

## 37. Saber Khalifa

Club: Olympique de Marseille

Date of Birth: 14th October 1986

Position: Attacker



Few players have made such a large step in their careers in 2013 as Tunisian international Saber Khalifa has done. A series of electrifying performances for Ligue 1 strugglers Evian in the early months of the calendar year caught the eye of arguably France's biggest club in the form of Olympique de Marseille in the summer of 2013.

With Les Roses, Khalifa found footballing piece of mind and his goals to games ratio of about one in every three over the course of one and a half seasons unequivocally made him stand out to a raft of other suitors in the summer of this year, including Premier League sides and Montpellier, who nearly signed him weeks before his eventual move to L'OM.

Khalifa's has endured hiccup after hiccup in his career to date and so to move from a club where he was comfortable and cherished at Evian, to go to a side where the competition for places is much greater and the media spotlight is more intense than anywhere else in French football at the Stade Velodrome was a risky move for the versatile attacking player who, if his first six months with OM are anything to go by, must still be looking for his perfect club.

Having survived the threat of war in Libya during a spell at Al Ahly Benghazi in 2011 in which he only played twice, Khalifa constantly seems to be drawn into potentially dangerous situations. When the player is in form, these are the very situations he creates for opposition defenders with his nifty touch and intelligent forward running, Khalifa, although not as fast as your typical winger, often creates spaces for his teammates by distracting the opposition through tracking his runs rather than those of his fellow offensively positioned colleagues. This perhaps gives an explanation for his general lack of goals since he made the summer move to Marseille- he has only scored once in the league this season at the time of writing.

While Khalifa maybe receiving flack for his apparent lack of pace and enthusiasm on the ball, this is often due to the excess work that he has carried out without the ball, a subtlety that the majority of Marseille fans seem to overlook.

When Khalifa does score however, he makes it count with classy and inspiring finishes from varying angles and distance away from goal over the course of 2013. In late November, Khalifa capped of an OM victory over Montpellier with an effortless finish that followed when he received the ball on the edge of the area to round of a Marseille counter attack. The player ran half of the pitch to provide an option for teammate Thauvin before stopping the ball dead, and, after a few seconds' pause, slotted the ball neatly through the legs of defender Benjamin Stambouli and out of the goalkeeper's clutches low into the bottom right corner.

Another phenomenal solo effort occurred in May 2013 when Khalifa was still wearing the rather loud pink colours of Evian TG FC. He completed a 4-0 rout over OGC Nice in the most unique of styles. The ball was cleared from an OGC Nice corner and Khalifa took it, ran to just behind his team's side of the centre circle, before unleashing an incredible half volley which travelled spectacularly, looping over a sprawling David Ospina and into the back of the net.

In total, Saber Khalifa has hit the back of the net eight times during this calendar year, but only once for his new club. In these simplistic terms, Marseille may be of the opinion that he does not have much use at the club, failing to really challenge André-Pierre Gignac for the spot as the lone striker. If they are so inclined, they fundamentally lack the tactical insight required to realise that Khalifa offers a team's attacking unit so much more than goals. His off ball movement combined with the general gusto he has showcased in the last 12 months make him a subtle but severe threat to defences, wherever he may be.

However, it does seem as if the Marseille faithful have already given up on the player and if this is the case, then Khalifa may well have to move again in 2014 unless OM's eventual new manager can take a favourable view on the Tunisian, as he well deserves it. Either way, hopefully Khalifa can take one step closer to finding footballing happiness rather than continuing to rot in the shadows at the Stade Velodrome, as he is expected to after a perceived poor run in form from October to December.

*'I like this club a lot, much like Hammam-Lif.'*  
Saber Khalifa

On comparing Evian to his local club in Tunis-  
29th March 2013

**DID YOU KNOW?** Saber Khalifa won the UNFP award for most beautiful goal of the season 2012-2013 with his screamer vs OGC Nice.