

74. François Clerc

Club: AS Saint-Étienne

Date of Birth: 18th April 1983

Position: Defender



Leaving Lyon in the summer of 2010 as his contract expired, you may have been forgiven for thinking that François Clerc had had his day at the top level. National team caps had long since dried up and, after a poor few seasons that saw him rack up just 19 appearances, the right-back seemed to be struggling. However, his struggles now seem a distant memory as, following a brief trial with Nice that led to a two-year stay at the club, he signed a three-year contract with Saint Etienne in July 2012 and has never looked back.

Very much a traditional right-back, Clerc possesses the versatility to be deployed on the left flank and has even played on the right of midfield earlier in his career. Surprisingly good in the air for a full-back, standing at 1.87m, Clerc also has a good eye for a pass and has maintained the necessary physical condition throughout his career to remain alert and mobile for all. He boasts an excellent disciplinary record - committing just 24 fouls in 31 starts last term - and seems to have sharpened his technical skills over the last year, alongside keeping himself in peak condition as he enjoys some of the best form of his career.

And while his attacking output has never been particularly noteworthy - with his best return coming in the 2011/12 season when he scored 4 goals - his consistently strong displays, high work-rate and considerable experience at the top level make him a key member of this over-achieving Saint Etienne side.

One contributing factor to Clerc's incredible run of form over the last 12 months is the fact that he has been injury-free since a minor knee injury kept him out for a month in late 2012. Aside from missing one match due to suspension, this prolonged run of form and fitness saw him play every minute of his team's league run-in in 2013 and it is certainly no coincidence that Saint Etienne's results were excellent throughout this period - losing just twice, to Lorient on both occasions.

His only goal that season came as the equaliser in the 2-2 draw at home against PSG. He ensured that his sole strike was a memorable one, however, as he fired an 18-yard rocket into the top corner with the outside of his right boot, sending the fans into raptures.

In the Europa League, meanwhile, Clerc played in both of *Les Verts'* third round qualifying matches as they cruised to a 6-0 aggregate win over Milsami of Moldova. With 3-0 victories both home and away, he even captained his side in the away leg. Disappointment came in the playoffs, however, as they fell to Denmark's Esbjerg in what was the final hurdle before the tournament proper. Clerc played every minute yet again - filling in at left back in the return match - but was unable to prevent his side from suffering one of the shocks of the round as Saint Etienne's European dream came to a premature end.

A vital cog in his side's Coupe de la Ligue triumph in the 2013 season, he remained on-pitch throughout their epic semi-final tie with Lille before going on to score what proved to be the winning penalty in the shootout as he calmly slotted his strike into the corner, sending the keeper the wrong way. In the final, meanwhile, he played the full 90 minutes and went close to scoring with a header and a volley, showcasing his technical and physical prowess, as Saint Etienne sealed a 1-0 victory over Rennes to end a three-decade long wait for a domestic trophy.

Since then, Clerc has brought this form and fitness into the current season, playing every minute of his team's league campaign so far and picking up right where he left off. In another rare goal-scoring display, he grabbed the opener in the 3-2 win over FC Lorient in October and also got himself an assist in that encounter, something he will undoubtedly hope to do on more occasions before the season ends.

Off the field, Clerc was subjected to controversy in late April this year when he became the target of a bizarre outburst from Montpellier owner Louis Nicollin. Well known for his inflammatory public statements, Lyon-native Nicollin branded Clerc a "gobshite" in response to the full-back's assertion that his trophy win with Saint Etienne meant more to him than his three previous Ligue 1 titles with Lyon.

While the chief was roundly condemned for his comments, Clerc's professionalism shone through. When speaking to the press about the matter Clerc said: *"Ultimately, I'm not overly surprised as he insults his players and coaches at Montpellier and, between us, he may have labelled me as a gobshite, but he's clearly the one who is full of it and it shows."*

This sense of maturity certainly benefits a player who has blossomed into one of the league's most consistent performers at full-back after something of a personal renaissance in recent years. While his focus will undoubtedly remain with Saint Etienne in the coming months, with a World Cup on the horizon he may still harbour dreams of pressing forward his case for a first international cap since 2008, however unlikely that may seem.

'I talked to him about the captaincy. We laughed but friendship subsides on that pitch.'

Maxime Gonalons

On rivalry and friendship with François Clerc -10th November 2013

Quotes of the Year: Francois Clerc: "I don't know who he thinks he is. When you're a club president you should be a bit more reserved. I've never spoken to him and I'm not going to insult him like that." Clerc was responding to criticism from Montpellier President Louis Nicollin.