

Real Salt Lake reaches CONCACAF quarterfinals with tie at Toronto

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TORONTO · Javier Morales recovered from a bad knee in the nick of time.

Introduced as a substitute at halftime of Tuesday's night's CONCACAF Champions League game against Toronto, Real Salt Lake's midfielder general got a clutch free-kick goal that gave Real Salt Lake a 1-1 draw with Toronto FC, and the single point required to send RSL to the quarterfinals of the tournament.

Morales had missed the last four games through a mix of suspension time and a knee problem.

Morales' goal was the first time a Real Salt Lake player has scored at BMO Field since Toronto FC came into existence in 2007. That's a total of 428 minutes of scoreless soccer in Canada's largest city. RSL drew 0-0 with the Reds when they met in MLS play Aug. 28.

With a 2-0 win over Arabe Unido on Tuesday, Cruz Azul also clinched a spot in the quarters, transforming their mid-October group stage game in Sandy into a meaningless friendly.

Not that coach Jason Kreis will be complaining. He rested five of his regulars in Saturday's 1-1 draw with the Colorado Rapids so he could field the best possible lineup for the Toronto game, ensuring that his club could focus on MLS down the stretch.

But his plan went awry when bad weather scuttled the team's connecting flight in Atlanta on Sunday. Instead of arriving in Toronto on Sunday night, half the team still hadn't crossed the border on Monday morning. They arrived on a number of planes through the day. Kreis was forced to cancel practice and couldn't evaluate if Morales was ready to return or not.

"It's hard to describe how difficult the travel situation was," said Kreis.

Before the match, Morales went through a quick fitness test, but neither player nor coach had any idea how his knee would hold up.

But, after a goal from former Colorado Rapid Jacob Peterson · his first as a TFC player · gave the Reds a 1-0 halftime lead, Kreis and Morales agreed that it was time to roll the dice.

"Absolutely, it was a big gamble," said Kreis. "The question was, how many minutes could he last?"

"It was a risk we had to take," Morales said. "I felt OK. I wasn't sure that I could go 45 minutes, but we were lucky · everything was good."

In the 68th minute, Morales smashed a free kick over the defensive wall. TFC midfielder Julian de Guzman had a chance to head it off the line, but the ball skidded off the top of his head · it deflected slightly but still found the back of the net.

TFC had de Guzman, who is 5-foot-7, on the goal line, rather than a tall defender. It was a mistake that cost the home team dearly,

Had Morales not pulled RSL out of the fire, the final group-stage game with Cruz Azul would have been a nailbiter. Because the Mexican side had already clinched its quarterfinal spot, it likely would not have started its best lineup. But RSL would have gone into that game without captain Kyle Beckerman, who will serve a yellow-card accumulation suspension after he was cautioned for kicking de Guzman long after the ball had gone.

Instead, Beckerman will miss a meaningless game.

"We're an extremely pleased team right now, to accomplish one of our major, major goals this season," said Kreis.

Peterson opened the scoring after taking a 50-yard throw from keeper Jon Conway. Toronto FC rested starter Stefan Frei, the MLS saves leader, but Conway was solid in his place.

Will Johnson, Real Salt Lake's Canadian midfielder, laid out to try and intercept the pass, but the ball got by him. Because Johnson went to the turf, it allowed Peterson to lead a two-on-one break into the RSL half, and he buried a perfect shot just inside keeper Nick Rimando's left post.

Rimando made an outstanding save on a 20-yard curling drive from Dwayne De Rosario in the second half, keeping the game at 1-0, allowing Morales the chance to perform his heroics.

Only 10,581 fans turned up for the game · the smallest crowd in TFC history.

Toronto FC coach Nick Dasovic said he wasn't concerned about the turnout.

"Anywhere you go in CONCACAF, there hasn't been great crowds," he said.