

Controversial late penalty dooms Whitecaps as they lose to NYCFC 2-1

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VANCOUVER – It didn't matter whether the roof was open or not (it was), Saturday was a perfect night for stargazing at B.C. Place.

Unfortunately, a thrilling encounter between the Vancouver Whitecaps and New York City FC will be remembered for two dubious penalty decisions, rather than the terrific 90 minutes of back-and-forth action, and an especially wild finish.

A NYCFC side that featured [Andrea Pirlo](#), Frank Lampard, and [David Villa](#) in the starting lineup came away with a 2-1 win, after Villa converted a controversial 95th minute PK. Late into stoppage time Lampard dribbled into the box, and while Matias Laba appeared to win the ball with a last-ditch challenge at the edge of the area, referee Ricardo Salazar pointed to the spot. It was a crushing blow for the Whitecaps, after Pedro Morales' 88th-minute penalty kick goal – a call that also raised a few eyebrows – had cancelled out Lampard's 29th-minute strike.

"The first goal in any game is crucial and New York got the first goal. We managed to claw our way back and deservedly so, and we probably should have gone ahead," said Whitecaps head coach Carl Robinson. "That call at the end ... just crazy.

"He's got the ball, I think everyone in the stadium could see it. I don't know whether he felt (he needed to make) a make-up call or whatever, but the game's about tackling. The game's about contact. Matti Laba is one of the best players in that position and he clearly won the ball."

In the past, international superstars playing in MLS such as Thierry Henry have not made the trip to face the Whitecaps because of the artificial turf at B.C. Place and the long flight to Vancouver.

But with NYCFC hoping to make a late push for the playoffs – they entered Saturday's game eight points out of sixth place in the Eastern Conference with four games to play – Pirlo, Lampard, and Villa took the field for the visitors.

The Whitecaps had their own spot in the standings to consider. A win and they would retain their spot atop the Western Conference. Otherwise, FC Dallas or the Los Angeles Galaxy could move into first place with a win Sunday. Vancouver's goal is to finish top two in the West and earn a bye to the second round of the MLS Cup playoffs.

Lampard opened the scoring Saturday in the 29th minute, making a great run into the box and finishing a cross from Angelino after Pirlo played the NYCFC left back into open space with a great ball from his deep-lying midfield position.

Lampard almost scored his second just before halftime, but couldn't get the timing quite right on a volley from outside the box off a Pirlo corner kick.

After NYCFC dictated the pace of play in the opening 45 minutes, Vancouver began to push back in the second half. Kendall Waston's strong header from in close forced New York City goalkeeper Josh Saunders to make a terrific diving save to his right. Kekuta Manneh had a go at goal from distance in the 63rd minute that tested Saunders again, but Manneh's blast went just wide of the left post.

Sensing that the opportunity to break through was near, Robinson inserted Pedro Morales in the 67th minute in place of defensive midfielder Gershon Koffie. Octavio Rivero followed shortly thereafter, coming on for Darren Mattocks.

With two of their more dynamic offensive players now in the game, the goal-scoring chances continued to come for the Whitecaps. Jordan Harvey rushed to a loose ball in the box, but his shot went way over the net. Rivero had a good look to even the score in the 74th minute, however, his header also flew above the bar.

Jordan Smith smashed a shot from over 35 yards out that Saunders saved awkwardly. As Waston lunged at the rebound, he was judged to have been fouled by Angelino, and the Whitecaps were awarded a penalty. Morales stepped to the spot and struck a hard shot into the bottom left corner of the net to make it 1-1.

It appeared Vancouver would walk away with at least a point, and they had multiple opportunities to claim all three points as they continued to put pressure on NYCFC's back line. They couldn't keep their composure in front of goal though, and it cost them in the end.

"We had a few chances during the game – clear cut chances – and we should maybe finish (or) find the right pass to finish the game off," said veteran striker Robert Earnshaw, who entered the game as a substitute in the 80th minute. "Because we didn't, this gave them the chance to get the penalty at the end."

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