timbers got 1.64 points a game: 11 wins, 6 losses, 8 ties. That's a pretty hot run. So, it'll be tough. But the Rapids have a number of encouraging signs: the team is, for the most part, healthy. The defense has given up only 19 goals, 2nd best in MLS. The team's goal differential is only -1. They have a game in hand to half the conference due to the SKC lightning cancellation. The team is locking down opponents with a mix-and-match backline. Clint Irwin is a brick wall. They're getting production from spare parts no one expected to contribute like Charles Eloundou and Vicente Sanchez (I mean, you'd hope to get 15 minutes of Sanchez a game. He's played nearly every minute in the last 3 matches, going the full 90 on that dodgy pitch in Seattle.)

We might not make the playoffs, and even if we did, I'd bet $50 on a Toronto- **LA Galaxy** final. But this Rapids team could make things interesting right down to the last day of the season.

This Game against Seattle

We saw a little of the same things against Seattle as we did when facing Vancouver and RSL: pressing high with the forward line, Lucas Pittinari popping up all over both on offense and defense, and the Rapids playing hard to the opposing endline and being crafty in order to draw corners (the Rapids are 4th in Corners in MLS this season). We saw less diagonal than

last game, more balls played on the ground. We saw a lot of low crosses or ground crosses into the box. And we saw a lot of aggressiveness in transition.

The two teams split a lot of the indicative stats: Seattle out possessed Colorado 54-46, while Colorado out-shot Seattle 13 to 9. The Rapids had more shots from within the 18 yard box (5 to 3). Seattle passed a little better than Colorado (74% to 67%), but neither was stellar there. The Rapids passing in the final third was a less-than-desired 51%. But Colorado led in the all-important 'Blows dealt that required stitches', giving Gonzalo Pineda the what-for when he went up with Kevin Doyle to head a ball.

Three GIFs to sum it up

Here's Jared Watts coming out on Tyrone Mears. Mmm. That was not good.

I don't show that to pick on Watts, because other that that, he was good. In fact, besides that miscue, an opening run by Seattle just 30 seconds into the game, and misplayed ball by Michael Harrington, the back four were again stellar. But there's no doubt that this game was incredibly close, and these errors could have cost the Rapids. The difference between Jared Watts filling in at center back and Jared Watts locking down the position is eliminating these gaffes.

Here's Sarvas -> Pittinari -> Doyle -> Pitti -> Arrrrrgggghhh!

This was a gorgeous play, and the lack of a finish was either due to the sorry-ass field conditions (favorite Richard Fleming line was a sort-of clutch-the-pearls 'Goodness me, this would never happen at sainted Dicks Sporting Goods Park...' It was quality trolling...) or an errant Pittinari final ball. But, I want to highlight that it was another example of the kind of thing you get in the 4-3-3 that we'd never have seen in the beginning of the year: multiple forwards in position to do damage, with our midfielders using vision and quick movement to get the best shot off. It also highlights Doyle's great holdup-holdoff play. He can head, he can dribble, he can work back-to-goal, he dishes the rock well under pressure. Badji could do some of those well, some of the time. Doyle is more of a most-of-the-time guy. That's encouraging.

And this was my favorite thing that happened.

Did you see my man Charles deek-and-burn Erik Friberg, then shimmy through a drainpipe-sized hole between Alonso and Mears? At full speed? On turf the consistency of a chia pet with herpes on wet cardboard? Never mind that the Rapids didn't get back fast enough to receive the ball. Note that it was only one of at least three times Eloundou burned the outside man in this match. Yes, he's got to do this with regularity before he can become a lineup lock. Some days, though, you can put aside the league table, the front office, the lack of decent vegetarian options at our home park, and the X's and O's of formation and tactics and technique, and just shut up and watch a gorgeous play.

Jogo Bonito, y’all.

Bet Now!

3/4, 9:30p	SKC	COL
SPREAD	+0.5 (-135)	-0.5 (-105)
MONEY LINE	+235	+260	-105
OVER UNDER	> 3 (-130)	
	< 3 (-110)	

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