

## 8. Stéphane Ruffier

There were 23 different sides that played in Ligue 1 over the course of 2013, and out of them all, one goalkeeper stood out. That man, as you may have guessed, is St Étienne's Stéphane Ruffier, who has had a remarkable last 12 months and is ranking higher than any other goalkeeper in the GFFN 100.

Stéphane Ruffier has an appropriate build, which is conditioned as well as any of Europe's top goalkeepers. Standing at 6 ft 2 inches, he is about the regular height for a player between the sticks. Well built, sturdy and very powerful, Ruffier's physique is emblematic of the modern goalkeeper, with the nature of the position having become so much more physically demanding in recent decades. With these characteristics, Ruffier's core is of the dependable infrastructure for him to demonstrate a commanding presence in the air, which evidently aids a goalkeeper in dealing effectively with the cannonball corners and free-kicks by laying claim to the ball or putting enough weight behind it to produce an operative punch away from danger.

On top of his rock-solid stature, Ruffier is exceedingly mobile. For a man of his height and size, he manoeuvres around his penalty area deftly, enabling him to fathom diving saves that another goalkeeper of his build would be physically incapable of making. It is the combination of physical strength with reactions and agility that is one of the attributes that sets Ruffier apart from other Ligue 1 goalkeepers. Whilst some may be particularly apt at making reflex saves, and others very capable at commanding their area, it is very rare that a goalkeeper can do both, to a consistently excellent level. As a result, it is very difficult to find flaws in Ruffier's game. His shot-stopping ability is first-rate, he deals with crosses with simplicity, and his positioning has improved considerably over the last twelve months. He is by far the most consistent goalkeeper in Ligue 1, and is reaching the level that top European goalkeepers have reached, when they make very difficult saves look easy. The likes of Manuel Neuer and Gianluigi Buffon are sometimes underwhelming to watch, simply because they are so unyielding that they do not need to dive around frantically, making flying saves – they deal with incoming shots with minimum fuss. Stéphane Ruffier is now reaching that standard of performance.

In the first half of the calendar year, while Ligue 1 was in its 2012/13 season, Ruffier kept 8 clean sheets in 19 matches as his St Étienne side lost just once in the entire second half of the season – a surprise 3-1 defeat to Lorient. In those 19 games, he conceded just 18 goals, which is below the 'goal a game' mark that typically separates the best from the rest. Ruffier's dazzling league form inspired St Étienne to make a late charge for the European spots, but they ended up falling just short, finishing 5<sup>th</sup>.

However, Ruffier's best form undoubtedly was displayed during St Étienne's Coupe de la Ligue run, a title that they of course concluded by winning. Ruffier played the full 90 minutes of every encounter (five in total), even playing the full 120 once, when St Étienne's semi-final against Lille went to extra time and then penalties. During those 480 minutes of consecutive 'League Cup' action, Ruffier did not concede a single goal, aside from within the penalty shootout with Lille. He kept clean sheets in each of the 5 matches, propelling St Étienne to overall victory in the tournament. Ruffier was the star man in St Étienne's most difficult fixture in their cup run, the aforementioned victory over Lille in a penalty shootout. Deep into injury time, Ruffier saved from Rodelin, who was through on goal, to take the match to penalties. St Etienne eventually triumphed 7-6 in a heart-stopping shootout where both sets of players threw caution to the wind.

The warm summer in the Loire region brought with it rumours of Ruffier's departure, as you would perhaps expect, given his form in the previous season. Roma in Serie A were touted as potential buyers, while Ruffier's own agent came out and said that a Premier League club were after him. However, as a result of both Ruffier's loyalty to St Étienne and perhaps the lack of acceptable offers, he decided to remain at the club for at least another season.

The start of the 2013/14 season brought substantially less success for both Ruffier and St Étienne. After qualifying for the Europa League prerequisite rounds thanks to their Coupe de la Ligue win, St Étienne were eliminated over two legs by Esbjerg in what was a shock result. They were also knocked out in the first match they played in both the Coupe de France and the Coupe de la Ligue, signifying that their failure to defend their title from the previous season. However, these cup disappointments allowed them to focus more readily on their league form, and, heading into the winter break, St Etienne sit 4<sup>th</sup> in Ligue 1, lying in a Europa League qualifying spot. Ruffier has, despite his team's drop in form, still been a standout performer.

**Club:** AS Saint Étienne

**Date of Birth:** 27th September 1986

**Position:** Goalkeeper



Overall, Stéphane Ruffier has had a fantastical twelve months. He has developed into an assured shot-stopper, improving in every single major aspect of his goalkeeping game. His consistency truly sets him apart from the rest – in fact Ruffier has played every Ligue 1 minute for St-Etienne since the beginning of the 2011/12 season, an amazing run that covers almost 100 consecutive games. If Ruffier continues in this brilliant vein of form, expect him to be a very strong challenger to Steve Mandanda's position as France's number two goalkeeper. In fact, it would be no surprise at all if Didier Deschamps were to whisk Ruffier off to Brazil come summertime. It seems like the sky is the limit for St Etienne's star man. Although I am sure that as long as Ruffier travels the skies with France to Brazil in June 2014, he will be more than content.