

## 6. Mathieu Valbuena

Although Olympique de Marseille's calendar year has been very much up and down, one player plying his trade at France's supposed most popular club has reached the upper echelons of the GFFN 100. He is without doubt the smallest player on this list, but also one of the craftiest, most skilful players currently in Ligue 1. Yes, it is of course the magician known as Mathieu Valbuena, or 'Valby', if you chose to call him by his affable nickname. In a year in which his team have had highs and impeccable lows, his excellent performances have been one of the only constants at the club.

Over the course of the first six months of 2013, when the Ligue 1 season of 2012/13 was coming to a climax, Mathieu Valbuena was in topmost form. He played in all but one of Marseille's games during the run in, and provided 6 assists and a goal in to ensure that Marseille finished a very impressive 2<sup>nd</sup>, only to money-rich Parisian outfit PSG. It was a just reward for his excellent performances throughout the season, in which he bagged 3 goals and 12 assists, with a place in the Ligue 1 Team of the Year of 2012/13, being one of just two Marseille players who received the honour. During the first half of 2013, he was also an integral part of the French national team, scoring a goal and making 5 assists during the World Cup Qualification campaign, which was to go right to the wire after a nervy playoff with Ukraine.

As the 2012/13 season drew to a close and the transfer market opened, there was strong interest in Valbuena across Europe, as there seems to be year after year. However, the Frenchman stayed loyal to Marseille, deciding to stay on once again with the team he has been part of since 2006. Unfortunately, Marseille did not enjoy the same level of success in the 2013/14 season as they had done in the previous campaign. Despite losing few players, Marseille began to stumble. As we head into the mid-season winter break, they lie in 6<sup>th</sup> place, a whole 15 points behind leaders PSG. However, regardless of Marseille's drop in form, the statistics suggest that Valbuena has remained as effective as ever...

In the first 16 games of the current Ligue 1 season, Valbuena made 5 assists and scored one goal in the league. When you compare this to his form in the run-in of the previous season, it is indeed very similar. While some slated him for his performances, Valbuena is one of the only players in Marseille who have performed at the same level as they did last year in the current campaign. He is an integral part of this Marseille side, and without him, their struggles this year would have been even more evident and damaging to the club's reputation.

So, what makes Valbuena such an effective and important player, both for club and country? Standing at 5 ft 6 inches tall (or short), he is obviously by no means of a strong physical presence, and therefore carries a non-existent threat aerially. However, his height, or lack thereof, does give him some tangible advantages, especially for an attacking midfielder. His low centre of gravity allows him to change direction extremely quickly and, while he is not blessed with the pace of some other Ligue 1 players, his alterations in direction are often enough to allow him to get past his opposing defenders. Players who can eliminate opposition defenders with pieces of skill are highly valued, and Valbuena most certainly falls under this category. However, Valbuena's most effectual attacking weapon is his range of passing. As is evident by the number of assists he consistently provides, Valbuena is the by far Marseille's best player when it comes to picking out a pass. He can make short, delicate passes into feet or long through balls, cutting apart the opposition defence. In addition, whereas other player may be able to formulate the same passes, it is as if Valbuena always chooses the correct option when he is going forward. At his best, he will simply dictate the attacking play of his side.

As a result of this combination of talents, Valbuena can play in almost any attacking position behind the striker. He is often seen in the hole behind Gignac for Marseille, but has also played on both wings for his club. In the national team, where a 4-3-3 formation seems to be preferred by Deschamps, he is predominantly a right-sided winger whenever he plays. This ability to switch seamlessly between positions gives his manager more possibilities than is customary in terms of where to place Valby and it is another strength in Valbuena's game and also why his versatility will serve him well if he ever decides to join another club.

If there is a criticism that is to be levelled at Valbuena, it is that he does not quite score enough goals for a player in his position. In the last 57 Ligue 1 games that he has played, he has just the 4 goals, a somewhat minimal return from a player who seems to always be in and around the opposition box. Whilst it is Valbuena's style to be unselfish when it comes to final third, if he was to just add a goal scoring touch to his game, he could lift his game up into the elite level. At the age of 29, it is unlikely that his footballing style will be severely altered, but if he combines his technical game with a little more hunger for goals, he could become an even better player than he already is.

**Club:** Olympique de Marseille  
**Date of Birth:** 28th September 1984  
**Position:** Midfielder



Overall, 2013 has been yet another successful calendar year for the charismatic Valbuena. He has been a class above most of his teammates, and without his performances, Marseille would more likely than not be struggling even more so than they are currently. With players like Valbuena, who seem to have an exclusive ability that few others do, one must enjoy watching them while they grace French football. Let us all just hope that Mathieu Valbuena has many more dazzling years left.