

62. Rio Mavuba

Club: LOSC Lille

Date of Birth: 8th March 1980

Position: Midfielder

At the heart of all good sides is a character who holds everything together, a positive influence whose presence alone can be enough to get the team to raise their game. In Rio Mavuba, Lille certainly have one such player.

An ever-present so far this season, playing in all 19 matches to date, the combative defensive midfielder is Lille's captain fantastic and has been a key part of their recent success. After finishing a disappointing sixth last season and missing out on European football all together, *Les Dogues* currently occupy third place half-way through the 2013/14 campaign, and are just four points behind leaders PSG.

Boasting excellent passing skills along with the ability to break down attacks with well-timed interceptions, Mavuba has put in consistently excellent performances this season whether his team have played well or not and leads by example. The France international can run for days and his statistics back up this centrality to the team: his pass success rate of 87% is only eclipsed by David Rozenhal and Marko Baša in the Lille squad, both being centre backs who favour more conservative passing options.

Arguably most effective when played in a midfield trio alongside Idrissa Gueye and Florent Balmont, Lille's midfield unit in a 4-3-3 is a match for any side. With all three players primarily central midfielders, shifts to other formations (Lille have used a 4-1-2-1-2 extensively and a 4-2-2-2 at times) see them sacrifice some of their players' effectiveness but Mavuba is always retained in the central role at the heart of his side.

Goal-scoring has never been a big part of his game, meanwhile, and his only goal in this calendar year came in the final game before the winter break as Lille drew 2-2 against PSG. Yet this deficiency should not detract from what has been an excellent year for the player, working hard in a position that can often see excellent performances go unnoticed as other players steal the limelight with goals and assists.

Even so, the start of the year was not overly noteworthy for Mavuba as he missed large chunks of his side's run-in and managed just seven matches in all competitions from January until the end of the 2012/13 season due to injury.



Indeed, more notable than his on-pitch contribution was perhaps his charity work off the pitch, where he continued to organise fund-raising events for his 'Orphans of Makala' charity group, set up in 2009, including a huge gala in Lille in April.

On the pitch more recently, however, Lille's – and indeed Mavuba's – form has been outstanding. In defence in particular they have been among the best in the league, conceding a league-best 8 goals in their opening 19 matches – an incredible figure that is undoubtedly linked with Mavuba's excellent performances in guarding the back-line.

Speaking to LOSC.fr recently about his side's season so far, Mavuba commented: "It's positive. At the start of the season nobody expected us to be among the top three after 18 matches. Nothing was written on the subject but we knew that PSG and Monaco had much bigger squads and budgets than ours. All in all though, everyone knows that logic isn't always respected in football. Our goal is still to finish among the top five and to do this we need to keep up this team spirit."

And this purple patch of form for his club certainly has not gone unnoticed by the national team bosses, with a figure as experienced and influential as Mavuba representing a real, potential asset for *Les Bleus*.

On the bench for the recent World Cup playoff matches against Ukraine and without a full cap since the end of 2012, Mavuba will see his excellent performances throughout this season as the perfect springboard towards a place in the starting XI this coming summer, despite stiff competition in the squad.

Ultimately, while he is perhaps something of an unsung hero in this Lille side, Mavuba is currently at his peak and is providing the kind of impact in games that any side would benefit from. If he maintains this current run of form and fitness, the player could well have a big part to play on the global stage next summer. With a big heart to accompany his big presence on the pitch, Mavuba should not be so easily overlooked.

'In France, there are not may better clubs than Lille.'

Rio Mavuba

29th June 2013

DID YOU KNOW? Rio Mavuba was actually born at sea! He was born inside a boat off the coast of Angola and therefore 'born at sea' is indicated on his French passport.