

# “I’m your typical slow burner”

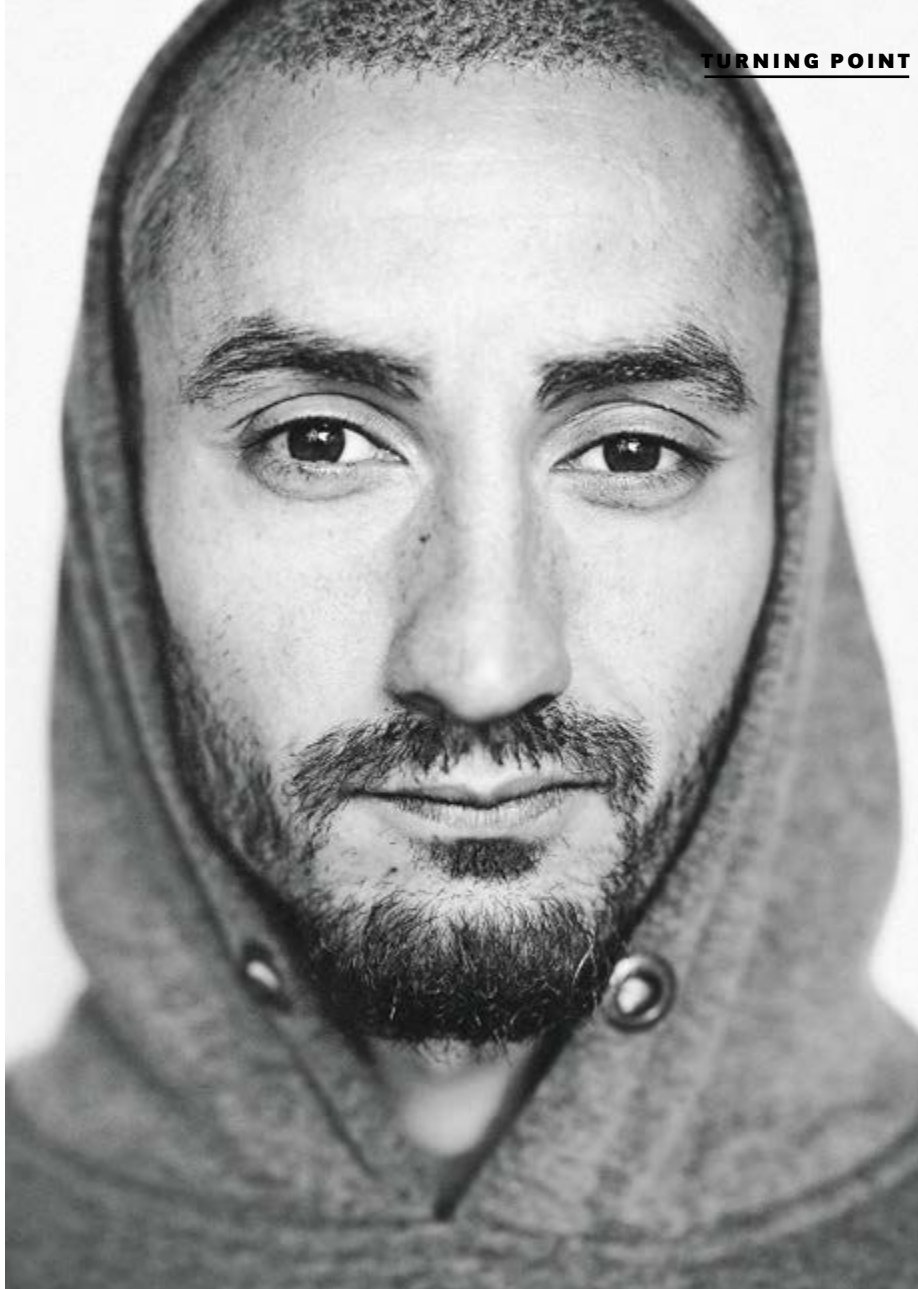
Stéphane Houcine Nater made his Swiss top-flight debut at the age of 27, but since then his star has ascended remarkably quickly. Today he’s a Tunisian international.

If my 23-year-old self had said his goal would be to play for the Tunisian national team, I’d have said he was crazy. At that time I was playing for an amateur team in Switzerland and had minimal contact with the country where my mother was born. I was brought up in France and eastern Switzerland, and I think we only ever visited Tunisia every five or six years. I never dreamed of appearing at the Africa Cup of Nations, but I always believed that I would make it as a professional. The change happened when I was 24, and it was like a light had been turned on in my head. The days of me turning up to a trial unprepared were suddenly a thing of the past. I guess I’m your typical slow burner in that sense.

FC Schaffhausen, then in the Swiss second tier, gave me a chance to prove myself. I made a reputation for myself as a defensive midfielder and the way I was able to make things happen on the pitch got me noticed. After I moved to Servette in Geneva, we were promoted to the top division, and in 2013 I helped St. Gallen, my hometown club, knock Spartak Moscow out of the Europa League.

Two other Tunisians – Yassine Chikhaoui and Amine Chermiti – had been playing in the Swiss Super League for a number of years, and whenever we’d play against each other, we’d often talk about the Tunisian national team. I’d never ruled myself out of being selected, and then, almost out of the blue, I found myself called up for a game against Cameroon in November 2013. What I’d never even dared to envisage suddenly didn’t seem so surprising anymore.

The only problem was that I didn’t have a Tunisian passport. To make sure my paperwork was in order, I travelled to Tunis a few days before the game. They approved my application, but it wasn’t done in time to allow me to play, and I had to wait until March 2014 to make my international debut at the age of 30. Pretty quickly I became a mainstay in the team and that made some local clubs in Tun-



sia sit up and take notice of me. Last summer, Club Africain from Tunis contacted me, and I didn’t have to think twice about the move: I’d be getting a good salary, and on top of that it would be a unique opportunity to get to know my mother’s homeland a bit better. To this day I’ve never regretted the decision, and my wife and young daughter are helping me feel more at home here.

We’re top of the league table and technically, the game is played at a high standard here. A lot of young players haven’t received any tactical coaching, though, and that’s where I try to support them in their development. The level of support and interest in football here is enormous, but when it comes to the national team, Tunisians are more reserved – they haven’t been treated to much successful, attacking football in the last few years. That’s what we’ll be trying to change at the Africa Cup of Nations, even if my first priority is to make us solid at the back.

*Adapted by Elio Stamm*

#### Name

**Stéphane Houcine Nater**

#### Date and place of birth

**20 January 1984, Troyes (France)**

#### Position

**Defensive midfielder**

#### Clubs

**2002–2004 FC Vaduz  
2004–2007 FC Chur 97  
2007–2008 GC Biaschesi  
2008–2010 FC Schaffhausen  
2010–2012 Servette FC  
2012–2014 FC St. Gallen  
Since 2014 Club Africain Tunis**

#### National team

**8 caps for Tunisia**

**In Turning Point, personalities reflect on a decisive moment in their lives.**