

1. Zlatan Ibrahimovic

Every so often somebody changes the game, moving the goalposts or singlehandedly raising the level of excellence, all on their own. When Zlatan Ibrahimovic made the decision to come to Ligue 1 and play for Paris Saint Germain in the summer of 2012, he was branded as a 'money-grabber', with claims that Ibrahimovic was moving to the supposed sub-par French football division simply to earn €14m a year in wages.

18 months onwards and Ibrahimovic-led Paris Saint Germain have played the major role in projecting Ligue 1 to a global audience, enticing world-class footballing individuals to try their hand in France's first division, which has subsequently seen the arrival of oligarch-backed AS Monaco into the Ligue 1 stratosphere, not to mention the arrivals of Edinson Cavani, Falcao and David Beckham.

PSG's mission is relatively simple: dominate Europe and thus world football. Such ambition at board level must be matched by that of their star players and not only do Thiago Silva and 'Zlatan' both embody and believe in the project, but they act as figureheads for Les Parisiens' European revolution to take shape. Regardless of the occasions during interviews when 'Ibra' has cast doubt over his future, most notably during the period of time in which Carlo Ancelotti's future at the club was questioned, Zlatan has always claimed to 'believe in the project.'

His unique character, purposefully arrogant but with a subtle softer side, also helps to promote QSI's football project. For whatever reason, be it is style, relationship with the media, raw talent or general effortlessness, people idolise over Ibrahimovic in a way that few other footballers are obsessed over. Zlatan Ibrahimovic is indeed an icon, because he stands up for himself whilst remaining distinctly professional, in his own admittedly roundabout way. One merely has to look at the very verb that he was given, which was officially introduced into the Swedish language "zlatanera", which means to dominate; or the series of Swedish stamps which were produced that had depictions of Ibra's face printed on them. Football fans love Zlatan, and so does his own country. Beyond the bravado and the on-pitch individual genius, there is another side to Zlatan that sets him apart from the Mario Balotelli's of the footballing community. Ibra stands for responsibility.

Ask any of his Paris Saint Germain teammates and they all reply in more-or-less the same manner: Zlatan is always there to help me. Ibrahimovic is not a hard-hitting celebrity who can be seen every evening at one of Paris' most renowned clubs or bars; instead, he is a family man and a father to two young boys. Sure, he has had his 'Balotelli' moments, including his infamous self-boycott with regards to the Swedish national team in 2007, but all the signs suggest that, at the age of 32, Ibrahimovic has become more level-headed if not on the pitch, then certainly off it.

The player's genius on the pitch seemingly knows no bounds. 27. The number of league goals that Ibrahimovic scored over the course of the calendar year. Admittedly, to a certain extent, a lone striker is only as accomplished as the teammates surrounding him. If Ibrahimovic were not as well served by the likes of Blaise Matuidi and Thiago Motta in particular, then he would simply not have scored as many goals as he has mustered in 2013. The individual brilliance, improvisation and brute strength that the player demonstrates from fixture to fixture is however not due to anybody else other than Zlatan. The back-heeled scorpion kick that he fashioned in October against SC Bastia in Ligue 1 was extraterrestrial and further reminded French football of Zlatan's extraordinariness, harking back to memories in particular of THAT goal against England.

His critics will argue that his ability is overstated because of his often outrageous character, that he failed to deliver for Paris Saint Germain in their big games, notably during their Champions League two-legged affair with Barcelona and that there is a darker, more angry side to his character which often results in him lashing out, be it at the referee, the opposition or, most often, his own teammates. It is undeniable that Ibrahimovic is frustrated exceedingly easily, regardless of whether his team happens to be winning or not. What is clear is that he sets tremendously high standards for himself, and all it takes is a couple of loose touches of the ball, and Ibrahimovic's initial mood being one of perseverance turns into a disenchanted one, where he will take his anger out on others. Lucas Moura and Edinson Cavani have admitted to tensions with the 6 ft 5 Swede in 2013 and one merely has to look at Ibrahimovic's abhorrent disciplinary record to see that he is not a huge favourite among French football's officials either.

In 2013 in Ligue 1 alone, Zlatan was yellow carded ten times and a confounding five of those were for disrespect towards officials, either through provocative gestures or words. As for criticisms regarding his habit of failing to shine during the encounters where PSG desperately needed an attacking talisman to make the crucial difference, he ultimately failed. In their Champions League duel with Barcelona, PSG were only knocked out on the away goals rule. Lionel Messi came back from injury in the second leg to make a decisive contribution to Barcelona earning a draw that consequently saw them through to the next round. Zlatan Ibrahimovic did not produce a similar piece of brilliance that would have seen Les Parisiens through against one of the most established sides on the European footballing scene. Extraordinary footballers are called upon to complete extraordinary actions at timely moments.

Club: Paris Saint Germain
Date of Birth: 3rd October 1981
Position: Striker



The negatives aside, Zlatan Ibrahimovic's character and performances have begun to make Ligue 1 important in football again. If anything, Ibrahimovic has become more lethal in front of goal and, on his own admission he is improving with age, 'like fine wine'. His importance as a role model, as the figurehead of Paris Saint Germain's ambitious project and his ability to wow footballing audiences make him the most worthy individual to take the highest ranking in this year's Get French Football News 100.