

49. Jérémy Toulalan

Club: AS Monaco

Date of Birth: 10th September 1983

Position: Midfielder

At 30 years of age, many thought that Toulalan was past his prime. When Monaco approached him to bring him to the club, some critics claimed that he was too old and slow to deal with the strength and speed that is now a feature of football in France. Others believed that it was a truly inspired piece of business from Les Monaguesques who had secured themselves a defensive midfielder with experience at the highest level who had just completed a fantastic season with La Liga side Malaga. Monaco, instead of seeing an ageing player past his prime, saw a clever, experienced player who would be vital to the success of a Monaco side full of young talent. They put their faith in the veteran Frenchman and, in 2013, he has already managed to repay them.

If really does feel as if Jérémy Toulalan has been in and around European football for a long time, with the often quip being that he looks far older than he is. In fact he has, having made his first Ligue 1 appearance in the 2001/2 season, at the age of only 17 years old, with Nantes. In the following 12 seasons of his career, 10 have been spent in Ligue 1 with Nantes, Lyon and Monaco, with a two year spell at Malaga just before he joined the latest of his collection of Ligue 1 teams. At the age of 30 and having notched up over 250 Ligue 1 appearances, Toulalan is very experienced at the highest level of French football, and this experience has helped a new-look Monaco, with many players that possess little Ligue 1 experience, live up to their potential so far this season.

Toulalan has never been known for his pace, and this is even more evident as he has aged over the years. He never used to be able to keep up with the quicker players in the game, although his sudden surges in terms of changes in acceleration have often aided him in breaking down opposition moves, but he has nevertheless developed ways around this over the course of his career. The first way he can combat this problem is using his sense of positioning in front of the back four; if there is nobody to chase after because you have already stopped them, your pace, or lack thereof, cannot be exploited. Second of all, Toulalan possesses the ability to execute complete challenges, both standing and sliding, which do not just delay an attacker's progress but stops them from contributing to the attack any further. This is of course more evident in the sometimes crunching sliding challenges that we have seen from Toulalan in years gone by but remains an integral part of the Frenchman's game and a subtle and underrated characteristic.



Last of all, the defensive midfield has never been a position that requires an unreasonable amount of speed. If you do your job well in sitting in front of the back 4 and restricting the space for the opponent's creative players to use, you will find that they have no space left to run around you and expose their superior agility.

There are, however, some problems that come with age that are not quite so easily evaded. Although Toulalan has had an impressive 2013 by all accounts, with his age a new problem has crept into his game: injuries. Last season he missed 13 Liga BBVA games through various different injuries, a figure, which amounts to close to half of a season, and during this 2013/2014 campaign for Monaco, he has already missed 5 of the 19 games with a torn muscle, which remain the only games he has missed all season so far. Although Toulalan can make up for deficiencies in his game relatively easily, as he has done throughout his career, it is much harder to control a circumstance such as injuries, which are essentially out of your control, especially as you get towards the back end of your career.

However, in spite of his injuries, when he has played Toulalan has impressed all around, and the statistics evidence this. Malaga's heaviest defeats in the league, 6-2 and 5-1, both came when Toulalan wasn't in the team. When Toulalan played the full 90 minutes, Malaga only conceded more than 2 goals once in 2013, against Barcelona in the Nou Camp. When he didn't, Malaga conceded more than 2 on 5 separate occasions. Clearly, Toulalan was a crucial part of the Malaga setup. Toulalan also played an understated role in Malaga's Champions League run to the quarter finals, where they were desperately unlucky to lose to Dortmund after conceding 2 goals right at the death.

This kind of pattern is even more obvious in his short time with Monaco. When Toulalan did not play the full 90 minutes for Monaco this calendar year, they only kept clean sheets 29% of the time. When Toulalan did play the 90 minutes, that figure rose to a massive 58%, exactly double that of the previous figure. Even in the short space of time that Toulalan has been wearing the ASM shirt, it is clear that his experience and serenity when defending has greatly enhanced Monaco's defensive record.

Overall, 2013 has been a very successful year for the French veteran midfielder. His performances have been crucial to both Malaga and Monaco and, if he can hold back his increasing injury problems, there is no reason to suggest that 2014 cannot be just as good for Jeremy Toulalan.

'I will not be speaking about the French national team.'
Jérémy Toulalan

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DID YOU KNOW? Jérémy Toulalan has admitted if he had not become a footballer he would have become a baker.