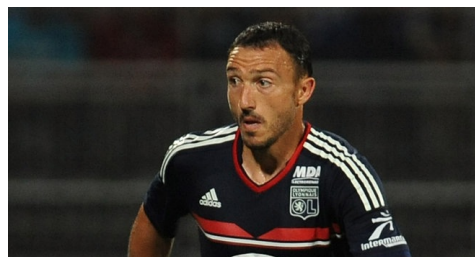


52. Steed Malbranque

Club: Olympique Lyonnais

Date of Birth: 6th January 1980

Position: Midfielder



Despite starting his career as a winger, Malbranque is one of those players who has refined his position with age and is now operating in a central position for Lyon. At the age of 32 in 2012, many wondered why Lyon decided to acquire Malbranque that very summer, but the player has responded by hitting some of his best form to date the following year (2013).

This year, Steed Malbranque has played a surprising amount of games considering the squad depth Lyon manager Remi Garde is fortunate enough to have at his disposal and this is testament to the player. The player has provided one goal for his team this year, merely a bonus with his main task being to distribute the ball in the midfield, win it back and create chances. This goal came in a 2-1 win against Ajaccio, where Malbranque guided the ball into the far corner with the outside of his boot from the edge of the area. It was an impressive finish and shows that the player still has the ability to score from a reasonable distance.

As mentioned, the player has primarily been deployed at the heart of Les Gones' midfield but it is worth noting that the vastly experienced Belgian-born Frenchman has played a few games on the wing this year. Malbranque's key strength, which has certainly made the former Fulham, Tottenham Hotspur and Sunderland player more selectable over the course of 2013 is his trusty passing radar. The variation to his game in terms of ratio between long and short balls is roughly 25-75, showing that Malbranque takes a sensible approach to building up the Lyon attacks. A quality that undoubtedly contributed to their securing of a Champions League place for the 2013-2014 season. Overall, Malbranque has a passing accuracy of nearly 90% this year, which further emphasises the success he has been enjoying.

An element of Malbranque's game which is starting to wane is his defensive contribution, so much so that Garde often has to play two defensive midfielders behind the Frenchman or, when played in that holding role, is supported by another deep-lying midfielder. Without these tactical adjustments when Malbranque is playing in the central midfield areas, Lyon's defence would be put under much greater pressure. This is obviously a skill that he has only had to develop recently with the new midfield role he first went into during his time with Sunderland, but Malbranque has clearly worked on his tackling and awareness of where the opposition are. While this is the case, he now lacks the pace to make those interventions to the same extent that he was previously able to. The player is also a strong dribbler, which comes from his days as a winger and so despite his lack of pace at the age of 33, Malbranque is still able to beat people using his skill.

It is probably fair to say that Malbranque has not been quite as good this season that in the first six months of this year, but to be honest, Lyon as a team are performing worse and so the same can be said for the majority of their player, with Alexandre Lacazette being an obvious exception. The difference is that Malbranque is not making the same impact when coming off the bench this season and it appears that the player needs at least ten minutes in order to settle down into the game. At around five foot seven, another issue for the player is his aerial ability, although this has obviously been an issue to whole of his career. The problem is that now playing in a central role, the 33 year old is more dependent on his head and so sometimes fails to win balls for his team.

Nevertheless, Malbranque adds vital experience to his team and appears to knock the ball about effortlessly to his teammates. He has demonstrated this year that he can still score and although perhaps it would be inaccurate to say his overall game has improved a great deal in 2013, he has certainly become more confident and established in this Lyon side in 2013. With Malbranque showing no signs of letting off, he could soon be seen as the French Ryan Giggs, although he is still a bit young! Malbranque has tended to play better in Europe this year than in the league and this is most likely due to the fact that Europa League opposition are less prepared tactically to exploit his deficiencies.

'I realised that I made a real mistake'

Steed Malbranque

On joining Lyon's bitter rivals Saint Étienne in 2011

DID YOU KNOW? Vicious rumours circulated a month in to Steed Malbranque's deal with St Étienne that his son was terminally ill with cancer, a rumour that was totally false but the player cancelled his contract with St Étienne shortly after anyway.