

Q&A with Arsenal defender Kolo Toure

By Bruno Salla

After being plucked from the relative obscurity of playing for African side ASEC Mimosas, Kolo Toure joined Arsenal for a mere £150,000 in February 2002 and has not looked back.

After first being played as a winger and then at various positions across the back four, the Ivorian has gone on to establish himself as the fulcrum of the Arsenal defence thanks to his sheer reliability at centre half.

ESPNsoccernet caught up with the 26-year-old and discussed Arsenal's impressive start to the season, the significance of manager Arsene Wenger and the team's objectives for the season.

ESPNsoccernet: Arsenal are top of the Premier League, have qualified for the next round of the Carling Cup and are plying well in the Champions League. Things couldn't be better at the moment, right?

Kolo Toure: It is true that we have started really well. The key for me has been the first game at home against Fulham (a 2-1 win). We were behind 0-1 and we struggled to come back and thankfully we won a penalty that allowed us back into the game and to avoid a disappointment. This win brought confidence because it was really important to start the season with a success at home. That win freed us. Before that we had been criticised and it did stimulate us. Criticism can be turned into a positive; you have to accept it to move forward and to improve.

ESPNsoccernet: At home, Arsenal have been in irresistible form with nine wins from nine games. What can explain such a difference compared to last season?

Kolo Toure: First of all we are much more efficient in scoring goals. Now we don't only rely on one or two players to score. The danger can come from Emmanuel Adebayor, Robin Van Persie, Cesc Fabregas and even me (laughing). We have more weapons. Plus, now we really feel at home at the Emirates, which maybe wasn't the case last season. We can feel comfortable when we play there. The pitch is bigger than at Highbury and you can see that when we play. We are calmer and more patient when bringing the ball forward. We control the ball better as we need to build up our offensive phases due to the pitch dimensions. We have changed our style and now we are enjoying more space.

ESPNsoccernet: Does the size of pitch perhaps explain why Arsenal have scored half their goals (15 out of 32) in the last quarter of matches at home?

Kolo Toure: We tire our opponents, indeed. When you chase the ball for more than an hour you are much more tired afterwards. We also worked on our physical skills during training and we are fresher than our opponents, usually in the last minutes of the game. Plus, I have to say also that our strikers are much more efficient. Van Persie and Adebayor have learnt a lot from Thierry Henry. I also have to mention Cesc Fabregas, who is having a terrific season so far.

I remember a story, when we were at the 'Player of the Year' awards ceremony. During the introduction

of the players they were showing the goals of Ronaldo, Drogba and Rooney. Cesc ended up third or fourth, I can't exactly remember. But I said to him: 'It's because you didn't score goals'. Now he is proving he can do it. That's what has changed in his game. He is more mature and takes more initiative, he tries harder and is even lucky, like against Tottenham, but it's because he provoked it.

ESPNsoccernet: Is he the new boss in midfield, Patrick Vieira's successor?

Kolo Toure: It is too early to say. He has taken on a new dimension in the team but other players are also expressing their talent now, like Abou Diaby, Lassana Diarra and Denilson. Everyone brings something to the team. I remember that against Newcastle in Carling Cup, Diarra started in midfield in place of Fabregas and I didn't see any difference.

ESPNsoccernet: In the meantime, we don't talk a lot about Kolo Touré. Does it upset you?

Kolo Toure: There are players that have less skill than me and who are in the media much more. The most important thing for me is to do a good job. Like we say in Africa, you won't be able to hide the sun with your hand. My time will come, I know that.

ESPNsoccernet: After extending his contract, Arsène Wenger has said he was 'happy to wake up every morning to go to work'. Same for you?

Kolo Toure: Yes, definitely. Regarding Arsène, even through the hard times we never really felt he was affected. He knew what he was doing; I knew he would stay. He takes great pleasure because he is the one who has built this team. The coach has a great quality, he can read the future. When you see all the players he has discovered you have to think so.

Who knew George Weah before he became a star in Monaco? Same for me, I came from the Ivory Coast. Same also for Fabregas, who was signed as a very young player. Wenger's Arsenal have always produced seducing football. We had Vieira, Dennis Bergkamp, Henry. Now it's a new generation and Wenger wants to keep it this way. He gives freedom to his players and that isn't easy to do for a coach.

ESPNsoccernet: The next two games in Premier League will be in Liverpool on Saturday and against Manchester United on November 3rd. Will these two fixtures be the first real tests of the season for Arsenal? Fixtures which determine if you really are contenders for the title?

Kolo Toure: Last season was really strange because we were very good against those big teams but struggled against the supposed weaker ones. For this reason, so far this season we have decided to focus on each game in the same way, we don't care if it's Liverpool, United or the so-called smaller teams.

Of course those two games are really important but, after all, it's only six points, no more. It would be useless to win these two games and then fail to win the next ones. We have to keep the same philosophy for each game as I said. I feel we are more mature this year to do it.

