

2. Blaise Matuidi

Blaise Matuidi is the definition of the twenty-first century footballer. His athleticism, pace and power combined make him into a truly unstoppable midfield engine. Over the course of the calendar year, Matuidi has gone from playing a more conservative role under Carlo Ancelotti, to one with more freedom under former Bordeaux manager Laurent Blanc, which has been synonymous with the superior quality of football that Paris Saint Germain have been executing since their new took the reins in the summer of 2013.

Matuidi is the only player in Paris Saint Germain's generally accepted starting XI to have been part of the Les Parisiens' setup before the assets of the Al Khelaifi and his Qatari crew were pumped into the capital club, as he joined on a €7.5m deal in 2011. The fact that he remains an integral part of the team, despite the high-profile arrivals of Marco Verratti and Thiago Motta, is testament to his raw talent but also the extent of his progression in the two and a half seasons that have followed since he first set foot in the Parc des Princes, wearing PSG colours.

Matuidi's story is one that ultimately proves the theory that hard-fought work, and effort pays in the end. He went largely unnoticed by the French national system until the age of 19 when Guy Ferrer first selected him in 2005 for the U19 setup. Now, Matuidi has become an integral part of the French national team at the most senior level and has become one of manager Didier Deschamps' linchpins in terms of his integrality on the pitch but also due to his buoyant and amiable character which further strengthens the bond between players in L'Equipe de France. If France are to at all succeed in Brazil next summer, they are going to need to be assured of a close-knit atmosphere which will dissuade the possibility of disciplinary dramas infamously seen at previous major tournaments. Matuidi's consistency on the pitch similarly exists off of it and his importance in the squad is generally understated.

A late bloomer on the international scene therefore, many still make a case that Blaise Matuidi is the best defensive midfielder on the planet as we near the end of 2013. The statistics, as usual, are utterly telling. The ball winning midfielder's role is both tiresome and repetitive, requiring discipline and sufficient poise to carry it out effectively. Over the course of the calendar year, Matuidi picked up just two yellow cards in league action. For a player whose role is simply to disrupt the opposition at every opportunity, his efficacy at doing so is highlighted by the aforementioned statistic. Generally in Ligue 1, Paris Saint Germain enjoy a clear majority of the overall possession during a match, which actually makes Matuidi's defensive role more difficult, as it becomes harder to maintain focus. There are elongated periods of time whereby Matuidi is involved instead in prying open opposition defences, with his passing accuracy averaging at 93% over the course of the calendar year in all competitions, one begins to appreciate that Matuidi is a multifaceted player with the ability to perform consummately in various seemingly unlike aspects of the game of football.

Not only does Matuidi possess a measured and reliable passing radar, but, with the help from Claude Makélélé and Laurent Blanc specifically, Matuidi's movement on the ball has improved markedly in the last six months. Matuidi is one of those footballers, who, when you take a glance at him, you do not immediately expect strength, but perhaps more endurance. Matuidi has worked hard to make the former characteristic more pronounced in his game and this is best shown by his boisterous runs into the opposition box, often from as far back as the centre circle, brushing off a couple of opponents, before looking to provide a teammate with an obliging cross. This action has become emblematic of Matuidi's more noticeable box-to-box nature that he did not necessarily act on to the same extent beforehand.

Matuidi is very much a player who relishes the big occasions, perhaps quite simply because, unlike his continental football-cultured PSG counterparts, Matuidi has never been part of a title-winning side before his time in the French capital. This was both noticeable throughout PSG's Champions League group stage encounters during their 2013/2014 campaign, with an especially sparkling performance against Benfica at home, where he was the standout performer in a game that Les Parisiens eased through, finishing 3-0 winners against arguably the most challenging opponents that their group had presented them with.

Club: Paris Saint Germain
Date of Birth: 9th April 1987
Position: Midfielder



Call him PSG's 'Duracell-bunny' or any number of other appropriate nicknames; Matuidi's most enviable statistic is arguably his level of endurance, which truly sets him apart. Simplistically speaking, Matuidi can simply perform better than most and longer than most. There is this unerringly robotic nature about his enactments that creates this sense of inevitability when watching Blaise Matuidi pull the strings. As an opponent, eventually, the French international will wear you down.

When writing this piece it became increasingly obvious when searching for appropriate comparisons to Matuidi that there simply weren't any which would do him justice. One cannot help but feel that PSG's defensive midfielder, who will sign a contract extension with the club imminently, is the first of an entirely new mould of player whose astonishing perpetuation and brute force, paralleled with the voracious technical skill he possesses may well make him a near-perfect footballer. Either way, neither Blaise Matuidi's importance to French football nor his brilliance can be understated.