

43. Gregory van der Wiel

Club: Paris Saint Germain

Date of Birth: 3rd February 1988

Position: Defender

It was the summer of 2012, and Gregory van der Wiel's life was about to change. He had spent 6 seasons at Dutch giants Ajax, after making his debut at the age of 18, but it was time to move on: Paris Saint Germain had come calling.

It must have been a hard offer to refuse. After all, PSG boasted some of the top players in the world, none greater than Zlatan Ibrahimovic, and no doubt the potential of the side was clear to see. The young Dutchman, though, was unsure. Ajax was all he had ever known. The club had been very good for him, educating him and overseeing the growth of his football career, and he had never played for a different city, never mind an altogether new country. In many ways, it was a risk. He was living a stable life at Ajax; he was a first team regular at the club and his first team place was virtually secure. All sorts of questions must have popped into his mind: 'How will I adapt to football, and life, in France?', 'Will I be assured a first team place?' Eventually though, with help from manager Carlo Ancelotti, van der Wiel was decided. Next stop: Paris.

Gregory van der Wiel had never played outside Holland. When he arrived at PSG, many thought that he would need more time than he did to adapt. In truth, it took him hardly any time at all. In the year and a half that he has been at PSG, he has played 34 Ligue 1 games, scoring a goal and making 4 assists on the way to helping PSG pick up the Ligue 1 crown that they so lusted after. In this current season, van der Wiel has played 14 games and PSG currently top the standings at the halfway point of the Ligue 1 campaign. There have been a few setbacks in his time in France, but van der Wiel is a man who is a battle-hardened footballer when it comes to dealing with these issues.

Rewind back to October 2009. Holland had a friendly game with Australia, but van der Wiel pulled out citing a concussion obtained with Ajax, only to go to a Lil' Wayne concert and post a picture of him with the artist on his Twitter feed. Dutch coach Bert van Marwijk was confused, saying 'It's rather strange that he was able to go to a concert, given that he told me that he was not allowed to fly by the Ajax medical staff.' It needed then Ajax boss Martin Jol to intervene to help resolve the situation.



This, though, was nothing compared to the disappointment suffered one night during the summer of 2010. Netherlands had made it all the way to the 2010 World Cup, with van der Wiel being an integral part of the team, and in the 115th minute, with 10 men, were desperately trying to hold off European champions Spain. Torres picked up the ball next to Van der Wiel, who couldn't prevent the cross, and a ricochet and a Fabregas pass saw Iniesta breakthrough to crush Dutch hearts in the process. It was the darkest night in van der Wiel's career, but he has moved on and, after a change of scenery at PSG, has put it past him. Van der Wiel has had various setbacks in his career, but he has never let them get to him, at least not in the long term.

Van der Wiel's career has come on a great deal in 2013. The experience of playing in a new league has really helped develop his game, and he has learnt a lot from the style of football he has been faced with in France. More so than in Holland, the French game relies on physical strength and maturity, especially in defence. This is why many defenders in Ligue 1's top teams are older than in other leagues, and it has meant that Van der Wiel has had to improve on the physical side of his game to succeed in France. He has matured into a stronger, fitter player than when he was when he arrived, and he is now able to match his opposing winger physically, which has set him apart in the last calendar year. Of course, he still maintains his impressive pace, which has always been a huge asset in his game.

2013 has been one of van der Wiel's most stable years in his footballing career. He has all but secured his spot as PSG's first choice right back and has improved both his defensive and, in particular, attacking play, with the quality of his deliveries notably improving over 12 months. He has matured and developed his game and become one of the leading full backs in the country, and to do it so soon after his move from Ajax must be pleasing for him. In fact, PSG's only loss this season so far, a 2-0 loss to Evian, came when van der Wiel wasn't playing. At only 25 years of age, he has many years left yet in his career, and 2014 will bring success for the Dutch full back, certainly in the colours of PSG but perhaps even at the World Cup in Brazil, where he will hope to go one stage further than that fateful night in 2010. 2013 may well be looked back upon as the year that van der Wiel truly became an established footballer.

'I get on well with Christophe (Jallet), even when he is playing more than me!'

Gregory van der Wiel

2nd November 2013

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