

60. Nicolas N’Koulou

Club: Olympique de Marseille

Date of Birth: 27th March 1990

Position: Defender



It’s safe to say that Nicolas N’Koulou has endured a rather tumultuous 2013 at Olympique de Marseille. Though, that is not to say that every year on the Canebiere isn’t tumultuous. It has been a year of many highs and also lows for the Cameroonian international, who – at 23 – is now beginning to court several of Europe’s top clubs.

The commencement of the Ligue 1 season after the 2012 winter break underlined that very fact. Marseille, who then were (and perhaps still are) a side devoid of determination, grit and attacking abundance were rejuvenated under former boss Elie Baup, and entered 2013 level on points at the top with PSG and Lyon and heading towards an unlikely title challenge.

N’Koulou would be central to any hopes Marseille had. Up to this point, he had featured in every league game, and would do so right up until December 2013. The combative defender, with his neat interceptions and strong defensive ability would bring an added layer of protection to an increasingly solid Marseillais defence.

N’Koulou and co. struggled in the opening stages of the year. The defender was directly responsible for seven goals conceded in three games – a 3-1 defeat to Sochaux, a superb 3-2 turnaround against Montpellier and then a 2-2 draw away to Rennes, before Marseille’s jittery form, and the beginning of the end for OM’s title hopes.

Frequently partnered with Brazilian recruit Lucas Mendes – a defender in the same build as N’Koulou, though not as technical – the Cameroonian took a while to blossom in January and February, as OM struggled upon the return of the winter break.

After the culmination of a 2-0 defeat to soon-to-become champions Paris Saint-Germain, at a time when the Cameroonian defender’s performances were starting to pick up – the 23-year-old’s season would really take off, if that of Marseille’s remained rather stagnant.

After a narrow 2-1 win over ESTAC Troyes at home, Marseille – with a defence harboured by the likes of Steve Mandanda, Lucas Mendes, Souleymane Diawara, Rod Fanni and Jeremy Morel, along with the burgeoning N’Koulou would go on a stunning run of seven games without conceding. A run that included draw away to Lille and Lyon, and a home win over Bordeaux amongst others.

N’Koulou’s star had really taken off. Those seven games – in which the former Monaco man played all but 14 minutes in that run had shaped N’Koulou’s reputation as one of the best up and coming defensive talents in European football.

More technical than the rest of the defence, N’Koulou’s preference to play the ball short, instead of hoofing it away had garnered plaudits and criticism. However, it was a skill that he perfected as OM rallied to a solid second place. Dribbling his way out of trouble had become his trademark, and it was no surprise that several clubs were beginning to take note.

The summer of 2013 saw N’Koulou linked with former club Monaco, who now having found riches wanted to bring their young starlet back, having been forced to sell him upon relegation in 2011. European champions Bayern were credited with an interest, and so too were several Premier League clubs. N’Koulou was persuaded to stay by Marseille – with the bonus of playing in the Champions League in which the team had worked so hard to qualify for, being the main factor.

But should he have gone? A €20m value was touted, and perhaps Marseille & the player should have taken it, for the latter half of 2013 had started to take its toll on N’Koulou.

Marseille had once again started the season strongly, though the defender was criticised for a lax display against EA Guingamp, and then Evian where he would routinely lapse in concentration, allowing quick players to get in behind.

Perhaps it was the dangerously high line Elie Baup had forced Marseille to play in, or perhaps N’Koulou’s form began to wane – but this time it was at an alarming rate.

The group of death that OM had found themselves in the Champions League could have – and perhaps should have – been the stage where N’Koulou could’ve announced himself. But a host of comical errors and shoddy performances saw OM finish bottom with 0 points, and with it, a new level of criticism. N’Koulou and Marseille had lost their defensive sparkle, having only managed three clean sheets since September.

For N’Koulou – it was a year where he grew as a player, but also experienced complete loss of form and helplessness. However, he deserves the plaudits, and is rightly recognised as a key talent in Ligue 1. With the World Cup to look forward to as the ultimate opportunity for a future move, the young defender must first seek to bolster a meagre end to 2013, and start the New Year with aplomb.

‘I owe a lot to Marseille. They are the team that sort of released me onto the forefront.’

Nicolas N’Koulou

17th December 2013

STATS CENTRAL: Nicolas N’Koulou played every minute of all 38 Ligue 1 matches that Marseille had in 2013.