

70. Issa Cissokho

Club: FC Nantes

Date of Birth: 23rd February 1985

Position: Defender



One of the most heart-warming yet still surprising stories to appear in French football in 2013 has been the rise to prominence of Issa Cissokho. He made his Ligue 1 debut in August 2013 at the grand old age of 28, having previously spent his playing days hanging about the French lower leagues donning the shirt of the likes of Orleans, Blois and Carquefou. Given his impressive performances for the latter and the geographical proximity to the city of Nantes it was not surprising when he joined FC Nantes' reserve side in 2010, where he was eventually given a run in the first team at the back end of the 2010-11 season, playing nine games. Then he went on to make 23 appearances in the first team the following season also.

Things changed for Issa when Michel Der Zakarian was reappointed in 2012, this is a common theme for many at FCN. Der Zakarian changed a lot at La Beaujoire and instilled a belief in his team that was often lacking in previous campaigns.

None more so than for Senegalese right-back Cissokho, one is duty-bound to point out at this juncture that he is the older brother of Aly Cissokho – the former Porto, Lyon and Valencia defender who is currently on loan at Liverpool. The two brothers career trajectories have been fairly different up until recently. Issa has not enjoyed the same ride around Europe the way his brother has. It is a testament to Issa's determination and work ethic that he is now enjoying life in Ligue 1.

Cissokho has spoken about how he now finally has a coach that believes in him fully. That belief translates into game time. He has been in the starting XI for Nantes in 2013 all bar three times. Moreover, he has played the full 90 minutes eighteen out of nineteen times this season, only missing out when Der Zakarian changed the system for the game against PSG in August 2013. FC Nantes' style of play often exploits their wide players and Cissokho fits this role. He is often seen marauding down the flank and trying to get a cross in.

He seems to have improved this element of his game, having at the time of writing already doubled his number of assists from last season to four after only half of this season. His crossing is constantly improving, this was previously something of a weakness for Cissokho. So much so that this was a source of a joke between him and his brother, when Aly observed the improvement in his centres and suggested that his older brother had been the recipient of a foot transplant.

Overall, he has been one of Nantes' standout performers this season. He was rewarded for his good performances with a call-up to the Senegal nation side in August and he was an unused substitute as Senegal lost to Cote D'Ivoire in the 2014 World Cup play-offs in November.

He is lightning quick down the right hand side and fits in perfectly to Nantes' tactical approach this season. They play on the counter a lot, thus having players of Cissokho's pace in the line-up is very useful for *Les Canaris*. He has also formed a good understanding with a much maligned player who is enjoying a decent season, Serge Gakpé, down the right hand side.

A former coach of his remarked how Issa in his younger days was a much more of an attacking player. The coach felt he had significant technical short-comings when it came to the defensive side of the game. This is no longer the case, while Cissokho will seize any chance to bomb forward he does not neglect his defensive duties. He is averaging over 2 tackles and interceptions per game as 2013 reaches a close. However, if we look at the same statistic for his counterparts in the left back role, Olivier Veigneau and Chakur Allhadur, who have pretty much equally shared the role this season, we find that they were both individually bettering Cissokho's efforts in this department. This is to be attributed to the fact that Cissokho forces his adversaries onto the back foot in defence and it is near impossible for a modern day wing back to be able to protect his flank fully.

As one might expect with someone who is something of a late bloomer he is really taking his chance with both hands. He continues to surprise people and challenge the received wisdom. In many ways Cissokho's success has been much like that of Nantes'. Both had been written off and both have thus far upset the odds in achieving what they have. Cissokho also typifies the spirit that has marked FC Nantes' return to the big time. He has been a true revelation in this Nantes team full of positive surprises.

2013 has most definitely been his year, a promotion achieved with a game to spare followed by a smooth transition into Ligue 1 with victories at rivals Rennes and Bordeaux the stand-out results. Cissokho and Nantes find themselves sitting on 29 points after half the season gone making the pre-season predictions of an immediate return to Ligue 2 seem ill-thought out.

'I have had quite a few setbacks in my career. Now I am so happy.'

Issa Cissokho

6th August 2013

DID YOU KNOW? At the age of 17/18, Issa Cissokho was considering joining a friend of his in the French army but did not like the sound of waking up early in the morning!