

# Defense remains Hounds' cornerstone

Features News

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*Riverhounds center back Illal Osumanu heads the ball clear in the team's 1-0 win over Miami FC on May 4 at Highmark Stadium. (Photo: Chris Cowger/Riverhounds SC)*

If there has been one constant in the **Bob Lilley** era with the Riverhounds, it has been the team's strong defensive record. With the team facing a nine-game stretch that will determine if they extend their playoff streak to seven years, maintaining that defensive record will be crucial.

The Hounds have allowed 24 goals in 25 games — 0.96 per game. Entering this week, that ties the Riverhounds for second in the USL Championship behind only Sacramento, and the team is also tied for second in the league for the most shutouts with 10, trailing only Charleston.

On the defensive stability of this season, even during a dry run of results in June, center back Illal Osumanu attributes it to the work put in during training.

"I just feel like we have good training habits. We are really competitive in training, and we know a lot from training goes in translation to games. And obviously we have high standards for ourselves," Osumanu said.

Osumanu was around last season, when the team allowed just 29 goals during a 34-game schedule. That was his first taste of the expectations Lilley has for his team, something Sean Suber has learned and taken on in his first year with the team.

Suber worked his way from a bench role at the start of the season to becoming a regular starter at center back since the beginning of June. But while he has stepped up individually, he also emphasized the importance of holding each other accountable in order to create results — as the team did with three consecutive shutouts of Sacramento, Detroit and San Antonio to begin this month.

"The strikers have been pressing well and putting pressure on the ball. Our job is really easy in the back end," Suber said. "Obviously, we have Eric (Dick) in the back, making saves when we need him. But talking about the locker room, it's just that we trust each other and try to push each other in training."

The team has been finding more success at this point in the season than earlier, having gone unbeaten in their past seven matches, but Suber doesn't see anything that has changed in training. He attributes their success to team chemistry and the players continuing to get comfortable playing together.

“I don’t think there has been anything noticeable. I just think everyone has started to learn each other’s chemistry and everything has gotten a lot better throughout the locker room. We’ve been getting more goals, getting more shutouts, which obviously will help in the games,” Suber said.

Continuing to build chemistry and culture is what Suber attributes to the team’s strengthened defense.

“I think we have a pretty good culture here and everything that Bob is trying to teach us,” Suber said. “Everyone is trying to get on the same page as everybody. But, yeah, I think the culture has been growing a lot over the last couple games.”

The overall defensive numbers look astoundingly similar to Lilley’s previous teams in Pittsburgh.

The team won’t match the defensive results of Lilley’s first year, allowing 26 goals in 32 games (0.76 per game) for the Hounds’ best total in a full-length season. But it is on pace to finish better than the 2021 and 2022 teams (1.06 and 1.12 per game, respectively) and be the fifth time in seven seasons the team has allowed less than a goal per game.

Still playing strong defense, the Hounds realize the importance of capitalizing on scoring chances in front of the net to make the shutouts count as wins and not draws. Going into the final nine matches, the Hounds sense the urgency and must find new ways to persevere.

“It is just urgent now. We know it is crunch time now, and we are right there on the playoff line. We are being more aggressive, knowing where we are now and just taking it day by day,” Osumanu said.

“We know these last nine games, we have to go on a big run if we want to make playoffs,” Suber said. “Everyone is super locked-in. We know there’s pressure on us, but you’ve got to live up to the pressure if you’re a pro.”

*Feature written by Riverhounds contributor **Jameson Keebler**.*