

## 71. Simon Kjaer

Club: LOSC Lille

Date of Birth: 26th March 1989

Position: Defender

It was the 16<sup>th</sup> October 2011, and Kjaer's Roma side made the short trip to face fierce rivals Lazio in one of the most hotly contested derby's in Europe. Within a few minutes, Roma were ahead. Delirium for the away fans. But then something happened that changed the game: Kjaer was sent off. Two minutes later, Lazio equalised and, in injury time with the last kick of the game, they scored the winner through Miroslav Klose. It must have been hard for Kjaer, 22 at the time, to take. Kjaer's AS Roma career never really got going again. In fact, he left when his loan spell terminated at the end of the season. However, following a move back to Wolfsburg and then on to Lille, Kjaer has managed to recover, and, in 2013, has shown himself as one of the most consistently promising centre backs to play in Ligue 1.

Kjaer is a very well-travelled footballer, having played in the Danish league, Serie A and Bundesliga before he arrived at Lille to tackle Ligue 1 football. This is impressive for a man who is only 24 years old, very young in centre back terms. It may also suggest that Kjaer has struggled to find consistency elsewhere, pointing to a pattern that perhaps emerges when you look at his inability to settle at any of his previous four clubs before arriving in the Northern half of France to sign for Lille in the summer of 2013. Having said this, there is certainly a convincing argument that Kjaer has more experience at the highest level than virtually any 24 year old centre back in Europe. In fact, when he secured his first team place in Serie A with Palermo, he was only 19 years old. This evidence suggests that Lille now have on their hands not only a young player who is still improving, but they have a vastly qualified defender in European football. It was therefore unsurprising that Kjaer steadied himself well in his opening Ligue 1 matches at the start of the 2013/2014 campaign.

Standing at 6 ft 2 inches tall, Kjaer has the classic centre back build. He is tall enough to deal with the aerial examination that comes with playing in the heart of the defence, but is also suitably mobile to deal with runs in behind him from opposing strikers. In the early years of his career, he used to be one of those centre backs who would do all of the hard things brilliantly, but then make a silly mistake that would cost his side a goal, or indeed, as we saw, cost his side the whole match. In 2013 though, it appears that he has amended this fault, certainly in the matches he has played for Lille in the first half of the season.



Defensive consistency. It is something that every defender wishes to master and there are already examples during Kjaer's career which suggest that he has been able to obtain this quality, but only when he is playing during a period of confidence on the pitch. This was evident firstly during his last season with Wolfsburg, who went 10 games unbeaten last season with Kjaer in the team. It is even more evident when we look at Lille's astounding run of 11 clean sheets in a row, of which Kjaer started 10 of the games. As we can see, Kjaer goes through prolonged phases of defensive excellence, and once he has the necessary momentum, they can last for a long time, and his team sees the benefits.

Kjaer is also quite competent going forward. Although he had yet to score for Lille at the end of the calendar year, he has 9 goals and 2 assists in his career. With his height, he is logically an asset from offensive set pieces. In fact, of his 9 goals 7 of them were headers.

Kjaer's current club, Lille, have, at the time of writing, the best defensive record in the league, having conceded only 8 goals all season so far and kept 14 clean sheets in total as the year closes. Kjaer has been a vital part of this record, as he has played in 17 of the 19 games Lille have had so far. Before Kjaer arrived, in the first 19 games of last season, Lille conceded 18 goals, only the 5<sup>th</sup> best record in the league. Although this is clearly not all down to Kjaer, he must at least take some of the credit.

As well as being vastly experienced at club level, Kjaer has also been capped 35 times by the Danish national team, and was a regular in the Danish world cup qualification bid in 2013. The Danish team finished behind Italy in second place, but unfortunately missed out a play-off spot as they had the worst record of the 9 runners up.

2013 may well have been the year that Simon Kjaer started to discover his true home. Home in the form of Lille. After fulfilling his time at Wolfsburg and wanting to move on, he has formed a quite brilliant partnership with 30 year old Marko Baša, which culminated in the spectacular run of 11 consecutive clean sheets in the league. While Lille's over-performing is likely to come to an end at some point, Kjaer is certainly one of Ligue 1's greatest signings of the season.

*'Marko speaks English, we have no problem communicating.'*

*Simon Kjaer*

On defensive partnerships- 27th August 2013

**STATS CENTRAL:** Lille only conceded 8 Ligue 1 goals in the first half of the 2013/2014 campaign.