

The Rise of Samuel Umtiti

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If I ask you to name Luis Enrique's best signing for Barcelona you're most likely to answer Suarez.

A rare breed of you might say Marc-Andre Ter Stegen instead. And while you're not wrong and it's your opinion, the point here is that none of you will say Samuel Umtiti, a player whose rise to Barcelona's and France's starting eleven has been absolutely phenomenal. A signing made with the future in mind.

Born in Cameroonian city of Yaounde, Samuel Umtiti has been on an incredible journey. Former Cameroon international Roger Milla tried to get Umtiti to play for the Cameroon national team but Sam went with France instead. He joined Lyon eventually and went through the ranks of the academy and ever since establishing himself as a regular starter in the team, he's has gone from strength to strength. Making his debut in January 2012 for the French outfit and forming defensive partnerships with Milan Bisevac, Kone, and Yanga-Bwia along the way, he's been an essential cog in the Lyon machine over the past few seasons. Composure on and off the ball, concentration, and great passing were characteristics of the Umtiti at Lyon (not to mention wacky haircuts as well). His time there subsequently saw him being named "Best Player of the Season" in 2015/2016 by the fans, ahead of a certain Alexandre Lacazette.

And that seemed to be enough for a national team call-up. With his future teammate Jeremy Mathieu injured, Umtiti was called up to the French side for EURO 2016 by Didier Deschamps and proved he was worth including. You'd think that a major European international tournament would put the pressure on a player who's only 22 and about to feature for his country for the first time. However, Umtiti really shone at his first international outing and did not let any pressure faze him one bit. He was huge for France's defence and really gave it some stability. His usual style of playing showed at the EUROS as he had an incredible 95% pass completion and his involvement could be seen from the 21 clearances he had to make alongside his 100% successful take-ons and 4 interceptions in just the 3 appearances he made. Crazy numbers for a young defender playing his first few matches for his country at his first tournament.

The next stage in Samuel Umtiti's career came about as FC Barcelona came calling in the summer after the EUROS. The club signed a defender (Jordi Alba) from the last EUROS after a wonderful display throughout the competition. This time another defender was on their agenda after some great performances. Sam signed for the Blaugrana for €30 million and his seamless transition into the first team has been incredible. Barcelona needed a central defender to replace Puyol and partner up with Pique and have the same influence that the captain himself had. Pique was the man who assumed the role. Efforts were made with Bartra, Mathieu, and Mascherano to fill the gap somewhat. Bartra was recently allowed to leave for Borussia Dortmund, Mathieu started disappointing appearance after appearance and although an aging Mascherano had settled pretty well into the role, the arrival of Umtiti changed everything.

While the other signings Luis Enrique made last season (Andre Gomes, Paco Alcacer) got the attention as they failed to justify their price tags and meet the expectations, Umtiti became a regular starter for Barcelona and formed a rock-solid defensive partnership with Gerard Pique. The defending La Liga champions had found their no-nonsense, focused centreback to go along with someone of Pique's ability. Both of them barely set a foot wrong all season (1 defensive error for Sam Umtiti, 0 for Pique) and showed signs that another lasting Barcelona defensive partnership had its foundation set for the coming seasons. He's been a blessing for the club and did not disappoint when given the chance in big games. Take a look at his influence in the PSG comeback game: 3 interceptions made, won 100% of his aerial duels, completed 90.4% of his passes and as an added bonus he created 2 chances. He's shown that he's exactly the defender Barcelona has been looking for.

And to say Samuel Umtiti had a great overall season is a bit of understatement. He's had an exceptional season in terms of personal growth: making the Barcelona team, gaining Lucho's trust, and forming a wall with Pique, and sometimes Mascherano as well when 3 at the back were played. Mascherano is the very player whose place Umtiti has taken in the defensive pecking order. Sam himself has said that he's learned a lot from playing alongside Pique and he's improving every day – just the news the fans love to hear.

When you think of the world's best defenders in your mind, the likes of Leonardo Bonucci, Jerome Boateng, Chiellini, and a few others will pop up. Samuel Umtiti's first season performances only back the claim that he's had a phenomenal start to

life in Catalunya with more tackles won (23) than Bonucci, Chiellini, and Boateng whilst committing fewer fouls than all 3 of them and Ramos. He's had the highest pass accuracy and completion (93% pass completion) of them all with no errors leading to a goal. Not to forget he's made more overall interceptions (50) than his teammate Pique, Giorgio Chiellini, and Boateng in just 25 appearances in La Liga. Staggering involvement for someone just 23 now and in his first year in a new league.

He's definitely one for the future for Barcelona and while that €30 million price tag isn't much anyways (relatively), it will seem like even more of a bargain after a few more seasons.

And with such talent and ability at a young age, Umtiti has proved himself at one of the biggest clubs in the world in his first season and has certainly justified the endearing nickname he has gotten from many Barcelona fans: UmTITAN.

This post also appears on the totalBarca site at [**https://www.totalbarca.com/2017/09/rise-samuel-umtiti/**](https://www.totalbarca.com/2017/09/rise-samuel-umtiti/)

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