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Young Samoan Tuiloma provides defensive strength for Timbers

By Mike Street

Special to The Asian Reporter

Last season, New Zealand's Bill Poni Tuiloma came to the Portland Timbers hoping to make his mark in Major League Soccer (MLS). That might sound cocky from a 22-year old rookie, but Tuiloma is a highly regarded defender who has already made history in the top division in France.

Born in New Zealand to Samoan parents, Tuiloma started playing soccer at age three and grew into an exceptional young talent. He left home to join a new Asia Pacific Football Academy, later becoming captain of New Zealand's under-20 squad. His talent caught the eye of the LA Galaxy, who signed him to their youth squad in 2013, where the team won the Generation Adidas Cup, the elite youth tournament put on by MLS.

But the Galaxy didn't have an international slot to sign him, so Tuiloma tried his luck in England, where he made the Queens Park Rangers but couldn't secure a work permit. Though disappointing, this near-miss opened the door for a much bigger opportunity: playing for Olympique de Marseille, one of the top clubs in France's Ligue 1.

A Queens Park player who had been on loan to Olympique referred Tuiloma there, where he received a historic four-year deal as the first Kiwi to play for France's first division. Unfortunately, that exciting beginning never translated to regular time with the first club.

Tuiloma made just two appearances with Marseille's first team in four years, mostly playing for their reserve squad, with whom he scored once in 22 appearances. Despite this lack of exposure to top-flight talent, he continued to develop internationally, amassing 23 caps for the national team, including appearances in all three Confederations Cup matches for the Kiwis as well as the 2016 OFC Nations Cup.

These successes made him well-known in New Zealand, the birthplace of Timbers general manager Gavin Wilkinson, who signed him to the Timbers in 2017. Much like he did in Marseille, Tuiloma spent his first Portland season with the second-tier T2 squad, eventually becoming the team captain and scoring three times in 11 starts.



Tuiloma began the 2018 season on the Timbers bench under new head coach Giovanni Savarese, but he soon found himself in the starting lineup. After Portland began the season 0-2, surrendering six goals, Savarese benched center fullback and team captain Liam Ridgewell, replacing him with Tuiloma.

Putting the young Kiwi in such an essential defensive position would have seemed unthinkable for a player of lesser caliber, but Tuiloma's experience in Europe gave him an edge. In addition to his talent, Savarese cited Tuiloma's confidence and locker-room presence as the reason for the change.

Tuiloma didn't take long to validate his coach's confidence in his new role, helping the Timbers earn their first point of the season in his very first game, a 1-1 draw. His efforts in the match, which included one interception, nine clearances, and two ball recoveries, earned him MLS Team of the Week honors.

This started a string of four straight starts by Tuiloma, during which he scored his first career MLS goal against Orlando on April 8. A set-piece assist from Diego Valeri showed Tuiloma's leaping ability as he surged above a row of defenders to win the ball and send it into the net.

But just as he seemed ready to establish himself with the first team, Tuiloma

sprained his right knee, leading to a rehab assignment with the T2 squad. When he returned, he could not find a regular starting spot on the defense, with several regulars returning to the team and fullback Larrys Mabiala emerging as an impact player.

Still, Tuiloma started all three of Portland's U.S. Open Cup matches, made a handful of appearances for the first team, and started three matches for T2. But his most pivotal appearances came during the playoffs.

After defeating the Houston Dynamo in a two-game series then winning a knockout-round match 2-1 against FC Dallas, the Timbers faced Portland's rival the Seattle Sounders in the Western Conference semifinal series. In the opening leg, the first of a two-game series, Mabiala was disqualified, having earned a red card in the previous game. Tuiloma filled in for Mabiala, making his very first MLS playoff start in a crucial match.

Despite conceding an early goal, Portland surged back to win, 2-1, and Tuiloma glowed about the victory.

"It felt great," he said after the match. "It was a big win from the team ... Playing Seattle at home, in the playoffs, is a big game for us. I kept calm and played my game. Having the players beside me and the trust they had in me just made it a lot

DEFENSIVE DEPTH. Bill Tuiloma signed with the Portland Timbers in 2017. He began the 2018 season on the Timbers bench under new head coach Giovanni Savarese, but soon found himself in the starting lineup. (AP Photo/Jan Landis)

easier."

Mabiala returned for Portland's next match against Seattle in the Emerald City, a series-clinching victory that ended only after a penalty-kick shootout.

In the conference finals that followed, Portland faced Sporting Kansas City and relied on Tuiloma when Mabiala went down early to an ankle injury and the young Samoan again stepped in for him. The two teams fought to a 0-0 tie, setting up a challenging away game for Portland. Portland faced long odds: Kansas City were the top seed in the west, had won 11 of 18 matches at home this season, and were 6-1 in the playoffs on their current home pitch, Children's Mercy Park.

Tuiloma again started for Mabiala and helped the team with 10 area clearances, though he could have done even better, having failed to stop the crosses on Kansas City's two goals. Portland, however, scored three times, including a long-distance shot from Sebastian Blanco that earned him the Play of the Year award by his teammates, and Portland advanced to the MLS Cup Final.

Portland earned its trip to the final with gritty away performances in Houston, Seattle, and Kansas City, but they could not overcome the deficit in talent against the home team, Atlanta United, who prevailed in a lopsided 2-0 match. At least Tuiloma was not to blame for the loss, as Mabiala returned from his ankle injury, and the New Zealand fullback stayed on the bench.

But the future is bright for both the Timbers and Tuiloma. First-year coach Savarese left his stamp on the team, which exceeded expectations by reaching the MLS Cup Final, and they will be bringing back their core talent next season.

Tuiloma also established himself as a starter in MLS, and the team has exercised its 2019 option on his contract, allowing him to build on his strong 2018 MLS debut. Given his confidence and experience, we can all look forward to this young player continuing to grow into his talent and establishing himself as an Asian athlete to watch.

Yusei Kikuchi finalizes \$56M, 4-year contract with the Seattle Mariners

By Tim Booth

AP Sports Writer

SEATTLE — Japanese left-hander Yusei Kikuchi has finalized a four-year contract with the Seattle Mariners that guarantees \$56 million and includes club options that could make it worth \$109 million over seven seasons.

Seattle announced the agreement just ahead of the deadline for the 27-year-old to sign with a major league club.

He receives a \$6-million signing bonus and salaries of \$8 million this year, \$14 million in 2020, and \$15 million in 2021. The agreement includes a \$13-million player option for 2022, and Seattle has options worth \$16.5 million annually for 2022-2025.

Seattle has until the third day after the 2021 World Series to exercise all four team options. If the Mariners decline, Kikuchi has until the fifth day after the 2021 World Series to exercise his player option.

"Yusei's combination of character, talent, experience, and relative age made him a primary target in our roster-building plans," Seattle general manager Jerry Dipoto said. "He is an exciting young pitcher with the ability to impact the Mariners, both in the present and future."

Kikuchi was posted by the Pacific League's Seibu Lions on December 4. Under the rules in the November 2017 posting agreement, he had until Wednesday, January 2 to



SEATTLE SIGNING. Seattle Mariners pitcher Yusei Kikuchi smiles and shows off his new jersey following a news conference after his signing with the team in Seattle. Kikuchi is the latest Japanese star to decide on calling Seattle home in the majors. (AP Photo/Elaine Thompson)

sign with a major league team.

Seattle owes Seibu \$10,275,000 as a posting fee: 20 percent of the first \$25 million in guaranteed money, 17.5

Continued on page 13

