



From Paris to Portland: Larrys Mabiala has found a perfect home with Timbers

*By Jamie Goldberg
July 7, 2018*

[Larrys Mabiala](#) had carved out a wonderful life for himself in Turkey.

Over two years with Turkish Super Lig club Kayserispor, the veteran center back had developed into an invaluable leader on the backline and earned the respect of his teammates as team captain. Off the field, he loved the natural beauty and hallowed history of Turkey and had grown to enjoy the culture, atmosphere and food in the large and vibrant city of Kayseri. But there was still a feeling of emptiness.

Mabiala's wife, Edwina, and young daughter, Layana, were more than 2,000 miles away in their home city of Paris. They had tried to join Mabiala in Turkey when he was competing with Turkish club Karabukspor, but the adjustment to a new school system had been too complicated for his daughter. For five years, the family lived separately as Mabiala moved from Karabukspor to Kayserispor. But after Edwina gave birth to the couple's first son, Jelany, in August 2016, Mabiala knew he had to seek out a new club to reunite his family.

That's how he found the [Portland Timbers](#).

"I have no regrets about the decision we made to come to Portland," Mabiala said. "It's the perfect life."

A BETTER LIFE

Mabiala grew up just outside Paris, less than 20 miles away from the city's iconic epicenter and the fabled Champs-Elysees.

But his Paris felt like it was light years away from the glamor and elegance of the famed Parisian boulevards and monuments.

His parents had fled a violent civil war in the historically unstable Congo and settled in Montfermeil, a commune in the eastern suburbs of Paris. Montfermeil was an enclave of almost entirely African immigrants and Mabiala grew up in a tight-knit community surrounded by families from a wide-range of countries. His neighbors always treated him as one of their own, opening their doors and offering meals or even a place to sleep. It often felt like he was part of a giant family.

But Montfermeil was also one of the poorest and most dangerous areas in the banlieues of Paris. There were often robberies and break-ins, and he was exposed to rampant drug dealing on the streets within his community. For many children growing up in the area, their futures felt predetermined and bleak. Some of Mabiala's good friends ended up in prison later in life. Others died young.

"I come from a very, very difficult area in Paris," Mabiala said. "You don't see a window where you can escape from it. So, what you will do is get easy money as soon as possible. Even if you have to do very bad things, you'll do them."

"I'm lucky because soccer kept me away from a lot of trouble."

Mabiala's father, Jean, had played soccer in the Congo, but had been forced to quit the sport and take a job to support his family. His love for the game never disappeared and Jean made sure to immerse his son in the sport.

At 12, Mabiala, who had been competing for a local club, entered a fortuitous skills contest in his neighborhood. He had to juggle the ball 50 times with both feet and run through a handful of challenging drills to demonstrate his talent for the game. Mabiala did so well that he was invited to participate in the final at Clairefontaine, the biggest training center in France. He was the only player at the event not connected with a professional club.

"All the other players came from professional clubs, so of course everybody started to look at me because it wasn't logical to them to have a guy at the final that wasn't even playing for a professional club," Mabiala said. "Everybody was calling my father. He started to realize that maybe this was a chance for me to have a better life and escape from everything."

At 13, Mabiala joined the prestigious Paris Saint-Germain academy. It was a defining moment in his life. Over the next four years, the physically imposing defender became more disciplined as he took his game to a new level in the famed club's youth program. Soon, he began to envision a future in soccer.

He was 17 when Paris Saint-Germain signed him to his first professional contract.

THE TRAIN FROM PARIS

During his years in the Paris Saint-Germain academy, Mabiala grew accustomed to taking the train on Friday nights from Paris back to Montfermeil to see his family.

That's how he first met Edwina.

He was 17 when he caught her eye on what turned out to be a fateful train ride. While he was competing in the academy, she had been taking classes in Paris. It turned out that their families were from a similar area and they had been riding the same train every weekend.

"That's how it started," he said with a broad smile.

Edwina was by Mabilia's side over the next few years while he began his career as a professional soccer player, fighting through three tough seasons as he dealt with injuries and struggled to earn playing time with Paris Saint-Germain. In 2009, Mabilia moved on to French club Nice. That same year, Edwina gave birth to the couple's daughter.

But things changed dramatically in 2012 when Mabilia was offered the opportunity to sign with Karabukspor in Turkey. It was a chance for him to elevate his career. He couldn't turn it down.

"Everything was set up for me to live the perfect life in Turkey, but I was missing something," Mabilia said. "For five years, I was playing every game. I was very happy in my career, but I wasn't really happy as a man. It was very difficult for both of us."

At the start of 2017, Mabilia began to look for a new opportunity. At that exact same time, the Timbers were reeling after an unexpected season-ending injury to center back [Gbenga Arokoyo](#). The club knew they needed to sign a player to fill the void and hoped to bring in a veteran that could be a powerful and consistent presence on the backline and in the air. That's when their pursuit of Mabilia began in earnest.

"It came down to his character and profile," Timbers General Manager and President of Soccer [Gavin Wilkinson](#) said. "You can see when you're around Larrys that everyone gravitates toward him. He's charismatic and very likeable. He's a leader in his own way." Shortly after his contract in Turkey expired in June 2017, Mabilia joined the Timbers. Since then, he has developed into a mainstay on Portland's backline. He made 13 starts last year, helping the Timbers earn four clean sheets and finish the season in first place in the Western Conference.

After a rocky start in his first two games of 2018, Mabilia has developed into Portland's most consistent defender this year, starting all 15 matches and anchoring the backline as the club has dealt with numerous changes on defense. In the attack, the 30-year-old has grown into a weapon on set pieces as he's gained chemistry with his teammates. He ranks in a tie for third on the team in goals scored with four this season.

On June 30, Mabilia outmuscled Sounders defender Chad Marshall to head in his second of two big goals against Seattle and lead the Timbers to [their first-ever regular season win at CenturyLink Field](#). After the match, Timbers forward [Samuel Armenteros](#) joked that no one on the team [had a bigger head](#) than Mabilia.

"He's been very strong, not only defensively, but finding goals as well," Timbers coach [Giovanni Savarese](#) said. "I think he's done a fantastic job to make sure that he gives everything we need in that position. He's been just growing more and more in confidence."

A BABY BOY

The transition to Portland was hardly seamless.

Mabiala's wife had grown accustomed to the bustling city and dynamic urban lifestyle in Paris. It took time for the family to adapt to a culturally different and more low-key Portland and discover activities and restaurants that fit their tastes. At times, they couldn't help but think about the 5,000-mile gap that separated Portland from Paris.

But over time, that gradually changed. It is now clear to Mabiala that he and his family made the right choice.

"My wife is happy," Mabiala said. "My daughter loves the school. My son is very happy. This is the perfect thing that could have happened to us."

In March, the Mabalas welcomed their third child. They named him Jamal. He is the first of the three children to be born in the United States. That's something that Mabiala thinks about often.

"To be able to raise and to have a kid that was born in the United States, it's completely different than where I was born, where my parents were born," Mabiala said. "This is what I wanted. Besides the fact that I wanted to be a soccer player, I wanted to raise my kids in good conditions, in a beautiful city, like this. It fills me with pride."

-- [Jamie Goldberg](#) | jgoldberg@oregonian.com
503-853-3761 | [@jamielgoldberg](#)