

Whitecaps set to begin potentially season-defining road trip

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By Israel Fehr

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VANCOUVER – As the Vancouver Whitecaps embark on their most challenging stretch this season, they saw just how slim the margin of error is on the road in Major League Soccer in their last home game.

The Whitecaps were deadlocked 1-1 with Real Salt Lake with the final whistle fast approaching, when the away side were undone by a costly error. Defender Elias Vasquez and goalkeeper [Nick Rimando](#) got crossed up as Vasquez headed a ball in front of Rimando that the RSL keeper was not expecting. With Vasquez and Rimando caught in no-man's land, Whitecaps winger Cristian Techera pounced on the mistake and scored the decisive goal in the 79th minute to deliver a [2-1 win](#).

"It was an important win," said head coach Carl Robinson after the game. "Salt Lake are a good team, they've got good players. When they had their period of play at the start of the second half the fans got us through that."

For the next little while though the Whitecaps won't have the luxury of leaning on their fans.

Saturday's home win was the first game played on the new turf at B.C. Place and it was evident early on that the new surface is noticeably greener, slower, and for now more slippery than its predecessor.

The new turf was installed because the FIFA Women's World Cup is taking over B.C. Place for the next six weeks, which is why Vancouver won't play a home game until July 12, bringing back memories of the Vancouver Canucks' 14-game road trip in 2010 due to the Winter Olympics.

The Whitecaps' five-game road trip starts off with a Canadian derby match on Wednesday in Montreal, which is

followed immediately by a flight back west to take on the Los Angeles Galaxy on June 6.

Next comes a bye week, which will be especially important because the next two games on the schedule are on the East Coast with visits to the New York Red Bulls on June 20 and the New England Revolution on June 27. The Whitecaps' travel odyssey finally ends on July 4 with a visit to Colorado and its always challenging altitude.

The trip is setting up as the kind where the young Vancouver side could really come together, or the kind that could really put a dent into their confidence. A terrific 4-1-0 start to the MLS season gave way to two wins in their last eight games before the 2-1 win over Salt Lake. Through three months of play the Whitecaps have 23 points and a 7-5-2 record.

Other than Seattle, who showed their dominance [with a convincing win in Vancouver in mid-May](#), there are questions about the other possible contenders in the Western Conference. RSL and the Galaxy appear to have taken a slight step back this season, leaving room for a team like Vancouver to take advantage in a wide open West, if they can string together a few positive results here.

"Whether we can score enough goals to win games has been the big question," Robinson said on Saturday. "I said to the guys [in the locker room] 'Well played, but I'm sick of saying well played but we're not winning.'"

"The group can go to a very special place if they really believe they can and want to."

Those elusive goals will be even harder to come by away from home. It will require a total team effort. It'll also be on Robinson to manage his team properly in between games to make sure they're ready to compete when kickoff rolls around.

We'll have a much better idea where the Whitecaps stand six weeks from now when they come back to B.C. Place to host Sporting Kansas City, another team that's in the mix in the West. Whether it's a triumphant return or a solemn one will be dictated by how the road trip plays out. It's shaping up to be a season-defining stretch.

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