



Quakes, Crew, United up for Challenge

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With just two weeks to the start of the season, the

three MLS sides competing in this week's Carolina Challenge Cup in Charleston, S.C., find themselves at very different places as their regular season openers loom.

The tournament pits D.C. United, San Jose Earthquakes and the Columbus Crew against host Charleston Battery of the USL First Division (second tier) in a round-robin format. Games are set for March 19, 22 and 25.

Coming into the tournament, United looks to be in good shape with two CONCACAF Champions' Cup matches under its belt, and more importantly, no major injuries.

The same cannot be said about Columbus.

"We're down 10 guys right now due to a variety of different ailments," Crew coach Greg Andrulis said. "We could only play two of our projected starters on Tuesday night. We're hoping to get three or four for Saturday night."

Columbus had little problem last Tuesday with Cincinnati, beating the USL Second Division side 3-0. The Battery should pose a more difficult test for what is essentially the Crew's reserve team.

Along with the string of injuries that has plagued Columbus the entire preseason, the Crew has been without the services of Jon Busch, Chad Marshall, Frankie Hejduk and Kyle Martino, all away on national team duty.

"It's unfortunate, but that's the way it is sometimes. We just have to be ready with who we have and who we have that's ready," Andrulis said.

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"We still have a lot to figure out in two weeks,"
Nowak said.

After losing the Challenge Cup last year to Columbus on goal differential, Nowak said D.C. has returned to Charleston to win the tournament, and Nowak said he would not experiment too much with the lineup.

"We are going to field our best team for these games," Nowak said.

San Jose, too, will be without three offensive linchpins -- Brian Ching, Dwayne De Rosario and Brian Mullan, all away on national team duty.

You love to have those guys in camp, but they are with their respective national teams, and you can't say no to that," San Jose coach Dominic Kinnear said. "The only thing is that they are not around to mix with the new guys."

Despite missing several key players, Kinnear plans on using the tournament as a final tuneup for his starters.

"With the season only two weeks away, the guys who are likely to be in my starting 11 will be playing this week," Kinnear said.

The Crew will face Charleston in the opening match of the tournament Saturday, followed by San Jose and D.C. Columbus takes on San Jose and D.C. battles the tournament hosts the following Tuesday. Play concludes Friday with Charleston facing San Jose, then the United-Crew match. Kickoff is scheduled for 6 and 8:15 p.m. all three nights.

Andrew Mosier is a contributor to *MLSnet.com*.
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