

## 26. Bruno Ecuele Manga

Club: FC Lorient

Date of Birth: 16th July 1988

Position: Defender

The next man to make this larger-than-life French football list is none other than Lorient centre back Bruno Ecuele Manga. The 25-year-old has impressed in 2013 being a crucial part of Lorient's recent mid-table stability. His form has helped Lorient keep a very tight defensive record, especially in the last few months of the year.

Ecuele Manga joined Lorient in 2010 as a long-term replacement for Laurent Koscielny, who of course joined Arsenal earlier in that year. At Lorient, Ecuele Manga soon began to flourish and secure his place at the heart of the defence. He has the ideal physical build to be a centre back – he carries a resilient build and stands at 6 ft 1, so he is able to use his strength when he needs to. However, his strength does not mean he lacks any pace. In fact, when compared to the average centre back, he is rather quick on his feet. This means that Ecuele Manga is not just another brutish Ligue 1 defender but is instead capable of successfully implementing his very unique style of play. He is unyielding in the air, convincing when taken on in a one-on-one dribble and alert enough to hurtle back to strikers who manage to run in behind Les Merlus' defence. In the first 17 games of the Ligue 1 2013/14 season, he only committed 10 fouls and received just one yellow card. This proves that he Ecuele Manga can aptly rely on his own abilities without the need to commit cynical fouls to get his side out of potential trouble.

Although Lorient made a very slow start to the 2013/2014 campaign, (they were 18<sup>th</sup> after 10 games), they have managed to recover since then to mid-table security in the weeks from November into December. This recovery has been based primarily around the mental vigour of the defence, of which Ecuele Manga is practically undeniably the heart and soul. From their game against Reims in early November, Lorient kept 5 consecutive clean sheets and won 4 games in a row. Ecuele Manga played in all of these games, and was one of the main reasons why Lorient were able to keep so many clean sheets.



We were shown how much Lorient missed their captain and leader in late 2012 to early 2013, a period in which Ecuele Manga was out injured for 6 months. At one point in that period, Lorient dropped as far as 12<sup>th</sup> in the table, but when Ecuele Manga returned Lorient's form picked up again, and they rose as high as 4<sup>th</sup> in the Ligue 1 table. What Ecuele Manga brought and still brings to the club is not only a brilliant defensive awareness, but also crucial leadership. He is an influential player, who puts his heart into everything he does on the pitch, and this inspires his teammates to do the same. A term that is probably over-used in football punditry these days is that of 'leading by example' but Ecuele Manga typifies it.

If you perform at a consistently high level like Ecuele Manga, you are bound to attract interest from other clubs, and that was no different in the Gabon international's case. It was rumoured that clubs such as Everton, Liverpool and Marseille themselves were in talks to sign the player, but it is a credit to the Lorient captain that he was able to resist such interest. He acknowledged the interest from Marseille, saying to RMC that 'It is always a pleasure to know that you are being courted.' However, he was keen to develop at Lorient for at least another season, and to see how it went from there.

There is no doubt that Bruno Ecuele Manga has a bright future ahead of him. At 25 years old he is not exactly very young in footballing terms, but one cannot help but think that his best days at a big club are still ahead of him. His muscular build should stand him in good stead to go a substantial distance in his career in terms of seasons played than most other footballers, and the experience he has gained by being made captain of Lorient will definitely help him in the future if he does decide to move on. As it stands though, Lorient have a top quality centre back in their ranks, and Ecuele Manga is going from strength to strength.

*'I want to play in England!'*

Bruno Ecuele Manga

26th June 2013

**DID YOU KNOW?** Bruno Ecuele Manga was snubbed of a new contract by former employers Girondins de Bordeaux earlier on in his career. Another one that got away from Bordeaux...