

GFFFN

1000



2015

WHAT IS THE GFFN 100?

The Get French Football News 100 comprises of our selection of the top one hundred talents that French football has to offer, judged solely on their performances in 2015.

To be eligible for the GFFN 100, the player must have been a registered squad member of a Ligue 1 or a Ligue 2 club on the 31st December 2015.

For example, Anthony Martial is ineligible despite playing half of the calendar year at AS Monaco because on the 31st December 2015 he was plying his trade at Manchester United.

However, Angel di Maria is eligible for the GFFN 100 despite having joined PSG in the summer of 2015 because on the aforementioned date he was a registered squad member of theirs.

Players that are eligible are judged on all their professional appearances in 2015, regardless of whether or not they were playing abroad for a part of the calendar year. This applies to the international appearances they might have accumulated, notably in EURO 2016 qualifying matches for example.

Players are ranked in descending order: with the highest-rated talent ranked 1st and the 100th highest-rated talent ranked 100th.

The selection process involved a nomination stage whereby the GFFN 100 contributors chose their favoured list of one hundred, alongside the use of statistical data to rank players according to a range of over 50 distinct parameters across different playing positions.



GREGORY VAN DER WIEL

100



Club: Paris Saint-Germain F.C.

Position: Defender

Born: Amsterdam

Date of Birth: 03/02/1988

Age: 27

*"I am a fighter and I
want to play."*

– Gregory van der Wiel

Gregory Van der Wiel was touted for huge things when he first emerged on the professional football scene. He showcased his precocious quality in the 2010 World Cup, having a brilliant tournament - selected in the final against eventual winners Spain- and winning Netherlands' young player of the year award in the same year.

It would not be harsh, however, to assert that Van der Wiel has not quite lived up to his destiny especially since he was once labelled as the new Michael Reiziger. But it would still be pretty ruthless to say that he has failed; he currently plays his club football at what is now one of the powerhouses of European football, Paris St-Germain. He was a regular in the French capital's line up when they first took back the Ligue 1 crown in his first season in 2013.

A competent, polished defender and comfortable on the ball, with bags of pace and a will to support attacks, Van der Wiel had the potential to be a 'complete' defender, similar to how Ashley Cole had plaudits gushing in the great Arsenal and Chelsea sides. There are glimpses in the past 12 months that reflect deeper reasons why he just has not been able to emulate such high performing, consistent players like Cole.

There are question marks over his attitude and his untimely, 'media unfriendly' comments. As a case in point, let us look at the pre-season period this summer and the start of the season. Further to tweeting that he 'was fit to play' before playing Montpellier, he caused quite an unwanted frenzy as to why he was not selected because PSG had officially stated 'he was getting back to fitness'. It emerged that the non-selection was down to a punishment sanctioned on the Dutchman after not completing post-match training in the game before, against Gazélec. Worse, Laurent Blanc confirmed that he had been on a separate training regime to the 1st XI... not exactly a great way to talk yourself into an extension on your contract.

In the summer transfer window, it actually seemed more than likely that Van der Wiel would leave and some - admittedly more unscrupulous sources - reported that Van der Wiel had said PSG wanted him to leave, such was the extent of his unsettlement! Before Chelsea got cover in the summer, José Mourinho considered that his defence was a bit light in this area and the tattooed right-back was duly earmarked. Nonetheless, he ended up stating himself that he wanted to stay in Paris declaring his love for PSG.

After prolonged contract talks coupled with a clear reluctance for PSG to sell Van der Wiel was still unable to secure an extension, with Raiola and his client reportedly unhappy with the salary offered, plunging his future into doubt as 2015 comes to a close. He has continued to have a tough time being in competition with Serge Aurier, the Ivorian who is one of the best right backs around in Europe right now. Laurent Blanc has incredible strength in depth at PSG so consequently rotates his players, especially in this position since he has Aurier and Marquinhos as competition to Van der Wiel.

Now we are into the business end of the Champions' League - the knockout stages - it will be interesting to see who Blanc goes with: Aurier has had the nod in both games against Real Madrid so a legitimate conclusion is that the Dutchman is still playing second fiddle.

Nevertheless, he is massively experienced on the European, if not international stage (46 International caps, 24 Champions' league appearances). And with Chelsea ironically now to meet PSG in the first knock-out stage, it could just be the moment for Van der Wiel to show, in the first leg at the Parc des Princes, what the Blues missed out on next February when they meet. The European Cup will be a defining tournament for Van der Wiel; left out of the 2014 World Cup squad due to a knee injury and with Netherlands also being dumped unceremoniously out of the Euro qualifications, the Champions' League will be the stage where his performances can be internationally measured.

That all said he could not do much more to impress his critics. He has only had seven starting appearances this season but has two assists to his name. Moreover, he has been in the starting line-up in the last five games in a row at the time of writing, two of which were clean sheets. There is much of the season to run too in Ligue 1.

Without a doubt, at 27 years old, he is more than hanging in there. It was noted that van der Wiel had the potential: he still has. But he is running out of time. And people may run out of patience.



SERGI DARDER

[99]
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Club: Olympique Lyonnais

Position: Midfielder

Born: Artà

Date of Birth: 22/12/1993

Age: 22

"We are going to attempt to rival PSG."

– Sergi Darder

To say it has been a testing 2015 for Sergi Darder might be putting things a little lightly. In one calendar year, he has been pushed into the limelight, had almost fallen ill while waiting for a move to France and now that he has got here, he is being strictly judged at every turn.

Who would be a footballer?

The Mallorca native joined Espanyol's youth set-up at 13, progressing all the way up to the Barcelona-based club's B team, where he made 36 appearances and scored two goals in a season with them.

The youngster then made his move to Malaga in July 2012. He spent a year with the B side before being called up by Bernd Schuster to join the first team on their pre-season tour and he impressed, scoring during a friendly against Aston Villa.

Darder was officially promoted after the summer, making his debut against Valencia in 2013. He featured in 64 games over two seasons with the club, impressing so much that he then signed a new deal with the Spanish side that would see him agree to remain until 2017. In his final season with the Southern Spain club, he made 33 league appearances, scoring four goals but also picking up 10 yellow cards and a red.

His form, however, caught the attention of a few clubs around Europe, with the main club chasing him being Ligue 1 runners-up Lyon. With their pedigree and the promise of Champions League football for at least one season, the temptation for Darder to join the French club was too much for him to bear.

A deal seemed to be agreed between the two clubs about a week before transfer deadline day but after cancellations and delays, Darder became a Lyon player just a day before the window closed for a fee of around €12 million.

Speaking to ESPN about the event, the Spaniard said: *"At one point everything seemed to be done."*

"I had confirmation -- and then it fell through. After this incident, I started losing weight and I wasn't sleeping any longer... but that's in the past. What matters is that today I'm at Lyon, one of the biggest clubs in the world."

It was quite the journey, Darder admitted that he had come to the club to win trophies and wanted to emulate the likes of Atletico Madrid in Spain by booting out the big boys even on a smaller budget.

He got off to a slow start but he really impressed against Toulouse, where he also scored his first goal. He arrived late in the box, much like he did when playing more centrally, controlled the ball in the box and instinctively prodded the ball home.

It was a showcase of what he can do. He made three tackles, he hit the post, he kept possession well and he just wanted to be involved in the game. That kind of effervescent performance is what he can give and while we have seen very little of it, with his recent performances heavily criticised, it is the kind of level that he has the potential to achieve on a regular basis.

Darder is a feisty box-to-box player who is full of energy and is more than ready to get stuck into the game, as evidenced by his yellow card total last season in Spain. He is not going to shy away from a physical battle, even though he is not the biggest player on the field and his tenacity really sets him apart.

He is also accomplished going forward, he has that classic Spanish style of being able to play in small pockets of space. What is not so traditional to his homeland is his blockbuster of a shot, evidenced by the goals he scores, which are usually from long range. Do not give him space and time anywhere close to 30 yards out as he can lash out a rapturous striker that all too often seems to fly into the top corner.

This season, his 80% pass completion suggests that he is struggling to retain possession but that is mainly a factor of Lyon's formation. Stuck further out wide, when possibly better in a much more narrow midfield, he is having to take greater risks with his passing more often, rather than being able to play neat football with players in around him.

Despite his struggles so far, it is hard to see Darder not eventually succeeding at Lyon. He clearly wanted the move badly, he is willing to put the effort in and on previous evidence he certainly has the talent to be a big part of this team.

Give him the time to adapt to a new country and to a new formation, should Hubert Fournier stay and persist with the diamond, and you can expect him to do well. However, with the pressure already being applied by the fans and media, it is becoming a worry that Darder may be crushed under the weight of it all.



EZEQUIEL LAVEZZI

[98
v 61]

Club: Paris Saint-Germain F.C.

Position: Attacker

Born: Villa Gobernador Gálvez

Date of Birth: 03/05/1985

Age: 30

"Sometimes, I think about stopping the whole thing."

– Ezequiel Lavezzi

When Ezequiel Lavezzi joined PSG in 2012 for around €30m, Les Parisiens' supporters were salivating at the prospect of seeing this rapid, exciting attacker gracing the pitch at the Parc des Princes with his presence. Fast-forward to 2015 and Lavezzi's unwavering eightieth-minute entrance onto the field during PSG matches is met with quiet applause at best from the by then half-empty Ligue 1 stadia caused by the early exit of fans after PSG have already usually won the game by several goals. It has been a spectacular demise for a player who was so highly rated when he first arrived in the French capital.

The reality is that Lavezzi simply cannot compete with the other star-studded members of PSG's current squad who currently occupy the starting spots. Already in the 2014/15 campaign, Lavezzi was nothing more than a bit-part player for Laurent Blanc's outfit, with the former French national team boss electing to pick Javier Pastore and Edinson Cavani alongside Zlatan Ibrahimovic to make, what was on paper, a rather skewed 4-3-3 formation in front of the now undisputed midfield trio of Verratti, Motta and Matuidi.

The summer arrival of Angel di Maria to the French capital must have been met with mixed emotions by Ezequiel Lavezzi. On the one hand, the dressing room was gaining another Argentinian national team player and a dear friend of Lavezzi's. On the other hand, Di Maria's arrival has signified the final nail in Lavezzi's coffin with regards to ever having a chance to reclaim his position in PSG's starting XI. Even Javier Pastore, a player who was so integral to the way in which the Ligue 1 champions played in 2014/15 has lost his place as a result of the former Manchester United and Real Madrid man's arrival.

The question is, does Ezequiel Lavezzi really care about the lack of playing time?

You would have to suggest, on the evidence of previous transfer windows, that the answer is no. Lavezzi could have returned to top level Serie A sides on multiple occasions but refused the offers that came his way because they could not match the wages that he is currently earning at PSG.

Instead, Lavezzi is content with his weekly Parisian pay packet and his "joker" status in the dressing room. It must be said that Lavezzi's practical jokes are always rather amusing, whether he is ruffling the hair of LFP President Thiriez or he is tripping over a cameraman. Now, that status within such a highly pressurized squad must not be underestimated in terms of how useful Ezequiel Lavezzi can be psychologically for the rest of his team. A bit of light relief is always important, especially when you have a squad that is attempting to win four trophies every year.

The fact that PSG are competing on four fronts very ably every season has been Lavezzi's saving grace and it is why he has scraped his way into the GFFN 100 2015. Naturally, rotation is key for PSG and Lavezzi has managed to recoup some playing time as a result of that. Lavezzi appeared 15 times in the league in the first half of the season, grabbing two goals in the process. The Argentinian remains a very good player and proved this with one of his recent strikes.

In a match against Toulouse in early November, Lavezzi reminded us what his game is all about. He made a sneaky run in behind the Toulouse central defence that was spotted by Zlatan Ibrahimovic who lofted the ball through to Lavezzi who cheekily finished on the half volley past a sprawling Ali Ahamada.

Generally speaking, the quality of Lavezzi's runs on and off the ball remains excellent. However, his finishing abilities have diminished the most due to the lack of playing time. Lavezzi's confidence in front of goal has undoubtedly dropped. He also remains one of PSG's weakest attackers physically. This poses problems for the Argentinian specifically in Ligue 1 games, with the majority of opposition conceding now that the best way to try and beat PSG is to attempt to dominate their more technically minded players in the physical battle.

Anyway, who are we to judge Ezequiel Lavezzi's decision-making in recent seasons. He remains a highly intelligent and technically gifted attacking midfielder who can play on the wing but also in the central striking role if need be. He is afforded just about enough playing time to make him feel as if he is truly adding something to PSG's fight for four titles in 2015/16.

He has won an incredible amount of silverware during his time with Les Parisiens and why would he not want to see this adventure through right until his contract expires at the end of the 2015/16 campaign.

Wherever he goes after that, his future club should know that they have a very talented individual on their hands, if he is motivated correctly and given the support to mend his confidence once again.



DIDIER NDONG

[97]
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Club: FC Lorient

Position: Midfielder

Born: Lambaréné

Date of Birth: 17/06/1994

Age: 21

"I feel as if Lorient is the best club for my progression."

– Didier Ndong

To fully understand how successful this year has been for Didier Ndong, you just have to compare where he was at the beginning and the end of 2015. At the beginning of January, the 21-year-old midfielder was turning out for CS Sfaxien in Tunisia. By December, he had established himself as a fully fledged member of the Lorient starting eleven and one of Ligue 1's hottest prospects.

His transfer to the French side was confirmed on the third of January, but Ndong himself was unable to make the move immediately, as he had the small matter of an African Cup of Nations tournament to compete in with his native Gabon. Having made his senior international debut in November 2012, aged just 18, Ndong played an important role during Gabon's short tournament, appearing in all three of their fixtures.

The youngster played the opening hour of their first two games, a win over Burkina Faso and a loss to Congo, before playing the final 21 minutes of his country's 2-1 loss to Equatorial Guinea as they finished third in their group.

Only then was Ndong free to finally join up with his new team in France, albeit with a wealth of international tournament experience in his pocket. Sylvain Ripoll was understandably patient with the youngster in his first weeks at the club, leaving him on the bench against Montpellier, before bringing him on for his debut with 20 minutes to go away at Reims in early February. Further short cameos followed against Bastia and Evian, before Ripoll handed him his first full start against St Étienne at the start of March.

However, it was a match to forget for the young midfielder, who was sent off for receiving a second yellow card after a nasty two-footed lunge on Benjamin Corgnet in the 68th minute. Lorient lost control of the match from that point, as St Étienne went on to score twice and take all three points.

It was a tough, bubble-bursting lesson for Ndong, especially so early into his career in France, but his play up until that point had been bordering on dangerous and sending him off was the only real option the referee had to curb his recklessness.

Ndong served his suspension and was soon establishing himself in the Lorient team again, so much so that he played the entirety of each of Lorient's final seven league games of the season.

And he certainly picked up where he left off after the summer break, as Ndong went on to play 90 minutes in all but one of Lorient's league games in the opening half of the 2015/16 campaign, missing only the goalless draw with Lyon on the opening weekend.

Over the last six months, it has become clear to see that Ndong has grown as a player and as a character on the pitch and he has now firmly cemented a starting spot in Lorient's central midfield, mainly as the most defensive minded of the group. However, he has also shown an eye for goal at times, scoring against both Monaco and Troyes so far this campaign.

His first was particularly notable, not just because it was his first for his club, but because it was a spectacular strike from 35 yards out to open the scoring in a game Lorient would go on to win 3-2. Having picked up the ball from Romain Philippoteaux, Ndong took one touch before firing an absolute pile driver past Danijel Subasic at the Stade Louis II. His second of the season came in another win for Lorient, 4-1 at home to Troyes, as he finished off a swift counterattacking move by collecting the ball in the box and firing past the keeper.

It is clear to see why he has become such an important player for Lorient; his drive, passion and energy make Lorient a hard team to overrun in the middle of the park. Ndong is particularly good at reading the game and being in the right place at the right time to make interceptions and break up play. And as shown by his goal against Monaco, his long shots are not half bad either.

The one glaring weakness in his game right now is his rashness. The youngster has a habit of jumping into tackles and his hotheadedness has seen him get involved in numerous tussles and disagreements on the pitch. Whilst this is all involved in the work of a defensive midfielder, Ndong needs to learn that some arguments just need to be forgotten and that sometimes staying on your feet is the better option. However, these are all things that will improve in time and with more experience.

Overall though, Ndong has had an extraordinary year, and if he keeps up his current level of progression, he could end up as an exceptional player.



HAMARI TRAORÉ

[96]
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Club: Stade de Reims

Position: Defender

Born: Bamako

Date of Birth: 27/01/1992

Age: 23

*"I am very proud to
join Stade de Reims."*

– Hamari Traoré

The inclusion of Hamari Traoré on this list of players may certainly raise some eyebrows. After all, Reims have battled relegation all season, enduring a brutal October and November stretch that saw the club lose seven matches in a row across all competitions. While they have righted the ship to some degree by notching a win and three draws in their last four matches, a trip to what will surely be a desperate Bastia looms at the weekend. Too, the plaudits for Reims seem to be going towards their young attackers, who have given the team a much-needed dynamism going forward. Nicolas de Préville, Grejohn Kyei and Jordan Siebatcheu have, despite Kyei's recent injury, been some of the most pleasant surprises this season. So, what, then, is a 23-year-old right back, signed from a relegated Belgian side, doing amongst the likes of Thiago Silva, Mathieu Valbuena and João Moutinho?

Born in Mali's capital, Bamako and developed there under the auspices of one of the numerous African academies of Jean-Marc Guillou, the former Cannes and Ivory Coast manager, Traoré had done well enough by the time he was twenty to garner a move to Paris FC. While the capital side now ply their trade in Ligue 2, the club were at the time in the third division. The 2012/13 season was tumultuous for the once-great club, as they not only recorded the division's lowest attendance but also churned through three managers, avoiding relegation by a single point. Nevertheless, Traoré did make somewhat of an impact, featuring sixteen times for the club and earning himself a move to SK Lierse.

Lierse are a fairly storied club, having won a handful of Belgian titles, but upon Traoré's arrival they had fallen on hard times, having only been promoted back to the top flight two seasons earlier. To bring Traoré, a player of considerable pedigree as concerns his involvement in one of the Guillou academies, (other alumni include the Touré brothers) on a free was almost too easy a decision. After spending the first part of the campaign with the B squad, Traoré made his first team debut in October, becoming, if not an automatic selection, at least a regular by season's end. He failed to contribute anything tangible in terms of goals or assists, but the confidence that playing time for a professional European team after having been an academy player in Africa less than two years prior will have been valuable.

In his second season, the team relegated after failing to come through Belgium's Byzantine playoff relegation system. Traoré, to his credit, continued to take steps forward as a player amidst the team's dismal form, recording five assists and adding a spectacular goal. The club employed three different managers by season's end, but the youngster had no problem impressing any of them, leading the team not only in assists but in minutes played. With the team generally lining up in a 4-3-3, coaches sought to use Traoré's pace and directness to get at the opposition on the counter, and he was essentially given free reign to attack, even if it came at the cost of being somewhat derelict in his defensive duties.

When Lierse were eventually relegated, Traoré moved from one troubled club to another, joining Reims, who had managed to stave off relegation in the season prior under Olivier Guégan, the former midfielder having replaced Jean-Luc Vasseur very late in the campaign. To the uninformed, the move seemed baffling, as Aïssa Mandi had done reasonably well to that point in time at right back, becoming an Algerian international and earning himself the club's captaincy. However, at 1.75m and powerfully built, Mandi's future was never as a right back, but rather at centre back, and Traoré's arrival allowed Guégan to move Mandi to a more natural position, partnering Anthony Weber. As Weber had played alongside the aging Mickaël Tacalfred at the back in the season before, the two were an almost unmitigated disaster, as Reims had the worst defence in the league, only staying in the league thanks to a fairly competent attack.

Now, with 22 goals conceded in eighteen matches, Reims have hardly become a Lille or an Angers, but they are doing enough to hold their own, and Traoré is the biggest reason for that. While discipline is still an issue, as it had been in Belgium, Traoré's eagerness is as much a part of his picking up bookings as is any sort of ill-temperedness. Too, despite his small stature, Traoré is a remarkably good header of the ball, having so far notched up one of the best aerial duel rates for his position. With a bit more application when it comes to understanding the physical nuances of the game as played in Ligue 1, Traoré certainly has the potential to excel at his position.

In attack, blessed with standout pace and acceleration, Traoré has been the main conduit for Reims in this season, his ability to create an instant counter-attack key to much of what the team try to do. While his cocksure attitude sometimes leads to him getting caught in possession, the potential for him to create something out of nothing generally outweighs any costs. Too, while he has yet to record an assist this season, his right foot is more than potent, as his fine goal against Marseille early in the season showed. When paired with de Préville on the opposite flank, their ability to cross the ball give Reims an extra option in attack. Again, as in his defensive play, not everything that Traoré tries comes off, but considering he is only in his third season of professional football, there is plenty of time for him to develop. As a final note, while much of Europe was fixated on the final round of European Championship qualifying in mid-October, Traoré earned his first cap for his country. While it was only a friendly, and some key players were rested or not selected, his call-up only serves to further validate that Reims have an impressively developing young player on their hands, and one deserving of his placement on this list.



BENJAMIN NIVET

[95]
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Club: ESTAC Troyes

Position: Midfielder

Born: Chartres

Date of Birth: 02/01/1977

Age: 38

"I would have liked to play for Barca... whilst keeping my life in Troyes."

– Benjamin Nivet

The term 'legend' is perhaps overused in general parlance nowadays, and this is particularly true in the world of football, where it has taken on cliché-like status. However from the sleepy Aube region of Champagne hails one figure in French football who could rightly be described as a modern-day footballing legend - the inspirational Troyes captain Benjamin Nivet. The role that the thirty-eight-year-old played in his side's ascension to France's top-flight last season was monumental, and his incredible contribution to the club's return to Ligue 1 under the stewardship of the now departed coach Jean-Marc Furlan won him admirers and the greatest amount of respect from fans across the hexagon. The Troyan skipper's performances over recent seasons have served as the perfect example to rising youths at the club, including Corentin Jean, Jimmy Cabot and more recently Paul Bernardoni.

There has been a notable absence of Champagne-related puns being used in relation to Troyes this season, and that has been with good reason. The dismissal of Jean-Marc Furlan was the most recent example of a long line of setbacks that the club has faced as a result of their inability to adapt to life in Ligue 1 successfully. After eighteen matches and just one victory, ESTAC are rooted to the bottom of the league's standings and there haven't been many reasons to celebrate. However Nivet's consistently industrious performances have earned him deserved praise in what has been to say the least a complicated season for the men from the Stade de l'Aube.

Throughout 2015, in both Ligue 1 and Ligue 2, Nivet has been a calm and assured presence within the Troyan midfield. He is a quintessential French central midfielder and his main strengths throughout his career have been his ability to pass intelligently and to take the pressure of the defence by dropping back to win back possession for his side or to receive the ball into feet in tight positions from defenders who are under pressure. Last season the thirty-eight-year-old played a key role in his side's collective attacking capabilities.

Troyes scored an impressive sixty-one times in their title-winning Ligue 2 season last year and Nivet played a key attacking-midfield job in the number ten role. The Troyes captain scored eleven times last season and his ability to burst into the box was evident. All of those eleven goals were scored in the box, highlighting the effectiveness of the thirty-eight year-old when he played as a central attacking midfielder for Troyes last season. As mentioned earlier, Nivet is an intelligent passer of the ball, and the nine assists he provided last season were proof of his ability to pick out key, potentially match-winning passes.

It would be fair to say however that Nivet's role has changed at ESTAC this season, and this can be put down to a number of factors. Troyes last season were a class above the rest of Ligue 2 and by the end of the season they were deserved runaway title winners. This allowed Furlan's side to dominate matches and they were rarely put under pressure, with their two-nil defeat against Nancy in April figuring as the only match in which they themselves were dominated.

As a result, Nivet was afforded the luxury of being given a sense of liberty in the final-third which he has not be allowed to have this season, and as a result he has been forced to play further down the field. Even the most ardent Troyes fans would also be forced to concede that Nivet appears to lack the same energy he had last season, and at times his age has appeared to catch up with him. The Troyes number ten has been less effective this season in terms of his goalscoring - he has only managed to find the net once, scoring from the spot in a four-one defeat against a resurgent Lorient side.

That said however, there have also been aspects of the thirty-eight-year-old's game that have been more than commendable. He remains a calming influence within his side and he often makes intelligent short and sometimes one-touch passes. The former Caen player has a pass completion of average of around eighty percent, which makes him comparable to players such as Paris Saint-Germain's Javier Pastore and AS Monaco's João Moutinho, two younger midfielders that would not normally be categorized in the same grouping as Nivet. The Troyes captain has also been more economical in terms of his energy output than he was last season, and this has been a wise decision, which has enabled him to play a proactive role in his side's midfield, whether he is helping win back possession or starting attacks with short passes.

As 2015 draws to a close, one thing is sure - few footballers in France have had as much an impact on the sport as Troyes' dedicate captain. Nivet is sure to remain part of new coach Claude Robin's plans between now and the end of the season, and he will undoubtedly make a valiant effort to save his side, against all odds, from the drop to Ligue 2. The thirty-eight-year-old has impressed with his conduct both on and off the park in recent years - he has been an extremely involved patron of the Assofrani association, an organization that aims to promote charitable links between France and Niger. If anybody can provide inspiration for the rest of the Troyan dressing room, it will be Benjamin Nivet.



DJIBRIL SIDIBÉ

[94]
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Club: Lille OSC

Position: Defender

Born: Troyes

Date of Birth: 29/07/1992

Age: 23

"I know that I have reached another level."

– Djibril Sidibé

Ever since Mathieu Debuchy left for England in 2013, Djibril Sidibé has proven himself to be a mainstay in the Lille starting eleven. His stats over the past year certainly prove that point; the full-back appeared in all but four of Lille's league games in 2015.

The 23-year-old is capable of playing in a number of positions on the pitch. After joining from Troyes in 2012, he was initially used as cover for Debuchy on the right hand side, replacing him in that position when the Frenchman joined Newcastle, but over the past year, he has been deployed mainly at left-back.

However, he is without doubt an attack-minded full-back, who regularly charges forward and launches crosses into the box, so much so that Hervé Renard occasionally experimented with playing Sidibé on the midfield flanks during his short spell in charge between June and November.

2015 certainly was not the easiest year for players to thrive in the Lille team, with poor performances, shock defeats and managerial changes all causing unrest and instability. Sidibé, almost inevitably, suffered too as a result, but the fact that he stayed almost ever-present throughout and was first choice under three different managers says a lot about the player's adaptability.

All four of the league games that Sidibé missed in 2015 came in the second half of last season, caused mainly by a red card in a goalless draw at home to Nice in February. A rash, reckless challenge on Carlos Eduardo earned the full-back a straight red and a one match suspension, but manager at the time René Girard waited another three games before restoring him to the starting eleven, perhaps as punishment for costing his team in a game they were dominating before going down to ten men.

Sidibé was soon back in his usual left-back slot though, helping Lille win five of their final eight matches of the 2014/15 campaign to finish eighth in the table. His attacking prowess was also on show in these games, scoring Lille's second goal in a 3-1 victory at home against rivals Lens. Sidibé charged down the left hand side, before chasing a loose ball into the box and slotting past the onrushing keeper.

And in their next, albeit less successful, game against Toulouse a week later, Sidibé claimed an assist as his shot was redirected into the net by Nolan Roux for Lille's opening goal in what ended as a 3-2 defeat.

The 2015/16 campaign so far can only be classed as a disaster for Lille, but Sidibé has managed to continue to supply an attacking threat, with two goals and two assists to his name at the time of writing. His first came in a 2-0 victory over Montpellier, as he charged at defenders and brilliantly curled the ball past the keeper from outside the box. His second came five weeks later, as he latched onto a precise through ball to tuck the ball into the bottom corner and snatch his side a point at home to Bastia.

Interestingly, both of those goals came from Sidibé playing on the flanks rather than in defence, which suggests Renard may have been onto something and that Sidibé may have prospered if the coach had been given more time.

Indeed, if there is one criticism to make of Sidibé, it is that he can sometimes neglect his defensive duties in favour of bombing forward; his runs up the pitch often lead to him having to scramble back and commit sloppy fouls when Lille lose the ball.

Given his natural attack mindedness, it seems ideal to free him of those shackles and let him run forward freely by playing him further up the pitch. At this point in time, it almost feels like Sidibé cannot move onto the next level without moving permanently into an attacking position, or conversely, improving his defensive ability.

Nevertheless, his attacking qualities and importance to Lille are what earns him a place on the GFFN 100. He has provided some vital goals and assists over the past calendar year and, as ever, his crossing provides a constant threat, which Lille's strikers really have not taken advantage of enough this season.

It is little surprise then that local press in Newcastle claim Steve McLaren is interested in taking Sidibé to the Premier League, especially given their past record of signing players from Ligue 1. It is ironic to think that Sidibé could possibly end up following the same path as the man he replaced in the Lille team.

Until any such move materialises though, it will be business as usual for Sidibé, who has appeared in every one of his team's league games so far this campaign. Things can surely only get better Lille on the pitch and you can guarantee Sidibé will continue to have a big part to play.



SALVATORE SIRIGU

[93
v 84]

Club: Paris Saint-Germain F.C.

Position: Goalkeeper

Born: Nuoro

Date of Birth: 12/01/1987

Age: 28

"I did not sign a four year contract extension to leave in the summer."

– Salvatore Sirigu

You can safely say that 2015 was a year of two very different halves for Salvatore Sirigu. On paper, the first half of the year could hardly have gone any better for the Italian goalkeeper, who won all four domestic trophies with PSG in the 2014/15 campaign. But Sirigu's fortunes changed drastically this summer, with the arrival of the promising Kevin Trapp from Eintracht Frankfurt.

Since then, the 28-year-old has had to put up with the role of back-up keeper, watching on from the bench; a consequence of PSG's bottomless pockets (once their financial restraints were lifted, of course) and their ability to create intense competition in every position.

His natural ability was obvious even from an early age when, after a couple of loan spells in the Italian lower leagues, he established himself as Palermo's number one at just 23. Despite interest from a wide range of clubs, including Juventus, PSG won the race for the Italian's signature for a bargain €3.9 million. And since joining the capital club, Sirigu has enjoyed success after success, winning consecutive league titles and being named Ligue 1 goalkeeper of the year for both 2012/13 and 2013/14. But nothing can quite be compared to the haul that Sirigu and PSG collected last season, as they won every domestic competition they entered.

However, this only tells half of the story, as although Sirigu was the undisputed first choice and PSG were winning almost every week, fans were slowly becoming disgruntled with the Italian between the sticks. Indeed, the club's success on the pitch at times masked some very out of character performances from Sirigu, but despite this, his position in the team was never under threat.

Sirigu missed just four of his side's 38 league games last season, all of which came in 2015 and most of which were caused by injury. He kept 13 clean sheets, four of them in 2015, and was an ever present in PSG's Champions League campaign, including during later round matches against Chelsea and Barcelona.

But it was his uncharacteristically poor performances that stick in the mind most, such as conceding three against Bordeaux in March. Sirigu has retained a place in this year's edition of the GFFN 100 because he remains a high quality goalkeeper who completed a clean sweep of domestic trophies in 2015, but at a club like PSG, you can only be unchallenged in your position for so long.

And so as soon as their restraints in the transfer market were lifted, the champions moved for Trapp. The transfer was not intended as a punishment for Sirigu, it was more of a statement that his position in the team had become far too comfortable and it was about time he faced some real competition. Trapp did, however, immediately become first choice and as a result, Sirigu has played just once in all competitions at the time of writing this season, keeping a clean sheet in a 2-0 victory away at Bastia in October.

It is important to look at exactly why Trapp overtook Sirigu in the pecking order with such immediacy. The Italian custodian has always struggled in the air and on occasions puts his team under pressure by electing to punch the ball away, even when catching it seems possible. Over the course of last season, Laurent Blanc slowly lost patience with the Italian, although at the time he did not really have the resources to do anything about it, with only the lesser talented 35-year-old Nicolas Douchez as back-up.

However, Sirigu has always been and remains an excellent shot-stopper, with lightning-fast reflexes that have bailed out PSG on numerous occasions over the years. And it should be noted that Trapp has not had the smoothest of starts to his PSG career, making a few mistakes over the course of his first six months including two in one game against Real Madrid, Lyon and Bordeaux, ironically, the same team Sirigu suffered against earlier in the year.

Despite this though, Sirigu still remains firmly second favourite in Blanc's mind and as a result, could well be on the move in search of first team football. The Italian reportedly turned down a loan move to Nice in the summer in order to fight for his place in the PSG team, but after warming the bench for half a season, resurrecting his career with the Ligue 1 champions seems an unlikely prospect.

Sirigu also has his international career to think of, especially with Euro 2016 on the horizon. He has 15 caps for his country and is currently seen as the next best option after the legendary Gianluigi Buffon, but playing one competitive club game in half a season is hardly the best way to secure your place in the national team.

Simply put, Sirigu will be itching for his situation to change, otherwise his 2016 risks going the same way as the last few months.



YOUSOUF SABALY

[92]
*

Club: FC Nantes

Position: Defender

Born: Le Chesnay

Date of Birth: 05/03/1993

Age: 22

*"I am ready to play
for Senegal."*

– Youssouf Sabaly

Paris Saint Germain cast a very large shadow over the rest of Ligue 1, achieving total domination of the championship with a gigantic nineteen-point cushion over their closest rival at the winter break. Their success and resources have left a lot of the supposed next best teams chasing their respective tails as they try to compete with the club from the capital. Expectations are constantly being reassessed and downgraded with every poor result from the likes of Lyon and Marseille et al.

Being a PSG player must be a fantastic experience; league titles all but assured year on year with that comes constant presence in the Champions' League and the fact that the calibre of your teammates is on par with the very best in Europe. Not to mention the financial windfalls and lucrative skin cosmetic product promotion.

Yet, not everyone is as lucky as to benefit from the aforementioned perks. Laurent Blanc can only pick 11 players each week and as such some players will struggle to make it on to the pitch. This can be the case more for many younger developing players and thus they are sent out to other clubs in order for them to get said playing time for them to be ready for PSG in a year or two's time. This has been the case for a player such as Adrien Rabiot whose spell in the Toulouse first team in 2013 was a precursor for his extended run in the PSG first team.

Another such player hoping to emulate Rabiot's path is Youssouf Sabaly. A member of France's triumphant Under 20 World Cup champions squad in 2013, albeit he only played seventeen minutes, Sabaly has spent his 2015 on loan at two different clubs in Ligue 1- Evian Thonon Gaillard and FC Nantes.

Having been an important part of the Evian side that completed the great escape in 2013/14 he was loaned back to the Savoyard club for the following 2014/15 season. Things did not go to plan, as Evian finally did what they had been teetering on the brink of doing for a few seasons and were relegated. Sabaly was an integral member of the Evian defence in both seasons clocking up 29 matches in the 2014/15 season, to go with his 36 the season before.

Sabaly began the current season on the fringes of the PSG side; he went on the pre-season tour to the United States and made the bench for two of PSG's first four league fixtures before confirming his loan move to FC Nantes. He made his debut in the home derby with Stade Rennais where the away side would win with relative ease as FCN finished with nine men. Injury would prevent him playing for just over a month when Troyes were the visitors to the Beaujoire.

However early in the season, this game may have been seen as something of a must win for the canaris who had endured a poor run of results. The visit of bottom club Troyes was an opportunity to build on their surprise win at Lille the previous match-day. The chance would not be passed up by Sabaly and his teammates.

FC Nantes took the lead on 41 minutes with Valentin Rongier's absolute wonder-strike to give the home side the lead at half-time. Five minutes after half-time Sabaly received the ball on the right flank 30 yards from goal. He surged forward and started to bear down on the penalty area and the goal. He cut in before ghosting past one defender before striking left footed. The ball found the net after ricocheting off the post, deceiving the keeper thanks to the earliness of the strike and the fact that the keeper is unsighted by the defender in his eye-line.

Sabaly's first goal in professional football put his side two goals up before Nantes would add a third through Yacine Bammou to complete a good win. Sabaly would be named man of the match for his performance, an award he would take again in the following game in an away win at high-flying Caen.

Sabaly as a full-back during his short career has been used in almost equal amounts on both sides of the defence. At Evian he spent a lot of his time on the left whereas Michel Der Zakarian has predominately used him on the right. Nantes' defence, as with most areas of the team, has experienced a large amount of flux as rotation has been commonplace.

Sabaly was brought in as an ostensible replacement for Issa Cissokho who headed for pastures new in Italy during the summer. The two players concerned are not identical defenders; Cissokho was more of a bustling forward charging defender capable of creating chances. Where Sabaly excels over Cissokho is in the tackling stakes. Sabaly's tackling stats are much higher than Cissokho's ever were in his two Ligue 1 season at Nantes.

Soon enough Sabaly will be faced with a decision that affects many players under contract at PSG which will be to decide where his future lies. Cautionary tales are aplenty with modern day PSG as players find themselves in a situation where their face does not fit. Given his performances in 2015, Youssouf Sabaly should have no trouble in finding himself a defensive flank to marshal.



RICARDO CARVALHO

[91]
v 34

Club: AS Monaco FC

Position: Defender

Born: Amarante

Date of Birth: 18/05/1978

Age: 37

"This could be my last season."

– Ricardo Carvalho

At 37 years of age, many players have ended their careers, hung up their boots and faded into obscurity. Ricardo Carvalho, though, is not one of these players. Instead, the veteran Portuguese defender remains a vital cog in the Monaco machine, using all of his knowledge and experience to marshal the team's back line.

The centre back has enjoyed a hugely successful career, playing at the very highest level in the Portugal, England, Spain and, of course, France, lifting an astonishing 22 trophies along the way.

His senior career started at Porto, where, after three seasons out on loan, he went on to become a stand out player in the team that won the Champions League in 2004. Carvalho would go on to follow José Mourinho to Chelsea, where he would really make a name for himself and become one of the best defenders in the world at the time. His time in England was just as successful as his time in Portugal was, winning the league three times as well as seven other domestic trophies.

Then, after many years of trying, Real Madrid finally got their man, as Carvalho moved to the Spanish giants in 2010, where he would again play under the leadership of Mourinho. As you would expect, more trophies followed, as he went on to lift the Copa del Rey in his first season and the league title the following year.

But after his three year contract at Madrid expired, Carvalho decided to join the 'Monaco project', along with the likes of Radamel Falcao and João Moutinho. Monaco's big money signings have gone on to achieve varying degrees of success, but it is arguably the free transfer of Carvalho that was the most significant of all.

He played in all but one of Monaco's league games during his first season in France, helping Monaco finish runners-up to PSG.

The following campaign did not go quite as successfully for the centre back, as injury blighted his season and restricted him to just 25 league appearances and 34 in all competitions. Carvalho picked up a calf injury at the start of December 2014 and never really managed to fully recover until the back end of the season, regularly missing matches during the first half of 2015.

As a result, he missed Monaco's Champions' League first leg victory over Arsenal at the Emirates and could only make the bench as his side scraped through on away goals at the Stade Louis II. He did manage to play the full 90 minutes of their quarter-final first leg against Juventus in Italy, however, he brought down Alvaro Morata in the box and Arturo Vidal converted the subsequent penalty. He again missed out on the return leg through injury, as Monaco failed to overturn the 1-0 defeat from the first leg and exited the competition.

It was not until the end of April that Carvalho fully returned to fitness, going on to play the entirety of Monaco's last five league matches, helping them secure third place behind PSG and Lyon.

Carvalho signed a one-year contract extension in the summer, tying him to the club until July 2016, and since then, the centre back has returned to form, playing 24 times in all competitions for Monaco during the first half of the season.

In the league, he has captained Monaco on several occasions, missing just four matches heading into the winter break. Monaco may have struggled during the opening weeks of the campaign, but Carvalho has played a vital role in their revival, helping them rise to second in the table.

Monaco have been less successful in Europe, failing to make the Champions' League after losing their qualifier against Valencia and then finishing behind Tottenham Hotspur and Anderlecht in their Europa League group. Carvalho did manage to record an assist in their 1-1 draw away at Qarabag, though, playing Ivan Cavaleiro through on goal to score.

On the international stage, Carvalho made five appearances for Portugal during 2015, helping them to qualify for the upcoming Euros. He opened the scoring in his country's 2-1 European qualifier victory over Serbia in March, heading in his first international goal for over eight years.

Despite not being the tallest centre back, Carvalho is known for his tough and tenacious style of play, and has excellent reading of the games. His ability to always be in the right place at the right time to make interceptions and stop attacks are what made him one of the best defenders in the world at his peak. And his calmness and passing ability also make him very useful at playing the ball out from the back and launching counter attacks.

With his contract due to expire in the summer, it is not clear what the future holds for the centre back, but for now, he remains a very useful asset for both club and country.



GRÉGORY SERTIC

[90]
v 68

Club: FC Girondins de Bordeaux

Position: Midfielder

Born: Brétigny-sur-Orge

Date of Birth: 05/08/1989

Age: 26

"If I am starting at Bordeaux today it is thanks to Laurent Blanc."

– Grégory Sertic

On many different levels, 2015 has been a catastrophic year for Bordeaux stalwart Grégory Sertic and his considerable drop in the GFFN 100 rankings serves as evidence for that. The worst thing about Sertic's 2015 demise is that it is almost entirely due to external factors that the Franco-Polish footballer has suffered a drop in playing time and performance levels.

Sertic has been the victim of a spate of unfortunate injuries over the course the calendar year that have prevented him from picking up many competitive minutes on the field. However, when Sertic has been fit and available for selection, his manager Willy Sagnol has let him down by forcing him to play in positions on the pitch that he is not habituated to. Namely, Sertic has had to fill in at times at centre-back over the course of the calendar year, following injuries to the likes of Diego Contento, a position that suppresses his ability to showcase his strong suits on a football pitch and exacerbates his weaknesses.

Sertic's career path has been fairly bland to date, working his way up the Bordeaux youth ranks before a brief spell on loan at Lens in 2010/11, which was fairly fruitless other than it enabled the player to earn more consistent playing time. Since the arrival of Willy Sagnol in 2014 at the helm at Bordeaux, Sertic's fortunes have changed somewhat. He was at the heart of Sagnol's initially impressive start to management in Ligue 1, as Les Girondins targeted a top five finish during the 2014/15 campaign.

This time last year, Gregory Sertic was the top assist maker in the entire division, notching up seven assists at the halfway point of the 2014/15 Ligue 1 campaign. His success derived from Sagnol's decision to allow the player to perform regularly in a deep-lying playmaker role, where Sertic was able to showcase both his rugged defensive midfield abilities to snuff out opposition attacks but also his brilliant eye for the pass, as demonstrated by his assist tally at the end of 2014. 2015 has unfortunately been an entirely different kettle of fish for Sertic. The January arrival of Clement Chantôme meant that Sertic now had a direct competitor for his deep-lying midfield spot. Sagnol recognised that both individuals were some of his most talented players and so decided that the best way of resolving the situation was to keep them both in the starting XI.

Unfortunately for Sertic, there was a catch. Sagnol's solution was to stick Chantôme in Sertic's place and find a variety of different positions for the latter individual to play in, severely hampering Sertic's ability to find any sort of consistency in 2015. At times he was playing as the deepest midfielder in a defensive midfield duo, which took away Sertic's previous licence to push forward and to influence Bordeaux's attacking moves. Those responsibilities had now been passed onto Chantôme. On other occasions towards the end of the season when Bordeaux were really faltering, Sertic was deployed as a centre-back, again restricting the player from having the necessary influence on the game in the centre of the park to make a marked difference on the match.

It should be noted that Grégory Sertic's versatility on the field, being able to play in any position within the midfield as well as at centre-back makes him an extremely attractive proposition for many sides in European football. Therefore the frustration in this profile is more at the fact that Sertic was not given the tools to go to the next level in 2015 by gathering some form of consistency through playing in a single position. Sertic is talented enough to go very far, but at the age of 26, Bordeaux's various managers need to stop abusing his ability to perform in various positions and finally allow him to settle.

Bordeaux ran out of steam in the second half of the 2014/15 campaign and so to did Sertic, who himself was plagued with minor injuries as the season came to an end. They were however fortunate that the rest of Ligue 1's elite suffered similar shortness of breath and Bordeaux maintained their mid-season 6th place when the curtain came down on proceedings in May 2015. Les Girondins, Sagnol and Sertic had all fundamentally fallen just short of their objectives.

The worst news of 2015 was however unfortunately still to come for Grégory Sertic when it emerged in August that he had suffered a rupture of his ACL in his left knee during the first Ligue 1 encounter of the new season against Reims. As a result, Sertic has just one appearance to his name in 2015/16 as the calendar year comes to a close.

To say that Bordeaux have missed his influence would be a large understatement. Les Girondins, despite moving into their new stadium the Matmut Atlantique at the end of last season, have not begun some new age. Rather, Sagnol's men have been on the rocks at times in the first half of the 2015/16 campaign, having severely underperformed. They occupy 14th place as 2015 comes to a close, a placing that has brought the fans to question just about everybody at the club, except Sertic who has been uninvolved as a result of his injury.

In 2016 Grégory Sertic must stamp his foot down and elect to play in a deep-lying midfield role or as an advanced midfielder. Otherwise this wonderfully complete midfield talent is in danger of having a career that never really got going.



FABIEN LEMOINE

[89]
v 60

Club: AS Saint-Étienne

Position: Midfielder

Born: Fougères

Date of Birth: 16/03/1987

Age: 28

*"In 2010, I wanted
to stop playing
football."*

– Fabien Lemoine

To put it simply, Fabien Lemoine is one of the most underrated players in Ligue 1. The St Étienne midfielder never makes the headlines in the newspapers, nor does he spark debate between members of the media and fans. What he does do, however, is perform admirably week in and week out in the heart of St Étienne's midfield.

Lemoine is the very definition of a player who works in the shadows; one who will deliver at least a seven out of 10 performance every time he steps onto the pitch and as a result of his consistency, his displays are most often taken for granted.

Now 28 years of age, Lemoine broke through the ranks at Rennes, making his debut back in 2007. After making 119 appearances for the club, spending his last three seasons as a regular in the team, Lemoine departed for St Étienne in the summer of 2011, much to the chagrin of the Rennes management who had fought valiantly to avoid him strengthening one of their rivals.

And they were right to be concerned, as the midfielder carried on going from strength to strength in the seasons that followed. After settling in nicely in the defensive midfield position, Lemoine's consistent performances helped St Étienne to a fifth placed finish, as well as the Coupe de la Ligue trophy, in 2012/13, before they went on to finish one place better off in 2013/14.

And it was more of the same from Lemoine in 2015, who appeared in all but three of St Étienne's league fixtures last season as they went on to secure another fifth place finish. As ever, the silver haired midfielder was highly influential, not just by protecting the defence, but also by providing two goals and four assists. Both of those goals came in 2014, but two of his assists did count towards his placing in this year's edition of the GFFN 100, against Lens in February and Lorient in March.

His first came in an eventful 3-3 draw at home to Lens, in which Lemoine slipped the ball to the left to allow Yohan Mollo to score his second of the game and give St Étienne a 2-0 lead. This came not long after Lemoine had headed the ball off his own goal line from an Ahmed Kantari effort.

His second assist of the calendar year came in a 2-0 win at home against Lorient, as he again fed Mollo, whose shot from just outside the box took a deflection and crept in to open the scoring.

This season, Lemoine has missed just three league games so far and has also appeared in seven out of St Étienne's 10 Europa League games. Whilst St Étienne have lost more games than usual heading into the winter break, Lemoine has been his usual consistent self in the middle of the park, and although he has yet to get his name on the score sheet, he has bagged himself one assist. In a 1-1 draw at home to Bordeaux in August, Lemoine fed the ball along the edge of the box to Romain Hamouma, who fired a first time shot into the net to give St Étienne the lead.

Lemoine is, though, mainly out there to do a defensive job and he is at his best when sat in front of the back four, tidying up play and controlling possession. St Étienne are usually a solid team at the back; they very rarely concede more than two goals a match, and Lemoine plays a big role in that.

He is effectively a safety blanket for St Étienne, allowing those in front of him the leeway to lose the ball and those in the full-back positions to bomb forward; as they know Lemoine will be behind them to cover.

Indeed, his positioning and reading of the game are second to none, which, combined with his tenacious energy, make him the ideal defensive midfielder.

That is not to say that Lemoine cannot contribute further forward himself. Whilst he may have failed to get himself on the score sheet in 2015, Lemoine did notch three assists, with his positioning as the deepest lying midfielder often allowing him to survey the situation in front of him, before playing an inch perfect through ball to one of the forward men.

His one area of weakness would probably be his over-tendency to foul, but perhaps this is a harsh criticism given the nature of his position. He picked up 10 yellow cards in all competitions over the course of the calendar year, but luckily managed to avoid picking up a suspension.

Overall though, 2015 was yet another solid year from the consistently consistent Lemoine and despite the greyness of his hair, he looks like he can continue for many years to come.



ADAMA TRAORÉ

[88]
*

Club: AS Monaco FC

Position: Midfielder

Born: Bamako

Date of Birth: 28/06/1995

Age: 20

*"In Mali, everyone
who is called Adama
is called Noss."*

– Adama Traoré

No, he is not that Adama Traoré, or that one, or even that one. A name that seems incredibly popular for Malian parents in this generation, there are four actively playing football as well as an Ivorian-born fifth at Basel, but this Adama Traoré plays for Monaco and could be the most talented one of them all.

Adama Traoré, born in June 1995, started his career with his local club Bamako JMG Academy before joining top-flight side AS Bakaridjan. After six months with the Malian club, he joined French side Lille in January 2014, but he was instantly loaned back out to Belgian second division team Royal Mouscron-Peruwelz.

The midfielder made just two appearances for the club before returning to Les Dogues in the summer. He made his debut in the 1-0 defeat to OGC Nice and made a few more substitute appearances before making his first start against Lyon in October.

That season, he was predominantly used from the bench but did make 10 starts in 20 appearances. He also grabbed two goals, which included a clever shift before a long-range finish against Evian and a swift counter helped him notch one against Bordeaux.

However, his shining moment so far came in the 2015 Under-20 World Cup with Mali in the summer of this year. The 20-year-old scored four goals and created three assists in several fine displays that helped his nation claim a bronze medal.

He was simply unstoppable at points, scoring some absolutely wonderful goals from long-range strikes to dancing through the defence and delicately chipping the goalkeeper. He would quicken the pace of everything, which was too much for too many teams to handle and he was rightfully awarded the Golden Ball for the best player of the tournament.

This then prompted AS Monaco to make their move, signing the Malian to a deal that would keep him at the principal-ity club until 2020. Monaco Vice President and CEO Vadim Vasilyev revealed that he turned down bigger offers from bigger clubs to join the youth movement that the club are so determined to progress with.

Traoré started his first game for the club against Toulouse and made six more appearances for the club in the 2015/16 season, creating an assist, before being sidelined with a broken ankle. It was a crushing blow for a player finding his stride in a team that collectively was trying to find its way.

The Malian youngster is predominantly a creator, he wants to attack the opponents either through his own skill or create something for a teammate to take advantage of. He is willing to take that risky pass that could lead to a goal and he is comfortable in possession with a 87.3% pass completion rate in his six games this season.

He loves a good dribble and has the skills to match: Traoré has great close control of the ball that allows him to dictate where he travels rather than the defender's positioning. Added to that, he has genuine pace that can frighten defenders as he gallops towards them and this allows him as a midfielder to arrive very late into the box and attack balls from out wide. That skill also means he draws a lot of fouls, as he did with Lille as he amassed 43 incidents in just 20 games. Defenders simply either cannot catch him or are wandering a leg into challenges that impede him from beating them with his skill.

Taking that into account, it is probably not best to give Traoré the opportunity to get a free-kick either. He can wave his wand of a right foot to curl in a wonderful set piece, whether it be a direct strike at goal or a cross from a wide position, he can deliver something that gives goalkeepers nightmares.

While he reads the game relatively well, he is not physical enough to operate in a more defensive capacity and his tackling is not his strong suit. Monaco will look to use him as an attacking playmaker and rightfully so, his ability going forward would be diminished if given too much responsibility in defence, hence why a holding midfielder next to him would be ideal.

The really disappointing thing for Traoré when he looks back at 2015 is that it could have been a really sensational year. He had sprung himself onto the scene, he looked better and better the more football he played but the injury really derailed his momentum.

The hope is when we see him in 2016 that he can simply pick up where he left off. There are improvements he can make to his game and if he can do that, he could really be the next interesting piece to Monaco's incredible youthful core.

This Traoré has the talent to stand out from the crowd and once he recovers, we can look forward to once again watching the growth of yet another exciting talent in Ligue 1.



MORGAN SANSON

[87]
v 35

Club: Montpellier HSC

Position: Midfielder

Born: Saint-Doulchard

Date of Birth: 18/08/1994

Age: 21

"I love football even more than before."

– Morgan Sanson

One of the youngest players to make the GFFN 100 is Montpellier's 21-year-old midfielder Morgan Sanson, who earns his place in the list after another strong calendar year of development and improvement. Despite suffering a cruciate ligament injury which ruled him out towards the end of last season and into the current 2015/16 season, Sanson has shown clear progress in his game, adding an end product which he had struggled to produce during his first few seasons in Ligue 1 football.

Despite his comparatively young age, Sanson already has a lot of strengths in his game, perhaps the most important of which is his versatility. Standing at a not particularly tall height of 1.80 metres, he would not strike you as a typical central midfielder, but that is the position he has occupied most often over the last 12 months. What he may lack in strength, he makes up for in his ability on the ball. He does not do too much defensive work, averaging only two defensive actions per game over the last calendar year, largely leaving that aspect of the game to his midfield partners. However, his main job is to distribute the ball when it is won back, and a pass completion percentage of 84% suggests that he carries out this task very effectively.

This composure and ability on the ball has allowed Sanson's late manager at Montpellier, Rolland Courbis, to play the Frenchman in various different positions over the course of the last calendar year. Sanson has made appearances in attacking midfield and on either wing, as well as in his usual central midfield role. Although he is less suited as a winger, lacking the pace or trickery to be a real threat as a wide man, he is still able to do an effective job for the team. In fact, one of his three league goals over the last 12 months came in a 3-1 victory over SC Bastia, in which he started on the right wing.

Whilst perhaps not possessing the same attacking skill as many wingers, when Sanson plays out wide he will track back and do a good job defensively, so against the 'bigger' teams in Ligue 1, Sanson is a safer option out wide. To demonstrate this point, last season Courbis deployed Sanson on the wing against Lille, St Étienne and champions PSG, a game in which Montpellier kept a clean sheet and came away with a 0-0 draw.

Despite his young age, it is clear that Sanson has become a crucial member of the Montpellier team. Last season, Sanson played in all 32 of Montpellier's first 32 league games, as well as every game in both domestic cups, until a cruciate ligament injury prematurely ended his season. Although Montpellier had a largely successful 2014/15 season, finishing 7th in Ligue 1, they really struggled over the last six Ligue 1 games with Sanson out injured, especially offensively. They only won two of those six games, scoring a meagre four goals in the process. It was clear now much Montpellier missed Sanson in terms of his attacking contribution, and that trend would continue into the current 2015/16 season.

Montpellier were never really likely to replicate their impressive 2014/15 campaign this season, but even they would not have expected to start as poorly as they did. With Sanson still out with his cruciate injury, Montpellier scored just 11 goals in their first 13 Ligue 1 games, winning just three of them, causing them to be hovering just above the relegation zone in 17th place.

However, Sanson's recent return to the squad has coincided with an upturn in fortunes. In Sanson's first six Ligue 1 games of the new campaign, Montpellier won three, scoring 11 goals in the process, which led them to climb back up to 13th position in the table at the halfway stage of the season. While the improvement in results is certainly not all down to Sanson, it is clear the team plays better football with him in the side.

Now, though, we come to look at the weaknesses in Sanson's game. I mentioned beforehand that Sanson was not what you called the typical central midfielder, in that his stature and size do not seem particularly suited for that role. Sanson is very impressive on the ball, in terms of his passing ability and footballing brain. However, to elevate himself to the next level, he needs to add another side to his game. The world's top midfielders, the likes of Yaya Touré and Paul Pogba from abroad, or Marco Verratti and Blaise Matuidi closer to home, all have multiple top class elements to their game.

So, to become one of the league's best midfielders, Sanson must add something else to his own, whether that be a more accomplished touch in front of goal (three career Ligue 1 goals is not a statistic that exactly sets the world alight), or a stronger contribution to his team defensively. Sanson is still young, and he will certainly be given time to complete his development.

Overall, Morgan Sanson is a very exciting young prospect in French football. I think he is currently doing exactly the right thing - playing week in, week out at a club with a strong identity like Montpellier, and if he continues on the trajectory he is currently on, whilst developing his game in new ways to become a better all around footballer, he could become one of Ligue 1's top midfield players. He deserves his spot on this list after a promising calendar year, and I am sure we will be seeing a lot more of this young Frenchman.



CHEIKH NDOYE

[86]
*

Club: Angers SCO

Position: Midfielder

Born: Rufisque

Date of Birth: 29/03/1986

Age: 29

*"I am keeping my
feet on the ground."*

– Cheikh Ndoye

During the summer transfer window, most of the French footballing world's attention was fixed on developments in the capital, as Paris Saint-Germain attempted to finally land Angel Dí Maria. The Manchester United winger's move to the Parc des Princes was never likely to be overshadowed by transfer developments elsewhere in France, but in the Pays de la Loire, Ligue 1 new boys Angers SCO were extremely involved in transfer dealings.

Under the guidance of the formidable trio of sporting director Olivier Picqueu, head of recruitment Axel Lablatiniere and head coach Stéphane Moulin, le SCO brought in more than a dozen shrewd and cost-effective signings to help bolster the squad ranks. One of those men was Cheikh Ndoeye.

Despite appearing at international level for his native Senegal and scoring twenty-one Ligue 2 goals between 2013 and 2015 for Créteil, Ndoeye's was largely unknown outside of France until he joined Angers on a free transfer in June. The Senegalese midfielder's impact on the top-flight in the first half of the 2015/16 season seems to epitomize the effect his club in general has had on the Ligue 1 championship. Like his club, Ndoeye has been bold, fearless and at times unstoppable. The club's inspirational captain has scored five times and created two assists already this, making him the club's top scorer and an instant fans' favourite at the Jean-Bouin. Not bad for a twenty-nine-year-old who signed on a free transfer.

So what has helped Ndoeye to be such an effective goalscorer in France's first division? On the face of it, when you look at his stats, you could be forgiven for thinking that the Senegalese international is a creative Ben Arfa-like number ten with a keen eye for goal and impressive dribbling abilities, but Ndoeye is not that type of player at all. His main capacity is his physical presence, and this has allowed him over the past few seasons to become one of France's most effective target-men. Standing at just under 1.90m and weighing in at around 90kg, the Angers number seventeen is a force to be reckoned with. Marking him at set-pieces effectively this season has proven to be a task that is as colossal as the man himself, as the Olympique Lyonnais defence found out recently when Ndoeye scored twice at the Gerland.

For both Créteil before and Angers now, Ndoeye has established himself as a fairly prolific goalscorer for somebody who plies his trade as a defensive midfielder. It is his ability to score with his head that has caught the attention of fans and pundits alike this season in Ligue 1, and you would not bet against the twenty-nine-year-old scoring more headed goals in the weeks to come in France's top-flight. He is an extremely strong presence in the air and he poses even the best defences in France serious problems with his aerial prowess.

His aerial ability makes him almost like an extra centre-forward when Angers are taking set-pieces, and this strength also allows him to play like an extra centre-back at the opposite end of the park when his side are defending them. Angers' ability to both defend and make the most of set-pieces offensively has been an integral part of the form that has guided them to second place in the table (as of week 18), and Cheikh Ndoeye has played a key role in this success.

Much has deservedly been made in the press of Ndoeye's aerial prowess, however he is not simply just a target-man. His contribution to the engine room of Moulin's midfield is often unfairly overlooked and opposing tacticians would be wise to appreciate the importance of the Angevin captain's role in this.

He is a strong and confident tackler and he does well to break down opposition moves. He is extremely comfortable sitting in front of the defence and this has been key in games where Angers have sat deep in order to take points off the opposition - one thinks immediately to Ndoeye performance against PSG where he played an important role as a rear-guard in front of the centre-backs Romain Thomas and Ismael Traoré.

On a good day, Ndoeye can be unstoppable. Whether he is blocking opposition moves and acting as a number ten's nightmare on the edge of the eighteen-yard line, or providing his team with an aerial target in the opposition's box, the twenty-nine-year-old can be very influential. However, he is not the finished product and there are aspects to his game that probably explain why he was allowed to be overlooked by Ligue 1 and UK-based recruiters for so long.

Ndoeye's playing style can be described as robust, but you could also argue that at times it is excessively so. He often commits fouls due to his forcefulness. He has committed twenty-eight offences in Ligue 1 this season, resulting in two yellow cards and a straight red for a dangerous high-foot tackle after just thirty-minutes into his side's one-nil win against Troyes. He is certainly rough around the edges, and although he is usually a careful passer of the ball, he can sometimes play stray balls that have the potential to cost his side dearly. His range of passing is also quite limited.

Having said that however, Ndoeye has been a crucial player in Angers' sparkling start to life in Ligue 1. Moulin's side have battled bravely against on paper stronger adversaries, and no player has battled more bravely than le SCO's redoubtable captain. He will surely continue to play an extremely influential role when his side return to the field in 2016.



RIO MAVUBA

[85]
v 31

Club: Lille OSC

Position: Midfielder

Born: At sea

Date of Birth: 08/03/1984

Age: 31

"There is a good atmosphere in the group, a good sense of cohesion."

– Rio Mavuba

2015 was very much about closing doors for Lille's statesman and captain. By committing to a four year contract extension with Les Dogues in May as a result of a lack of attractive offers from abroad when he was out of contract, Mavuba has more than likely ended his dream of participating in one of the best leagues in the world such as the Premier League or La Liga again.

So, instead of a summer of uncertainty as a free agent, Mavuba elected to sign the dotted line with the Ligue 1 outfit from northern France that he has been a part of since 2008 before the transfer window had even really begun. Some might question Mavuba's ambition in this regard, but the reality of the situation was that there was very little interest in his services. Perhaps 2015 was also the year in which Mavuba realised that he had begun the beginning of the end of his career. If that was the case, then it made sense for his family for him to sign a long-term deal for a club in a city that he is nicely settled in, whilst still holding a large role within Les Dogues' squad, as captain no less.

Rio Mavuba is a defensive midfielder and for a long time and until very recently he was considered to be one of the best in his position in the French top flight. Mavuba's membership within the France 2014 World Cup squad now seems a world away, but the Frenchman retains the core of the stock qualities that made him such an opposition-wrecking ball in the middle of the park. Intelligent and hungry, Rio Mavuba's strengths lie in his ability to intercept the play and break up opposition attacks before they are able to advance into dangerous areas within the final third.

Lille have had three different managers in 2015, René Girard, Hervé Renard and Frédéric Antonetti, and Mavuba has remained the undisputed captain, a constant in an ever-changing setup for Les Dogues. Mavuba's success lies not with a crowd-pleasing eye for the pass or with any real ability to create. It lies instead with an above average duel success rate.

His physicality and knack of anticipating his opponent's next move enable him to win the ball back not just through the raw interception of play, but also in one-on-one situations. He executes the latter action from both standing and sliding tackle positions to great effect.

In recent seasons, Lille have been blessed with fantastic defensive talent that has supplanted Rio Mavuba's opposition-stopping efforts. This is not to take anything away from Mavuba, but rather lends to his organisational and leadership abilities to marshal the other defensive players within the Lille side effectively.

With the likes of Marko Baša, Simon Kjær and Vincent Enyeama at René Girard's disposal until his departure at the end of the 2014/15 campaign, Girard's policy had been to build the team around a robust defence and the results were, in the main, a stunning success for all to see (I say the results and not the performances, the latter of which made for largely incredibly boring viewing).

They finished 3rd in 2014, conceding fewer goals than all of their Ligue 1 rivals bar PSG and washed-up 8th in 2015. Washed-up is the appropriate term here, the 2014/15 campaign was topsy-turvy for Lille and Mavuba, whose defensive solidity compared to the previous season had been undone somewhat. The reason for this is two-fold: a selection of unfortunate injuries to key players (Baša notably) and the gradual decline in ability that manifested itself in others ensured that Lille's blueprint to success, i.e. do not concede, was no longer fulfilled.

Manager Girard departed during the summer and many had expected to see Mavuba head to the exit door alongside him. Had it not been for the passionate discourse of a certain Hervé Renard, René Girard's immediate successor, then Mavuba might have swapped rainy northern France for Turkey. However, Renard was able to convince Mavuba of how central the French international was to his plans, resulting in the club captain penning an extension.

Renard barely lasted half a season as it turns out and Mavuba is having to once again readjust himself and thus the rest of his squad to a new set of demands laid out by Frédéric Antonetti.

In many ways therefore, 2015 has been a year of sacrifice for Rio Mavuba. Sacrificing his personal dreams of finishing his career in another country and league for the sake of his family's stability. Sacrificing the excitement that comes with a new adventure for the sake of teaching, mentoring and advising the latest batch of Lille prospects about the ropes in Ligue 1. Sacrificing the chance at a bigger wage somewhere else for the sake of this modest French club's Ligue 1 stability and financial security.

If you look at his calendar year in this regard, then Mavuba's story is not one of a lack of ambition. Rather, the story of a footballer putting the needs and desires of others above his own. I think we can agree that this alone sets Mavuba apart in French football and indeed in the GFFN 100.



MEXER

[84]
v 51

Club: Stade Rennais F.C.

Position: Defender

Born: Maputo

Date of Birth: 08/09/1987

Age: 28

"For me it was real progress to come here."

– Mexer

One of Ligue 1's most impressive success stories from the last few years is Mexer of Stade Rennais, who deservedly earns a spot on the GFFN 100. When he made his move to Ligue 1 football in the summer of 2014, coming from CD Nacional in the Portuguese league, not many in the country had heard about the centre back.

Since he has arrived, though, he has forced everyone to pay attention, with consistent high quality performances in the heart of defence. With reported interest from big clubs across Europe over the last calendar year, it is clear that Mexer's 2015 has been one of real quality.

In the first six months of 2015, during the second half of the 2014/15 season, Mexer played 16 of 19 Ligue 1 games for Rennes. The club had a relatively successful season, eventually finishing 9th in the Ligue 1 table, and ended up having the joint 7th best defence in the league. Mexer was a crucial part of the Rennes outfit defensively, and was sorely missed during the three games he was unavailable for selection.

In the 16 games Mexer played, Rennes conceded just 14 goals at 0.875 goals conceded per game. In comparison, in the three games that he did not feature in, Rennes conceded four goals at 1.33 goals conceded per game. Clearly, Mexer had a very positive impact on the Rennes back line, and that trend would be set to continue into the current 2015/16 season.

This season, Rennes have build on their previous campaign and have risen even higher in the Ligue 1 table. At the halfway stage, the club currently sit in 7th position, whilst maintaining the 5th best defensive record in the league. Once again Rennes' defensive record remains stronger with Mexer in the side; they have conceded 1 goal per game with him in the side, compared to 1.22 without him.

Since his move to France 18 months ago, Mexer has established himself as an undisputed starter for Rennes, and as the statistics show he has clearly become a key member of this outfit.

So what makes Mexer so effective? In reality, as with all good defenders, it is a combination of factors. The first of these is his speed and agility, surprising for a centre back, which allows him to be very effective in individual battles with strikers.

If an opponent tries to take on Mexer with a piece of skill, they will find it difficult because of the physical attributes of the Mozambique international. This is evidenced by the fact that throughout the calendar year of 2015 in Ligue 1, Mexer has won the ball in 100% of take-ons attempted by an opponent, an amazing statistic which showcases how hard it is to get round the 28 year old.

Another of Mexer's strengths is his ability in the air. Standing at 1.87m, Mexer already has a height advantage on almost all strikers he will come up against. This, coupled with good agility, makes him the favourite in most aerial duels. In fact, during the second half of last season he won 64% of aerial duels, with that figure improving to 74% this season.

These aerial strengths are not only of use in a defensive sense - they can also be of use down the other end, evidenced by two goals scored in the last two months. This ability in the air combined with his proficiency on the floor means that he is a very well-rounded footballer.

Mexer's impressive form has not gone unnoticed over the course of the last calendar year. Rennes have had to fight off interest from a host of top clubs, including Manchester United of the Premier League, who were reportedly interested in bringing Mexer to England in January of 2015.

When asked about the reported interest at the time, Mexer said: *"Officially, Manchester United put no interest forward but... I have never concealed that one of my dreams is to play in the Premier League. I can't say any more... I knew of this supposed interest of Manchester United from the press and social networks."*

With Mexer already 28 years of age, time may be running out on a dream move to one of Europe's top clubs.

Overall, Mexer has had a very impressive last 12 months, in which he has cemented his status as one of Ligue 1 top centre backs. He has a very well balanced game, which stands him in good stead to raise his game even further in the coming years.

Both his team Rennes and Mexer individually have made improvements so far this season compared to the 2014/15 campaign, so there is nothing to suggest that 2016 will not be another year of prosperity for the 28 year old Mozambique international.



BRYAN DABO

[83]
*

Club: Montpellier HSC

Position: Midfielder

Born: Marseille

Date of Birth: 18/02/1992

Age: 23

"I feel more liberated."

– Bryan Dabo

One of Ligue 1's most versatile players, Bryan Dabo, earns his place on the GFFN 100 as a result of his performances all over the pitch over the course of the last 12 months. Proficient in three different positions - right-back, right midfield and defensive midfield, Dabo's ability to play in multiple areas is any manager's dream.

However, the simple ability to play in various positions is not enough - Dabo is included in this list because his performances in all three of these positions have been of a high class, especially for a player who is relatively young at 23 years of age.

Bryan Dabo plies his trade at Ligue 1 side Montpellier, who have had somewhat of an up and down last 12 months. Last season, with Dabo playing 21 games of the 38 in total, Montpellier finished a solid 7th position in Ligue 1, just missing out on a place in Europe for the 2015/16 season.

When we look closer at the games Dabo played and compare them to the ones he missed, it is also clear he is a very positive influence on the side. In particular, Reims earned 1.41 points per game without Dabo in the side, compared to 1.52 with him. In finishing 7th last season, Montpellier preserved the 5th best defensive record in the league, which Dabo can take at least partial credit for considering he plays largely as a defensive player.

This season, things have not gone quite so smoothly for Montpellier. At the halfway stage of the season heading into the winter break, the club sits 15th in the Ligue 1 table. However, it is not all doom and gloom for Dabo and his teammates: as a result of the mid-table teams being packed very closely together, Montpellier are in fact just four points away from 8th position in the league, so a run of a few good results could see them climb the table surprisingly quickly.

So what it is in Bryan Dabo's game that makes him effective in multiple positions? Well, first of all let us take a look at his defensive qualities, primarily on show when he plays at right-back or defensive midfield. First of all, he is good in the air. Standing at a tall 1.87m and with a good leap, he is the favourite in most aerial contests, evidenced by the fact he has won over 60% of aerial duels this season. Whilst perhaps not so useful an asset at right-back, it is certainly a useful ability to have in defensive midfield.

Dabo's defensive qualities are not limited to the air, though, as he is also impressive when engaging with opposition trying to take him on. Once again, his success rate is over 60% in one on one take-ons with opponents, and he is yet to make a defensive error that has led to a shot on goal this season. These defensive qualities mean that he is solid off the ball at both right-back and in defensive midfield, two positions where he has played a lot over the last 12 months.

Having assessed Dabo's defensive qualities, let us take a look at what allows him to play further up the pitch at right midfield if needed. First of all, he is sharp on the ball and has a good eye for a pass. So far this season, he has maintained a pass percentage of 82%, which suggests he is sensible in his selection of passes. In addition, he is positive with his passes, with 78% of them going in a forward direction, helping drive Montpellier onwards towards the opposition box.

However, Dabo is not the quickest player for a winger and also does not particularly possess the skill and trickery to get round players, so last season he found it a little bit difficult to create chances for his strikers when playing out wide. In fact, in the first six months of 2015, Dabo only created six chances for his teammates, a somewhat disappointing figure for a player who should be doing better from an advanced position in midfield.

However, he has made a clear improvement this season, creating 13 chances during the first half of the 2015/16 campaign, more than twice as many as he managed during the same time period in the first half of the calendar year. It is worth remembering Dabo is just 23 years old and still learning as he goes, so improvements in his game are to be expected.

Despite some clear areas in his attacking game in which improvement is necessary, Dabo has shown over the last 12 months that he has enough quality to really influence a game in his team's favour and deliver at the business end of the field. The most notable example is Montpellier 3-1 victory over Reims this season, in which Dabo aerial ability played a starring role. After Reims opened the scoring, Dabo flicked on a corner to allow Yatabaré to head in unmarked from close range. Then, after Camara had given Montpellier the lead, Dabo turned from provider to scorer as he powered home a header from another corner to seal the win for his side. It was a reminder of how effective the Frenchman can be.

Overall, Bryan Dabo has had a very impressive calendar year, in which he has showcased the many qualities he has in his game. Whilst it may be beneficial for him to stick to a particular position in the near future to really commit his game fully to playing there, for now the 23 year old is gaining valuable experience by being deployed all over the park. His ability and performances have already been good enough to earn him a spot on the GFFN 100, and at such a young age if Dabo continues to improve he could have a very successful career ahead of him.



BENJAMIN MENDY

[82]
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Club: Olympique de Marseille

Position: Defender

Born: Longjumeau

Date of Birth: 17/07/1994

Age: 21

“Signing a contract extension would be a good thing.”

– Benjamin Mendy

It has been an extremely difficult year for Olympique de Marseille and its players. At the top of Ligue 1 at the start of the year, the club has taken huge steps backwards with its personnel and performances, seeing them fall out of league contention with a whimper in the spring, while one of its worst starts ever to a season in 2015/16 means Les Phocéens are now stuck in the middle of the table, seemingly at a dead end.

There have been few in the famous white and sky-blue strip that have impressed at the Vélodrome in the calendar year, with OM's defence being seriously shown up, while their attacking threat has been sorely lacking following the sale of key players like André-Pierre Gignac, André Ayew and Dimitri Payet.

One player that has impressed however has been youngster Benjamin Mendy. The 21-year-old signed for Marseille in 2009 from Le Havre, and has been progressing nicely on the Mediterranean coast, picking up caps at U17, U18, U19, and most recently with Les Bleus' U21 setup.

Mendy arrived from Le Havre, where at 17 he was already playing regular first-team football in Ligue 2 and having played a crucial part in France's U17 World Cup side who reached the quarter-finals. Originally played as an attacker for US Palaiseau, the youngster, then 14, signed for Le Havre and was converted into a left-back on the Normandy coast.

The change would prove instrumental to the defender, whose parents are Senegalese, and his talent shone through, representing his country for the first time at U16 level against Wales in 2009, and his selection for the U17 World Cup came as no surprise. On the back of that Mendy was given his first professional start for Les Ciel et Marine in a Coupe de La Ligue game that August against Amiens at 17 years old.

Mendy was expected to leave Le Havre at the end of the 2012/13 season, and was linked with Arsenal, Tottenham Hotspur, Cardiff City, and Lyon, and even travelled to Sunderland to view their facilities, admitting he wanted to play in England in his career, before deciding to stay in France with Marseille.

The prospect was brought to the Vélodrome in July 2013 by Élie Baup for 3.5 million Euros and had little difficulty setting into his new side, making his Champions' League debut against Borussia Dortmund in October of that year, and under Marcelo Bielsa was instrumental to OM's fantastic start to the 2014 season, finishing the season as Champions d'Autonne.

Mendy, despite the lack of quality around him in the backline, has performed admirably over the course of the year for the Marseillais, earning him a regular spot under first Marcelo Bielsa, and now Michel's starting XI. The Longjumeau native's incisive attacking play, range of skills, excellent anticipation and excellent defensive positioning have been absolutely essential to his side.

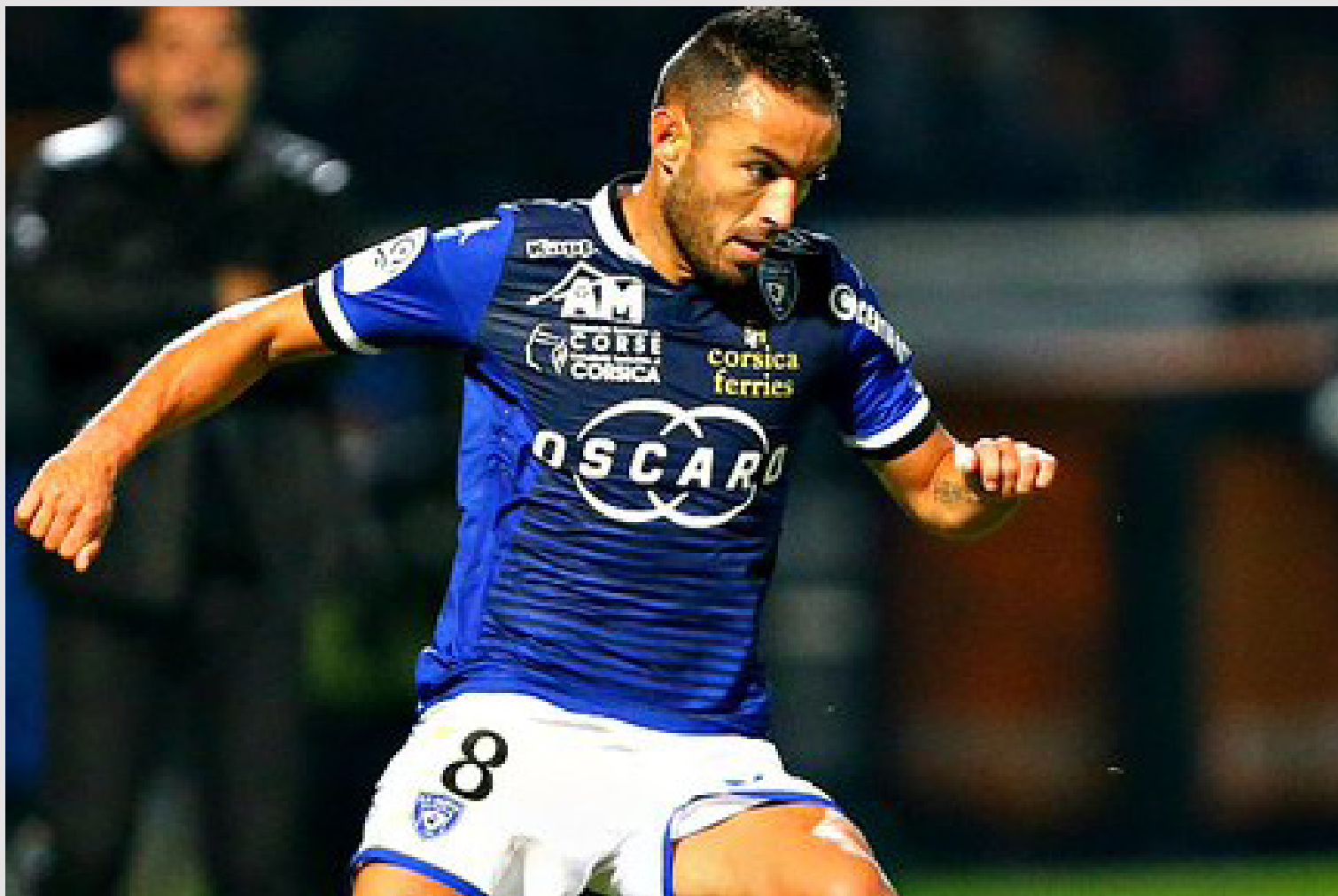
However, the young full-back is far from the finished article, and his defensive ability, along with the rest of Marseille's backline, has been called into question throughout 2015, with OM's defence often cited as the main protagonist behind their appalling year. One thing that cannot be disputed is Mendy's work-ethic, particularly in the Bielsa era during which the youngster was expected to play as a full-back in a three-man defensive line with little-to-no cover ahead of him due to the Argentinian's attacking system.

This can be of benefit to the marauding left-back, who, when in possession, is given an opportunity to exploit the space with driving runs, as well as the chance to overlap the wide players. Mendy's excellent crossing ability left the defender with four assists over the course of the season, but with the departure of Gignac, Marseille's key heading threat, the former Le Havre player has seen that number reduce to a single 'passe décisif' so far in the 2015/16 season.

His number of appearances have reduced slightly this season so far, with the arrival of Spanish prospect Javier Manquillo providing some competition for the Frenchman. Coach Michel has spoke about his need to improve his attitude if he's to improve.

"He jokes around but he does not realise the qualities he has. When he puts everything together in his own head he will make a fantastic left-back. If I'm getting grey hairs, it is partly thanks to him!"

The youngster needs to convert his potential into consistent performances, but is continuing to suffer due to OM's terrible recruiting under Vincent Labrune, which leaves Marseille continuing to be under equipped in both their defensive strength and depth. Mendy is contracted to Olympique de Marseille until 2017, but with his team seemingly going backwards the youngster needs to decide whether his future lays on the Mediterranean coast, or whether, with Euro 2016 on the horizon, he needs to put himself and his international future first.



GAËL DANIC

[81]
*

Club: SC Bastia

Position: Midfielder

Born: Vannes

Date of Birth: 19/11/1981

Age: 34

"I am at an age where I know that the individual comes second in football."

– Gaël Danic

One of the most experienced Ligue 1 players, at 34 years of age, Gaël Danic still has a lot to offer to football. His experience is highly valued at Bastia; a side that will remain solid but with a tendency for bad runs that could land them in trouble.

Danic is from Brittany and started his career at the biggest club in the area, Rennes. His impact was minimal though and he soon transferred to neighbours Guingamp in the summer of 2002. He spent a decent season there as Guingamp finished 7th. Danic was in and amongst a strong squad including the likes of Florent Malouda and Didier Drogba. Danic finally left Brittany to join Grenoble in Ligue 2 where he showed his qualities as a creative midfielder.

Those qualities were noticed by Troyes who at the time were in Ligue 1 and duly enrol Danic who returned to France's first division. However, Troyes struggled throughout Danic's time there: they narrowly avoided relegation in 2005/06 by finishing 17th but were relegated the following season finishing 4 points behind Valenciennes.

Danic spent his last Ligue 2 season at Troyes who finished in a respectable 6th place. This was where Danic got his big break and he was transferred to Valenciennes. There, Danic was able to return to his Grenoble form only this time he was doing so whilst playing in Ligue 1 and not the second tier, proof of his improved all-round game.

In those days, Valenciennes were a modern Angers: very hard-working and hard to beat. Not a lot of goals were being scored but the football on display was pleasing on the eye with Danic at the centre of all the praise of the squad. Exciting young prospects like Fahid Ben Khalfallah and Foued Kadir were also blossoming playing next to Danic who became a squad and crowd favourite.

Valenciennes did not finish anywhere near Europe but were more than safe from relegation and, what was supposed to happen happened: the squad's brightest prospects were pegged by the Ligue 1 big boys. Ben Khalfallah went to Bordeaux, Kadir joined Marseille and Lyon stumped up €1m to acquire Danic in 2013.

Danic's big move failed to materialize though. In 2013/14, Lyon's policy is to give youth its chance and the likes of Um-tit, Gonalons, Grenier, Fekir and Lacazette were the players to shine while Danic started just once all season making 8 substitute appearances that lasted barely 15 minutes. The following season (that would be last season), the Lyon youth had gained maturity and Danic appeared in only one game during the first half of the season. He knew that his playing would be forever limited if he stayed at Lyon.

Thus came his latest move at the 11th hour in the January transfer window of 2015 to Bastia who needed Danic's experience and cool head to ensure safety. It works. Danic is respected in the dressing room and he is given playing time by the Bastia manager. After 18 months of sitting on a bench, watching youngsters having a good time, Danic is finally playing regularly in Ligue 1.

Despite his age, Danic is still being played on either wing or in the hole of a 4-2-3-1 or on the left wing of a 4-4-2 (a more rare occurrence is in the hole of a 3-4-1-2) which means that he still possesses the speed and drive to challenge the opposition's full-back and also to get the ball in the middle of the park and create a chance for his side.

He certainly is the player that the manager and his teammates are looking up to when they do not know which way to turn in order to score a goal.

After 19 games, Bastia's attacking statistics are above average for Ligue 1 standards as they have managed to score 20 goals which is more than a goal per game. No local goalscorer is making his mark as the highest scorers are Danic and Floyd Ayité both on 3 goals. This tally may seem unimpressive but Danic is providing his side with his experience and since he has been in Corsica, Bastia have not looked that concerned with relegation.

Danic is however coming towards the end of his career which will be remembered as one of a quality player who could have played at a higher level but came to Lyon at the wrong moment (when youth players were being prioritised). It would be unfair to criticize Danic for that unfortunate event in his career and remember that he remains one of Ligue 1 most creative players and can still play for another three solid seasons at this level.

Wingers usually revert to playing centrally once their legs are gone, Danic is still playing on the wing, proof of the "boy's" tenacity.

100-81 RECAP

- 100 - Gregory van der Wiel (Paris Saint-Germain F.C.)
- 99 - Sergi Darder (Olympique Lyonnais)
- 98 - Ezequiel Lavezzi (Paris Saint-Germain F.C.)
- 97 - Didier Ndong (FC Lorient)
- 96 - Hamari Traoré (Stade de Reims)
- 95 - Benjamin Nivet (Troyes AC)
- 94 - Djibril Sidibé (Lille OSC)
- 93 - Salvatore Sirigu (Paris Saint-Germain F.C.)
- 92 - Youssouf Sabaly (FC Nantes)
- 91 - Ricardo Carvalho (AS Monaco FC)
- 90 - Grégory Sertic (FC Girondins de Bordeaux)
- 89 - Fabien Lemoine (AS Saint-Étienne)
- 88 - Adama Traoré (AS Monaco FC)
- 87 - Morgan Sanson (Montpellier HSC)
- 86 - Cheikh Ndoye (Angers SCO)
- 85 - Rio Mavuba (Lille OSC)
- 84 - Mexer (Stade Rennais F.C.)
- 83 - Bryan Dabo (Montpellier HSC)
- 82 - Benjamin Mendy (Olympique de Marseille)
- 81 - Gaël Danic (SC Bastia)



WISSAM BEN YEDDER

[80]
v 76

Club: Toulouse FC

Position: Attacker

Born: Sarcelles

Date of Birth: 12/08/1990

Age: 25

“Concerning Ben Yedder and others, I am watching them.”

– Didier Deschamps

A shining example of how the limelight can run away just as quickly as it arrives, Wissam Ben Yedder's name in the rumour mills has vanished in recent months. A hot property a year ago, a lapse in form and a club in a small spiral have him stuck between a rock and a hard place.

The Frenchman grew up in the Sarcelles, a northern suburb of Paris, to Tunisian parents. He started his young career with a number of clubs, including Saint-Denis, before landing at UJA Alfortville. He helped the club earn promotion to the National league in his only season there, playing 23 games and scoring on nine occasions.

He then joined Toulouse in the summer of 2010, but made just four appearances in his first campaign. He managed nine games in the 2011/12 season but it was the season after that would stand as his breakthrough zenith, scoring 15 goals in 34 appearances.

Ben Yedder continued that form into the 2013/14 season, scoring his season-best 16 goals in 38 games, while also adding five assists. He had become the real focal point of a Toulouse side who had struggled to find a regular source of goals since André Pierre Gignac was sold in 2010.

Last season was another year in which he excelled. 14 goals and three assists made it his third season where he scored into the teens. Form such as this saw him linked to the likes of Barcelona, or in a more likely world the likes of Liverpool, because he was simply irresistible, especially in 2014, where he shocked many to a fourth placed finish in the Get French Football News 100.

He managed to do the business without too much help around him, without being able to rely on either another strike partner or particularly mesmerising creative play in midfield. Many began to wonder what might become of Ben Yedder if he had more competent teammates surrounding him.

Ben Yedder stayed in the summer despite numerous rumours but he has yet to hit the heights that he had previously. In 16 games this season at the time of writing, he has scored four goals and created three assists as Toulouse struggle again at the wrong end of the Ligue 1 table.

The dip could be explained by the lack of talent around him and the team's current struggles, but these were issues that he had to deal with last season. If anything, Martin Braithwaite is playing much better than previously and with even that little bit of help, he should be doing more.

As a player, the 25-year-old can be best described as an incredibly budgeted version of Luis Suarez. He likes the ball at his feet, he wants to run at defenders with his strong dribbling ability and he has the nous to both create chances for others to score or to score himself.

The forward is superb in one-on-one situations and can regularly be relied upon to finish off clear goal-scoring opportunities when presented with them. He is able to keep a cool head and pick his spot, whether that be a powerful drive or a delicate lob, Ben Yedder has all the tools you would associate with a deadly striker.

As mentioned earlier, he has good ball control and likes to dribble at defenders. While not at an elite level, his skill and pace does put Ligue 1 defenders on the back foot which allows him the space to either get a shot away or to beat them with his speed. With that, he can also sit on the last defender, as he trusts his agility to beat anyone in a foot race.

He is a decent passer of the ball, able to pick out a teammate over short distances but usually wants to play quick passes, either for him to take up a better attacking position or to get others in-behind. What he does lack is the ability to track back, he is not going to really dive into challenges and harry others too often and with his height, he is unlikely to win any aerial duels.

However, in a terrific match against Lorient, he confirmed his talents once again. He won two aerial duels, had three shots, completed two dribbles and even scored a goal in a fine display that was lost under his side's 3-2 defeat. He had 55 touches, unusual for a centre forward but he popped up literally everywhere in an attempt to help his team, even though in the end it was in vain. The major positive for Ben Yedder will be that time is most certainly on his side. He only turned 25 at the start of the season and if he can find some way to force a move in January, he may be able to rediscover his previous form at another club.

There is no doubt that there is talent in his boots that should be coveted by other clubs, the worry for him now is that he will get lost in the shuffle under a poor season. It has happened before to players from struggling Ligue 1 sides and if he wants to continue to progress as a footballer, a move away from the Stadium Municipal is essential to his future growth.



JÉRÉMY SORBON

[79]
*

Club: En Avant de Guingamp

Position: Defender

Born: Caen

Date of Birth: 05/08/1983

Age: 32

"My head in the stars, my dreams... those are over."

– Jérémy Sorbon

Jérémy Sorbon is one of those players who have gone under the radar throughout his career. Playing in perhaps the position that grabs the least headlines at centre back, and always appearing understated and reserved off the pitch, we never hear too much about the Frenchman.

But, at 32 years of age and a whole 11 seasons since he first made his Ligue 1 debut, Jérémy Sorbon makes the GFFN 100 - a testament to the longevity and dedication of a man whose footballing career seems to be ageing like a fine wine.

Back in the summer of 2013, at almost 30 years of age, Jérémy Sorbon's contract at his hometown club Caen had run out. He was looking for a new club, and the newly promoted EA Guingamp were the ones to take a chance on him.

At the time many considered the move a risk - both for Sorbon, who was leaving everything he knew in footballing terms, and for Guingamp, who were taking a risk on an ageing player who may have been past his prime. But looking at how the move has panned out - with Sorbon being a constant fixture in the defence and with a Coupe de France winners medal to boot - it turned out a resounding success for everyone involved.

Now, at the end of 2015, Jérémy Sorbon remains a crucial fixture at the heart of the EAG defence. He has started 35 of the 38 Ligue 1 games that Guingamp have played over the last 12 months, captaining the side seven times in the process. Last season was deemed successful for Guingamp, as they finished a solid 10th in Ligue 1, and reached the Coupe de France semi-finals, where they narrowly lost out to Auxerre 1-0.

This season has not gone quite so well, with the side in the relegation zone at the halfway stage. However, their position is largely to do with their struggles to find the back of the net, not their struggles at the back. In fact, Guingamp have conceded only four more goals than AS Monaco, who are 2nd in the Ligue 1 table, so the blame does not lie too heavily on Sorbon and co. in defence.

Individually, what does Sorbon have in his game that has allowed him to have such a long and consistent career? Well, as he has aged, like all players Sorbon has lost some pace, making his job harder at the back. However, a variety of factors have allowed him to cope with this issue and remain at the top of his game.

The first of those is his ability to read the game. As his career has progressed, Sorbon has become better at positioning himself in the correct place to cut out an attack. In his earlier years, he could perhaps afford to be a little sloppy and give the striker a chance, but be quick enough to recover and snuff out the opportunity.

However, as he is no longer so quick nowadays, he relies on being in the perfect position to cut out an attack effectively before it gets too close to goal. As a result, you do not see Sorbon making too many dramatic last-ditch slide tackles, which perhaps contributes to him going under the radar as much as he does.

Another of Sorbon's strengths is his aerial ability. Standing at 1.83m tall, Sorbon has the height needed to compete effectively with pretty much all Ligue 1 strikers.

The statistics back up his proficiency in the air, as he has won 67% of aerial battles so far this season, and 66% during the second half of last season. This aerial ability allows him to deal effectively with most crosses into the box, and combined with his positioning when the ball is on the ground, Sorbon is a very clever and astute centre back.

However, not all of Jérémy Sorbon's strengths lie on the pitch. Having had a career in French football spanning 11 seasons, Sorbon brings plenty of experience to a Guingamp team which may well need exactly that this season.

Having lost five games on the bounce and currently sitting in 18th position, there is no doubt they are in a battle to avoid relegation, and the experienced players in the dressing room, those of the likes of Sorbon, will be relied upon to keep a level head and help bring about an upturn in form.

Overall, Jérémy Sorbon has had a very impressive calendar year of 2015. At the age of 32, he continues to go from strength to strength and, at this rate, he could go on for quite a while longer if he so wishes. Both Caen and Guingamp fans will tell you how important he has been to their sides, and it is about time we start giving out praise to one of Ligue 1's most understated stars.



SAMUEL UMTITI

[78]
*

Club: Olympique Lyonnais

Position: Defender

Born: Yaoundé

Date of Birth: 14/11/1993

Age: 22

*"I like to pass and
bring things forward
in an attacking sense."*

– Samuel Umtiti

It has been a mixed 2015 for Lyon man Samuel Umtiti. He has been one of the standout performers for his club, but Lyon's league form and poor defensive record in the current campaign has somewhat tarnished his overall success in this calendar year.

2014/15 was a successful season for OL, with Umtiti at the heart of their defence. They ended the season with the third best record in that department, conceding only 33 goals, fewer than champions PSG, and finishing second, confirming qualification for the Champions' League.

The 22 year old was ever-present, starting 35 league games and seven Europa League games, making him one of the club's most used players. He even, although not in 2015, chipped in with a goal; an important equaliser in the final ten minutes away at PSG. Perhaps such a goal can be viewed as a fitting reminder of just how crucial the defender is to his team.

Despite being able to play both as a left-back and at the centre of defence, 2015 could be seen as the year where the 22 year old has finally nailed down a position. All of his starts this campaign have come in the centre back role where, although he offers less of an attacking threat, he is able to have more of an impact on his defensive line.

Indeed, despite only being 22, the Frenchman does appear to be acting beyond his years, having played one short of 150 games for his side, often shouting instructions and reminders to his fellow teammates. He also appears to be given more responsibility on the ball than some of his counterparts, often carrying the ball out of defence, looking to pick and pass, and also sometimes aiming to dribble past opponents. Thus, whilst playing as centre back, Umtiti appears to have the ability on the ball of a full-back.

2015 has been less successful, however, although arguably has only acted to remind spectators of just how important their young centre back is. Currently, Lyon sit 9th in Ligue 1, a long way short of expectations. Despite the loss of key players such as Nabil Fekir to injury, in a division where the likes of Monaco and Marseille have been forced to sell many of their star players, and two newly promoted sides sit in the top four, Lyon should perhaps be pushing PSG at the top once again. However, this is currently not the case.

Arguably, the main reason for such an outcome has been the lack of Samuel Umtiti in the last month. The player is currently out due with injury a reality that has had a negative effect on the team as a whole and once again outlined how key he is to his side's success.

After losing just two games in their first thirteen in the league, in which the centre back started 12, the 22 year old has been injured, and in this time, Lyon have lost five and drawn one in the league. Their sudden turmoil in defence, in Umtiti's absence does appear to be playing a large part in this, with Lyon conceding five away at PSG, four whilst hosting Montpellier and three away at Nice. A 2-0 win away at Valencia in the Champions' League appears to be a high point in this spell but it is agreed amongst almost all that the results would have been far better had the 22 year old been able to feature in the side.

Such a reliance on Umtiti has come with more responsibility on the shoulders of the former French youth international. Touted as a possible future Lyon captain, the player was given the armband early for an away game to Bordeaux earlier this year, which unfortunately ended in a 3-1 defeat.

Indeed, despite the side needing the defender to be at his best, he is by no means the finished article, and this is perhaps why he has been overlooked by national team coach Didier Deschamps for younger alternatives who are believed to be more mature already than Umtiti.

Indeed, on a European stage, at least during this current campaign, the 22 year old has floundered slightly. Despite the win over Gary Neville's Valencia, Lyon have had a fairly miserable campaign, finishing bottom of their group containing Valencia, Genk and Zenit, which does not appear to justify OL's showing of just four points. Umtiti failed to show the kind of performances we are used to in Ligue 1, and despite a good showing in a 2-0 defeat away at Zenit, looked unpolished throughout.

Nevertheless, the 22 year old has to be credited as a major driving force behind Lyon's success over the last year, and his performances perhaps go unnoticed compared to those of the likes of Alexandre Lacazette, who is receiving interest from clubs around Europe.

In a few years time, however, with even more experience and polishing, we could have a top European centre back on our hands, pushing for an international place.



ROMAIN THOMAS

[77]
*

Club: Angers SCO

Position: Defender

Born: Landerneau

Date of Birth: 12/06/1988

Age: 27

*"There are no stars
in this Angers team."*

– Romain Thomas

There is no denying it – Angers have had an incredible first-half of the season and they have taken Ligue 1 by storm. Stéphane Moulin's side currently sit in third position in the league's standings, and a key factor in their success has been their ability to remain organized and disciplined in face of technically-superior opposition.

This has aided Angers to become Ligue 1's second-best defence after Paris Saint-Germain, as the men from the Pays de la Loire region have conceded just eleven goals in 19 games. The club's imposing central defender Romain Thomas has played an important role in achieving this success.

Thomas has been a longstanding fans' favourite at the Stade Jean-Bouin since his move to the club from National side USJA Carquefou in 2013. The giant Breton has developed an integral central defensive partnership with summer signing Ismael Traoré at the heart of the Angers back four, and both players have developed well-earned positive reputations as a result of their reliability when they play.

Thomas has played eighteen matches this season in Les Angevins' black and white shirt and he has been a near omnipresent part of their so far successful campaign. The twenty-seven-year-old was an inspirational part of the club's successful promotion campaign last season in Ligue 2, in which he played an impressive thirty-five times.

Since his signature, Thomas' reliability has been an extremely endearing part of his game for Angers supporters. The twenty-seven-year-old played an impressive seventy Ligue 2 matches in just two seasons between 2013 and 2015. The product of the Stade Brestois 29 youth system's playing style can be fairly described as 'steady'. He often does not take risks and his ability to maintain his composure at the back is one of his main positive attributes.

He likes to keep things simple and he does not tend to dive into tackles unless it is necessary and his passing is usually 'practical' and pragmatic, as he prefers to play short passes as opposed to riskier long-range attempts. At 1.93m, he is a logical aerial presence in the box and he mostly does well to deal with balls played into the danger zone, clearing trouble usually with success.

Thomas has utilised his aerial presence to good effect this season in the opposition box, making the most of Angers' well-arranged set-pieces, to score two headers in Ligue 1, against Bordeaux and Marseille. However, at times there are clear limitations to Thomas' game that could prevent him from ever becoming a top class centre-back.

He is not the quickest player and he often relies on his excellent ability to read and anticipate the game in order to stay one step ahead of pacey strikers.

He is usually a convincing force in the air - however there have been a few occasions in which he has been outmuscled by opposing players, both on the deck and in the air.

On matchday 19, he appeared to lose out in a tussle with Neal Maupay, who is hardly the most physically imposing player in France's top-flight, and this led to a strike from Benjamin Corgnet that swung the match in St Étienne's favour and caused Thomas' side to drop points.

His limited range of passing marks him out as less dynamic than top class centre backs and at times he looks slightly uncomfortable and cumbersome with the ball at feet. Another aspect of his game in which there is room for improvement is his inability to avoid committing fouls, as Thomas has picked up five yellow cards already season in eighteen matches.

Thomas is however learning. He has shown incredible force of character in recent seasons to step up from playing third-division football just two years ago to now becoming a Ligue 1 regular starter within so far one of the league's most exciting sides.

The twenty-seven-year-old brings a wealth of cross-league experience to Stéphane Moulin's side, and he serves a prime example of the talent in the lower leagues of French football that can often be overlooked. His 'steady' style has mostly had a calming influence on the Angers back four, but as mentioned before there are obvious elements to his game that needed to be improved if he is to raise his level of performance.

The partnership that Thomas has developed with Ismael Traoré has been nothing but a surprising and renowned success. The Angers back four has been completely stabilised by their level of co-operation and their ability to deal with the threats posed to them by the opposition.

Thomas is likely to remain at the club until at least the end of the season, and he will surely play an important role for his current side throughout the rest of the campaign.



NICOLAS PALLOIS

[76]
v 1

Club: FC Girondins de Bordeaux

Position: Defender

Born: Elbeuf

Date of Birth: 19/09/1987

Age: 28

"Last season, I played with 5 different central defenders."

– Nicolas Pallois

In yet another case of better late than never, Nicolas Pallois had to wait a long time for a real shot at Ligue 1 football. After two previous stints with a club in the top flight of French football that did not take off, the 28-year-old seems to have finally found his feet at Bordeaux.

Starting at Caen back in 2007, he failed to make an appearance for the club before he decided on making the move down to amateur side Quevilly. A solid spell there earned him a transfer to then-Ligue 1 side Valenciennes but again, his chances were limited in the top division.

A loan move to Ligue 2 and Laval, where he made 21 appearances and scored three goals before making a permanent move to Chamois Niortais, who had just been promoted to the second division, came calling next. Two successful years, where he made 71 appearances and had 21 yellow cards, convinced Bordeaux to acquire his services in 2014, allowing him to finally have another shot at Ligue 1.

In his first season with Les Girondins, the Frenchman made 34 league appearances, where he helped Willy Sagnol's side finish sixth. They conceded 44 goals and kept just nine clean sheets as Pallois managed the one goal in the Coupe de la Ligue but was sent off in the league.

In his second campaign at the Matmut Atlantique, he has made just 13 appearances in a run during which he is still yet to score in Ligue 1. He has made 2.2 tackles per game, 2.4 interceptions but his place in the side has not stopped a porous defence leak a lot of goals.

His 2015 finished early after being sent off despite already being substituted against Rennes as he protested a penalty decision in the final minutes of the game. Pallois pushed an assistant referee and the French FA have retrospectively banned the defender for three months dating back to the incident in late November.

As a defender, Pallois comes across most of the time as a classic bruiser. He is not afraid to get physical and he is determined in both the air and in tackles on the ground, which makes him usually difficult to beat.

However, saying that he is not always the best timer of tackles, as shown by his foul and yellow card counts, but he does put himself about. Pallois is usually positioned well to cover and has a surprising amount of pace to make up for others mistakes.

Pallois is a reasonable passer of the ball over shot distances and while he only has a 79% pass completion rate, that is undermined by his five clearances and five long balls attempted in each game so far.

Sometimes the best way to evaluate a defender is on a team's poor performances and their 6-1 defeat to Nice is a prime example of disastrous defending but in fairness to Pallois, only one goal could be claimed as his fault.

The first is a great goal but the second you have to take issue with him: the first strike from range is saved and tapped in by an on-rushing striker, by the opponent that he was marking and Pallois should have followed him into the dangerous area where the goalkeeper might be susceptible to spilling the ball.

The third goal was a total fluke in the fact that it comes off Pallois last after a good save from Cédric Carrasso but the initial attack is able to commence due to a very poor mistake from his centre-back partner Frédéric Guilbert.

Ben Arfa's first is another mistake by Guilbert and Pallois cannot close it down quickly enough, his second and the final goal comes from a poor Carrasso clearance that leaves Pallois in no man's land and as he tries to do something, he ends up actually doing little of note as they pass round him.

This disaster actually showed that Pallois is very positionally aware: he was not personally caught out for any of the goals other than the one that only the real quality players spot before they happen. Playing next to someone who was putting on a dismal display left Pallois a little exposed but he did all he could to prevent Nice racking up the score that they did.

It is such a shame that some positives in 2015 have been soured by the events that ended it for Pallois. The punishment may seem a little extreme to some but football needs to protect their officials and his actions, no matter how he may have felt, his actions cannot be in any way justified.

He now faces a spell on the sidelines until at least late February, possibly early March as he regains full match fitness, and then will have to rediscover some of the form that he showed especially at the start of last year. Not only that, he is being treated for a severe infection to a wound he suffered in the same game and that could also spell a long road before we see Pallois on our screens again.



MARTIN BRAITHWAITE

[75]
*

Club: Toulouse FC

Position: Attacker

Born: Esbjerg

Date of Birth: 05/06/1991

Age: 24

*“Can somebody tell
me what the point
of the police is?”*

– Martin Braithwaite

Two and a half years after joining Toulouse from his native Denmark, it now feels as if Martin Braithwaite is finally coming into his own in Ligue 1.

The 24-year-old joined the French club back in the summer of 2013 from Danish Superliga side Esbjerg as a raw but extremely promising young forward. Braithwaite had impressed back home; scoring 19 goals in 97 appearances and helping his club win the Danish Cup in 2013, and was on the radar of many clubs across Europe. It was Toulouse, however, who won the race for his signature and they instantly got their rewards for taking a chance on the youngster, as he netted four times in his first eight appearances and eventually ended his debut campaign with 11 goals in all competitions.

His second season was not quite as successful, with six goals in total, four of which came in 2015. He opened his account for the calendar year in mid-January, scoring the equaliser against Bastia with a first time shot from outside the box that crept past the keeper and into the corner of the net. Braithwaite, however, saved his best till the end of the campaign, scoring three times in four matches between April and May as Toulouse just about saved themselves from relegation.

First up was a vital match winner against fellow strugglers at the time Lorient. Tongo Doumbia did the hard work, but Braithwaite was on hand to fire home Doumbia's square ball across the box and claim a massive three points for Toulouse. The forward did not score in Toulouse's next outing, a 1-1 draw at home to Nantes, but did claim an assist as he set up Adrien Regattin's opener.

Braithwaite was back on the score sheet in the next match though, firing the ball under Monaco keeper Danijel Subasic to bring the score back to 1-1. His effort was in vain; however, as Monaco went on to win the match 4-1.

His final goal of the campaign was much more important, though, as he grabbed a late, late winner in a 3-2 victory over Lille. The striker kept his nerve in a one-on-one situation with Lille's Vincent Enyeama, slotting the ball into the corner to give his side yet another vital win.

Indeed, Braithwaite was hugely influential in Toulouse's late surge out of the relegation places at the end of last season and has to be credited with being in the right place at the right time to score what turned out to be some vital goals.

And the Dane has continued to prove useful this season, managing to match last season's tally of six goals before the winter break. He netted Toulouse's first goal of the campaign, against St Étienne on the opening weekend, with an excellent long range free kick that was struck low into the corner.

More goals soon followed, with efforts against Rennes, Reims and Marseille all finding the target. His goal against Marseille, a close range effort in which he redirected Regattin's shot into the net, looked set to be the winner, but Michy Batshuayi's late equaliser denied Toulouse all three points on that occasion.

That was not to stop Braithwaite though, who netted against Gazelec Ajaccio the following month and striking again in a 2-0 win over Nice in November.

Toulouse, however, have struggled throughout most of this campaign, spending the best part of November and December in the relegation zone, yet Braithwaite has still managed to keep his name on the score sheet on a regular basis. Come the latter stages of the season though, Toulouse may just need some more heroics from Braithwaite to save themselves once again.

Braithwaite has also been active on the international scene, making five appearances for Denmark in 2015. He appeared in their European qualifiers against Armenia and Portugal and also played 71 minutes of their play-off first leg against Sweden, a tie in which Sweden came out on top.

Throughout his time in France, Braithwaite has demonstrated his ability to score a variation of goals. He can score free kicks, calmly put away one on ones and be in the right place at the right time to poach loose balls inside the six yard box. As such, there is no such thing as a typical Martin Braithwaite goal, an asset that makes him so hard for opposition defenders to account for.

During his development in Denmark, Braithwaite played in all positions across the front line, which perhaps explains his range of finishing. He possesses the skills and trickiness of a winger, as well as the cool headedness and finishing ability of a natural striker.

At 24 years of age, Braithwaite still has a lot to learn and a lot of room for improvement, but he is without doubt a talented young player who is starting to show signs of his true potential.



ROMAIN ALESSANDRINI

[74
^13]

Club: Olympique de Marseille

Position: Midfielder

Born: Marseille

Date of Birth: 03/04/1989

Age: 26

"Maybe we are a bit stressed out."

– Romain Alessandrini

Following Olympique de Marseille throughout 2015 has been somewhat of a rollercoaster ride. Their fans and players have been put through the full gamut of emotions. The year began with them sitting atop Ligue 1 at the winter break only for them to lose their first league game of the year at Montpellier which saw them drop to second. From then onwards they began a fairly steady slide down the table dropping as low as fifth after April's nadir, in which they lost all four games including Le Classique at home to PSG. However, four wins in their last four games saw them cement fourth place. That conclusion meant no Champions' League for Marcelo Bielsa's side; they would have to make do with Europa League action on Thursdays.

The subsequent season began in typically volatile fashion when Marseille lost at home to Caen on the opening day. This loss prompted coach Bielsa to quit, bizarrely at the end of the post-match press conference. Marseille were plunged into crisis; they were beaten at Reims the following week. Spanish coach Michel joined and oversaw a 6-0 walloping of Troyes in his first game. Results would remain similarly up and down, OM would often find ways to win away from the Vélodrome but were poor at home losing to Angers and Nice, whilst there were disappointing home draws to Gazelec and Lorient.

One player that fits in with the general Marseille paradigm is Romain Alessandrini, a Marseille native who was on the club's books until the age of 16 where a dispute over his position with the coach saw him quit. He rebounded at FC Gueugnon where he learnt his trade as a professional before signing for Clermont Foot in 2010. Two seasons in Ligue 2 showcased his promise before signing for Rennes in 2012 where he would explode onto the Ligue 1 scene, making the French national squad at the start of 2013 only for injury to curtail his progress. Marseille first made attempts to sign him in the summer of 2013 to no avail, but Alessandrini returned down south for good a year later.

Under the watch of Bielsa, Alessandrini began to accumulate more minutes as time elapsed, he initially found it difficult to break into the first team and was regularly brought off the bench as Marseille blasted their way to the top of the league. Injury ended his 2014 but when 2015 came around he gained more playing time as Bielsa sought to arrest the slump. He showcased his ability in the home game against Monaco with an assist and an 87th minute winner. He would also find the net in a 4-0 romp away to Lille the following week.

The 2015/16 season saw wholesale changes in the OM playing staff. As a result Alessandrini found himself with a lot more game time and he did not hesitate in seizing his opportunity: 5 goals in his first 12 games saw him come to the fore much more. He managed three goals in his first season at OM but went on an eight-month dry spell at one point during that campaign. This time around he meant business and he chalked up three man of the match awards in said 12 game period.

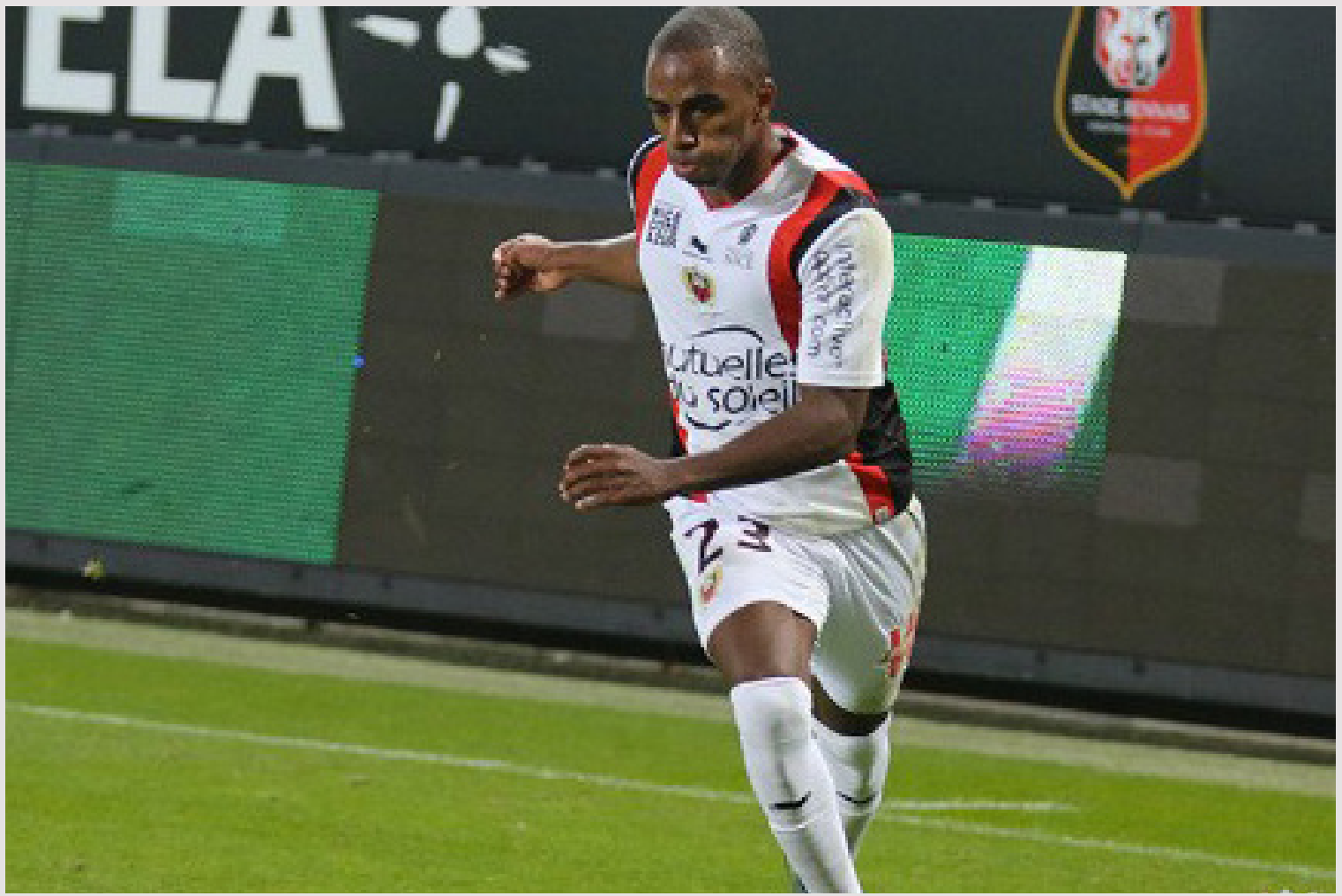
When one looks at his goals, Alessandrini's key attributes are clearly evident. Not only does he possess a wonderful left foot capable of firing the ball into the back of net in any number of different ways, but he is a tenacious kind of player who also has an excellent ability to read the game that allows him to see opportunities that others may not and allows him to arrive in position at just the right moment to make the impact needed. His goal against Troyes came about through him pressing a defender into giving the ball away on the edge of penalty area. He then fed Michy Batshuayi who could not get his shot away when one-on-one with the keeper but Alessandrini had followed the move and was left with a simple finish.

His first goal, of two, against Bastia a few weeks later came immediately from the kick-off. His driving run had him exchanging the ball with Batshuayi once more before Alessandrini had only the keeper to beat, which he did with aplomb, after he held off several defenders to get into position required.

His second against the Corsicans came from his presence of mind; he was able to anticipate a block on a cross that he seized upon before lashing the ball home. Similarly away at Lille, Marseille mounted a quick counter attack to which the Lille defence seemed to have managed to regroup leaving Batshuayi with few options open. However, Alessandrini arrived on the edge of the box completely untroubled by red shirts, the ball was rolled into his path and he unleashed a curling dipping shot high into the Lille net to give the his side a two nil lead on the ground where his 2012/13 season had been cruelly interrupted by injury.

That finish brought back memories of his purple patch at Rennes when every goal he seemed to score was a scarcely believable long-range strike. His 30-yard volley at home to Lille and swerving dipping volley at Nancy are particular highlights of that period. It is no surprise that he is an excellent striker of a dead ball.

At this moment in time, Marseille are one of a number of traditionally powerful French clubs trying to get to grips with how Ligue 1 has developed and with the Parisian hegemony seemingly fully set in for the future. As such, aims are being reassessed while the team transitions. To that end, a player with talent and a very useful skill-set such as Romain Alessandrini could well become a key player in any future resurgence from a side who look to have some green shoots of hope for the future. Alessandrini is one such hope.



RICARDO PEREIRA

[73]
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Club: OGC Nice

Position: Midfielder

Born: Lisbon

Date of Birth: 06/10/1993

Age: 23

"He is an excellent player and an excellent person."

– Carlos Eduardo

With Claude Puel's side brimming with young, creative talent, it is not surprising that the clever Nice manager went out to find a little risk in the summer that could return a big reward. In that mould sits Ricardo Pereira who, while it is still early doors, could prove to be a very shrewd move indeed.

Ricardo Domingos Barbosa Pereira was born in October 1993 in Lisbon, Portugal. He dotted around a few local clubs, from Futebol Benfica to Sporting Lisbon, who he spent six years with during his development. Eventually, his career path led him to Primeira Liga side Vitoria de Guimaraes, making his debut in April 2012.

In the following season, he made 30 appearances for the club but really shone in their run in the Taca de Portugal. The full-back scored six times in six games, including the winner in the final against Benfica as he helped Guimaraes win their first ever Portuguese Cup.

It was that form that led to his transfer to Portuguese giants FC Porto in the summer of 2013. However, he could not repeat the exceptional exploits he showed at his former club, managing just 19 senior appearances in two years.

Then in the summer of this year, OGC Nice came in with an offer to take the 22-year-old on a two-year loan deal and he settled in surprisingly quickly. Playing predominantly as a left-back but also being deployed on the right when needed, the youngster has created three assists in 11 Ligue 1 games and that form even earned him a call-up to the national team.

A prominent figure throughout the youth set-up of the Portuguese international team, Fernando Santos finally gave him the call in November 2015 to be a part of their squad ahead of their friendlies against Russia and Luxembourg.

While he only came on as a late substitute in both games, it will be a huge boost to his confidence. He tried a variety of different positions, coming on as a defensive midfielder in the second fixture, but he will be well aware that he would have been seen as cover for Raphaël Guerreiro at this moment in time.

Pereira reminds you a little of almost every prominent Portuguese left-back in recent memory. Much like his compatriots that both now ply their trade in Ligue 1, Fabio Coentrão and the aforementioned Guerreiro, he is very much an attacking full-back and can be very dangerous in the final third.

He has a wicked left foot that can pick out a cross when needed, which is the bread and butter of any full-back of the modern era. The Portuguese man is able to be a little more risky in the final third and is willing to take on his opponent and add real support for Nice's wingers.

Unlike many might perceive he is also a very solid defender. He averages four tackles a game and in an emphatic display against Marseille, he made nine and that just shows how well he times his tackles against opposing wingers.

However, given that he does make quite a few tackles, he also gets it wrong on enough occasions too. He makes at least 1.4 fouls a game and has picked up three yellows in 11 games, showing that he may sometimes be a little too over-exuberant in trying to get the ball back.

He also makes 3.3 interceptions per game, which for a full-back is a real positive as he is either stopping the cross, stopping someone passing him or stopping the switch of play, which can set off the counter attacks that Nice are so deadly at.

What he does need to do is provide some consistency. He can occasionally disappear out of games and that is what is stopping him from getting to the next level.

Whenever someone is trying to rediscover their form, it is best for them to carry on doing what they are doing, even through the difficult patches. It is much easier for a young player to achieve this and just as it seems Pereira has, his best move will be to continue his excellent form at Nice.

A move too quickly in the winter or in the summer even might disrupt the rhythm he is developing by playing regular games and being involved. He is starting to find his feet and it was really impressive how quickly he has adapted to a new country and a new language, something that can be a real challenge for anyone.

It is always good to see a player finding his talent again and that can only be a huge positive for Nice and for his parent club. Seeing out that two-year loan is easily his best option because at the end of it, he will still be young and if he can find consistency in Ligue 1, then there will be no shortage of suitors.



JONAS MARTIN

[72]
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Club: Montpellier HSC

Position: Midfielder

Born: Besançon

Date of Birth: .09/04/1990

Age: 25

"I must confirm my performances whilst being more decisive for the team."

– Jonas Martin

Montpellier have suffered a slow start to the 2015/16 campaign, residing at the time of writing in the bottom half of the Ligue 1 table, despite a resurgence in form in the final weeks of the calendar year. The club finished 7th in 2014/15, just one place outside of the European qualification spots and MHSC fans could have been forgiven for hoping for a similar result this time around. A man who played a major part in last season's success was certainly Jonas Martin.

The number 8 was a force to be reckoned with at the heart of the Montpellier midfield, playing 28 times over the course of the 2014/15 season notching 27 league appearances and also partaking in a disappointing, if not expected 0-3 loss to PSG in the Coupe De France. He suffered an injury at the beginning of 2015, in late January, being forced to leave the field in the 36th minute during a league game against Lorient after damaging his shoulder. Martin was only be reintroduced to proceedings in April, playing 45 minutes in the 3-1 dismantling of Bastia. At the age of 25, the Frenchman's career is now progressing nicely and the rest of Europe is watching, but it has not always been smooth sailing for Martin.

The Besançon-born youngster began his football at local side US Rigny Benjamin's, before his parents later relocated, leading him to join Nimes Olympique in 2000. A game that Martin will no doubt remember fondly is the under-13 final of the Coupe de la Ligue du Languedoc-Roussillon: he scored twice in that game to help Nimes to victory. Four years later, a move to fierce local rivals Montpellier gave the midfielder a further boost in his career. Martin did not make a single league appearance for Nimes, but Montpellier decided his talent could not be wasted.

On his 18th birthday he signed his first professional contract with Montpellier and a year later he was playing with the likes of Benjamin Stambouli, Rémy Cabella & Younes Belhanda. More glory was soon to follow for Martin when Montpellier won the Gambardella Cup in 2009. His performance was fantastic in the prestigious youth tournament final that led media outlet France Football to award him Man of the Match. His professional debut for Montpellier Herault came on the 25th of September 2010 in a 3-1 victory over Arles Avignon. Martin replaced Marco Estrada in the 87th minute wearing the number 28 shirt.

In April 2011 despite injury concerns, Montpellier remained loyal to Martin and offered him a contract extension until June 2015. Martin duly signed and after a couple of impressive seasons, he was offered another extension in May 2014 until 2017. In the 2010/11 season he was loaned out to Ligue 2 side Amiens aged just 19. It was steep learning curve for Martin as Amiens where eventually relegated finishing bottom of Ligue 2. The midfielder performed to a good standard nevertheless and managed to score on 3 occasions in 28 appearances. In 2014/15, the impressive Rémy Cabella was sold by Montpellier to English Premier League side Newcastle United. Martin saw this as an opportunity and hoped to fill the void left by his former teammate, even if he was a slightly more defensive midfield player than the now current Marseille man.

Now undisputedly a vital player in the current Montpellier set-up, manager Rolland Courbis will be looking for Martin to drive the team further up the league. Standing tall at 1.84 metres and weighing roughly 77 kilograms, he is usually tasked with being the deep-lying, playmaking role in the side. He is charged with keeping the ball moving quickly in defensive-midfield areas whilst breaking up play whenever necessary. One of those players who is blessed with natural technique and confidence on the ball, Martin at times offers moments that get the fans on their feet. He has a penchant for dribbling and has a surprising turn of pace that allows him to go past opponents, creating space for more advanced attacking players like Ryad Boudebouz, as opposition defenders get drawn to Martin.

His technique is matched by an exemplary work-rate and an obvious passion for the club. He is happy to stay out of the limelight and has often been forced to sacrifice his attacking qualities to play a more defensive role, his multi-faceted skill-set allows Courbis to deploy Martin in various positions, from defensive midfielder to attacking midfielder so far this term, underlining the player's versatility. One weakness that Martin has yet to address in his game is his lack of consistency when it comes to playing longer balls, either over the top of the opposition defence or in form of a cross when the player is in wide areas.

Martin surely has aspirations of getting an eventual shot in the French national side, even if the competition for places in midfield looks as if it will be exceptionally high for the foreseeable future. In order to achieve this lofty ambition he will have to maintain his consistency and surely secure a move away from Montpellier in 2016. However, for now he remain one of Courbis's men and while this season has started poorly for MHSC, you can expect to see Jonas Martin playing a key role in any possible resurgence that they may enjoy in the second half of the season.



ADRIEN REGATTIN

[71]
v 12

Club: Toulouse FC

Position: Midfielder

Born: Montpellier

Date of Birth: 22/08/1991

Age: 24

"It is up to us to take matters into our own hands."

– Adrien Regattin

Over the past year, Adrien Regattin has become an increasingly important figure at Toulouse. The diminutive Moroccan has popped up all over the pitch for the Ligue 1 outfit, playing in central midfield, on the right and left wings, as an attacking midfielder and even as a centre forward over the last 12 months, helping his team out in any way he can. And whilst the team may be struggling in the league, Regattin is getting his just rewards, playing more often than he has previously ever done in a Toulouse shirt.

The 24-year-old joined the club back in 2009, but his first few seasons were frustrating to say the least. The midfielder found it hard to break into the team at first, regularly watching on from the bench and even when Regattin was given a rare chance to impress towards the end of a match, he found himself being named back amongst the substitutes the next weekend. Either a tough run of fixtures would follow meaning the manager chose more experienced options, or the player himself picked up an injury and was ruled out. Whatever the reason, it just was not working for Regattin.

But things have started to change for the better over the past calendar year. Regattin has been involved much more often and even captained the side on two occasions, against Evian and St Étienne in late January and February. He scored three goals during the 2014/15 campaign, one of which came in 2015, at home against Nantes in April.

Regattin, who had been deployed as a makeshift centre forward, the only time to date he has played up front for Toulouse, picked up a loose ball and kept his composure under pressure to race down on goal and slot the ball past the keeper. His goal opened the scoring, but Nantes scored late on to peg Toulouse to a 1-1 draw.

This season, the Moroccan has just the one goal to his name, scoring against Bordeaux in a match that played out strikingly similar to the one earlier in the year against Nantes. Regattin opened the scoring superbly; curling a shot from outside of the area and into the net with such precision that goalkeeper Cédric Carrasso did not even move. However, Toulouse again conceded a late goal and had to settle for another 1-1 draw.

Regattin has played in all but two of Toulouse's league games so far this campaign and although he is still not a guaranteed starter, he is playing more consistently than ever before.

One reason behind his increased involvement is his adaptability. Regattin, although most comfortable in an attacking midfield role, has at some point been deployed across all of the midfield, wing and forward positions imaginable. The Moroccan is a manager's dream, capable of filling in for injured or suspended players whenever needed and his time on the pitch has undoubtedly increased because of that. Even though he is not Toulouse's most talented player, he is a fast learner and a vital member of their squad.

Although small in stature, standing at just 1.66m, Regattin is an extremely tough player who often has to withstand a kicking from opposition defenders. He is at his best when deployed as a typical playmaker, finding pockets of space between the opposition's midfield and defence, bringing others into play and feeding inch perfect through balls.

As such, he does not offer much in terms of defensive work. His size does not help, but he is certainly not a player associated with tracking back and getting stuck in to tackles.

He does pop up with the odd goal on occasions, most of which tend to be eye-catching to say the least, such as his effort against Bordeaux in September.

Some would argue though, that Regattin should be contributing more goals than he does. For a player that has played regularly in attacking positions, two strikes in 2015 is a statistic he could really improve on if he could just get himself into the right place at the right time more often.

Looking to the future, Regattin simply needs to carry on improving at the same rate. He is playing on a more regular basis than he was in 2014, so the challenge now is for Regattin to make himself undroppable. Toulouse have had an extremely poor season on the pitch, entering the winter break in the relegation zone, so the timing is perfect for the Moroccan to really push on and make a statement.

If he can begin to take games by the scruff of the neck and add more goals to his game, then Regattin could be the saviour that his team desperately need in 2016.



BENOÎT COSTIL

[70]
✓ 46

Club: Stade Rennais F.C.

Position: Goalkeeper

Born: Caen

Date of Birth: 03/07/1987

Age: 28

"There is never a good time to be injured."

– Benoît Costil

Benoît Costil has had an up and down 2015, which is paralleled by his side Rennes performances in the calendar year. In the GFFN 100 2014 edition, Costil was rightfully high up in the standings in 24th place but this year his performances have somewhat dropped and his far lower GFFN 100 ranking illustrates the change.

Despite this though, Costil is still a very impressive goalkeeper coming from a nation that has put, and continues to put many top shot-stoppers at the disposal of the France manager, Hugo Lloris and Stéphane Ruffier to name a couple.

Benoît Costil was born in Caen in July 1987 and began his youth career at US Bretteville, a team just on the outskirts of Caen. At just the age of 8, Costil got his move to hometown club Caen and progressed through the ranks until 2005 where he became a professional at the club.

He featured in a smattering of games when the side were in Ligue 1 but never really cemented his place at the outfit, as his inexperience counted against him and he quickly became frustrated on the fringes of the squad.

A loan move to Vannes in 2008 proved to be fruitful as Costil impressed and made 27 appearances for the Brittany club. His performances caught the attention of then Ligue 2 side Sedan, who snapped Costil up on a free transfer. He generally played very well at Sedan over a period of two years and then moved on to current club Rennes who offered Ligue 1 football to Costil in the summer of 2011. Since he joined the famous Brittany club, Costil has made the number one spot his own and has performed excellently in a Rennes team that is predictably unpredictable.

Costil's performances over the years for Rennes caused many to wonder why his international career has not accelerated to more than a few Under 21 appearances, especially since the arrival of Deschamps as coach.

The problem, as previously mentioned, is the volume of quality keepers that France develops, and also, the lack of spotlight and glamour that a player playing for a more 'provincial' side such as Rennes receives. It is always the case that players at big teams, rightly or wrongly, often get picked on reputation alone as opposed to their consistency at club level.

Here lies another problem for Costil. Rennes are one of the most inconsistent teams in France. They have some excellent players such as Ntep, Quintero and of course Costil, but they are a club that seems to undergo too many changes each season.

Players who do well for them such as Ntep tend to get linked to big money moves either abroad or to teams such as PSG. Costil himself has been linked with moves away many times, even to Arsenal a year or so ago. So this lack of continuity makes it challenging for coaches and players alike.

Rennes finished 9th last season in Ligue 1, where they were expected to at least challenge for the Europa League spots but were too inconsistent. This season is similar, as at the turn of the year, the Brittany club sit in 7th place. Due to the dominance of PSG, but the struggles of other contenders such as Marseille and Lyon, it must be frustrating for Rennes supporters and players such as Costil alike, because if they could find some consistency, then this could be a year to remember for 'Les Rouges et Noirs'.

Costil is a very competent all-round goalkeeper, who makes some exceptional saves, yet is also culpable to the odd blooper. He has good feet for a goalkeeper, and is quick to see danger and is one of the most focused professionals in his position in the French top flight.

Despite Danzé holding the rather honorary captain's armband, coach Montanier generally looks to Costil to lead from the back, as he has been at the club for longer than the vast majority of his teammates and owing to his position on the field.

Costil's 2015 performances have been impressive enough, and one cannot help but feel like a move to pastures new may give Costil an exciting lease of life. Costil's has the ability to become a competent goalkeeper in any division in European football. A Premier League club such as Newcastle could do much worse than come calling in January.

Costil is only 28 that means that he has so many years ahead of him at the top, if he keeps hungry and fit of course. One hopes that Costil continues to perform at a high standard, so that he might receive recognition on a more considerable, continental level for his talent than the current sporadic slaps on the back that the French media gives him for his performances in our humble Ligue 1.



VALÈRE GERMAIN

[69]
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Club: OGC Nice

Position: Attacker

Born: Marseille

Date of Birth: 17/04/1990

Age: 25

*"I needed to play, I
needed to score."*

– Valère Germain

Ligue 1 is a league where youth is given its chance. Players are nurtured at a very young age to develop the attributes of positional sense and advanced technical skills. Those are values that are sold by Ligue 1 to the rest of the world. What pleases the general public even more than a young player making his debut aged way under 20 years old is when he has his breakthrough year. There is no term that could better describe what 2015 represents for Valère Germain.

Germain started 2015 the way he ended 2014: on the bench. Not a single Ligue 1 start in the second half of the 2014/15 season. The most minutes he played in a game was against Nantes in late January when he completed the grand total of 22 minutes on the pitch!

The Champions League did not offer many more shining opportunities for Germain. He did not even make the bench in any of the two games against Arsenal but he did get his spot in the 18 for the trip to Turin and substituted Martial with 14 minutes to go in the return leg. Alas, Monaco fell short to Juventus who went on to make the final. Monaco's European adventure being over, Valère Germain went back to the bench for the league games coming on in near enough every game for the last 15 minutes or so.

In the summer, Monaco loaned Germain to south coast neighbours Nice as Jardim did not expect to play him much more in 2015/16 than he did in 2014/15. Martial's subsequent transfer to Manchester United sure was good news for the Principauté's bank account but Monaco suddenly found themselves short of fire power up front with Berbatov retiring and Germain now gone.

Germain's stay at Nice is a great success story so far. Claude Puel has built his side around Hatem Ben Arfa who was finally allowed to play after his faux-depart in January with Les Aiglons, prevented from playing for 3 clubs in the same season. The pair's understanding is obvious for all to see. Both players are not out and out strikers à la Inzaghi or van Nistelrooy. They possess technical awareness and drive that allows them to get themselves in dangerous attacking positions. Ben Arfa is taking most of the plaudits these days but Germain has given this Nice side an air of excitement around the place. With those two upfront, Nice's midfielders have started to be more adventurous and almost impossible to defend against (with 30 goals at the time of writing, Nice are by far the league's most lethal attack behind PSG).

While Germain was busy sitting on a bench for Monaco for most of last season, this season Puel has trusted him to form a strong duo with Ben Arfa. It worked almost instantly as Germain netted Nice's first goal of the season after only 7 minutes against... Monaco. Germain is however often sacrificed during towards the end of the game, as Puel does not risk taking off Ben Arfa who can create a chance out of nothing (more so than Germain).

25-year old Germain must now confirm his early season brilliance in 2016. Nice, like most Ligue 1 clubs is giving youth its chance and Saïd Benrahma often replaces Germain with 10-15 minutes to go. Germain needs to make sure that he does not lose his spot to Nice's next big youth attraction.

But is Germain's future really with Nice? He is only on loan and it would be odd for Jardim to keep him on loan for another season given the season Germain is having and the difficulty Monaco are facing upfront. Of course, Jardim did not know that when he let Germain go to Nice as Martial was still a Monaco player and Jardim did not have to rely on the very unreliable Guido Carillo to come up with the goals.

It will be interesting to see what kind of trajectory Germain's career takes as from next summer. He certainly has the potential to be snatched up on the cheap by a Premier League desperate for invention and creativity upfront (like Aston Villa).

For now we should all applaud the tenacity and determination of Germain. He did the dirty work when Monaco were in Ligue 2 only to find himself relegated to the substitutes bench once promotion was secured playing second-fiddle to world class strikers like Falcao and Berbatov. At 25 though, he is at a good moment in his career where he has learned from great strikers and is ready to make the next step which could be steeper than many experts think.



HILTON

[68]
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Club: Montpellier HSC

Position: Defender

Born: Brasília

Date of Birth: 13/09/1977

Age: 38

*"I try to be an example
through how I play."*

– Hilton

Hilton could without doubt be considered an odd choice to be a part of the GFFN 100 in 2015 as he is closer to the age of 40 than 30. However, his relatively consistent performances for a rather inconsistent Montpellier team are enough to cement his place amongst France's top 100 players in the calendar year.

Vitorino Hilton da Silva was born in Brasília, Brazil's capital city in 1977. He began his professional career with Chapecoense before moving to Parana Clube at the turn of the millennium. He impressed with his solid performances at Parana, and this caught the attention of many teams in Europe, who always dream of managing to pick up a top Brazilian talent for small money, and then selling on for a huge profit.

Hilton had a few choices but opted to join Servette in Switzerland and soon became a fixture at the back for this Swiss side. He even managed to notch a goal against Hertha BSC in the UEFA Cup.

From there Hilton moved to France, initially on loan to Bastia. His solid performances with the Corsican side earned Hilton a permanent move to RC Lens, where he became a fans favourite and scored 8 goals in over 120 appearances over a 4-year spell.

Then came a somewhat problematic move to Marseille, where Hilton (amongst other players) was involved in an armed robbery of his house and he suffered both physically and mentally from the experience.

The trauma he had to deal with almost made him return home but current club Montpellier came calling in 2011 and tempted the likeable Brazilian to stay in the south of France and he signed a 1-year deal with MHSC.

Since moving to Montpellier, Hilton has defied his years by putting in good performances on a regular basis and speaks warmly of the club: *"Montpellier opened the doors for me after my difficult period at Marseille. I think a lot of people were doubting me again. I wanted to show people that I still had the quality and the talent to play in Ligue 1. And I was rewarded with another league title."*

As he states, Hilton was a big part of the famous title winning side in 2012 where he started 34 matches alongside Yanga-Mbiwa at centre half. The Brazilian speaks very highly of Yanga-Mbiwa *"I got on very well with Mapou. Even if he was young he listened a lot and on the pitch he gave everything."*

The Montpellier number four and captain is known as a tough tackling defender who reads the game very well and is composed when others around him seem to panic.

One of his main strengths is his abundance of leadership qualities, which have seen the Brazilian described as 'a good leader' by former Montpellier frontman Olivier Giroud, and an 'example' by MHSC boss Courbis.

His performances in 2015 have been excellent and despite him being in his late 30s, Hilton played every minute of Ligue 1 football from the beginning of the 2014/15 season to the end of April 2015. That is fantastic for any outfield player, let alone a veteran defender. Even though Montpellier have had quite a turbulent 2015 where they flirted with relegation for a while last season, Hilton has demanded consistent ratings of over 7/10 per match.

He is second only to Dabo in terms of consistency in the 2015/16 campaign. The man himself states that he reckons 2015/16 has been a good one for him: *"It's one of my best seasons in Ligue 1. I don't think I played this well even during my title-winning seasons."*

Montpellier as a club could do with finding other players who inspire the consistency that Hilton does, as they sit 15th in the table at the moment and need to improve if they do not want to be in a relegation battle come April/May. Hilton being at the heart of the defence will no doubt aid MHSC's cause, so managing his fitness is a must for the Montpellier medical staff.

His age means that surely that this season will be his last... apparently not! Hilton has stated recently that he would like to play for a few more years yet, targeting the milestone of becoming 40 years old before he hangs up his boots. When he finally does retire, I, along with many other followers of Ligue 1 will miss the talismanic Brazilian defender, as in an age of young fast players, there is something very refreshing about a veteran player compensating for a lack of pace with a 'footballing brain'.



ADRIEN RABIOT

[67]
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Club: Paris Saint-Germain F.C.

Position: Midfielder

Born: Saint-Maurice

Date of Birth: 03/04/1995

Age: 20

*"To be in a great club
and to earn lots of
money is not enough."*

– Adrien Rabiot

A frequent feature on the front page of the Get French Football News website, although not always for the most positive of reasons, Paris Saint-Germain midfielder Adrien Rabiot's career has been somewhat star-crossed to date.

A first-team player at the age of 17 under Carlo Ancelotti, the second half of that season saw him loaned to Toulouse, where he was impressive under Alain Casanova, but saw little first team action upon his return to the capital.

His fortunes were similar under Laurent Blanc, leading to his agent, his mother, attempting on more than one occasion to agitate for a move away from the club. This season, however, Rabiot looks to have potentially turned a corner. With a long-term injury sidelining Marco Verratti over the past six weeks or so, Rabiot has replaced the diminutive Italian in Blanc's starting eleven, turning in an accomplished set of performances that may finally be starting to justify the club's doggedness in holding on to him over the recent past, as opposed to the multiple loan spells endured by the likes of Youssef Sabaly, Alphonse Areola and Jean-Christophe Bahebeck.

Born in the Paris suburb of Saint-Maurice, Rabiot's route to the champions' academy was a circuitous one, as he spent time on the books of clubs as disparate as Creteil, Manchester City and FC Pau.

A move to Paris came in 2010, and while his first team breakthrough was not imminent, he did well at the time to impress at youth ranks, his debuts for France's various youth international teams generally coming at an age younger than those of his fellow squad members, including his first cap for the Under 21 side at just 18.

When Rabiot signed for Paris Saint-Germain, the club had not yet become the property of QSI, and the midfield was not the ferociously competitive battle for places that it is at present. However, by the time that Rabiot signed his professional contract in 2012, the likes of Blaise Matuidi, already a French international, and the experienced Thiago Motta had been brought in to the club. Marco Verratti joined that summer as well, and with the winter arrival of David Beckham, it was easy to see why Rabiot's move to Toulouse was always in the cards.

The following season, 2013/14, started brightly enough, as Rabiot, although not starting every match, featured more often than not, and was a regular in the Champions' League. However, winter brought with it the double setback of the arrival of Yohan Cabaye and a knee injury that kept the youngster out for some six weeks.

With the former Lille man's arrival, as well as PSG's elimination from Europe, playing time down the stretch came at a premium, as Cabaye, while not as imposing of a physical force as Rabiot, added much more to the attack via his elegant passing.

Last season, even with Motta, Cabaye and Matuidi all approaching or past 30, he failed to feature in the season's early going, having been excluded from the squad for most of the season's first two months. However, when the fixtures began to fall thick and fast in November, Rabiot was used more often, although injuries to Cabaye, Motta and Clément Chantôme, as well as the departure of the latter will have surely aided his cause.

This season started off rather ignominiously, as PSG's opening match against Lille was made rather difficult by Rabiot, who, having earned the start for the season's opening fixture promptly received two bookings in the space of half an hour.

The introduction of Thiago Motta, thought to be out the door in the summer, in that match, proved a calming influence, and the thought process on Rabiot immediately reverted to the all-too-familiar debate on his readiness to feature regularly and his general maturity.

However, in recent weeks, the injury to Verratti has seen his inclusion in the side on a regular basis, and he has responded in magnificent fashion.

Able to be used in any of the three midfield positions in Blanc's 4-3-3, Rabiot's tall frame still needs some filling out, but as he matures, his confidence and power has continued to grow. In a scoreless draw against Angers, for example, Rabiot was exceptional, his all-action style at its best against a powerful, physical opposing midfield.

Leading the team in touches, aerial duels and tackles, he showed how, even on a night when Cheick N'Doye was getting the best of the undersized Blaise Matuidi, and the normally dogged Verratti was absent, the champions could still go toe-to-toe with a physically ebullient opponent. While not the most robust himself, Rabiot's anticipation and general positional awareness made him able to counter Angers' aggressive style.

Even if the result was not perhaps what the team would have wanted, the performance was a sterling demonstration of Rabiot's obvious talent as a true box-to-box midfielder.

This is not, of course to say that he is the finished article by any means. While fans of Les Bleus may dream of a midfield powered by Rabiot and Paul Pogba leading their team to success over the next decade, the reasons why Rabiot has not been included in Didier Deschamps plans of yet are more than merely competition for places.

Despite harbouring strong footballing intelligence, the bookings against Lille showed that, for all of the plaudits sent his way, this is still a player of just twenty. He is still a bit impetuous in the tackle, and his range of passing pales in comparison to that of Verratti, meaning that the Italian will, with his health regained, likely supplant the youngster.

He also lacks a true position, at least in this 4-3-3. Not physical enough to shield the back four, not as pacey and direct as Matuidi, (nor as hard-working) Rabiot might find more success playing as one of two central midfielders, harrying forward when necessary, but generally breaking up play in the centre of the park.

A good header of the ball, owing to his height, and also possessed of a powerful left foot, Rabiot is not the finished article yet, but if he can battle past what has been a frustrating lack of opportunity at times, he has the tools to become an important player for club and country.



JIMMY BRIAND

[66]
*

Club: En Avant de Guingamp

Position: Attacker

Born: Vitry-sur-Seine

Date of Birth: 02/08/1985

Age: 30

*"It is no secret. We
need to win regularly."*

– Jimmy Briand

The end of the 2013/14 season had arrived, and for Jimmy Briand it was to signal a new direction in his career. He had spent four successful but ultimately frustrating seasons with Lyon with Ligue 1. Despite scoring 34 goals and making 23 assists for the club, he did not feel fulfilled.

In his mind, he was being played out of position, out on the right wing instead of up front. As a result, when his contract ran down in the summer of 2014, Jimmy Briand knew it was time for something new. He had interest from a host of clubs, including some in England, but ultimately chose to move to Germany, with Hannover 96 on a one-year contract. It was to be an entertaining, if rather brief, period in his career.

Despite his desire to play as a striker, Jimmy Briand was still largely deployed as a right midfielder with Hannover. However, that did not stop him from being effective, just as he was at Lyon. After the winter break of the 2014/15 season, he scored one goal and made five assists in 17 Bundesliga games.

Although those figures do not stand out as hugely successful, it is when we look at the games in which he scored or assisted that his impact on Hannover's fortunes become clear. With three games to go in the season, Hannover were on the brink of relegation, and it was time for Jimmy Briand to step up and perform...

With three games to go until the end of the 2014/15 season, Hannover sat just one place above the automatic relegation zone, and without a league win in 2015. They hosted rivals Werder Bremen in a potentially decisive game. Briand had played most of the season on the right wing but, going into the last few games, he was given the chance to prove himself as a striker.

Against Werder Bremen, Briand rose highest to flick a header through to captain Stindl to open the scoring. But just as Hannover looked to be earning a crucial three points, Werder Bremen equalised late on to leave Hannover firmly in the relegation zone with just two games to go.

And it looked like Hannover were really up against it, with a visit to 5th place Augsburg as their next game. It was to be Briand and Stindl who stepped up once again. First, Briand played an exquisite through ball into the path of Stindl, who opened the scoring once again. Augsburg pegged Hannover back through a penalty, but Briand and Stindl struck once more as the former's cross allowed the latter to bundle in from close range to earn a crucial three points for the side.

The win meant that it would all come down to the last game against relegation rivals Freiburg. Win and Hannover stayed up, draw or lose and they would likely go down.

Hannover got off to the perfect start, going 1-0 up in the 3rd minute of the game. As the match went on without further additions to the scoreboard, the fans and players of both sides were clearly restless, but it was Jimmy Briand who stepped up once again.

In the 84th minute, he got on the end of a cross to divert it towards goal, and as Augsburg's keeper struggled to prevent it from going in, it cannoned off Augsburg's defender Krmas for an own goal which all but sealed Hannover's safety. A late consolation left the score 2-1 to Hannover, and Briand's performances in the last three games of the season had ensured they remained in the Bundesliga.

At the end of the season, Briand moved on once again, this time back to France with EA Guingamp. This season with EAG, he has finally got his wish of playing as a striker consistently; scoring 3 goals and making 3 assists in the 16 Ligue 1 games he has played.

Although Guingamp are struggling this season (they lie in the relegation zone at the halfway stage), they are yet to lose a game in which Briand has scored or assisted. With Guingamp looking like they are in a relegation battle this season, they may well need some more Jimmy Briand heroics to help keep them up, just as the Frenchman did with Hannover last season.

Overall, 2015 has been a successful year for the 30-year-old Frenchman. Although it looks like he may be coming towards the end of his playing career, over the calendar year he has proved he still has what it takes to influence crucial football games.

Now back in France with Guingamp, he will hope the next 12 months are just as eventful and entertaining as the last.



ANDY DELORT

[65]
*

Club: Stade Malherbe Caen

Position: Attacker

Born: Sète

Date of Birth: 09/10/1991

Age: 24

"We really do laugh a lot."

– Andy Delort

The modern game differs greatly from the forms it took in previous eras, but one thing remains the same – strikers are judged on their ability to score. If goals are anything to go by, Caen's Andy Delort has had a very good start to life with Patrice Garande's club. The twenty-four-year-old has found the net six times so far this season, and you would be ill-advised to bet against him scoring more goals after the restart in January.

Just as Caen's credibility as a side has been assured with their punchy performances and consistent form this season, Delort has shown through his own performances that he is a goal threat whose abilities should be taken very seriously by his opponents.

In recent years, Caen have developed a well-earned reputation for being a club that invests wisely in the summer transfer window. After Emiliano Sala's return to Bordeaux after a successful loan spell at the Stade Michel d'Ornano, the club would need to recruit wisely once again in order to find a reliable goalscorer. After an uncomfortable spell at Wigan Athletic, Delort spent the rest of last season on loan at Tours and he played a crucial role in ensuring that the club would survive the drop down to the National. Caen were made aware of his availability during the pre-season, and the centre-forward soon made his way to the club to finalise a transfer deal.

This season, Delort has seized the opportunity to realize one of his longstanding career ambitions – to become a regular goalscorer in France's top-flight. As a former striker himself, Garande has taken Delort under his wing, and the effects his coaching has had on his summer recruit have been evident. The twenty-four-year-old has replicated the form he showed whilst blitzing Ligue 2 in the 2013/2014 season with his goalscoring capabilities, in which he found the net an impressive twenty-four times. One of these strikes included a superb, driven effort against Garande's Caen side.

At 1.82m, Delort is not the tallest striker in the league, but what he lacks in height he makes up for in physical presence. He is a stocky striker, who uses his upper body strength to shoulder defenders away from him when opens up his stride or to protect the ball when dribbling or holding up play. His power combines well with his excellent technical abilities on the ball, and he is more than capable of unleashing long-range shots at goal, as he demonstrated with his goal against Marseille at the Vélodrome. The twenty-four-year-old is at his best when he drops his left shoulder and lets fly with well-placed driven shots across the goal with his right-foot, and he has scored all six of his goals this season with his right-foot.

Delort's reliance on his right-foot to score perhaps restrains him, and it could be argued that if he scored more headers or goals with his left-foot he could become a truly top striker. There are also other aspects of his game that he needs to improve if he wants to be one of France's best attackers. Despite his ability to hold the ball up, his link-up play this season has not always been as effective as it could be, and at times he has been guilty of gifting possession to the opposition. He has also committed a phenomenal amount of fouls – according to the LFP he has been guilty of a grand total of forty-seven offences this season.

However, that said, Delort is still learning and his showings in his first full-season in Ligue 1 as a first-team regular have been more than impressive. He has made the step up from an established Ligue 2 goalscorer to becoming a player that seriously threatens Ligue 1 opposition successfully. He will hopefully improve his link-up play with time and experience, and there are already signs that he is learning more with increased game time.

The hard-working Delort that dropped back down the pitch successfully to aid the midfield against SC Bastia on Matchday 12 appeared to be more mature than the Delort that looked isolated against Lyon on Matchday 4. Although he could justifiably be criticised for committing too many fouls, he is a 'niggly' striker, and the 'rough and tumble' aspect of his game is likely to win him as many admirers as critics, particularly from understanding former forwards such as Garande himself.

Delort has faced setbacks in his career, but it has been his ability to overcome these setbacks gallantly that has won him many admirers. He has proven this season that he can ruthlessly find the target in the highest level of French football, and his potential is significant. If he continues to learn and he continues to improve, he could go on to bigger and better things. At twenty-four-years of age, he remains an exciting prospect whose future in French football could continue surprise those who doubted him in the past.



STEVE MANDANDA

[64]
v 15

Club: Olympique de Marseille

Position: Goalkeeper

Born: Kinshasa

Date of Birth: 28/03/1985

Age: 30

*"Our difficulties at home
have nothing to do with our
fans, who are exceptional."*

– Steve Mandanda

2015 presented Steve Mandanda with yet another mixed twelve months, but one that certainly failed to vindicate the veteran netminder's performances over the course of the calendar year. The 30-year-old was again an imposing figure in the Marseille net, but has unfortunately found things more than difficult since the beginning of 2015 as his side have fallen from the top of the table to middle of the road mediocrity in the space of 12 months.

Club captain Mandanda was left stranded by then manager Marcelo Biesla's decision to leave the club following OM's first game, and has, along with the rest of the Phocéens, had to pick himself back up. Also crucially for the custodian, now in his 9th season on the Mediterranean coast, a number of key players who were close to the Zaire-born number 1, such as André-Pierre Gignac and the Ayew brothers, departed over the summer without any meaningful replacements being brought in.

The year was all set to be a big one for Mandanda; his side were top of the table at the turn of the year, and with only 18 months until EURO 2016 was to be held in his own country, the pressure was on to stake a claim in the side following a good year in goal for Les Blues, despite not taking to the field in the 2014 World Cup.

OM's form in 2015 began to crumble however with successive away defeats to relegation battling Montpellier and neighbours Nice, which shunted Bielsa's men off the top spot. However Mandanda himself was still turning in some top performances, almost becoming a weekly feature on the top saves highlight reel. The goalkeeper appeared to be getting only stronger, with his fantastic positioning, sharp reflexes, bravery and agility rescuing what was in truth a substandard Marseille defence.

Mandanda's control of his area and distribution helped turn defence into attack to spark off Marseille's occasional counters, and his ability with the ball at his feet fitted in perfectly with Biesla's philosophy of passing football. Marseille were not at the level of the progressing Lyon and Paris Saint Germain, and their long-anticipated title challenge had ran out of steam by April. However for Mandanda there still lay opportunity in the form of games for the national team. Unfortunately the goalkeeper failed to impress in his first opportunity of 2015, in one of his rare poor performances of the season as France went down 3-1 to Brazil in Saint-Denis.

Despite pulling off a number of excellent saves in the opening moments the ever-reliable 30-year-old was arguably responsible for the first two Seleção's goals; the first escaped through his sprawled legs into the back of the net, the second he probably should have done better to cover at the near post. It was a blow for Mandanda but with Hugo Lloris' wrist fracture in August he was given the chance to represent France again in November by coach Didier Deschamps, putting in a solid performance as Les Bleus overcame Denmark 2-1 in Copenhagen.

It has been a frustrating year on the whole for Mandanda however, who continues to excel for his club but coming up short for his country. The Marseille captain must find a way to take Tottenham goalkeeper Lloris' place ahead of next summer if he is finally to be first choice goalkeeper for France in a major tournament. On the wrong side of 30 now, time is beginning to run out.

On the domestic front a poor off-season for OM in the transfer market saw the loss of Gignac, André Ayew and Dimitri Payet amongst others, and following OM's defeat to Caen, manager Marcelo Bielsa sensationally walked out on the club after just over 12 months. Club captain Mandanda was forced to face the cameras following the decision, which many learned via social media, and showed his importance as a leader off the pitch: *"It is a massive shock. At Thursday's press conference he was positive, today it's come as a massive blow. He's someone whose really important for the club, for the team. We're very disappointed but respect the decision and we will carry on."*

OM began with one of their worst ever starts in the league, and were hovering above the relegation places. Impressive draws against Lyon (amid much fanfare) and away to PSG have shown what Le Phocèens are capable of, but an appalling home record (two wins in their first 10 home games) sees OM languishing in the middle of the table. Within those have been some outstanding performances from Marseille's "trusty" Steve however, in which the fan-favourite rescued his side. Some excellent stops away in that draw at the Parc de Princes enabled Mandanda to showed his worth in the big games, while crucial stops in games such as the away affair at Toulouse have secured much needed points for his side.

Now, with Marseille in the knockout stages of the Europa League, Mandanda's leadership will be more crucial than ever, should he resist the temptation of a Premier League relegation battle. Marseille will not stand in the way of their heroic servant should he decide to leave in January, with his contract up at the end of the season in the event of Champions League non-qualification.



NICOLAS DE PRÉVILLE

[63]
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Club: Stade de Reims

Position: Attacker

Born: Chambray-lès-Tours

Date of Birth: 08/01/1991

Age: 24

*"Let's not get ahead
of ourselves."*

– Nicolas De Préville

The beginning of Nicolas De Préville's career was hardly simple. After quitting school to pursue his career as a professional footballer, the Tours-born attacker, for the majority of his early years, languished in the amateur leagues in southern France. An initial ray of light came when he joined Caen's youth academy. However, he soon fell out with some of the training staff there - in their eyes he was not deemed able enough for the level - and returned back into the wilderness of amateur football in southern France.

De Préville has admitted himself though that during his time playing in the south in the more humble of French football divisions, on a social level he was able to reacquaint with old friends, live life as a normal 19 year old, in sharp contrast to the Anthony Martial's of this world, and get some direction of where he wanted to go, to figure out what life's purpose might be. A far cry from the pressure and competitiveness that he seemed to endure at Caen's youth academy, this rather modest and reflective time allowed De Préville to undergo some soul-searching to remove some of the burden and self-expectation that had been put on him at such a young age.

In 2007, he was spotted by Frédéric Arpinon and then signed into the ranks of Istres's youth setup and here he was quick to develop, notably the technical side to his game. Having been offered this opportunity, Arpinon essentially gave De Préville that chance that he was looking for. It was a lifeline and one that De Préville was now mentally and physically ready to embrace with both hands. By the 2011/12 season he was playing regularly in first-team, scoring a tidy 7 goals, in a competitive Ligue 2.

In the 2013 January transfer window, Stade de Reims snapped up 21-year-old De Préville from Istres for just £700,000. Unfortunately the start to his Reims career was not ideal as he suffered his fair share of injuries and did not necessarily always fit in to the fore of previous coaches Hubert Fournier's and Jean-Luc Vasseur's tactical decisions. But now that he is now injury-free and with a coach, Olivier Guégan, who clearly believes in his ability, life could not be going much better for the young attacker.

After 15 starts this season (17 appearances in total) he had scored four goals and had two assists to his name, making him the current top scorer at Reims and this season promises to be Nicolas De Préville's best ever as a professional football player. While centre forward is his self-proclaimed favoured position, something that is understandable as he has the physical presence of a target man, he has more often than not played on left flank in 2015/16 thus far.

This is because he has an incredible turn of pace tied to the fact that he is more than happy going up against defenders one on one or even two on one, not being afraid to negotiate multiple defenders: a good sign for a manager when picking a winger. He is naturally right-footed but loves coming off the left wing on to his favoured side to take a shot or to set up teammates by whipping in a cross in.

With David Ngog or Jordan Siebatcheu alternating for the central number 9 position under Guégan, De Préville is clearly enjoying his time as a left-winger and could quite possibly nail down this position for himself in the long-term. He is a 'right place, right time' kind of finisher, which of course lends itself more naturally to a number 9 role but he has proven that he can score goals outside the box too.

His goal against Rennes in late November 2015 will surely be a contender for goal of the 2015/16 season in Ligue 1, a beautiful dipping long range shot outside the box after beating three defenders. De Préville is a self-confessed fan of Thierry Henry and the Arsenal legend himself was very adept at coming off the wings to attack the heart of an opponent's defence.

After the first eight games of the 2015/16 Ligue 1 campaign, Reims lost just once and drew with the mighty PSG, an incredible start for the Champagne region side. More recent results may infer that it could be a season where Stade de Reims are constantly looking over their shoulder and battling against a slip towards the relegation zone. But les Rémois should not be fearful: with De Préville in this kind of form going into the new calendar year, surely his productivity on the pitch will mean that the club's status is preserved in the top-tier of French football.

De Préville has grafted at the low levels of French football. He has been a slow burner and has had obstacles to overcome, people to convince. But he has now realised his dream in playing in Ligue 1: it is nothing but a testament to De Préville's hunger and determination.



RÉMY VERCOUTRE

[62]
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Club: Stade Malherbe Caen

Position: Goalkeeper

Born: Grande-Synthe

Date of Birth: 26/06/1980

Age: 35

"We have done something that nobody thought we could do."

– Rémy Vercoutre

At 35 years of age, Rémy Vercoutre could be considered by some as an abnormal member of the GFFN 100 2015. However, the Caen goalkeeper's excellent performances over the course of the year for undoubtedly the most overachieving outfit in 2015 result in his inclusion within this publication.

When Caen returned to the French top flight in 2014, they were naturally amongst the favourites to be immediately relegated to Ligue 2, but due to some excellent recruitment (including that of Vercoutre) they exceeded everyone's expectations and managed to finish mid-table.

Many thought that SMC's excellent form at the back end of the 2014/15 campaign simply could not continue into a brand new season, especially when the Normandy outfit lost their star man, Ngolo Kanté, to Leicester during the summer transfer window. However, at the halfway point of the 2015/16 campaign, pundits who predicted a Caen-esque demise now have metaphorical custard pies smeared across their faces.

Vercoutre has been an ever-present throughout 2015 and Caen have rounded off the year by sitting in a highly-unanticipated, lofty fourth position in Ligue 1.

Rémy Vercoutre was born in the far north of France, in a suburb of Dunkerque in June 1980. Vercoutre's youth career was spent at local side US Dunkerque before he moved to the south of France to begin his professional story with Montpellier. He played several times for the 'B' team, before making the step up to the first team setup at MHSC. He went on to play 36 times for the Cote D'Azur club until 2002, where Vercoutre's impressive performances caught the attention of Olympique Lyonnais.

OL decided to make an offer for Vercoutre and he moved to the Stade Gerland for an undisclosed fee. The player's Lyon career was albeit a rather peculiar one.

He had several spells as the number 1 between the sticks over a period of 12 years, yet was never really given consistent backing nor was he ever considered dependable and good enough for the heralded number one goalkeeper's shirt at OL. This meant that despite being at the club for over a decade (except for a brief loan spell at Strasbourg), Vercoutre played far less than a 100 times for Lyon.

The move to Caen in 2014 was perfect for Vercoutre. He had in Caen a team that showed faith in him and moving back closer to his hometown can only have been a positive for the French stopper. He has been one of the first names on the Caen team sheet ever since.

2015 has been an excellent one for both Vercoutre and Caen. Rémy helped the Normandy club to a very good midtable finish, after many thought that they would be in a relegation battle to the end. This season has been even better, where 'smaller' teams such as Caen and Angers are defying all the odds by sitting in the European places at the turn of the year, in 4th and 3rd places respectively.

Vercoutre has been simply brilliant and reliable for Caen this year. This season in particular, the Frenchman stands testament to the mantra that goalkeepers' purple-patches really are in their mid-thirties, exemplified by his performances in the Caen goal. Vercoutre seems to have the confidence of his defence, and vice versa, which is a huge boost for a keeper who was never fully trusted, especially in big matches, at Lyon. The understanding between Vercoutre and centre backs Yahia and the impressive Da Silva have undoubtedly aided Caen's push to challenge for the European places.

Rémy's style is both helped and hindered by his size. Standing at 1.85m, Vercoutre is not especially tall for a goalkeeper and this means he has had to work very hard on his positioning to be able to command his goal in the necessary manner. He is a good shot stopper and also positive with his distribution.

The one negative aspect of his game is, unsurprisingly, is his lesser ability to command his area and come out and collect crosses. With Vercoutre being smaller than a lot of the strikers he is up against in Ligue 1, it immediately puts him at a natural disadvantage when up against them and it can make the former Lyon stopper reluctant to come out for crosses that he perhaps should. The rest of his game and his experienced 'father figure' demeanour more than compensate for this though. Vercoutre signed a new 2-year extension to his current contract with Caen in December of this year, meaning that he will be at the club until the summer of 2018.

I for one am glad that Vercoutre's performances in 2015 have been rewarded with a place in the GFFN 100. He needed the move to Caen to escape being second choice and a backup that nobody really believed in at Lyon, to becoming a permanent fixture in a flourishing Caen side. If Vercoutre and Caen continue their 2015 form into next year, there is no doubt that Vercoutre will be in the 2016 edition of the GFFN 100.



MARQUINHOS

[61]
v 30

Club: Paris Saint-Germain F.C.

Position: Defender

Born: São Paulo

Date of Birth: 14/05/1994

Age: 21

*"It is nice to know that
Manchester United
are interested in me."*

–Marquinhos

While controversy has swirled around Paris-Saint Germain's misuse of their young and homegrown players, particularly in defence, resulting in the departures of the French international Mamadou Sakho, Christophe Jallet, Lucas Digne and others, the situation of Marquinhos should be used to illustrate that this unfortunate situation is not necessarily unique to French players. Brought in from Roma at considerable cost (more than €30m, then the third-highest amount spent on a central defender in history) at a tender age, the Brazilian has, despite being involved for his country at all levels up to and including the senior team, continued to operate on the periphery in the French capital.

While the exclusion of the likes of Jallet and Sakho was down ostensibly to the outsize influence of Thiago Silva and wanting to play alongside fellow Portuguese speakers, Marquinhos lacks that as a reason for his exclusion, which can really be summed up as a lack of trust from Laurent Blanc.

Despite a tough set of fixtures in the Champions' League that would seemingly necessitate rotation, particularly for the now 31-year old Silva, Marquinhos has generally remained glued to the bench in the biggest matches, failing to start in the league against any of Monaco, Lyon or Marseille. While that trio of opponents have had inconsistent seasons to date, they have showed to be PSG's most formidable adversaries in the league over the past few seasons, necessitating a high level of respect from Blanc as regards his starting eleven.

Following on from a pattern that saw similar selection choices by Blanc in the biggest matches last season, one really has to wonder why Luiz is preferred to Marquinhos on a week-in, week-out basis. Last season, there was certainly some justification for including the floppy-haired former Benfica player over the youngster; especially in the first part of the season, the club were struggling for goals, drawing too many matches in the process, and Luiz, trained as a midfielder, has much more of an ability to make haring runs from central defence. While this ability can be a liability from a positional point of view, at the time, with Zlatan Ibrahimovic dealing with an injury and Edinson Cavani off the boil, his added dynamism from the back only made sense.

Despite not being picked as a centre-back last season, Marquinhos was selected for a run of fixtures at right-back, being preferred to Gregory van der Wiel during a period of absence for Serge Aurier. As a right-back, the Brazilian obviously lacks the pace and ability with the ball at his feet that the former Toulouse man has in abundance, but nevertheless he turned in an assured performance for the most part, getting forward at a rate that likely surprised many and showing himself to be a judicious, if not overly enthusiastic crosser of the ball.

In his brief spell in this position, Marquinhos demonstrated much of the same skill set that made him such a sought after prospect two summers ago, linking well with Marco Verratti in playing the ball on the ground and doing well to contain a succession of dangerous opponents through a stellar reading of the game.

Not the most gifted in terms of speed, the two keys to Marquinhos' potential success lie in a combination of positioning and elegance in the tackle. Like the best centre-backs, he is rarely afraid to make a tackle when necessary, but his positioning and general understanding of opposing attacks mean that he is rarely forced to do so, conceding fouls and being cautioned at very low rates on a per minute basis.

Calm and assured, it would seem that the youngster would be the perfect complement to the fiery Silva, pushing Luiz forward into midfield. That, however, would necessitate dropping Thiago Motta to the bench, and the veteran, despite almost leaving in the summer has been arguably the club's most influential player this season, his composure key to aiding the club in getting out of many a dangerous situation.

While the former Italy international turns 34 in the summer, it is difficult to blame Blanc for his current approach as regards his defensive core. Even with the noted foibles of Kevin Trapp this season, PSG still have the league's best defence, having conceded only nine goals at the winter break. While Luiz might be used more in midfield come next season if Motta departs or is simply used less due to his age, for the time being, Marquinhos simply has not done enough to justify his inclusion into Blanc's starting eleven on a regular basis.

With no real weaknesses to his game except for perhaps not being as proficient an aerial threat as Silva and Luiz, (but then, who is?) at 21, there is still plenty of time for the player's circumstances to change. For now, though, playing off the bench and impressing when he can seem to be his lot, and despite this being no small feat for a player of his age, right now, he still must be regarded as only a "potentially" great centre-back as opposed to a world class one.

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- 75 - Martin Braithwaite (Toulouse FC)
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- 65 - Andy Delort (Stade Malherbe Caen)
- 64 - Steve Mandanda (Olympique de Marseille)
- 63 - Nicolas De Préville (Stade de Reims)
- 62 - Rémy Vercoutre (Stade Malherbe Caen)
- 61 - Marquinhos (Paris Saint-Germain F.C.)



GIOVANNI SIO

[60]
*

Club: Stade Rennais F.C.

Position: Attacker

Born: Saint-Sébastien-sur-Loire

Date of Birth: 31/03/1989

Age: 26

*"Once a Corsican,
always a Corsican."*

– Giovanni Sio

2015 was a year of uncertainty for Giovanni Sio, with spells at three different clubs in two different countries, but it is beginning to look like the centre forward has finally found a home at Rennes.

Despite only being 26 years of age, Sio is a seasoned, well-travelled player who has experience of playing in La Liga, the Bundesliga, the Swiss Super League and, of course, Ligue 1, whilst on the international front, he has 14 caps for Ivory Coast and represented them at the 2014 FIFA World Cup.

He started his career in the Nantes youth teams, but moved to Real Sociedad before making a senior appearance for the French side. After failing to really establish himself in Spain, Sio made a much more successful move to Sion in Switzerland. This led to a transfer to Wolfsburg in 2012, but after just 18 months, in which he was loaned to Augsburg and Sochaux, the striker made his way back to the Swiss league with Basel.

During his time with Basel, Sio made 48 appearances in all competitions, netting 14 times, but fell out of favour in 2014, playing just nine times during the first half of the 2014/15 campaign. And it was in this situation that Sio found himself in at the start of 2015. Unhappy with his playing time at the Swiss club, the striker made a temporary loan move to Bastia in February, signing on until the end of the season. At this point in time, Bastia looked like they were in serious trouble. The Corsican club had recently sacked Claude Makelélé, replacing him with the inexperienced Ghislain Printant, and were in real danger at the bottom of the table. Sio's impact, however, was immediate, as he scored in three of his first five league appearances, helping Bastia sky rocket up the table to 13th.

His first goal for the club came in his second match, a 2-0 victory away at Nantes in mid-February. The striker opened the scoring, finishing off a counter-attack by lobbing the ball over the head of Nantes keeper Rémy Riou. A week later, Sio was again on target, as he equalised against Lille, this time in front of Bastia's home fans. The Ivorian got his head on the end of a Gaël Danic cross and left Vincent Enyeama stranded. Bastia would go on to win the match 2-1, with Floyd Ayité scoring the winner. And Sio went on to score a winner of his own two games later, in a 2-1 victory over Nice. With the game locked at 1-1, Sio latched onto a through ball, raced down on goal and kept his cool to slot the ball past the goalkeeper and into the net. Two more goals followed in April, albeit in less successful circumstances. Sio scored Bastia's only goals as they were defeated 3-1 away at Montpellier and 2-1 at home against Reims.

Overall though, Sio's loan spell at Bastia was a huge success and he played a vital role in their rise from a potential relegation battle to their eventual 11th placed finish. Understandably, Sio was reluctant to go back to warming Basel's bench, so in June, he agreed a permanent move to another Ligue 1 outfit, Rennes.

And he hit the ground running at the start of this campaign, scoring against Bastia of all clubs on the opening weekend. Sio gave his new side the lead after 39 minutes at the Stade Armand Cesari, heading in Ludovic Baal's cross from close range. However, that was as good as it got for the striker, as Bastia went on to win 2-1 with Sio also being booked in the last minute.

Better things were to come though, as Sio hit the back of the net in consecutive league matches between August and September. He netted in a 3-1 home win over Toulouse, scoring his side's third goal in the 90th minute to wrap up all three points. Paul-Georges Ntep did brilliantly on the wing, beating his marker and crossing low into the box for Sio to tap in. And after a brief international break, Sio was back on the score sheet in Rennes' next outing, away at Nantes. It was another last minute goal for the forward, who broke clear of the defence and calmly put the ball beyond the keeper to give his side a 2-0 lead. It was also Sio's second goal of the calendar year against the club at which he started his career. Sio's fourth goal of the campaign, and final goal of 2015, came at the end of September, away against Gazelec Ajaccio in a 1-1 draw. Once again, the forward struck extremely late on, finishing from close range to equalise for Rennes and deny the hosts their first win of the season.

Sio has not scored since, but, having appeared in all but two of his side's league fixtures this season, it is clear that the forward has a big role to play in this Rennes team and is in a much better position than he was this time last year in Switzerland.

His goal threat is obvious; the forward has a knack of being in the right place at the right time and, perhaps even more importantly, he has the habit of scoring late on. Whether it is a last minute winner, an equaliser or even just a consolation, Sio has proven time and time again over the last year that he can be counted on when his side are in desperate need of a goal.

The only thing left for Sio to do now is to really settle down, spend three or four seasons at the same club and prove his quality over an extended period of time. He will be hoping that Rennes is just that club.



CLÉMENT MAURY

[59]
*

Club: Gazélec Ajaccio

Position: Goalkeeper

Born: Aurillac

Date of Birth: 20/11/1985

Age: 30

*"If you gave me the choice,
I would prefer to play out-
field than as a goalkeeper."*

– Clément Maury

2015 not only capped the remarkable rise of Gazélec Ajaccio, who reached the top flight of French football for the very first time in their history, but also of their goalkeeper Clément Maury, who like his club, has climbed the national league pyramid from the very bottom as well.

The Frenchman, now 30 years of age, has spent the majority of his career journeying around the lower leagues, starting out with Châteauroux. He was a regular for their reserve team, but never managed to make a senior appearance for the club.

When they decided not to offer him a new contract in 2005, and after several rejections from other professional clubs, the goalkeeper dropped down to the Championnat de France Amateur (CFA), the fourth tier in France, and signed with Brive. It was at Brive that Maury would taste his first experience of first team football, playing 70 times for the club over the course of two seasons.

From there, Maury would drop down another division and move on to Toulouse Fontaines, where he was a regular feature in the side that would go on to win promotion to the CFA in 2009. The year after, Maury was on the move once again, this time to his current club Gazélec Ajaccio, who at the time had also just won promotion to the French fourth division.

But after never really settling at his three previous clubs, Maury found a true home at the Stade Ange-Casanova, and it was here that his remarkable rise to the top would begin.

Indeed, Maury had joined the club on the back of their promotion to the CFA, and in his very first season at Gazélec, they would go on to win the league. The goalkeeper became their number one choice straight after joining and played a pivotal role in their championship win.

And things would only get better for Gazélec and Maury, as they went on to achieve yet another promotion the following year, finishing third in the Championnat National and thus rising to Ligue 2 for the very first time in the club's history.

Ultimately though, the club if anything gained promotion too early, as they clearly were not ready for the demands of the professional league and ended the 2012/13 campaign in 20th, dropping back down to the third tier.

In most cases such as these, the over-achieving club turns out to be just a flash in the pan and is never heard from again, but Gazélec proved to be the complete opposite. They went on to be promoted back to Ligue 2 at the first time of asking, but were once again tipped for immediate relegation by just about everyone.

Gazélec, however, were having none of it and took the second division by storm, going on to finish the 2014/15 campaign as runners up and thus gaining promotion to Ligue 1. It was the summit of their incredible rise to the top, with the team defying their almost non-existent budget and poor facilities. Their success was built on excellent management and collective team performances and Maury was once again crucial throughout.

Maury was an almost ever-present that season, missing just three of the club's 38 league games, keeping 15 clean sheets in the process. It was in games with fellow promotion rivals that the goalkeeper really shone, such as when he shut out Sochaux in April, and he also played a big part in turning the Stade Ange-Casanova into a fortress, with 10 of his 15 clean sheets coming on home turf.

No-one could deny that Gazélec Ajaccio deserved their place in the top division after five promotions in six years, and Maury contributed to all but the first of them.

This season has been tough for the Ligue 1 new boys, there is no doubt about that, and after watching their opening game of the season, a goalless draw at fellow newcomers Troyes, from the bench, Maury was handed his first ever top-flight appearance away against champions PSG.

It could not possibly have been a tougher start for the goalkeeper, who performed admirably, but could not prevent Gazélec losing 2-0.

And that was the story of Maury's season up until mid-October; doing his best, performing miracles at times, but ultimately ending on the losing side.

Mid-October was when it all changed though; as Gazélec would go on to win their first match of the season, 3-1 at home against Nice. And to top it off for Maury, he also grabbed an assist in the match, as his long punt up-field led to Gregory Pujol's goal within the opening seconds.

And the week after, the keeper would go on to claim his first, and so far only, clean sheet of the campaign, in a 2-0 victory at home against Bordeaux. Since then, Gazélec have continued to climb the table, rising from bottom to 15th, and at the time of writing are one of the league's form teams.

On the pitch, Maury is absolutely vital to Gazélec's success. With such a low budget, the club needs to get best out of every player and Maury certainly helps in that regard, marshalling his defence and barking instructions from the back.

He is also a remarkable reader of the game; he saves shots that he really has no right to reach simply because of his excellent positioning. As such, he has saved his team on many occasions, not just in 2015, but ever since joining the club five seasons ago.

And off the pitch, the goalkeeper is just as impressive; he holds a management degree that he studied for during his time in the amateur leagues.

Overall, it has been nothing short of a remarkable rise for Gazélec and their goalkeeper, and no matter where they find themselves come May, both the club and Maury end 2015 on top of the world.



NICOLAS BENEZET

[58]
*

Club: En Avant de Guingamp

Position: Midfielder

Born: Montpellier

Date of Birth: 24/02/1991

Age: 24

"I want to go back to a time where I only had to worry about my Pokémon evolving..."

– Nicolas Benezet

Nicolas Benezet's performances over the last calendar year have rightfully earned him a place in the GFFN 100, but if there were an award for worst ending to 2015 then the young Frenchman would probably take it. With his side Guingamp struggling in Ligue 1 heading into December, they were plunged into further worries after losing 1-0 to Bordeaux. After the match, a clearly frustrated Benezet said his side had *"failed to make the most of the few counter-attacks we had"* and set his eyes firmly on the next game against Montpellier. Sloan Privat gave visitors Guingamp the lead, but a fired up Benezet earned two yellow cards in quick succession and Guingamp were reduced to 10 men. They would go on to lose the match 2-1. It was a sign that, despite a very promising calendar year of 2015, the Frenchman still has a lot to learn.

Nicolas Benezet is an attacking midfielder, who can play on either wing or as a number 10 behind the striker. The 24 year old has had the rare honour of playing for three different Ligue 1 clubs this season, moving from Evian to Caen in January and then from Caen to Guingamp in the summer. During the second half of last season, Benezet only ended up playing 12 Ligue 1 games for Caen, but was influential in helping the side stay up, with Caen eventually finishing 13th and nine points clear of the relegation zone.

For Caen, Benezet managed to produce some wonderful individual moments. He managed four goals in his 12 games, but each of them seemed to have a big impact on the game they were scored in. For sure his most memorable goal came against Marseille in week 27 of the 2014/15 season. Marseille had taken a 2-0 lead over visitors Caen, and a comeback against Bielsa's side looked unlikely. However, two Caen goals in quick succession levelled the score and set the game up for a grandstand finish. In the 87th minute, Benezet produced a moment of magic, as he picked the ball up on the left wing, cut inside on his right foot and unleashed a spectacular shot into the top corner past a helpless Mandanda to complete Caen's remarkable comeback. It was certainly one of the high points of Benezet's brief time with Caen.

It seems Benezet enjoys the challenge of taking on the 'big' teams in Ligue 1, and probably his best performance in a Caen shirt came against Lyon in May of 2015, with Benezet's double inspiring Caen to a 3-0 drubbing of the high-flying Lyon. The Frenchman's first goal was from a cross that went past Lopes untouched, and the second was another spectacular effort, where he took on two Lyon defenders and sent a shot flying past Lopes into the top corner. Overall, especially considering the moments of magic he produced, Benezet's short stint at Caen was a success.

Over the summer, Benezet moved to Guingamp in the hope of joining a team that would challenge for places a little higher up the Ligue 1 table. In fact, quite the opposite happened: Benezet's old side Caen currently sit 4th in the Ligue 1 table, while Guingamp are a lowly 18th and stuck in the relegation zone. However, that cannot really be put down to any lack of contribution from Nicolas Benezet, who if anything seems to have improved from his time at Caen last season. To illustrate this, Benezet created 12 goal-scoring chances for teammates at Caen, whilst creating 31 chances at Guingamp this season in only a few more games.

In addition, he has maintained his rather entertaining trait of producing his best performances against big clubs. This season, he scored from 25 yards against Marseille, with a strike from his weaker left foot beating Mandanda in goal which helped Guingamp to a 2-0 home win in probably their best result of the season. He also had a stunning game in Guingamp's 3-3 draw against AS Monaco, in which he was directly involved in all three of EAG's goals. For Guingamp's first goal his corner was met by Privat who headed home from close range, and Benezet turned from provider to goal scorer when he headed in Briand's cross for Guingamp's second. Benezet then earned Guingamp a point late on in the game when his cross-shot fooled Lopes and went in at the near post to draw his side level at 3-3.

Benezet possesses many different strengths to his game. His pace and trickery cause many defenders problems, and as we have seen he is getting much better at creating chances for teammates. Also, he has a strong weak foot, as evidenced by his long range goal against Marseille this season and, at just 24 years of age, he has plenty of time to reach his full potential.

If you could fault Benezet, it would be that his contributions all tend to come in short periods over a run of few games, rather than consistently throughout the season. As an example, three of the four goals that he scored for Caen, as well as his only assist, all came in the space of three consecutive games. If he could improve his consistency, he could raise his game to the next level.

Overall, 2015 has been a year of success for Nicolas Benezet. He has scored plenty of important goals in big games, and will need to continue to do that for Guingamp this season if they are to climb out of the relegation battle they currently find themselves in. It is a shame that the red card against Montpellier ends the year on a bit of a sour note, but it is now up to Benezet to prove that it was just down to a momentary lack of concentration rather than a deeper underlying problem when he steps back onto the pitch in 2016.



NAMPALYS MENDY

[57]
v 14

Club: OGC Nice

Position: Midfielder

Born: La Seyne-sur-Mer

Date of Birth: 23/06/1992

Age: 23

"Our game is based on runs, on movement, on dynamic play."

– Nampalys Mendy

One of Ligue 1's brightest young stars is OGC Nice's Nampalys Mendy, who has had a wonderful calendar year in which he has shown real development and progression as he looks to raise his game to the highest level. At just 23 years of age, Mendy is actually one of the older members in a youthful OGC Nice setup, but that responsibility has not prevented him from putting in performances that have forced critics and fans alike to notice him. One of a new breed of defensive midfielders who are physically small but great on the ball, Mendy has all the attributes required to become one of French football's biggest stars.

Mendy's team, OGC Nice, have had a calendar year in which they have gone from strength to strength, improving throughout the 12 months to an extent to which now puts them as one of the league's top teams. Having finished the 2014/15 season in 11th place, by no means a disaster but for a club of high ambition not where they want to be, Nice looked at the 2015/16 season as the campaign where they might push themselves to the next level. They have done exactly that this season, as they sit pretty in 5th place in the table, just three points behind second placed AS Monaco, and with the second best attacking record in the league after runaway leaders PSG.

Nampalys Mendy has been a crucial part of OGC Nice's successes of the last 12 months. He played the full 90 minutes in 36 of the club's 38 Ligue 1 games last season, and in all 19 of the club's league games this season, meaning he is one of the few players who has played every minute of every game. He has also captained the side in 23 of those league games over the last season and a half, showing tremendous leadership skills for someone of such tender years. Nice also seem to have a considerably better defensive record when the Frenchman is captain; they have conceded 0.75 goals per game when Mendy has captained the side, compared to 1.55 when he has not.

As we mentioned before, Mendy is not your typical type of defensive midfielder. If you expect him to be someone who is physically intimidating and wins all the challenges in the air, then you will be disappointed. But Mendy is part of what seems to be a new class of defensive midfielder, those who are of a smaller physical stature, but are fantastic on the ball, without of course shying away from any defensive duties. Standing at 1.68m, Mendy will likely be one of the smallest players on the pitch, very much in the mould of a Marco Verratti of PSG or Ngolo Kanté of Leicester City, but these types of players have strengths that many defensive midfielders do not.

The first of these is an expert ability on the ball. It is very rare to see Mendy misplace a pass, as he is very clever in his selection of pass and has the technique to execute it effectively. As a result, he has maintained a very impressive 92% pass success rate in Ligue 1 so far this season, a considerable improvement from the 84% he had last season. In addition, he does not tend to make simple passes back to his defenders, he looks up the field to try and drive his side towards the opposition goal. This is evidenced by the fact that 68% of the passes he has made this season have been forward passes. His ability on the ball allows him to dictate the pace of the game very effectively from his midfield berth, and is one of the many reasons why Nice are doing so well so far this season.

That is not to suggest, though, that Mendy neglects his defensive duties, which are his primary goals as a defensive midfielder. This season, he averages three defensive actions per game, and is yet to make a defensive error that has led to a goal. However, whilst these statistics are good, they are not quite at the level of the top defensive players in the league. If Mendy is able to improve his game so that he contributes a little more to the side defensively, his proficiency on the ball will allow him to really stand out amongst midfielder plying their trade in France.

What we also cannot forget when analysing Nampalys Mendy is that he is only 23, although it is very easy to forget that if you look at the maturity of his performances. At 23 years of age, the fact that he has captained his side Nice so many times over the last 12 months shows what kind of character he is. He is a player who will give his all out on the pitch, and his energy and enthusiasm will inspire others to do the same, especially when he is the captain of the side. Such a wise head on young shoulders will stand Mendy in fantastic stead for the rest of his career; it is very useful to already have the experience and pressure of captaining a side at a young age.

Mendy has already represented France at every level from Under 17 to Under 21 and, if he continues to improve and grow as a footballer as he has done over the course of the last 12 months, it could only be a matter of time before he earns that all important first cap for Les Bleus. Mendy's career is on the right path: he is playing consistently for one of Ligue 1's most in form sides, even captaining the side many times, and his game is improving every week. Having enjoyed success both individually and as part of the OGC Nice team so far this season, Mendy will be enjoying his winter break and, no doubt, be looking forward to another 12 months of success in 2016.



FLOYD AYITÉ

[56]
^16

Club: SC Bastia

Position: Attacker

Born: Bordeaux

Date of Birth: 15/12/1988

Age: 27

"We need to show desire."

– Floyd Ayité

Bastia's form was extremely up and down during 2015, but Floyd Ayité provided a constant source of positivity for the Corsican club's fans. The winger managed to play with genuine enthusiasm even during Bastia's rough patches and over the course of the year became one of the first names on head coach Ghislain Printant's team sheet.

The 27-year-old started his career at hometown club Bordeaux, but after loan spells at Angers and Nancy, left for Reims in 2011 after making just eight appearances in all competitions for Les Girondins. After slowly working his way into the Reims team, Ayité enjoyed a highly successful 2013, scoring five times in the league, but a series of poor performances followed the year after and as a result, Ayité lost his place in the starting eleven.

It was little surprise then that Reims decided not to renew the Togolese winger's contract when it ran out in July 2014, with Ayité subsequently joining Bastia on a free transfer. He became one of 13 players that Claude Makelélé signed after taking charge of the club earlier that summer.

Over the course of his first campaign with Bastia, Ayité made 33 appearances and scored nine goals, six of which came in 2015.

He got the year off to the perfect start, scoring both of Bastia's goals in a 2-0 win over Lille in the first round of the Coupe de France. His first was far from spectacular, but it was caused entirely by Ayité's tenacious closing down of the opposition. The winger chased down a Lille back pass in the fifth minute, which led to goalkeeper Steeve Elana firing his clearance straight into the Bastia man, and the ricochet flew into the net.

His second of the night came 20 minutes later. Ayité was played clean through, one on one with Elana and the winger kept his cool to fire over the diving keeper and into the top corner. It was a match-winning performance from Ayité and the best possible start to the new year.

His form continued on into February, when he scored in consecutive league matches, against Nantes and, once again, Lille. His goal against Nantes was, truthfully, down to extremely bad defending, as Ayité was allowed to run freely in the final third of the pitch, before firing a shot past the keeper from just outside the box.

His goal against Lille, however, was far more impressive. Ayité provided the perfect end to a Bastia counter attack, receiving the ball and letting fly from outside the area. His shot was unstoppable, flying past Vincent Enyeama and into the top corner. The goal also turned out to be the match winner, as Bastia won 2-1.

It was not until May that Ayité scored again, but he bagged another two vital goals in the final month of the campaign, scoring the only goal in a victory over St Etienne and the equaliser in a 1-1 draw with Caen.

After flirting with relegation for a long period of the 2014/15 campaign, Ayité played a crucial role in Bastia's revival. Many of his goals directly influenced the result of the game and Bastia certainly would not have finished as high as 11th without the efforts of the winger.

Ayité started this season in a similar vein of form, netting in Bastia's opening two league games. In their first match, at home against Rennes, Ayité equalised after Rennes had taken the lead in the first half. It was another stunning finish from the winger, whose acrobatic volley hit the underside of the crossbar and before going in.

One week later, Ayité was again on the score sheet, this time away at Lorient. The Togo international scored after the four minutes, latching on to a through ball, before brilliantly escaping the challenges of two Lorient defenders, rounding the goalkeeper and swivelling to fire the ball into the net. It was a goal worthy of all three points, but Lorient snatched an injury time equaliser thanks to a Benjamin Moukandjo penalty.

Ayité's form has dropped off slightly since; those two goals remain his only strikes so far this campaign, but he did manage to claim three assists during the run up to the winter break.

Meanwhile, on the international scene, Ayité made three appearances for Togo during 2015, scoring in their 2-0 African Cup of Nations qualification victory over Djibouti in September. He now has a total of 20 caps for his country.

On the pitch, Ayité is capable of playing in a number of different attacking positions, including all across the front three. Since Ghislain Printant took over at Bastia, Ayité has been utilised on both the left and right wings, as well as up front on a few occasions. It is no secret that he is most comfortable on the left; his pace and trickery make him extremely hard to stop once he gets going. Plus, in this position, he is able to pick up the ball, drift into more central positions and fire long range efforts at goal.

Indeed, Ayité's long shots are one of his strongest features; as his high percentage of goals scored from outside the box will attest.

One area in which the winger could improve is his ability to stay onside. His attacking instincts naturally mean he will be caught offside more often than most, simply because of the high number of runs he makes, but Ayité can sometimes stray needlessly and frustrate the Bastia faithful as a result. If he can time his runs a bit better, then his goal tally could increase exponentially.

Overall, though, Ayité has proven himself to be a deadly weapon at times and it is now just a case of continuing to improve. At 27 years of age, a big money move may just be beyond the winger, but there is no reason why he can't truly establish himself as Bastia's main man in the years to come.



NICOLAS N'KOULOU

[55]
v 9

Club: Olympique de Marseille

Position: Defender

Born: Yaoundé

Date of Birth: 27/03/1990

Age: 25

*"I am not going to
speak about my future."*

– Nicolas N'Koulou

A quick eye on the last two profiles of Nicolas N’Koulou in the GFFN 100 publications of 2013 and 2014 shows the Cameroonian defender profiled negatively, then positively, and then negatively again, with the underlining statement that the Marseille defender could always do better. Should always do better in fact, given his previous potential and frustrating fact that when he is on form, there are few better defenders in Europe let alone France.

And at the start of 2015, Marcelo Bielsa’s Marseille sat pretty at the top of the Ligue 1 table and the defender’s plaudits continued to pour in after forming a surprisingly formidable partnership with the previously maligned Jérémy Morel. The platform was set for a big season. OM were within shot of the title, and at the very least odds-on favourites to take a spot in the Champions’ League.

But for Nicolas N’Koulou, duty for his country at the Africa Cup of Nations in Equatorial Guinea was the first priority. And so, Marseille were without their key defender for at least a month. In Africa, N’Koulou and his pack of Indomitable Lions were dumped out of the competition at the first hurdle having failed to beat Guinea & Mali before suffering defeat to Ivory Coast. A quick return to Marseille ensued, with the belief that his swift appearance would help OM in their title bid. They had after all, lost twice in his absence.

But disaster struck. N’Koulou would be ruled out for a significant period following his return to Stade Vélodrome. A knee injury, received while on international duty had put paid to any return. N’Koulou would go on to miss seven games, with OM struggling in his absence. Marcelo Bielsa’s table-toppers had won only twice as they relinquished their spot at the summit, going down to third behind PSG & Lyon, but importantly - were still within touching distance.

So, in the first quarter of the year, N’Koulou had managed one game in Marseille colours. A frenetic, yet embarrassing exit to fourth-tier Grenoble in the Coupe de France. OM had struggled throughout the match in the bitterly cold Alps, but were ahead in extra-time before Salim Bengriba got the better of poor defending, of which N’Koulou was also culpable to send the game into extra-time. As these cup fixtures go, a shock was confirmed when OM departed having lost 5-4 in the shootout.

So, fast-forward to April. N’Koulou had returned just before the eagerly-anticipated Clasico fixture against Paris Saint-Germain. Marseille were only four points behind, but the return of their key defender had bolstered hopes. In the end, Bielsa named the Cameroonian defender on the bench as OM tilted 3-2. So the title was perhaps slipping away, but surely OM could hold on to their Champions’ League spot? After all, they had not been outside of the top three since September 2014.

The answer was no. A resounding no. For when N’Koulou had returned and taken his place in the squad ahead of makeshift centre-back Rod Fanni and young pretenders in Baptiste Aloé and Stephane Sparagna, the team and defending got considerably worse. In his first Ligue 1 game for more than three months, he failed to intercept a cross to Cédric Yambéré, whose emphatic finish condemned OM to defeat.

To Nantes, where OM’s fate was decided by a pathetic mistake to allow Nantes to score. N’Koulou was not party to the error in this scenario, but his colleagues in defence were indicative of just how bad the OM defence was. Marseille were slipping & fast.

But the real comical low point was in the home game against Lorient. Bullied by former team-mate Jordan Ayew, questions were raised as to whether the defender was fit at all following his performance. Singled out as the worst player on the pitch that night as OM tilted 5-3 against the side fighting relegation - it seemed his credibility, and that of Marseille’s European hopes crashed and burned.

There was an upturn in fortunes in May, as Marseille rallied, but they finished fourth outside of the coveted UCL spots.

For N’Koulou, the question was now to stay or go? Lyon had offered €7m to test OM’s resolve for a player with, for all of his inconsistencies, was one of the stronger Ligue 1 defenders in recent years. But the dilemma was Marseille’s. Were they going to cash in on a player that had failed to ignite in 2015 thus far, and was approaching the final year of his contract? Or were they going to keep him? In light of the eight other first-team departures OM suffered this summer, the club thought it best to keep their defender for a fifth season.

So N’Koulou did not get his move to Lyon, with former defensive partner Jérémy Morel instead going north to the Rhone club. OM put the issue to bed, and challenged the centre-back to show his quality as a justification for their decision.

The jury remains out for that one, as the inconsistencies remain. He was suspended for Marcelo Bielsa's final game as OM coach, but returned to steady the ship somewhat. However, poor mistakes in a defeat to Angers coupled with OM's low league standing led to questions in whether it was a good decision to keep him?

As 2015 comes to an end, N'Koulou has once again highlighted what he is capable of doing, putting in a strong showing as OM uncharacteristically ground out 1-0 wins over tough sides in St Étienne & Rennes away from home.

2016 will almost certainly see him leave Marseille on a free transfer, with his contract ending. The onus on him is to put himself firmly in the shop window and cut out the inconsistencies after a negative year.



SÉBASTIEN SQUILLACI

[54]
^17

Club: SC Bastia

Position: Defender

Born: Toulon

Date of Birth: 11/08/1980

Age: 35

*"At SC Bastia I have
found joy again."*

– Sébastien Squillaci

Making the GFFN 100 for the second consecutive year is a man who defines redemption: Sébastien Squillaci. After a torrid spell in England with one of the Premier League's biggest sides Arsenal, Squillaci's reputation was tainted, both in France and abroad. When he moved on from Arsenal, many feared his career to be over and, when he joined Bastia in the summer of 2013 at the age of 33, few expected him to be a success at the club. The fact that he made this list last season is a sign that he proved his doubters wrong, and the fact that he makes the list once again this year confirms that the Frenchman is still able to play at a consistently high level in French football.

Squillaci's transfer to Bastia was to signal a rebirth in his footballing career. He wanted to move on from his time at Arsenal, where consistent mistakes at the back meant he was both under pressure in the media and not trusted by the Arsenal fans. In 2015, Squillaci went on record about his time at Arsenal, saying his tough final season at the club, where mistakes on the pitch came to a head, was 'difficult to take.' It must have been a rather demoralising experience, and it required a man of great character to come back from that situation and find success back in his home country with SC Bastia.

2015 has been a year of stability for SC Bastia. The club avoided relegation comfortably in the 2014/15 season, eventually finishing 12th in the league whilst maintaining the 11th best defensive record in the top flight. If they could repeat that performance this season, it would help cement SC Bastia as a consistent Ligue 1 side, and allow them to go on to the next stage and begin to look higher up the table. Last season, the club also found success in the Coupe de la Ligue, in which they beat the likes of Caen, Rennes and Monaco on the way to the final against PSG, which was to be the lowest point in Sébastien Squillaci's calendar year of 2015...

The 35-year-old Frenchman had been crucial in ensuring that Bastia made the final of the Coupe de la Ligue. Despite missing the first two rounds, home wins against AJ Auxerre and SM Caen, Squillaci came in for the quarter-final, when Bastia hosted fellow Ligue 1 side Rennes. Squillaci grabbed a goal in a 3-1 win, helping his side reach the semi-final, where they were to travel to Monaco, a team for which Squillaci had played 140 games earlier in his career. In Monaco, Bastia and Squillaci produced one of their best performances of the season, holding Monaco to a draw after extra-time and winning 7-6 on penalties to progress through to the final.

The final against PSG was always going to be a big challenge for Bastia, and they needed all of their players to have a very good game to have a chance. Unfortunately for Bastia, Squillaci had quite the opposite of a very good game. Just 20 minutes into the final, the Frenchman was given a straight red card, effectively ending his team's hopes of silverware. PSG went on to win the game at a canter, with the final score 4-0 to the side from the capital. It was the blip in an otherwise impressive 2015 for Squillaci.

The 2014/15 campaign showed very clearly how much the Bastia defence now relied upon Sébastien Squillaci. In the 25 league games he played, Bastia only lost seven, compared to eight losses in just the 13 league games that he missed through injury. His presence, leadership and individual qualities mean he is sorely missed at the back when he is unavailable for selection, which unfortunately happens more often than he would like as a result of his age.

So how has Squillaci managed to be so successful at Bastia? He has never been the quickest, and at 35 and counting he is not going to get any quicker, so he has to rely on different attributes in his game to be an effective defender. The first of those is his ability in the air, which has always been one of his strongest assets. He is effective in both boxes, clearing crosses in from own area and heading them in at the other end. The two goals he has scored this season are evidence of the fact that he gives Bastia a real attacking threat from set pieces.

Squillaci also uses all the experience that he has gained in his career, both positive and negative, to good effect on the field. He is a leader in defence, never afraid to tell his teammates where they should be and what they should be doing, and this experience also allows him to be a better defender individually as well. To avoid having to run and chase strikers too much, Squillaci must be in the right position at all times, and over 2015 he has largely been successful at this, averaging 10 defensive actions per game this season.

We know Squillaci is not afraid to talk to his teammates on the pitch, but recently it was revealed he quite likes talking to opposition players also. Earlier this season, after PSG travelled to Bastia, Squillaci allegedly told striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic "You are s***, you are not a great player, you have no respect for others," despite the Swede scoring both goals in a 2-0 PSG win!

Overall, Sébastien Squillaci has continued his rebirth in French football with great effect over the last 12 months. At 35 years of age, he may not have many seasons left in his career, but if 2015 is anything to go by, he is making the most of what he has left.



DAVID LUIZ

[53]
^10

Club: Paris Saint-Germain F.C.

Position: Defender

Born: Diadema

Date of Birth: 22/04/1987

Age: 28

"This is my home now."

– David Luiz

After an abysmal World Cup in 2014, the 2014/15 season, and to some extent the current one, have been about repairing David Luiz's reputation as one of the top defenders currently playing in Europe. Indeed, his form for PSG has aided the club to win all the available French competitions in 2015 and is a reason behind PSG's success so far this campaign. Nevertheless, it would be untrue to say that Luiz has been able to dispel all doubt possessed by pundits concerning his ability, occasionally reminding us of his lack of concentration and position which was so evident during his time in the Premier League.

Having signed for PSG in 2014, his first campaign possessed some lows, but mainly highs. The Brazilian remained a mainstay in the side throughout despite competition from the likes of Marquinhos, ending the season having played 45 games. However, conceding 33 goals in the league will be something that will not have pleased Laurent Blanc, with three teams possessing better defensive records. Arguably, therefore, it was the attackers and not the defence that led PSG's success last season.

Nevertheless, it does seem harsh to pass judgement on Luiz's season merely due to the amount of goals his whole defensive line shipped last campaign. Indeed, Luiz did show himself to be one of the best in Ligue 1 and entirely capable of playing alongside the likes of Thiago Silva, his international counterpart.

Despite occasionally showing some signs of wavering, Luiz's overall positioning and concentration throughout the whole ninety minutes does appear to have improved since his big money move from Chelsea. His recent outing against Shakhtar Donetsk demonstrated this with the player being exemplary throughout, demonstrating a real commanding and assured presence at the heart of the PSG back line.

Indeed, Luiz, as well as doing so to some extent at Chelsea, has shown his class at the highest European level. Perhaps his favourite game of 2015 would have come on his return to Stamford Bridge, in a 2-2 draw which saw the Brazilian and his teammates knock his former side out of the Champions League despite being a man short for most of the game. PSG did concede two, but down to ten men, Luiz showed a real marshalling presence in order to make sure no more goals were conceded.

Not only this, but he scored a vital header in order to take the game to extra time, emphasising his ability in both boxes. Although the French side failed with their ultimate aim of winning the competition, Luiz, alongside the likes of Thiago Silva, allow PSG to be highly competitive and hopeful of progressing further when their quest returns in the New Year.

As mentioned above, Luiz is a threat in both boxes, and it has to be concluded that he is one of the more threatening defenders going forward in Europe. Not only is the 28 year old a challenge for opposition defences in the air, but he is also one from almost all areas in the attacking third. As displayed at Chelsea, the Brazilian has a rocket shot from distance as well as the ability to hit a fine free-kick. With the attacking options as they are at PSG, his opportunity to do so has perhaps been more limited, but Luiz has had the occasional chance, and his return of six goals in sixty one games for PSG in all competitions reflects his ability going forward which is unrivalled by any of his fellow defensive teammates.

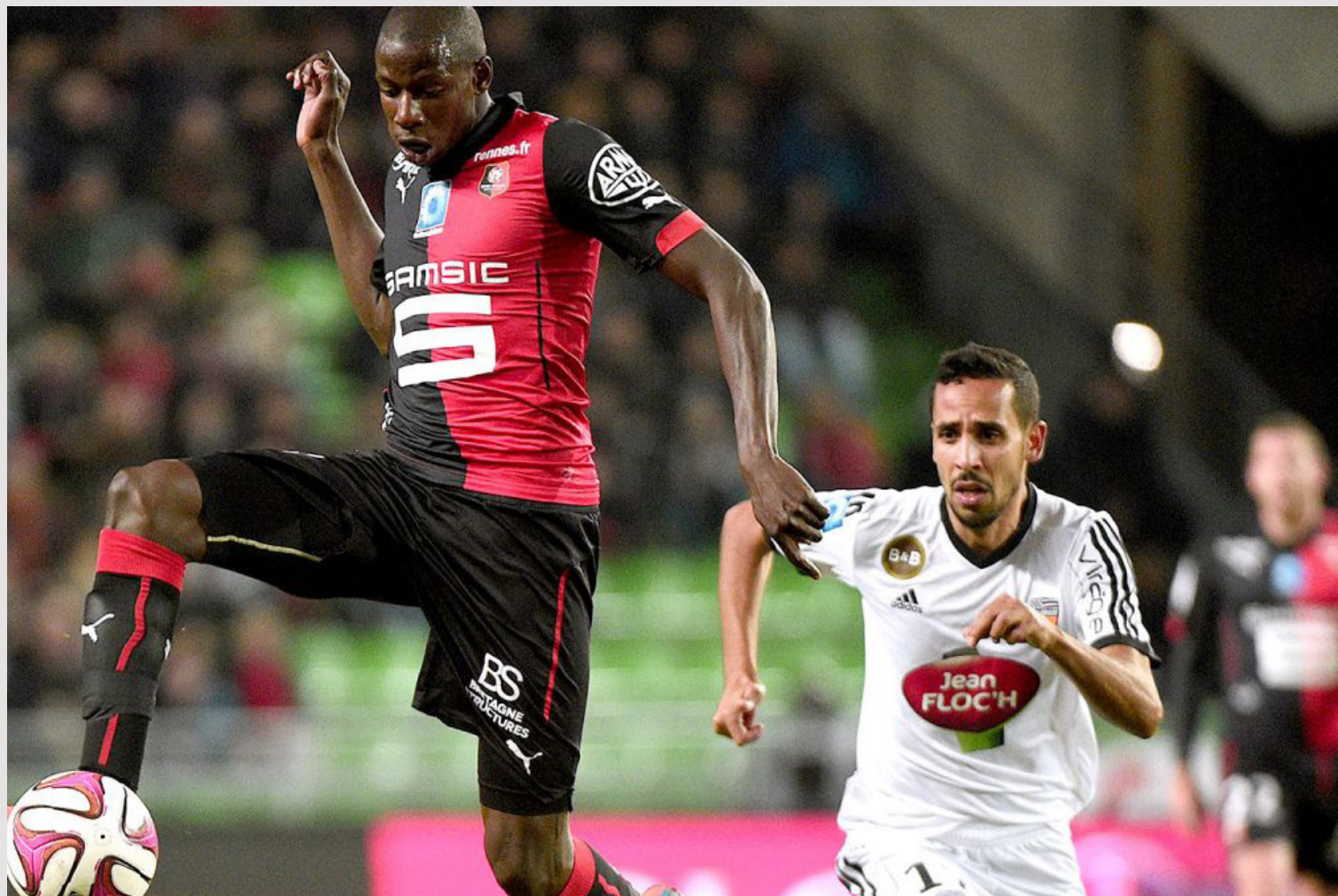
In truth, despite PSG's fine form, on a personal level, Luiz has failed to get his season properly going. Indeed, a few different injuries have stopped the defender from making performances consistently in the first team. The player has already missed eight games through injury and been benched for another three as he struggles to get into full flow.

Perhaps the fact that PSG have won all but two and have not lost in his absence suggests that they by no means rely on Luiz's presence, but in fairness probably acts to highlight, not only their strength in depth, but the weakness of their competition in the French league.

Despite successes for his club, 2015 has been another year to forget on an international stage for David Luiz. The player has once again underperformed, following that disastrous defeat to Germany in 2014, raising further doubts about his position as a first team player for his country.

In the 2015 Copa America, despite progressing through the group stage as a starter for his country, Luiz was dropped as his country were dumped out to minnows Paraguay; Hardly the required response after the previous year. Whilst qualifying is on track for the 2018 World Cup, the defender was disgraced again, being sent off in a 1-1 draw with Argentina, further bring about questions concerning his ability to perform with his country on the big stage.

However, it has to be concluded that 2015 has been a fairly successful one with the player, at least for his club, and Luiz will look to put his international demons to bed in 2016.



ABDOULAYE DOUCOURÉ

[52]
*

Club: Stade Rennais F.C.

Position: Midfielder

Born: Meulan-en-Yvelines

Date of Birth: 01/01/1993

Age: 22

"When I was young, I was really good at French, History and Geography."

– Abdoulaye Doucouré

Cousin of former world champion hurdler Ladjji Doucouré, Rennes midfielder Abdoulaye Doucouré has overcome many obstacles in his career and 2015 has seen him move to the front of the pack.

Born in 1993, Abdoulaye Doucouré joined Stade Rennais' youth system in 15 years later. He played on 23 occasions for the B team before earning a call-up for first team action in the final few weeks of the 2012/13 season. He made four appearances in the final few weeks, scoring on his debut in a 2-0 win against Brest.

It was a superb solo goal, picking the ball up on the halfway line, this tall, lanky young kid ran through the defence like it was not there and blasted the ball high into the top corner with his left foot. Doucouré's marked his arrival on the professional stage in style, but then his world changed very quickly.

In that fourth game of his debut season, the midfielder suffered a serious knee injury that ruled him out for six months. It was a cruel blow but it did not discourage him and he seemed to simply pick up where he left off as soon as he got back.

Last season, he made 35 appearances in Ligue 1, scoring five goals and creating another three. It was a really impressive, complete and consistent season that saw him linked to Chelsea in January before more concrete interest came from Watford in the final few days of the summer transfer window.

It looked like a deal would be forced through in the final moments but in the end, Doucouré stayed and has continued his fine form in the French league. So far in his 2015/16 campaign, the midfielder has made 14 appearances in all competitions, scoring three goals and creating two assists, at the time of writing. He is already showing a solid level of consistency and those numbers should be set to increase in the second half of the season, which will likely lead to more interest in the summer.

Doucouré's ability is best explained by his own manager, Philippe Montanier, in an interview with BeIN Sports a few years back. He said: *"He's a real box-to-box midfielder, as the English say. If you look at the goal he scored at Marseille, when he ran 93 metres at the end of the game, well that shows what he can do. He reads the play well and is often able to get on the end of crosses or shots."*

A box-to-box midfielder is easily the best way to describe him. He has a Moussa Sissoko-like frame and an abundance of athleticism to boot. He has that wonderful ability to stride forward with real purpose, which puts defenders in a real panic, and is always willing to help attacking play.

He is able to play in defensive midfield, in the centre, as an attacking midfielder and has even been employed as a right-winger this season. While not quite adept to play out wide, it shows that he has the versatility of skills that can be applied to a variety of different positions on the field.

Montanier has questioned his technique in the past, although he seems to have improved in that area. His assist totals are testament to this fact, along with his 86.3% pass success rate and his 1.6 key passes per game, although with his height he does need to win more aerial battles.

In his own words, Doucouré has said: *"I'm a deep-lying playmaker. I try to make the team more solid by helping win the ball, and then when we have the ball I look to get forward and get in to positions from where I can score goals and set them up."*

This is also a relatively good assessment and while he is very much willing to win the ball back, he just needs to become more successful at it. 1.7 tackles and 1.2 interceptions per game for any kind of midfielder does not quite cut it for someone with the ambition of heading to the Premier League.

What he must attempt to do, as he has began to grow into his lanky frame, is add a little more physicality to his game. He does not foul or get booked often, preferring to stay on his feet, which is often seen in football terms as a good thing, but it also suggests a bashfulness to his game despite having the necessary frame to be more of a wrecking-ball in midfield areas. If he works on this aspect of his game then Doucouré can become a dual-action midfielder, one who is potent in attack and defence.

His best game this season came against Angers, where he scored and got himself involved in every facet of the game. He had over 100 touches, more than anyone else in the Rennes team from attacking midfielder, and even got four tackles in. He was aggressive and a poor Angers midfield allowed him and his fellow midfielders Gelson Fernandes and Benjamin André, who were also excellent, to dictate play.

He attempted 79 passes, had an 86% success rate and just seemed to be everywhere on the field. That kind of performance will be what teams want to see and if he can add some of that to a more reserved role, he could become a real menace in any league that he wishes to go to.

Whether we will see him at Rennes for too much longer is another question as a move to England could be mutually beneficial. The club would get a good fee and the young midfielder will get to test himself in what some might call a more traditionally physical league, which might just be the right push to pull all of his skill-set together into a complete box-to-box player.

Doucouré, at the end of it all, is less of a Rubik's cube and more of a jigsaw puzzle. We seem to have all the right places, all the edges have been filled in but it is just about connecting everything in the middle together to create the final picture.



JÉRÉMY TOULALAN

[51]
v 21

Club: AS Monaco FC

Position: Midfielder

Born: Nantes

Date of Birth: 10/09/1983

Age: 32

"I want to be able to look myself in the mirror."

– Jérémy Toulalan

One man who continues to defy the ravages of time is Monaco's 32-year-old midfielder Jérémy Toulalan. Having joined AS Monaco a few years ago, a team that was full with money, ambition and top class players, many questioned the Frenchman's ability to contribute to the team. How they have been proved wrong. In 2015, Toulalan had another strong season, becoming one of the most important players in the AS Monaco side. He is the captain of the side and, under his leadership, Monaco have gone from strength to strength over the last 12 months, with particular success in the defensive department, keeping one of the tightest defences in Ligue 1 history.

During the first six months of 2015, as the second half of the 2014/15 season played out, Monaco were drawing headlines across Europe. Domestically, after a relatively average start to their Ligue 1 campaign, something clicked in their back line, and it became very, very difficult to score against them. Monaco, led by Jérémy Toulalan in defensive midfield, conceded just nine goals in their last 19 Ligue 1 games, an astonishing record that underpinned their eventual rise to 3rd in the Ligue 1 table. Throughout the duration of the season, they conceded just 26 goals in 38 games, the best defensive record in the league and just five goals over Marseille's all time record of 21 goals conceded, set in the 1991/92 season. In fact, if Monaco had the same defensive record in the first half of the season as they did in the second, they would have comfortably broken that record set by Marseille.

Their success was not, however, limited to domestic competitions. They had a very good run in the Champions' League in the 2014/15 campaign. They conceded just one goal in six group stage games in a group with Benfica, Bayer Leverkusen and Zenit St. Petersburg. But their crowning achievement came in the knockout stages, where a world-class counter attacking display saw them beat Arsenal 3-1 at the Emirates as they made it to the quarter-finals. Here, they would be narrowly knocked out 1-0 on aggregate by Juventus, who eventually went on to lose in the final to Barcelona.

This season, whilst their famous defensive solidarity has somewhat slipped, due largely to the lack of form of the other Ligue 1 teams (PSG excluded of course), Monaco sit 2nd in the table at the halfway stage. They have already conceded 23 goals, just three fewer than for the whole of the previous season, and are 19 points behind leaders PSG, but are firmly on their way to securing Champions' League football once again for the coming 2016/17 campaign.

Defensively, it is clear just how important Jérémy Toulalan is to the Monaco side, both as a leader and due to his defensive qualities. Due to injuries, Toulalan has played only 12 Ligue 1 games this season, missing seven, and Monaco have really struggled defensively when he has not been in the side. In the 12 games Toulalan has played, Monaco have conceded just 10 goals at 0.83 goals conceded per game, keeping six clean sheets in the process. On the other hand, in the seven games he has missed Monaco have conceded 13 goals at 1.86 goals conceded per game, keeping just one clean sheet. Perhaps one of the main reasons behind why Monaco's defence is not as strong as last season is the number of games Toulalan has had to miss with injuries.

So what makes Toulalan so adept defensively? At 32 years of age, he is not, and has never been, the quickest of players, but luckily he plays in a position in which positioning and reading of the game can make up for the lack of certain physical attributes. Having had a long career in European football, Toulalan is very experienced in his position, and this allows him to be in the right place at the right time to break up an opposition attack. In fact, this season he has contributed on average seven defensive actions per game, whether that be blocks, tackles or clearances. In addition, he has improved in one on one situations when being taken on by an opponent. Last season, he won the ball 60% of the time, but this season he has improved that figure to a very impressive 86%, showing that, even at 32 years of age, Toulalan can still make telling improvements to his game.

His qualities are not, however, limited to his ability off the ball. In midfield it is vital to be a good passer, and Jérémy Toulalan ticks this box very effectively. This season, he averages an 82% pass accuracy, with an average pass length of 20m. This shows that the Frenchman is not always one to play short passes to his centre backs or midfielder - when possible he will try a direct ball straight to his striker or wingers.

If there has been a negative point in Toulalan's calendar year, it is that injuries seem to consistently be preventing the 32 year old from getting out on the pitch. This season, he has missed over 1/3 of the league games due to various injuries and, with Toulalan not getting any younger, it is likely that he will have to come to terms with spending a little time on the sidelines more often than he would like.

Overall, 2015 has been another year of success for a player who keeps proving critics wrong. His move to AS Monaco has been a resounding success and now, as captain, I am sure he will be more determined than ever to get his hands on some silverware. Who knows, maybe 2016 will see that wish come true?



RAPHAËL GUERREIRO

[50]
^ 31

Club: FC Lorient

Position: Defender

Born: Le Blanc-Mesnil

Date of Birth: 22/12/1993

Age: 21

*"I would come back
as a shark to be the
strongest."*

– Raphaël Guerreiro

A Parisian by birth, Guerreiro was initially spotted by Ligue 2 side Caen and progressed at an impressive rate. He was handed his debut in the first team in 2012/13, though still only 18, and went on to notch up 37 appearances for the Normandy side. In spite of having an incredible start to this current season, Caen did not go on to gain promotion to the top tier in May 2013, so a few of the French football giants, such as Marseille and Lille, queued up to secure his services. But it was Lorient who shrewdly got ahead of the pack to sign him for a cool €2.5million. No question, his stock has increased since and it is easy to see why.

Employed strictly as a left-back in 2013/14, Guerreiro has showed his ability to adapt and learn to such an extent that at the beginning of the 2014/15 campaign he started to play further forward as a left-midfielder. He exploded into action, scoring six goals and claiming two assists in a 15-game spell.

He is not a natural defender and has admitted himself that he enjoys playing in a more advanced role. His small stature does not lend itself to combatting robust and tall athletic attackers, especially in aerial battles. Nonetheless, as a defender, this was at least partially compensated by a good sense of positioning, high work rate and sheer determination. In any case, what he may lack in defensive capabilities is now offset by his creativity as a left midfielder as he has added a new dimension Les Merlus. He can certainly provide speed on the flanks and gives defending right backs a lot to think about. Thanks to the early spell in his career appearing as a left-back, coupled with an appetite to run, he naturally tracks back to help out his team.

Such was the extent of the impact that he had on Ligue 1 last season that he put himself on many European clubs' radars and it was expected that he might move on to start a new chapter in his career. He was touted for a move to the Premier League in the summer of 2015, with Arsenal and Manchester City listed as potential suitors. Therefore, coupled with the Premier League raid on Ligue 1 clubs during the most recent summer transfer window, it might have come as a surprise that the only tabled bid came from German giants Borussia Dortmund, for €8m. Yet it would be hard to imagine businessman Loic Féry to sell at such a modest price and he was certainly within his right to expect much more for the left-sided player, being in no rush to sell. A move never materialised and he therefore has continued to ply his trade in Ligue 1.

Guerreiro is of mixed heritage, with a Portuguese father and French mother and opted to play for the former country. He was selected for Portugal's U21 side in the summer championships in the Czech Republic, starting in every game, including the final where he was particularly unfortunate to experience defeat on penalties to Sweden. The diminutive left footed player now has 3 senior caps to his name and scored in only his second game against Argentina.

There is no doubt that he can become a star for the Portuguese national team and he will hopefully be afforded ample playing time in EURO 2016 in France to prove his worth on the European stage. Whether or not he can supersede AS Monaco's Fabio Coentrão to earn a spot in the first eleven at this stage is however quite another matter at the moment, especially when one considers that Portugal's present starting formation is not a classic 4-4-2, meaning that there is only one left-sided position in the starting side to fight for. There is however nothing to suggest that Guerreiro will not be part of the 23-man squad.

The 2015/16 season for Raphaël Guerreiro has been a bit of a slower start if you look exclusively at the stats just before Ligue 1 football in 2015 came to a close: 13 appearances, 1 goal and 1 assist. But in reality his performances have still been of a standard that you would expect of a young, developing talent, something that Guerreiro clearly is. His goal earned his team a draw against Rennes and likewise his assist allowed Lorient to snatch a point at Guingamp, so bit by bit he is making a difference. He actually started playing this season in the right midfield position - and once as a right-back. While playing on the opposite flank has become a relatively common trend in the modern game, it only highlights his flexibility. In recent games he has returned to the left flank and is more often than not getting the nod over Yann Jouffre or Maxime Barthelmé, in a Lorient line-up that young manager Sylvain Ripoll likes to tinker with on a weekly basis. Guerreiro is, clearly, a highly thought of and carefully managed asset.

Guerreiro has mentioned in the past that as his father is a Benfica fan, he would love to play for them one day. However, in another interview he was previously quoted saying he dreams of playing for Real Madrid. Ironically, another young left back with a raising profile, Alberto Moreno, has also signalled a wish to play in Spain if los Blancos came looking. Hence, a reason why Liverpool have been reported, very recently, to be keeping close tabs on the Portuguese player, as he would be a credible replacement if the Andalusian returns to Spain.

We are however in no doubt that before next summer's transfer window there will be a whole host of Europe's power-houses linked to the Lorient man. Small in stature but a big talent, Raphaël Guerreiro is undeniably one to watch for the future.



CLÉMENT CHANTÔME

[49]
*

Club: FC Girondins de Bordeaux

Position: Midfielder

Born: Sens

Date of Birth: 11/09/1987

Age: 28

"PSG is the club of my heart."

– Clément Chantôme

To say that the purchase of Paris Saint-Germain by their Qatari owners has been cruel to French-born players is an understatement. Of the players at the club prior to their takeover, none remain, save Alphonse Areola and Jean-Kevin Augustin. Even in those two, though, there is a tough truth, the duo having spent the vast majority of the past four seasons on loan, to varying levels of success.

Even players who had been ballyhooed arrivals from other Ligue 1 clubs during the Qataris' time in charge have moved on, with short stays being the order for the likes of Kevin Gameiro, Milan Bisevac and many have departed, some only having recently arrived. Even bright prospects like Kingsley Coman and Lucas Digne seem to have moved on, albeit the latter only loan but having serious competition in the form of Layvin Kurzawa.

Through it all, battling, suffering through a loan spell at age 26, yet always ready to give it another chance for his boy-hood club, was Clément Chantôme. Having signed for the capital club in 2000 at the age of 13, for many, he represented the last link to the "real" Paris Saint-Germain, a club of the people, ferociously supported even when up against the obvious limitations of the squad.

In January of this year, though Bordeaux had been struggling mightily under Willy Sagnol in the former Bayern Munich man's first season, no number of trophies could be a palliative for a lack of playing time, and Chantôme made the move to southwestern France for just €700,000.

The figure was shockingly low for a player of Chantôme's experience; despite his lack of playing time at the Parc de Princes, he was a former French international who had proved himself a reliable presence in midfield over the best part of a decade.

However, at 27, who could blame him? The prime of his career would only last so many years, and with Bordeaux a club of some means relative to Ligue 1, the move did make sense from a competitive standpoint, if not an emotional one.

Upon his arrival, Bordeaux were an unqualified shambles. They had just been hammered by Lyon, 5-0, in the final match of 2014, and the match was a microcosm of the problems that plagued one of the division's worst defences. With 26 goals scored in 19 matches, Bordeaux were an intriguing enough prospect going forward, but with leading scorer Cheick Diabaté set to miss the rest of the season, a defence that had conceded 27 in that span was a genuine cause for concern. Even with the club sitting in sixth place, the Malian's goals would be difficult to replace in a squad bereft of proven finishers.

The difference that Chantôme made was tremendous; over the second half of the season Bordeaux had the league's third-best defensive record, conceding just seventeen times. While they kept just six clean sheets, they turned in a surprising set of performances, going unbeaten against the five sides above them, the highlight being a 3-2 that remains Paris Saint-Germain's last domestic defeat.

With Chantôme in the side, the squad had a surfeit of defensively oriented midfielders, and without cup competition to manage, Sagnol played to those strengths, giving Wahbi Khazri free reign in front of a defensive phalanx of Chantôme, Jaroslav Plasil and one of Grégory Sertic or Andre Biyogo-Poko. The Tunisian international, who had generally flattered to deceive since arriving from Bastia, was enlivened by his newfound freedom and his link-up play with the untested duo of Diego Rolán and Isaac Kiese Thelin, the pair combining for thirteen goals in the run-in, effectively replacing the lost production of Diabate and then some.

Sagnol was hailed as a managerial genius, but as the start to this season has proven, that is perhaps not the case; Chantôme should really be given more of the credit. Featuring in every match for the club in the back end of last season, Chantôme was just what Bordeaux needed to protect the back four, especially given the attacking proclivities of Mariano and Diego Contento.

Not the most imposing at 1.80m, Chantôme instead brings to the defensive midfield role not the instincts of a destroyer, but one who seeks to build from the back. With the two full backs racing up and down the flanks, they made the perfect targets for Chantôme, allowing him to quickly start a counter attack despite his own lack of pace.

This side of his game has even continued to develop during his time away from the capital, as he was not necessarily allowed to be as expressive by his managers. He is also adept in tackling and short passing, if sometimes a bit over-enthusiastic as regards to the former, earning five bookings last season for Bordeaux, as well as further five thus far.

Good in the air despite his unassuming size, perhaps Chantôme's best asset, though, is his work-rate, always willing to go the extra step or two to continue battling an opposing midfielder or full-back.

With Bordeaux having a youngish squad, his "intangibles" in terms of leadership and experience should also not be undersold, particularly as Diabaté and defender Lamine Sané continue to feature infrequently due to injury. Indeed, during Chantôme's season at Toulouse, he was even named captain several times, a rare feat for a loaned player, even if it largely owed to the unavailability of Étienne Didot and Jonathan Zebina.

This season, despite a buoyant start to the campaign that saw the club in fine form in qualifying for the group stages of the Europa League, things have not gone quite as smoothly for the player or Bordeaux. With Sertic a long-term miss due to injury and Plasil not getting any younger, Sagnol has generally opted for a 4-2-3-1 this year, a formation which allows for more squad rotation, as most weeks have featured multiple matches.

Chantôme's statistics are largely the same, but with his nominal partner in central midfield, Henri Saivet often surging forward, his role has become more doggedly defensive, limiting his chances to demonstrate much of why he was brought to the club, in terms of long balls and holding possession.

Not only this, but he is often left in isolation when the club are caught on the counter, forcing him to hare about the pitch in an attempt to shut down opponents, one possible factor in his increased number of bookings and poor rate of tackles. Chantôme remains a class act, but with Bordeaux fielding the league's third-worst defence it is more difficult than it should be to extol his virtues, even with the extenuating circumstances of Europe and Sagnol's tactical vagaries.



THOMAS LEMAR

[48]
*

Club: AS Monaco FC

Position: Midfielder

Born: Baie-Mahault

Date of Birth: 12/11/1995

Age: 20

"When I am given a chance, I do everything to take it."

– Thomas Lemar

Only just returned from a long injury lay-off, Thomas Lemar's start to the season for Monaco took many observers by surprise. In keeping out the likes of Rony Lopes, so excellent at Lille last season, and Bernardo Silva, perhaps the key player as Monaco chased down and caught Marseille to return to the Champions' League, side-lined, the pint-sized attacking midfielder was the revelation of the season, and was giving good evidence that, despite ostensibly having been purchased as one for the future, he could also be one for the present.

Along with Almamy Touré, Lemar has had a much bigger role than expected this season, as Monaco have slowly but surely climbed the table after an uneven start, scoring three times and adding two assists, his performances earning him his first call-up for France's Under 21 squad.

Born in Guadeloupe, Lemar signed his first contract with a mainland club in 2010, moving to Caen's youth ranks, where he was an immediate success, following in the footsteps of players like Ronald Zubar. Upon his arrival in Normandy, he rapidly rose through the ranks for both the club and France's youth international setup, demonstrating a considerable skill set in the process. Despite being small and slight at just 1.70m, Lemar quickly moved from the Under 19 side to the reserves at the age of only 15.

Caen's B team manager, Philippe Trenchant, remarked on Lemar's promotion to the reserves, then playing in the fourth division: *"He's a creative player, extremely talented technically, but he doesn't have the athletic dimension to play reactively. He's a player of anticipation; in the CFA, he doesn't go into duels, he avoids them! I didn't hesitate for a second to play him in the B team, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't pay attention at this time to his game in its totality. Surrounded with the right complementary players and a well-defined tactical project, he can become a top player."*

Indeed, after two seasons with the reserves, Lemar made the step up to the first team in the fall of 2013, the first of what would be seven appearances that year, still aged just 17. He was often on the bench or not even in the eighteen towards the back end of the season as Caen chased promotion, but the next campaign saw him become much more of a fixture as the club who sought to re-establish themselves in the top flight.

Bottom of the table at the winter break, Caen subsequently went on a stunning run that included victories over Marseille and St Étienne, pulling themselves clear of the relegation scrap. With safety looking more assured, Patrice Garande began to show more faith in the youngster.

While he rarely started, the different look that he offered compared to Caen's other midfield options made him an ideal substitute. His pace would allow him to torment opposition defenders, and his small frame, like that of a Mathieu Valbuena or a Nabil Fekir, meant that he was being fouled at a rate which exceeded twice a match.

While earning free kicks is certainly the mark of a good player, Lemar might be even better at taking them. Of his six assists in Ligue 1 in 2015, four were from dead balls, as he is able to deliver the ball not only from the field but also at corners with fine style. Likewise, two of his four goals have been direct free kicks, and it cannot be long before he is recognized as one of the division's best in this regard by a larger audience.

Obviously his size means that he relies on technique rather than power, but there is perhaps even something to be said for that aspect of his game, as recording an assist from a free kick is in some ways more difficult than going for a goal, requiring not only finesse in the delivery but also a good rapport with one's teammates.

Given the rate of success that Lemar has had in this area, it would not be unfair to label dead ball situations the phase of his game where he shines the brightest.

Despite rarely starting for Caen, then, it was little surprise when Monaco came calling, continuing their recent strategy of purchasing promising youngsters from around France with a view towards their sell-on value.

Despite the chance that Caen had given him, even the club's hierarchy could see the sense in moving to a club who look set up to be regulars in Europe, despite churning through players at an almost unheard-of rate.

Trenchant, again illustrated that the move represented a clear step up for Lemar, not only in terms of his opportunities for playing time but for what the club had the resources to achieve. *"When one invests like this (the €4m fee Monaco paid) in a youngster, it's necessary to count on him. Look at the number of matches that Monaco will have with the European Cup, (sic) there will be playing time, he can expand his confidence. There is still work to do in the construction of his game, but he has the potential (to succeed) at a high level."*

And indeed, there is work to do on Lemar's game. His lack of size in terms of stature is one thing, but should he be able to gain some upper-body strength, then he will become more versatile and a greater attacking threat by battling with defenders instead of avoiding them. While his ability to deliver free kicks is tremendous, Lemar's links with his fellow attackers in open play can be tenuous.

While much of this is due to familiarity and squad rotation at Monaco, this sort of intelligence will need to be improved upon for Lemar's star to continue to rise.

A willingness to defend from the front is also somewhat lacking, and while playing centrally in Monaco's 4-2-3-1 makes this somewhat less of an issue, he needs to dig in more in this regard so as to demonstrate more of a tactical versatility, becoming a complete player and not a luxury.

In sum, Trenchant should have the last word on Lemar: *"A young player is to be judged on his capacity for the future, and his is the strongest of any player I've ever recruited to Caen."*

Still just twenty but already showing his dynamism and creativity in a physical, defensively oriented league, it would be hard to argue with that statement. Should Lemar continue to perform in 2016 as he has this year, it would be hard to imagine his time at the principality being a long one, especially given the club's overarching transfer strategy.



BENJAMIN MOUKANDJO

[47]
^ 39

Club: FC Lorient

Position: Attacker

Born: Douala

Date of Birth: 12/11/1988

Age: 27

*"I said to myself that
I was not respected."*

– Benjamin Moukandjo

Benjamin Moukandjo is the very definition of a journeyman striker, playing for seven different French clubs since moving to the country in 2007. But things seem to have finally fallen into place for the forward over the past year, as he has hit the best form of his career since joining Lorient this past summer. The 27-year-old Cameroonian started his journey at his hometown club Kadji Sports Academy, whom he joined at the age of 10. He learnt his trade there for nine years, at which point his ability persuaded Rennes to take a punt on him and bring the striker to France. He never managed to make a senior appearance for Rennes though, spending his two seasons at the club with the reserve team and on loan at L'Entente.

In 2009, the striker moved on to Nimes, where he scored eight goals in 51 appearances over the course of 18 months. A switch to Monaco followed in January 2011, but their relegation and subsequent squad overhaul saw Moukandjo leave for Nancy after just half a season at the Stade Louis II.

It was at Nancy that the striker really established himself in French football for the first time, netting 23 times in 94 appearances in all competitions. He spent three years at the Ligue 2 club, but after Nancy's failure to reach the top flight, Moukandjo left for Reims in July 2014. After previous unsuccessful spells in Ligue 1 with Rennes and Monaco, Moukandjo really needed to prove himself during his time at Reims, and he did so relatively successfully, scoring eight goals over the course of the 2014/15 campaign. Only two of those goals, however, came in 2015.

His first of the calendar year came in a 3-1 loss at home to Lorient in February. Moukandjo gave his side the lead just before half-time, taking advantage of some slack defending to volley in unmarked from close range. And in May, the striker netted a late winner in a 3-2 victory away at Evian, controlling the ball first time in the box before curling a shot past the despairing keeper. It proved to be an absolutely vital goal for lowly Reims, effectively saving them from the drop and all but relegating Evian at the same time.

Although Moukandjo's form had dropped off a bit after the winter break, his contributions to Reims were pivotal to the club and that was what persuaded Lorient to make a move for him during the summer, with the striker signing a two year contract at the club he scored against both home and away last season. And Moukandjo has not looked back since, taking the league by storm over the past six months. The striker has scored 11 goals in just 19 appearances to date, leaving him joint-second in the top scorers chart, behind only Zlatan Ibrahimovic and level with Michy Batshuayi.

His first goal for the club came during his second appearance, during a 1-1 draw at home to Bastia. The striker kept his cool to score a penalty in injury-time, sending the keeper the wrong way to snatch his team a point. It was in late September, though, that Moukandjo really hit a rich vein of form. It all started with a winner against former club Monaco that gave Lorient a surprise 3-2 victory at the Stade Louis II. The striker finished off a counter attack by brilliantly controlling a lofted ball sent over the top of the defence, before burying his shot past the keeper.

And Moukandjo then went on to score nine goals in his next nine league outings, netting against Caen, Bordeaux, Marseille, PSG and Gazelec Ajaccio as well as bagging braces against Guingamp and Troyes. It was a simply remarkable run of form, and for the first time in his career, the media and fans alike really started to pay attention to the Cameroon international.

The striker has also been a regular on the international scene, making eight appearances for his country over the course of 2015. He may have only scored once in those eight games, but his solitary strike was an important one, as he netted against Guinea during the African Cup of Nations back in January. He now has a total of three goals and 30 caps for Cameroon since making his debut back in June 2011 and he also played in all three of their games during the 2014 FIFA World Cup.

The striker has the ability to score a variety of goals, as he has demonstrated over the past 12 months. Moukandjo is cool in front of goal when put through one on one with the keeper, is a quality header of the ball and has a highly successful conversion rate from the penalty spot. He also has a surprisingly good first touch and close control for a big man, as shown in his goal against Monaco back in September. He is a real handful for defenders and despite his many appearances throughout the French leagues over the last eight years, most still have not worked out how to stop him.

If there is one area in which Moukandjo could improve, it is his number of assists. The striker has set up just two goals for his teammates since joining Lorient this summer and only assisted once throughout his entire spell at Reims. If he could add more assists to his game, he would be an even more dangerous proposition than he already is.

Overall though, Moukandjo has had a hugely successful 2015 and finally seems to have found a club in which he thrives. He has been linked recently in the English press with a move to Sunderland, but for now, Moukandjo and Lorient seem like the perfect partnership.



RÉMY RIOU

[46]
^2

Club: FC Nantes

Position: Goalkeeper

Born: Lyon

Date of Birth: 06/08/1987

Age: 28

*"We are always
obligated to win."*

– Rémy Riou

Last season FC Nantes finished 14th, leaving them 8 points clear of 18th placed & relegated Evian. Their ability to survive was built around a solid defence which included the now Chelsea centre back Papy Djilobodji. However, the man who perhaps should have received the majority of the plaudits was their goalkeeper, Rémy Riou.

In 2014/15, the flying Frenchman made 32 Ligue 1 starts playing a total of 2880 minutes. Riou recorded 9 clean sheets which is particularly impressive considering his club battled relegation for the majority of the season. Whilst Riou was decisive in almost every match that he featured in, it is fair to say that his best appearance came in a 1-2 victory away at Lorient back in December. A man renowned for his shot-stopping ability, Riou certainly showcased it that day, making no less than 9 saves and despite not keeping the clean sheet, he was the hero of the game.

As a club, it is apparent that Nantes will never be a high-scoring side and when your mentality is firmly on defending, you must have a star between the sticks. Not just a player who showcases his ability on the odd occasion, but a player who consistently performs to the highest level. In Rémy Riou, that is exactly what Nantes have. He made 106 saves in Ligue 1 last season, a statistic that ranks him as the best goalkeeper in the league to play less than 3000 minutes. Alphonse Areola (118), Benjamin Lecomte (109) and Anthony Lopes (109) all made more saves than Riou, but all played at least 170 minutes of match action more than him. With these kind of statistics, it is no surprise that the former Auxerre keeper has been widely tipped for a first national team call up.

After a season in which Nantes achieved their targets, it must have been disappointing for supporters to see many of their starts move on. Jordan Veretout moved to Aston Villa, whilst three defenders in Djilobodji, Hansen and Cissokho all left for pastures new. It would have been a worry to lose three men who all played their part in an impressive defensive record. Despite the odds being stacked against them, Nantes have again defied expectation and in 19 games, have conceded just 17 goals. The Canaries are, at the time of writing, 13th and again a lot of that is down to their ever-present goalkeeper.

As many stars left, Riou remained loyal and is now receiving the credit that he deserves. Despite his fantastic form last year, he has gone to another level in 2015/16 in which he has already produced 9 clean sheets. Unsurprisingly Riou has played every minute of the current league campaign leaving back up Maxime Dupé restricted to cup appearances. Unfortunately for the reserve keeper, he has only featured once this season in the Coupe De La Ligue. Nantes dropped out in extra time at the hands of Ligue 2 outfit, Bourg-Perronas. Despite the lack of playing time, Dupé is in no position to complain considering he is the understudy to the keeper who has made the most saves so far in the league (42).

A fantastic start to the season all round, but whilst a lot of credit is being given to the goalkeeper, it must be noted that the defenders in front of him have performed admirably. Despite being on a seven game winless streak, at the time of writing, Nantes have produced some excellent results so far this term. Arguably their best coming away from home with a 0-2 win at free-scoring Caen and 0-1 victory at Stade Pierre-Mauroy, the home of a defensively-sound Lille side. It is often suggested that a good goalkeeper can secure 10-15 points alone, and with clean sheets at the two away trips mentioned, Riou certainly fits into that category.

Whilst Riou is finally getting the positive attention he deserves, it must be remembered that just a year ago he was being publicised for the wrong reasons. Sporting Club Bastia were left furious following the suggestion that fans of the Corsican outfit had propelled stones at the Nantes keeper. The alleged incident occurred at the Stade Armand Cesari during their fixture in late September 2014. Bastia decided the best course of action was to file a civil case against the individual, and this at the time admittedly tarnished the reputation of Rémy Riou. If he truly has aspirations concerning a possible appearance in the French national team, then he must avoid these kind of situations the future.

The standards that are being set by Riou makes it a challenge to find flaws in his game. The man who started his career at Lyon excels in shot-stopping and his reflexes are arguably second to none in Ligue 1. Beating the Nantes keeper is no easy task and despite making stunning saves consistently, he does seem to struggle with strikes of a certain nature. When fully scrutinised, it could be suggested that his positioning is sometimes poor. The stopper has been found out on numerous occasions by long distance strikes and if he does want to be considered the best in France, he must aim to improve this area of his game.

With 2016 just round the corner, Nantes will likely be aiming to finish as close to the top half as possible. Thanks to Riou and a back four consisting of Dubois, Djidji, Vizcarrondo and Sabaly, a top half dream could become a reality. Manager Michel Der Zakarian can sleep safe knowing that his star man is tied to the Canaries until 2018 following his contact extension last summer. Whilst easier said than done, if Der Zakarian could match his watertight defence with a more potent attack, then Nantes' achievements could be greater than ever imagined.



NICOLAS MAURICE-BELAY

[45]
^2

Club: FC Girondins de Bordeaux

Position: Midfielder

Born: Sucy-en-Brie

Date of Birth: 19/04/1985

Age: 30

"It feels good to be back."

– Nicolas Maurice-Belay

A man who started his career at AS Monaco under current France national team manager Didier Deschamps, Nicolas Maurice-Belay has come along way in the 10 years that have passed. Now a vital component in a Bordeaux side full of talent, Maurice-Belay has made himself a firm fan favourite at the Matmut Atlantique.

At 1.82m, the winger is well known for his powerful driving runs forward that really lift fans off of their seats. The Frenchman can play anywhere across the forward line, but he is predominantly tasked with occupying a wide left position. Not a renowned goal scorer in a side that struggles in front of the net, Maurice-Belay is primarily in the team to create chances for the likes of Cheick Diabaté and Diego Rolán.

In 2014/15, the wide man managed to offer four assists whilst scoring twice, not the greatest of records by any stretch of the imagination, but Maurice-Belay's chance creation arguably deserved a higher assist total. Running directly at defenders is the area in which he excels, and with fantastic dribbling abilities, Nicolas Maurice-Belay would be a danger for any side. As well as his excellent running power, Bordeaux's number 19 is a very useful outlet for his side when under pressure, his strength and determination enables him to hold the ball up and allow Les Girondins to get higher up the pitch. Certainly an important player for his side, and one that manager Willy Sagnol rates highly.

Despite being highly-rated, Maurice-Belay did not get many opportunities to showcase his abilities whilst at AS Monaco, with that in mind, he was loaned out to newly promoted Ligue 1 side, Sedan. Plenty of opportunities were presented to the youngster there, and he ended the campaign having made 30 first team appearances. Unfortunately for Sedan, they were relegated and life has not got much better for them since as they are now competing in the national leagues. There is no doubt that Maurice-Belay gained vital experience from that loan spell and he has since come a long way.

An excellent season in 2014/15 saw Les Girondins finish in 6th, during which they ensured qualification for the Europa League the following season. Maurice-Belay was in and out of the side that season, but he certainly offered plenty when he got an opportunity. A 2-1 victory back in April against soon to be relegated Lens, was a result that was heavily down to Nicolas Maurice-Belay. During a game that seemed certain to be ending in a bore draw, proceedings suddenly came to life as the clock rolled past 80 minutes. Bordeaux opened the scoring through a Mariano strike, but Lens leveled things up just six minutes later thanks to Pablo Chavarria's timely equaliser.

It seemed set to be a frustrating afternoon for Bordeaux until Maurice-Belay struck in stoppage time. He found the bottom corner with an excellently placed finish in the third minute of injury time. The match winner had come off the bench to replace the disappointing Grégory Sertic on the 72nd minute, Maurice-Belay seized his opportunity and certainly contributed to a strong finish. A good season for the winger, but it must be remembered that in the same season, Maurice-Belay was involved in a bust up with teammate Diego Rolán on the substitute bench. As a result, the flying Frenchman was dropped by Sagnol for the next few games. It was certainly a wake up call, and one that perhaps even had a positive effect when you consider his form afterwards.

Now competing for one of the most established clubs in France, Maurice-Belay will be hoping to add some silverware to a long career in French football. With his club competing both domestically and continentally, this could have been the best chance for the 30 year old to add a winners medal to his collection.

Disappointingly for him, Bordeaux have been terrible this season: they finished bottom for a Europa League group consisting of Liverpool, FC Sion and Rubin Kazan. Domestically, they are also underperforming, currently labouring in 14th, Bordeaux could perhaps be facing an unexpected relegation battle. Maurice-Belay, as previously mentioned has suffered relegation early on in his career, and he will do everything in his power to ensure Bordeaux do not even get close to Ligue 2.

Maurice-Belay personally has performed to a decent level for the six time Ligue 1 champions, he has arguably been their brightest spark along with the talented Wahbi Khazri. 13 starts so far this term have resulted in one goal and two assists for the Frenchman so far, with his biggest contribution no doubt coming in the 3-1 victory against his former club, AS Monaco. Monaco took the lead through Helder Costa, but the Bordeaux winger took advantage of a deflected Khazri cross, after a swift Bordeaux counter attack to level the scores. Bordeaux would then go on to win the clash in seemingly comfortable style, thanks to goals from Cédric Yambéré and Jaroslav Plasil. An impressive result that seen Bordeaux hand Monaco their first defeat since September in all competitions.

A big second half of the season is ahead for Les Girondins, their current situation is a dire one, and one that is certainly not acceptable for a club like Bordeaux. It will be down to the more experienced players such as Maurice-Belay to drive the club back up table and into a more familiar position. Now 30 years old, Nicolas Maurice-Belay should see himself as a leader in the dressing room, and he himself will be expecting to offer an even greater contribution in 2016 to ensure Bordeaux end on a high note.



MAXIME GONALONS

[44]
v 23

Club: Olympique Lyonnais

Position: Midfielder

Born: Vénissieux

Date of Birth: 10/03/1989

Age: 26

"To be called up for France, you have to play well for your club."

– Maxime Gonalons

The Venissieux native joined his local club Lyon's youth team back in 1999 aged just 10, progressing all the way through the ranks. In 2008, a staph infection in his ankle put his entire career at risk, with some doctors fearing that the limb may have to be amputated, but he recovered to progress to the first team a year later. Gonalons then made his first-team debut against Anderlecht in the qualifying rounds of the Champions' League in 2009/10 and he went on to make 27 appearances in all competitions over the course of that campaign. That included a single goal against Liverpool at Anfield in the knockout stages of the same competition he made his first bow in.

Since the 2011/12 season, the 26-year-old has been a constant within the Lyon ranks. The midfielder has racked up at least 40 appearances each season, his lowest tally being 42 in 2012/13, and has been there through all the recent ups and downs at the Stade de Gerland. He has been linked with several high-profile clubs in the past, from Arsenal to Napoli, with rumours emanating at the time that he turned down the Serie A club during the summer of 2014. Despite this, Gonalons tried his best to dismiss any movement in 2014/15. The Lyon captain told French newspaper *Le Progrès*: *"It is necessary that in front of me, there is ambition and a competitive team, in this respect, OL is ambitious. If next year we have the happiness to find the Champions' League, I do not see why I leave."*

As a French international, Gonalons made his debut in 2011 but despite his consistency, he has made just seven appearances for France. Admittedly, there is an intense amount of competition for places among the central midfield spots for Les Bleus, and Gonalons's recent wane in form over the last 12 months that is demonstrated by his fall in this year's GFFN 100 index has prevented him from becoming a part of Deschamps's squad.

Gonalons had a solid if not unremarkable finish to last season, playing in almost every fixture in the second half of the campaign. He led a young side to a superb 2nd place finish and while their title chase ran out of steam towards the end, the midfielder was certainly responsible for the foundation that allowed the young, exciting attacking players to go and express themselves.

So far this season, Gonalons has made 19 appearances in all competitions, creating one assist while picking up four yellows and a red card. The sending off came after incurring a silly second yellow against Zenit St Petersburg, which almost looked like it was born out of frustration with a clear foul that he really should not have made.

It has been a relatively up-and-down campaign, playing reasonably well as a defensive midfielder but that has been thwarted by Fournier's decision to deploy him at centre-back following a defensive injury crisis. Injuries to Samuel Umtiti and Milan Bisevac, along with manager Hubert Fournier's decision to overlook Bakary Koné and Lindsay Rose, have forced Gonalons into a central defensive position, where he has understandably been weaker. Perhaps the biggest problem with this tactical change has not been Gonalons' shaky performances in the back four but more his absence from the defensive midfield role that Corentin Tolisso has not been able to fill.

Gonalons is the definition of what you would expect from a modern day holding midfielder. He has very good positional awareness, shown by his 2.5 interceptions per game in 2015, and he takes heed in not advancing too far up the pitch, which is especially key in the diamond formation that Lyon regularly deploy. By relishing the physical side of the game, Gonalons sometimes lands himself in trouble with regards to fouls and cards, although perhaps that is something that comes with the territory, and the 3.5 tackles per game that he has averaged this season exemplifies his effectiveness. He made more tackles (24) than anyone else in the Champions' League on the 24th of November, according to WhoScored.

The Frenchman is somewhat limited on the ball and tends to allow the more box-to-box players, like Corentin Tolisso or Jordan Ferri, to have the ball and create further forward. He is willing to play the long ball on occasion, especially with the pacey strikers Lyon possess on the counter, and his two assists last season both derived from long through balls to Nabil Fekir and Clinton N'Jie respectively.

Euro 2016 is perhaps too great a stretch for Gonalons, especially when one considers the desperate nature of Lyon's first half of the 2015/16 campaign. If he is played consistently as a defensive midfielder and can prove his credentials as a captain who has perhaps escaped the criticism he deserves for the utter disarray that the OL dressing room finds itself in at the end of 2015, then Lyon might rise through the ranks again.

As for the future, if his Arsenal dream is serious (Thierry Henry was a big hero of his, with posters on his wall of the Arsenal striker in his youth), then Gonalons must rediscover his consistency, in his favourite position, over the rest of the 2015/16 season. On his day, he is a dependable player with real quality with high personal standards; he has the ability to be an asset wherever he ends up once the season is over. Often it is the hardest periods of a footballer's career that define him. We shall soon see if this applies to Gonalons.



BENJAMIN LECOMTE

[43]
*

Club: FC Lorient

Position: Goalkeeper

Born: Paris

Date of Birth: 26/04/1991

Age: 24

*"I need to progress
in all areas."*

– Benjamin Lecomte

With plenty of young French stars making their name across Europe, it is a very exciting time to be a supporter of Les Bleus. Not many nations across the globe can boast such fantastic young talent as France. Paul Pogba looks as if he could become the best midfielder in world football, Anthony Martial is lighting up the Premier League with his striking ability and Raphaël Varane is fast becoming a stalwart in the Real Madrid defence. It is clear that France have the players coming through to compete right at the top in coming years, but to complete a potentially menacing spine, they need a top young goalkeeper.

Step in Benjamin Lecomte, the Lorient stopper is just 24 years old and whilst older than the three talents mentioned above, for a goalkeeper, 24 remains a baby-age. A player who is taking Ligue 1 by storm, a player who is consistently contributing to every point picked up by Les Merlus, Lecomte has an exciting career ahead. 2015 has been a landmark year for Lecomte, and perhaps EURO 2016 is not out of the question for the Paris-born goalkeeper.

Lorient by their own admission had a terrible season in 2014/15, finishing a miserable 16th which left them just 5 points ahead of Evian who were relegated. It is apparent that there were not many things for supporters to be excited about that season, but Lorient seem to have unearthed a gem in arguably the most crucial position on the pitch. 2014/15 was the season that Benjamin Lecomte really made his name, the youngster started all 38 games in the league. The level of performance that he exhibited perhaps came as a shock to even Lecomte himself, he conceded just 50 times and it could be suggested, that the then 23 year old was the main factor in keeping Lorient in France's top flight.

There was one game in particular that season which stuck out and deserves to be highlighted, despite eventually losing 3-2 at Bordeaux, Lecomte turned in one of the finest goal keeping displays seen in Ligue 1. It is hard to offer such praise when a keeper concedes three goals, but it could have been double figures for the home side without Lecomte's interventions. A stunning triple save denied Touré and Cheick Diabaté twice in one attack, and that is sure to be a moment the young Frenchman will remember for the rest of his career. That particular game was not perfect unfortunately, it was Lecomte's error that led to the Bordeaux equaliser just before half time. The goalkeeper elected to come for the ball and completely missed, eventually the ball bounced rather fortuitously off of Diego Rolán and into the path of Wahbi Khazri who made no mistake to level proceedings with 43 minutes on the clock. A steep learning curve for Lecomte, however he must be praised for the character shown, many young players would have put their head down, but his reaction was one you would expect from a seasoned veteran with the strongest of mentalities.

Lorient went into the season of 2015/16 with a much more positive attitude, with an aim to prove the doubters wrong and offer a strong showing to reassure fans. So far so good for the Brittany side, at the end of 2015 they sit in 8th place and have already amassed 26. It has been a strange old season so far when you consider that Lorient despite being just four points off of 4th placed Caen, Les Merlus are also only seven points clear of the team occupying the final relegation place, Guingamp. Once again their much-coveted goalkeeper is the man who has really been the catalyst to his side's resurgence under manager Sylvain Ripoll. Lecomte has started 18 of his side's 19 games so far this term; he missed a 4-1 humiliation at the hands of relegation threatened Reims due to suspension.

Lecomte was given his first and only red card of his career on the 23rd of August in a 0-1 defeat at home to St Étienne, the keeper was sent off after just 40 seconds of play in probably the most bizarre scenario that Lorient will see this season. Practically straight from the kick off, Les Verts sent a ball over the top and Hamouma gave chase, Lecomte characteristically out of his area quickly met Hamouma just outside the box, but unfortunately he dangerously missed the ball and connected high on his opponents head. A straight red card and rightly so, Lorient came ever so close to the most unlikely of points, only to have that man Hamouma leave them heartbroken after an 87th minute winner. Yet another steep learning curve in the career of Benjamin Lecomte.

The 0-1 loss to St Étienne will no doubt be the low point of Lecomte's season, but one can be sure that plenty of highlights are to come for the former Niort man. Already this season he has produced a string of stunning performances and one he will likely remember with great fondness, is the 1-1 draw at the Stade Vélodrome with Ligue 1 giants, Marseille. Not many sides who finished in the bottom half the previous season will go to the Vélodrome and deny a Marseille side in front of their own fans. Lorient managed it with an excellent team display, it almost seems unfair to single out one player, but Lecomte was awarded man of the match, and rightly so. He made eight saves that game, which is an impressive personal record for him.

2016 is a big year for anybody in French football, and the same applies to Benjamin Lecomte. He will be 25 and at this stage, it is imperative he shows that he has the capabilities to be considered of an international class. If Lecomte is to reach those levels, he must learn from past mistakes and improve in areas that he has previously struggled in. Exemplified by his red card back in August, Lecomte must improve his decision-making and perhaps then, he can truly be considered as one of the best in France.



NABIL FEKIR

[42]
*

Club: Olympique Lyonnais

Position: Attacker

Born: Lyon

Date of Birth: 18/07/1993

Age: 22

*"I asked myself if I
was ever going to
play football again."*

– Nabil Fekir

While Nabil Fekir had made a handful of starts both in the league and in various other competitions prior to April 27, 2014, when Lyon hosted Bastia, he was somewhat of an afterthought. He had only come to own his place in the eleven that day because of the constellation of injuries that had left Clément Grenier and Yoann Gourcuff unavailable, and even though the hosts were still chasing European action, little was expected of the pint-sized attacker. What transpired, even taking with a grain of salt the quality and motivation of the opposition on the day, was nothing less than miraculous. Linking with Bafétimbi Gomis and Alexandre Lacazette, running at the opposition, dribbling, holding off defenders with his strength, creating from a set piece, forcing the opposite goalkeeper into a fine save from a free-kick and finishing with two assists and a goal, that sunny afternoon was unquestionably the Nabil Fekir show, a veritable catalog of a skilled and well-rounded number 10. For a player of 20 years of age with only a solitary cap at youth international level and a rather itinerant youth career, (Fekir spent time on the books of five different Rhone-area clubs before finally settling with Lyon only in 2011) the display marked an altogether sensational arrival into Ligue 1.

Fekir's two subsequent appearances that season failed to yield any more explosive performances, as the club played out the string on their season to some extent, even though Lyon had not qualified for Europe. With Remi Garde on the way out that summer, (along with Gomis and Jimmy Briand) last season looked to be a daunting proposition as far as returning to the Champions' League was concerned. Grenier, Gourcuff and Fofana were all long-term injuries in midfield, and while Lacazette had enjoyed a fine first season playing up top, he was still relatively unproven as a genuine goal-scoring threat. In a somewhat surprising twist given the personnel available to him, new manager Hubert Fournier opted to stick with the diamond 4-4-2 that had been so effective under Garde, even though Lacazette would lack the bulky Gomis as a conduit for hold-up play. Fekir got the nod behind Lacazette and Mohamed Yattara in the season's first match, but went off after suffering a shoulder injury.

He returned a month later for a match against Monaco; Paris Saint-Germain were next and the club had already lost to Toulouse, Lens and Metz, as well as having suffered elimination from the Europa League. To say that the season needing saving already was an understatement, but Fekir, at 21 and with just seven league starts was up to the task, netting the opener in sublime fashion. After Lacazette recovered the ball on the wing, he touched the ball to Fekir, who played it back to Malbranque. The veteran knocked the ball back to Fekir, whose first touch brought the ball up in what seemed a miscontrol, but he recovered to swivel around the ball and fire it in with his left foot. From there, it was a magical rise up to the top of the table at the winter break. Fekir was at the heart of it all, drawing fouls, playing one-twos with Clinton N'Jie and Lacazette and generally being a nuisance. As well as his skills, his versatility was also on show, as Lyon were able to operate with Gourcuff in the hole behind the strikers, with Fekir moving forward to partner Lacazette. Adept at hold-up play and enough of a goal-scoring threat himself, Lyon were danger personified, the speedy N'Jie being the opportunistic counterweight when called upon.

By the time the campaign had ended, Lyon had let the title slip with some disappointing performances in the run-in, but Fekir had been at the heart of all of the club's success. There was consternation in some quarters about his ability to rise to the occasion beyond the friendly confines of the Gerland, and discipline was an issue at times, with Fekir finding himself in the referee's notebook seven times in 2014/15. One could also find fault with his defensive contribution, but with the diamond system behind him, it would be a somewhat limited criticism given the onus placed on his creative responsibilities. For his country, he was given a series of caps, scoring against Brazil and featuring often as a substitute as Didier Deschamps negotiated a series of friendlies.

With a hat trick against Caen as part of a 4-0 thrashing, Fekir started this season in equally brilliant form to the way that he had ended 2014/15, and looked set to become increasingly important for club and country. In France's first friendly of the season, against Portugal, Deschamps even went so far as to experiment with his formation to privilege Fekir, pairing with Karim Benzema ahead of Paul Pogba in a 4-3-1-2, echoing how Lyon had used him ahead of Yoann Gourcuff. Long-time observers of Les Bleus will know how strictly Deschamps has hewn to his favoured 4-3-3, so for the manager to experiment, even in a friendly, with the tournament less than a year away showed a remarkable amount of belief in Fekir's ability. That experiment, however, soon came to a dismal end, as not fifteen minutes had elapsed before Fekir had to be stretchered off, his knee ligaments ruptured and looking set to miss six months.

His absence has been keenly felt at Lyon, as without him, Mathieu Valbuena has operated as the nominal playmaker, but his lack of directness and physical power compared to Fekir's style of play has all but gutted what was Ligue 1's most compelling attacks last season. The club may yet rebound upon his return, but the seriousness of his injury, especially for the ebullient way in which he plays the game, constantly drawing fouls and jostling with defenders means it could yet have serious negative effects on his long term future. This is not to say that Fekir should not be considered among the brightest prospects in Ligue 1, but with only one season (and a handful of matches) of professional football under his belt, the jury is out as to whether or not he can return to his best.



EDINSON CAVANI

[41]
^ 28

Club: Paris Saint-Germain F.C.

Position: Attacker

Born: Salto

Date of Birth: 14/02/1987

Age: 28

"I live one day at a time."

– Edinson Cavani

Edinson Cavani is one of those players who, in the eyes of many fans and critics, can never do anything right. This is a man who comes under constant criticism, despite consistently putting in top class performances for a quadruple winning side, all while being played out of position.

Edinson Cavani, over the last 12 months, has again shown how effective he is as a goalscorer, and has enjoyed plenty of success both individually, and as part of the PSG side that was so dominant over the last calendar year. His goal-scoring record, with which very few players in Ligue 1 can compare to, should speak for itself, and the interest PSG keep having to turn down from other top European clubs should be a sign that Cavani is a real force to be reckoned with.

Cavani's side PSG have had about as successful a 2015 as anyone could hope for. Despite a somewhat slow start to their Ligue 1 campaign, they reeled in leaders Lyon and ended up winning the title pretty comfortably, by an eight-point margin. In the domestic cups, they also enjoyed tremendous success, winning both the Coupe de la Ligue and the Coupe de France trophies.

Even in European competition, they impressed, beating Premier League Champions-elect Chelsea on away goals after extra time at Stamford Bridge, despite being down to 10 men for the large majority of the match after Zlatan Ibrahimovic's red card.

For a side to win the domestic treble every player in the squad needs to make a positive contribution and Edinson Cavani was one of the key players behind PSG's successes in 2015. Having previously been criticised for failing to exert his influence in the big games, this year Cavani showed that he could turn the most important games in PSG's favour.

In the league, he scored against all of Marseille, Lyon, St Étienne and Lille, earning PSG valuable points against potential competition for the Ligue 1 title. Those goals were part of a total of 18 goals in the season, including a remarkable late run of 10 goals in PSG's last seven Ligue 1 games.

But it was in the domestic cup competitions where Cavani really stood up to be counted on the biggest stages. In the Coupe de la Ligue final, when PSG took on fellow Ligue 1 side Bastia, Cavani put in one of his top performances, grabbing a double in a 4-0 PSG win to help his side towards winning their first silverware of the calendar year.

His contribution to PSG's Coupe de France win was even more telling. In France's biggest cup competition, Cavani scored in every game in which he played, helping PSG reach the final, where they were to play considerable underdogs AJ Auxerre. However, the Ligue 2 side put up a valiant fight at the Stade de France, with an impressive goalkeeping performance in particular keeping the efforts of Cavani and Ibrahimovic at bay.

That was until the 54th minute, when Cavani rose highest in the box to meet a cross from the right wing with a towering header to send the ball off the underside of the crossbar and into the back of the net. It was to be the only goal of the game, as PSG added another trophy to the cabinet.

Even in the toughest competition in club football, the Champions' League, Cavani continued to score goals consistently. In the group stages, he scored five goals in six games, helping PSG finish second in the group, narrowly behind group winners Barcelona.

In the last 16, Cavani scored PSG's only goal in their 1-1 draw with Chelsea in the first leg at the Parc des Princes, setting PSG up to eventually qualify on away goals after a fantastic performance at Stamford Bridge. PSG would go on to lose over two legs to eventual champions Barcelona in the next round.

This season, it has been more of the same for Cavani and PSG, in fact if anything they have done better than they did last season. Cavani has bagged 10 goals in 16 games, making him one of the top scorers in Ligue 1, and one of the highest scoring players who plays predominantly out wide in world football.

He has scored plenty of important goals, scoring a brace against Monaco, grabbing a goal and assist against St Étienne, and another goal against last season's runners-up Lyon. His goals and assists have helped PSG to an astounding 19 point lead over second place Monaco after just 19 games of the Ligue 1 season, with another Ligue 1 trophy seemingly within touching distance in 2016.

As a full-back, it must be very difficult to attempt to mark Cavani when he plays on the wing, as he often does for PSG due to Zlatan Ibrahimovic's occupation of the central striker role. The Uruguayan always looks to drift in towards the box, where he can get into goal-scoring positions, and is so dominant in the air that very few centre backs, never mind full-backs, can cope with his ability to score from headers.

Whilst Cavani may not be one of the most skillful or quick of players who start out wide, he is certainly one of the most dangerous. He can score all sorts of goals, with both feet or with his head, as evidenced by the fact that of the 10 league goals he has scored this season, he has scored four with his right foot, four with his left and two with his head. He is a very balanced, all-round goalscorer.

In many ways, 2016 promises to be a very positive year for the 28 year old. He has been very patient at PSG, playing second fiddle to one of the world's greatest players in Ibrahimovic but, with the Swede turning 35 in the New Year and rumours of a move away from Paris in the summer growing, he could well finally get the chance he has been hoping for to consistently play as a striker for PSG.

If he were to decide to move on, there would be no shortage of suitors, with a host of Premier League clubs consistently declaring interest in and being linked to the Uruguayan. Cavani will hope 2016 can be just as successful as the year just gone, both individually and for PSG as a team.

60-41 RECAP

- 60 - Giovanni Sio (Stade Rennais F.C.)
- 59 - Clément Maury (Gazélec Ajaccio)
- 58 - Nicolas Benezet (En Avant de Guingamp)
- 57 - Nampalys Mendy (OGC Nice)
- 56 - Floyd Ayité (SC Bastia)
- 55 - Nicolas N'Koulou (Olympique de Marseille)
- 54 - Sébastien Squillaci (SC Bastia)
- 53 - David Luiz (Paris Saint-Germain F.C.)
- 52 - Abdoulaye Doucouré (Stade Rennais F.C.)
- 51 - Jérémy Toulalan (AS Monaco FC)
- 50 - Raphaël Guerreiro (FC Lorient)
- 49 - Clément Chantôme (FC Girondins de Bordeaux)
- 48 - Thomas Lemar (AS Monaco FC)
- 47 - Benjamin Moukandjo (FC Lorient)
- 46 - Rémy Riou (FC Nantes)
- 45 - Nicolas Maurice Belay (FC Girondins de Bordeaux)
- 44 - Maxime Gonalons (Olympique Lyonnais)
- 43 - Benjamin Lecomte (FC Lorient)
- 42 - Nabil Fekir (Olympique Lyonnais)
- 41 - Edinson Cavani (Paris Saint-Germain F.C.)



STÉPHANE RUFFIER

[40]
v 21

Club: AS Saint-Étienne

Position: Goalkeeper

Born: Bayonne

Date of Birth: 27/09/1986

Age: 29

"I am a competitor."

– Stéphane Ruffier

In the Ligue 1 of 2015 with newly promoted sides sitting proudly in the Champions' League places after half the season, established sides slum it in mid-table as they are defeated by Ligue 1's unheralded members, as ten points separate the third placed side and the team in seventieth.

Aside from Paris Saint-Germain's cakewalk to the title there are few things that can be relied upon in France's top tier. Form books have gone well out the window and preseason predictions look more and more foolish after every week.

One such constant is St Étienne's presence towards the top of the table, battling against their glass ceiling issue that has stopped them recently that is the Ligue 1 podium. Since 2012, St Étienne have always finished in the top seven, peaking in 2014 with a fourth place finish two points off Lille in third but a comfortable eight points ahead of rivals Lyon.

In the second half of the 2014/15 season, Sainté never dropped lower than their eventual finishing position of fifth. They reached the quarter-finals of the Coupe de la Ligue and the semi-finals of the Coupe de France where they would come up against the Parisian behemoth who would end their cup ambitions on both occasions.

A key element to les Verts' success has been their defensive solidity, they boasted the second best defence in the league in 2014/15. Naturally, any good defence requires a good goalkeeper and in Stéphane Ruffier, St Étienne can claim to have one of the best in the championship. Ruffier kept an impressive 18 clean sheets during the previous season. At the winter break Ruffier's tally stood at seven clean sheets.

As an ever-present in Christophe Galtier's selections since his arrival from Monaco in 2011, he has racked up an extraordinary run of more than 170 consecutive league games at the halfway stage of the 2015/16 season.

Stéphane Ruffier is an imposingly built stopper, his 1.84m muscular frame enables him to command his box and net with authority. His raw strength allied to his genuinely quick reflexes make him a real asset his side.

Ruffier's build does not stymie his ability to deal with low strikes, he is particularly strong at saving close range shots. Overall, he possesses one of the best all-round games in France.

One area where St Étienne were able to improve this year was their performances in the Europa League, having made it through a qualifying round and a play-off, they made the group stages once more and after 2014's winless efforts they were able get past 2015's beaten Europa League finalists Dnipro to qualify alongside Lazio thanks largely to home and away wins against the Ukrainians, in which Ruffier kept clean sheets in both games.

In March of 2015, Ruffier made his third appearance for the French national team in a friendly with Denmark. In a match held at St Étienne's Geoffroy Guichard stadium, he kept a second clean sheet for Les Bleus.

He had previously made his two appearances in home and away fixtures with Norway in 2010 and 2014 respectively and was the third goalkeeper for Didier Deschamps' side in the Brazilian World Cup of 2014.

It would not be for Ruffier's appearance against the Danes for which he would be in the French national consciousness this year. A regular in Deschamps' squads in recent times, he has found playing time to be difficult to come by.

Three caps in a little under five years attests to the sheer level of competition he faces to line up for Les Bleus. So often it is that goalkeepers face a high standard of competition. Ruffier has to surpass French team captain Hugo Lloris and Marseille keeper Steve Mandanda who Deschamps knows from his time managing at the Vélodrome.

The third keeper internationally is an ideologically challenging role, during the 1998 world coach Aimé Jacquet enthused Lionel Charbonnier's energy and willingness to work with the number one and two keepers, maintaining their motivation and technical skill. A similar role was undertaken by Mickaël Landreau in Brazil 2014 after Mandanda's injury saw Ruffier promoted to reserve number 2. Whereas, former French coach Michel Hidalgo saw the role as offering experience to a younger keeper whose time is ahead of him.

During the March meet-up Deschamps and Ruffier had a long chat over his role in the side going forward. The challenge of displacing Hugo Lloris on a regular basis is a daunting task at best and with Steve Mandanda waiting in wings the task gets all the more difficult. The three men are all of a similar age and as such chances of a significant shake-up in selection policy seem slim; certainly in the short term ahead of the Euros.

Ruffier was indeed called up for France's friendlies at the beginning of September but was forced to withdraw after suffering an injury in the home win to Bastia at the back-end of August.

Then a month later, having not missed any club football, Ruffier was not selected as the opportunity fell to PSG's Alphonse Aréola who was performing well on-loan at Villarreal in La Liga.

Deschamps, whilst not closing the door forever seemed to cast doubt on Ruffier's willingness to be the third choice.

"I had a long discussion with him (Ruffier) last March, recently I spoke with him again and following this discussion I have decided not to select him." - Didier Deschamps, October 2015.

Once more Ruffier did not make the squad for the November games with Germany and England with Benoit Costil taking on the role. So, looking forward it seems unlikely Ruffier will be in the squad come this summer's tournament in France given Deschamps' tendency to be ruthless and strong minded in his decision-making.

While missing out on a home tournament must be a massive disappointment for the St Étienne man, he backs his own ability to do what he does best.

Looking to the future, without any further potential international distraction he can spend his time preserving his status at one of Ligue 1's most consistent performers who will no doubt have no shortage of suitors from France and abroad.



THIAGO MOTTA

[39]
v 34

Club: Paris Saint-Germain F.C.

Position: Midfielder

Born: São Bernardo do Campo

Date of Birth: 28/08/1982

Age: 33

"This PSG team is the best that I have ever played for."

– Thiago Motta

2015 has been another assured year for PSG's Italian midfielder Thiago Motta, who despite now being in the later years of his career, is still a regular in the big spender's first team.

The 33-year-old plays in a deeper holding role, providing vital protection to the back four, which allows PSG to be so successful defensively. The club have conceded just nine league goals so far this season. His work has been important, particularly in the Champions' League, where PSG were able to progress to the later stages at the beginning of this calendar year, as well as successfully making it out of the group in this current season.

Notable performances have come in this competition, with the Italian featuring for a full 90 minutes against Real Madrid in a 0-0 draw, where he was able to keep the likes of Ronaldo and Isco quiet for the whole game. Thus, despite his age, Motta looks far from being finished at the highest level.

Despite being demonstrated year in year out, Thiago Motta's passing in 2016 has been at an all-time high. As of September, he had the most successful passes of anyone in Europe's top five leagues, demonstrating his influence in the heart of PSG's midfield.

The Italian has a passing accuracy of 92.8% in Ligue 1 and 93.2% in continental football this current season, leaving him with one of the highest success rates in the European game.

These are numbers which have improved from last season, demonstrating how Motta is still adapting to make himself a better player, even now heading towards his mid-thirties.

At many times in Ligue 1, particularly this calendar year, Motta has been able to control the tempo of the game. Such has not been more evident than in big wins, against the likes of Toulouse 5-0 and 3-0 victory away at Caen in recent months, where many attacks have come due to Motta breaking up play and picking a pass. Thus, at times it has been Motta's industry that has actually resulted in goals as well as clean sheets.

This being said, however, although not his role, Motta does do little to contribute to PSG's attacking play compared to some of his other midfield rivals, such as Marco Verratti and Blaise Matuidi, who tend to chip in with more goals and assists than the Italian.

The 33 year old failed to score for his club in the whole of 2015, where as in previous times, such as at Inter Milan, 5 years ago, he regularly chipped in with three or four goals a season.

The highlight of 2015 for Motta has to indeed be PSG's Ligue 1 title victory of last season, in which he played a key part, playing in nearly 30 games. Although maybe less of a celebrated name than the likes of Ibrahimovic and Cavani, Motta was perhaps as crucial in success, being in fine form throughout. Indeed, one of the Italian's main strengths is his consistency, rarely making mistakes, misplacing passes, or indeed putting a foot wrong.

However, despite his successes in 2015, 2016 will be an interesting one for Thiago Motta. At the ripe old age of 33, PSG will need to start looking for replacements if they are going to achieve continued success in not only France, but continental football.

The player recently signed a new contract until 2017, highlighting that PSG still see him as an important first team player. Nevertheless, it remains to be seen as to whether Motta will still have the legs in a year's time in order to still compete in the later stages of the Champions' League or will start to prove a weaker link for his side.

The summer signing of Benjamin Stambouli does perhaps suggest that PSG no longer believe that they can rely on Motta alone in the defensive midfielder position, but in all fairness to the 33 year old, the quality of his performances have kept the new signing mainly out of the first team, receiving only sporadic outings, with only one in the Champions' league. Whether PSG look to bring in someone else in this position next summer, or indeed this January will be very interesting to see.

Overall, therefore, despite being in, what one would presume are, the later stages of his career, over the course of 2015, Thiago Motta has demonstrated that he still has the ability to compete at the highest level, showing a great deal of consistency and adaptation in his role as a defensive midfielder for PSG.

The Italian is one of the pivotal forces behind not only PSG's great defensive record in all competitions, but their success as a whole and has celebrated wins in not only Ligue 1, but also Coupe de La Ligue and the French Cup in 2016. Whether Motta can sustain such a high level in 2016 remains to be seen, but as we approach the turn of the year, he still looks like a player who can perform to the best of his abilities week in week out.



HATEM BEN ARFA

[38]
*

Club: OGC Nice

Position: Midfielder

Born: Clamart

Date of Birth: 07/03/1987

Age: 28

"I am in heaven."

– Hatem Ben Arfa

On the third day of 2015 one of Ligue 1's prodigal sons was offered a shot at redemption and a return to his native land. Hatem Ben Arfa was announced to be ending his four and half year association with England and the Premier League to join Nice on a free transfer. This would offer him the chance to play on a regular basis in a team based around him.

However, this would be short-lived as on January 12th news broke that the deal was in serious doubt. Problems began to arise when it became apparent that he had played in a youth reserve team fixture for Newcastle at the beginning of the season before beginning his ill-fated loan spell at Hull City, where he made 8 appearances for the Tigers before falling out with manager Steve Bruce where Ben Arfa was allegedly made to feel like a scapegoat for their poor results, which would ultimately result in relegation. Given that FIFA footballing rules state that players cannot play for three different clubs in a single season, Ben Arfa's move to Nice was in serious jeopardy.

What then ensued was a month-long period of administrative to-ing and fro-ing between various bodies as they tried to discern whether the fixture with the Newcastle reserve counted as an official match or whether it should be counted simply as a friendly or exhibition match: the LFP first put off making a decision on Ben Arfa before delegating the matter. After all the back and forth, a month on from announcing his return to France, Ben Arfa was forced into conceding defeat. Ben Arfa was left in footballers no-man's land, unable to play for half a season, without a club or a contract and confessed to having serious doubts as to what his next move was. He even went as far as to intimate that his career may be at an end.

Fast-forward to June and Ben Arfa finally got his chance to sign officially for OGC Nice. He made his return to Ligue 1 in the opening day derby south coast derby loss to Monaco. The following week he would net his first goal for the club converting a penalty in a topsy-turvy game at newly promoted Troyes that finished three goals apiece.

It is fair to say the level of expectation for Ben Arfa was not particularly high, a player without a minute of football since the previous autumn was hardly to be expected to bring about miracles. Several unflattering photos emerged of Ben Arfa in training ahead of the season that seemed to go along with this image of Ben Arfa as a sort of faded superstar with a huge amount of unfulfilled potential.

Talent has never been an issue for Hatem Ben Arfa. His magic wand of a left foot has left many a player bamboozled by his myriad of tricks and flicks down the years. Newcastle fans were left in raptures after his wonder goals against Bolton and Blackburn in early 2012, both coming from long mazy runs mixed with an array of trickery of the very highest order.

Nice fans were similarly treated to such skills come the beginning of the 2015/16 Ligue 1 campaign. Matchday three saw Caen visited the Allianz Riviera on a balmy Saturday night in late August. A game that was meandering along at zero-zero exploded into life. Ben Arfa picked up the ball on the left hand flank, sensing his opportunity he began dribbling towards the Caen penalty area. He then proceeded to go through the defence like the proverbial hot knife through butter, four defenders in white were simply not able to get close to him as he left them for dust before lashing the ball high into the net from an acute angle.

The game would finish 2-1 to the home side with Ben Arfa's strike almost immediately cancelled out before ten minutes later Nice scored the winner through Alassane Pléa. This would be the start of the period in the season where Nice's games were something close to must-watch given the level of entertainment that often ensued.

Nice travelled to Bastia for matchday six for a match that began a sequence of thrilling games and goals aplenty for les aiglons. The cumulative scores for four consecutive games amounted to 17-4. As Bastia (3-1) Bordeaux (6-1), Saint Etienne (4-1) and Rennes (4-1) were dispatched with aplomb. Moreover only the Bordeaux game was at home. In these games Ben Arfa was at the heart of everything chalking up five goals and an assist for his side.

His second goal against St Étienne probably stands out above all with his jinky run through the defence taking out 5 defenders in the process before slotted effortlessly passed Stéphane Ruffier in the Sainté net as Nice run up some mightily impressive results. Yet, things would drop off slightly the next three games would see a loss to Gazelec Ajaccio a home draw to struggling Lille side and a home loss to Nantes side, not renowned for their goal-scoring ability. Before the year was out there would still be time for some more than decent results, a three nil thrashing of Lyon and a hard-fought win at the Vélodrome against rivals Marseille.

In a Ligue 1 season where two promoted sides sit in the top four Nice have been of the stories of the season thus far with Ben Arfa's renaissance at the core. Ben Arfa would see himself recalled to the French national team in November for the games against Germany and England. While these games will not be remembered for things on the pitch given that they took place with France and the rest of the world in shock after the 13th November Paris attacks; it was in recognition of Ben Arfa's performances that he made the squad in the first place and he will hope to make the squad for March's friendly against the Dutch and the Russians.

From training with Newcastle's reserves and being frozen out at Hull, Ben Arfa ends 2015 as one of Ligue 1's best performers in a young team packed with youthful energy and vigour. There is already talk of a transfer away from Nice and France for the five-time French title winner, however the Nice president has quashed all talk of a January move. Ben Arfa's is clearly in a good place at the moment: he is able to express himself and has a manager that believes in him with his teammates also reliant on him to provide that creative spark that he is so good at doing.



LASSANA DIARRA

[37]
*

Club: Olympique de Marseille

Position: Midfielder

Born: Paris

Date of Birth: 10/03/1985

Age: 30

"I am happy to be back."

– Lassana Diarra

The purpose of the GFFN 100 is to rank the best playing talents in French football in this calendar year, and track their progress, the highs and the lows throughout the previous 12 months. For 98 players in Le Championnat, this is a relatively straightforward thing to do. Not so for Lassana Diarra (or Hatem Ben Arfa).

12 months ago, the France international, who picked up the FA Cup with Portsmouth in 2008, and won plaudits and trophies at Chelsea, Arsenal and Real Madrid, was languishing in football's abyss after a contract dispute with Lokomotiv Moscow in Russia, saw him literally stuck between Russia and a hard place.

Training with the likes of West Ham in the Premier League was a far cry from where the 30-year-old should have been. But take a closer look at the player - commonly known as Lass - and his demeanour. Never complained, never once felt sorry for himself. Diarra worked hard to try and engineer a return, and the early part of the year saw many setbacks as he failed to complete a move to the Hammers as well as Celtic in Scotland.

Four months later, and a surprise move to Marseille had come about. The fallen French giants, having lost midfield pearl Giannelli Imbula to FC Porto in the summer needed reinforcements, but had little cash to part with. Step forward the unlikeliest of risks taken by the maligned OM president Vincent Labrune.

To replace Imbula, the darling of ex-coach Marcelo Bielsa in midfield, was a 30-year-old washed-up midfielder, who had not played a minute of competitive action for one year. With OM having also signed ex-Arsenal midfielder Abou Diaby, you could forgive one for wondering what OM were upto.

Competitive action for 2015 began for Diarra in the game vs. ESTAC Troyes at the Stade Velodrome in late August in Michel's debut as coach. It turned out to be Diarra's Ligue 1 debut, having left France ten years previously. If the former Real Madrid man had planned his perfect debut for Marseille beforehand, he executed it to precision.

Confident passing in midfield, slick movement and a superb rapport with Lucas Silva (and later Mauricio Isla) in the centre, Diarra racked up an astonishing 98% pass success. He nestled in fantastically in front of the defence, picking off a poor Troyes attack. But the memory of the evening was a perfect debut goal.

A long-range effort from 30 yards out after a short corner sequence, Diarra struck an absolute beauty into the top corner with such power and accuracy. It brought with it the acclaim of the hard-to-please Stade Velodrome faithful. He has not looked back since.

With Marseille's league form spotty as they came to terms with the fallout from Marcelo Bielsa's sudden departure, there remained one shining light in the team. And it was not from the men that they bought, or from the man that excelled under the Argentine coach. Surprisingly, it was from the player who had fallen off from radars completely just mere weeks before that game against Troyes.

Marseille have gambled on Diarra, and Diarra has paid them back in full - and then some. In the Clasico against Paris Saint-Germain, he was arguably OM's best player on the pitch - completely holding his own against pretenders in Blaise Matuidi and Marco Verratti. While the Velodrome was hot with fury against Lyon and the much-documented return of Mathieu Valbuena, OM's young side threatened to boil over. In Diarra, they had the leader figure that they had long been crying out for. His professionalism and calm demeanour, coupled with absolute determination and work-ethic had rubbed off on colleagues in the dressing room.

Such sentiments were echoed by coach Michel who lauded the France international for his attitude and the effect it had on the side. Players ranging from Nicolas N'Koulou to Abdelaziz Barrada lined up to speak positively of their team-mate.

Diarra contributed to Marseille's revival in November, as they saw off Nantes, Lorient and St Étienne with the type of performances that OM were seemingly incapable of in seasons gone by. Gritty, measured and conservative - the type of profile that Diarra himself has come to embody.

His exploits down on the Canebiere had not gone unnoticed by Didier Deschamps over at Clairefontaine. And in October, a return to the France squad was confirmed - his first in five years. It completed a remarkable turnaround in fortunes for the midfielder.

Upon signing for Marseille, Diarra was quoted as speaking of a possible shot at returning to the France squad ahead of Euro 2016. It was met with derision, and the sort of "OK, take it down a notch" expression from numerous corners. He had achieved it at the first attempt.

What Michel & Deschamps have in common, is that they both have a respect for players who can bring a little something extra to the squad. Ability is a given at the top clubs in Europe. Without it, you would be shipped off of course. But there was previously a dearth of leaders, possible captains and role models at both Olympique de Marseille & the French national team.

So, given Diarra's competencies off the field, as well as on it, there is little surprise that he has been taken to so warmly by both coaches. He already is at the forefront of the picks for Euro 2016, edging ahead of Morgan Schneiderlin and Yohan Cabaye. The bolt from the blue is on an upward trajectory indeed as he moves towards the twilight of his career.

2015 was an incredible year for Diarra professionally. Off the field, it was tinged with tragedy. While hitting new heights at the Stade de France on that fateful November night against world champions Germany, the Paris terror attacks not only hit close - but also hit home, with a cousin one of the victims at the Bataclan hall. His personal attributes were there for the whole world to see, and respect and admiration for his story and response became well-known.

2016 promises so much for Diarra. Given the turnaround this year, who knows where he will end up in 12 months.



SERGE AURIER

[36]
v 22

Club: Paris Saint-Germain F.C.

Position: Defender

Born: Ouragahio

Date of Birth: 24/12/1992

Age: 23

"This is my home."

– Serge Aurier

Serge Aurier has transferred his impressive 2014 form into 2015 with a string of excellent performances in the rouge et bleu. His consistent, energetic displays for Paris Saint-Germain have been rewarded with Laurent Blanc installing him as his first choice right-back ahead of the previous occupier Gregory van der Wiel.

It has been quite a ride for Aurier, who started his career at Lens before a move to Toulouse in 2012. After 72 appearances for TFC including some eye-catching performances, Laurent Blanc made clear his admiration for the Ivorian and it was in the summer of 2014 when the president got his man. Aurier moved to Paris on a season-long loan deal with the option to buy, after PSG reached their FFP expenditure limit with the signing of David Luiz from Chelsea. Aurier was brought in initially to replace Christophe Jallet who moved to Lyon but also to provide competition to the already established van der Wiel.

The right-back was predominantly back up for the first half of the season but his season sprang into life at the start of 2015 when he was called up for the Ivory Coast squad for the Africa Cup of Nations. A number of strong defensive displays from Aurier helped lead his country to a first title since 1992. He went on to say that it was *"the proudest moment of my career"*.

Upon returning to the French capital, Aurier was given a start against Caen and although PSG let slip a two-goal lead to draw 2-2, Aurier was praised for his performance on the day but sadly suffered an thigh injury, keeping him out for 6 weeks. Aurier's return in April was warmly received and Blanc installed him as his first choice right back based on his good form and after a reported fall out with van der Wiel.

The Ivorian took his chance with a string of fine displays as PSG claimed a third straight Ligue 1 title, a second consecutive Coupe de la Ligue and a first Coupe de France success since 2010. During this period, Aurier was rewarded for his form, when in April, PSG opted to sign the right-back from Toulouse for a reported 10 million Euros. Laurent Blanc had seen the potential that Aurier has and his ability to progress into a world-class full-back.

Since the end of the 2014/15 season Aurier has found himself as PSG's first choice right back, forming a formidable back four with David Luiz, Thiago Silva and Maxwell. Aurier's improvement has not gone unnoticed and the full-back is popular amongst PSG fans. His tenacity and work ethic have warmed the hearts of the Parisian faithful and he has also weighed in with 5 goals since his move from Toulouse.

The full-back has also been a danger in the attacking third providing assists for the likes of Zlatan Ibrahimovic and Edinson Cavani. The start of the 2015/16 season has seen Aurier firmly cement himself in Blanc's side and as one of the first names on the team sheet. His adjustment to the step up of playing in the Champions' League has been comfortable and despite his inexperience at this level and a tender age of 22, Aurier was exceptional in PSG's unfortunate 1-0 reverse against Real Madrid at the Bernabeu.

If there is one area of criticism that could be aimed at Aurier then it is his over-commitment at times. Aurier's no nonsense approach to the game can at times be counter-productive to his side. Yellow cards have been shown to him unnecessarily and an accumulation have contributed to suspensions.

Whilst this is an area for development, it is not yet an area of concern and with the guidance of players such as Thiago Silva who himself has an exemplary disciplinary record, Aurier's improvement in this area should rectify itself as his experience grows.

There is no doubt that after the year Aurier has had, Gregory van der Wiel will have a huge task in dislodging the Ivorian from his starting berth. Aurier is in the driving seat and with an exciting second half of the season awaiting them, the attacking right-back will have a pivotal role to play domestically and in Europe with PSG chasing glory on four fronts.

Serge Aurier will hope that 2016 is filled with as much success as 2015 and that further progression can be made with his performances for PSG. With his incredible speed, hunger and at times exceptional crossing ability, Aurier is one of the finest specimens belonging to the new breed of full-back that is required to be as effective in attack as he is in defence.

Aurier has all the credentials necessary to become one of the best defenders in Europe and he is at the right club to help him achieve his ambitions. Aurier has the right players around him and will get the time and patience to develop in the French capital. If PSG manage his progress in the right way then they have the possibility of a top class right-back at the club to cover the next 10 years.



MICHY BATSHUAYI

[35]
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Club: Olympique de Marseille

Position: Attacker

Born: Brussels

Date of Birth: 02/10/1993

Age: 22

"The Europa League, it is better than nothing."

– Michy Batshuayi

In the early career trajectory for young players (normally midfielders & forwards), there are two distinct years. One is where they join a bigger club to the one that they were at before. And the second is where they rise to announce themselves on the European stage as the team's most important player.

If 2014 represented year one for Michy Batshuayi, 2015 was most certainly the second, whose calendar year has been a textbook example of the above scenario. At the beginning of 2015, the young Belgian star was number two to André-Pierre Gignac, who was enjoying a bit of a purple patch in the scoring charts.

Marcelo Bielsa however, noted the importance of Batshuayi as a pretender to Gignac's crown. And OM knew full well that Gignac would be departing in the summer, with almost zero chance of spending millions on an established striker to replace him. Batshuayi it seemed, was bought for the sole purpose of being groomed as the Frenchman's heir. The only issue was for the 22-year-old to replicate the faith that had been shown in him from the management.

And the ex-Standard striker, despite sporadic game time, did superbly in highlighting his worth. Reduced to a bit-part role, he was the one player Bielsa could call upon to make a difference. And a difference he did make.

In late February against St Étienne, a side that Marseille usually do not do well against away from home, Bielsa took off the under-performing Gignac and replaced him with Batshuayi as OM looked for alternatives having gone 1-0 down. 40 seconds later, Batshuayi controlled a long ball expertly, chesting down & holding off his marker before firing OM level. Forty seconds.

Two minutes after that, inexplicably OM were ahead. St Étienne were lackadaisical in defence, and the visitors pounced. Benjamin Mendy's low cross was caught on by Batshuayi who steered the ball past Stéphane Ruffier. 63 minutes he had come on, 67 minutes OM were 2-1 ahead, Michy had two.

He was given the nod to start the next game against Caen at Stade Vélodrome, but could not replicate the same performance in a difficult encounter. Gignac replaced him after the hour, and scored - before OM lost 2-3. It was a steep learning curve for the player, however.

He was given a second chance against Toulouse at Stadium Municipal. This time however, he managed to impress, scoring twice once more - at the beginning of the first half (2') and at the end (44') before being substituted. Marseille had two firing strikers on the pitch and on the bench.

And the rise continued against Lens at the Stade de France. He replaced Gignac at the break, and scored within a minute, putting OM 1-0 ahead before completing a 4-0 scoreline at the end of the game with a tap-in. Michy Batshuayi was becoming a veritable super-sub in European football with his quick impact. While he would have preferred to be the club's number one striker, he was excelling despite his bit-part role.

And such performances not only caught the imagination, but also caught the attention of Belgium coach Marc Wilmots, who handed him his debut against Cyprus in Euro qualifying. Coming on for Christian Benteke - and? You guessed it, scoring his first international goal three minutes later.

Surprisingly, for such an end to the season, there were few reported suitors for Michy Batshuayi. Marseille had made it clear that they had no intention of parting with their young starlet. Gignac had indeed parted in the summer, off to Mexico with Tigres UANL. And while the core of OM's side were sold off, Batshuayi would remain having been promoted as the club's number one striker.

Instead, Marseille were seeking a striker to alleviate the workload that Batshuayi would have to get through. He was the number one striker indeed, but the only striker on the club's books. And as OM failed to bring in reinforcements, including a failed bid to bring in Erik Lamela on deadline day and Wissam Ben Yedder remaining at Toulouse, all eyes turned to the big Belgian who would have to carry his side into at least the first half of the 2015-16 season.

Hard work indeed, but Batshuayi relished the challenge. It beat being on the bench anyway, as he was now guaranteed to start every game pending match fitness. After a spotty start to the season, he bagged two against Troyes, and a further one against Bastia - but it was towards the end of September when the streak began, scoring five in five to aid Marseille in their revival.

He became Marseille's most important player this season, and having scored already 11 goals in 18 in Ligue 1, with a further three in the Europa League, he has done superbly well in keeping OM afloat despite their striking deficiencies.

The problem with Batshuayi is, that it is hard to really judge if he is the all-encompassing striker as is evident. For every goal scored, there remains one or two clear-cut chances missed, which adds a layer of frustration for viewers of his game. If he does show great desire and determination to win the ball and bully defenders, he often complements that with poor decision making in failing to feed team-mates on the counter-attack. It is the same problem that Marc Wilmots has spoken about when deciding to call him up on the counter-attack.

As ever, Batshuayi needs to benefit from strong competition, with Marseille attempting to pull out all the stops to sign a centre-forward which can challenge him for the second-part of the season and to also assist in helping him avoid burnout as OM launch an attack on all four competitions they remain active in.

And it is important that Batshuayi remains fresh and potent in attack for 2016 will prove to be a big year with possible participation at Euro 2016 with the Red Devils. There has been talk of possible £30m moves in the summer, but for now, he remains the undisputed holder at Stade Velodrome. Long may that continue.



KEVIN TRAPP

[34]
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Club: Paris Saint-Germain F.C.

Position: Goalkeeper

Born: Merzig

Date of Birth: 08/07/1990

Age: 25

"There is too much speculation about my personal life."

– Kevin Trapp

Germans are few and far between in Ligue 1. In fact, there are only two of them. Diego Contento is a left-back plying his trade at struggling Bordeaux while Kevin Trapp signed for PSG this summer from German club Eintracht Frankfurt.

While the former has made a bit of a step-down – going from Bayern Munich to Bordeaux – 25-year old Kevin Trapp has made the step up from a mid-table Bundesliga side that makes the odd appearance in the Europa League here and there (their last foray was in 2013/14 where they were harshly knocked out by Porto in the round of 32, 5-5 on aggregate) to a club that is now a European giant winning the league every year à la Bayern Munich and eagerly awaiting its first Champions' League success.

Trapp learned his goalkeeping trade at the Gerald Ehrmann goalkeeping school of Kaiserslautern (Ehrmann was Kaiserslautern's goalkeeper from 1984 to 1998, having funded the school in 1996). Other notable goalkeepers to have completed the course are Roman Weidenfeller (long-term Borussia Dortmund custodian) and Tim Wiese (likewise for Werder Bremen). Trapp is thus a well-trained shot stopper.

Trapp makes the Kaiserslautern squad for the 2008/09 season behind Tobias Sippel. He made cameo appearances in the DFB Pokal (the German Cup) in which he shone. Sippel got ill in March 2011 which gave Trapp his chance to make the #1 jersey his own which he did as he played every game until the end of the season and remained Kaiserslautern's first-team goalkeeper until the club's relegation to the second division at the end of the 2011/12 season.

It was clear that a talent such as Trapp was wasted in Germany's second tier. Trapp was thus courted by a host of decent Bundesliga clubs. He was promised to be a starter at Frankfurt, a good opportunity for a young, up-and-coming goalkeeper. Despite getting sent off in his baptism of fire game after 15 minutes in a Pokal game against Erzgebirge Aue, Trapp had a great season as Eintracht Frankfurt finished 6th in 2012/13, narrowly missing out on a Champions' League spot by 4 points. The following season, Frankfurt made it past the Europa League group stage to the detriment of their league form (such is usually the case for a club the size of Eintracht's). Still the club had a solid season, not concerned by relegation at any point during the campaign. Trapp's last season – 2014/15 – was soured by injury though and he did not play from September through to January. Still, as soon as Trapp returned, he had no trouble winning the #1 shirt back from Felix Wiedwald (now at Werder Bremen).

The summer arrived and Trapp made no intention of leaving public. The move to PSG came very much as a surprise to most (much like PSG's acquisition of Benjamin Stambouli from Tottenham) as PSG did not really need to sign a goalkeeper. Salvatore Sirigu did not have a particularly brilliant 2014/15 campaign but the same can be said for pretty much the whole PSG squad. Nicolas Douchez, Sirigu's understudy, was also perfectly happy to play as the cup goalkeeper, deputising in the Coupe de France and Coupe de la Ligue games.

PSG manager Laurent Blanc however decided to give Sirigu some competition and signed Trapp on July 8th (coincidentally Trapp's 25th birthday). He did not state which goalkeeper he would start on a weekly basis at the start of the 2015/16 campaign.

Now halfway through the season, we can see that Blanc trusts Trapp despite the bloopers the German has come up with. His howlers have come as a surprise as Trapp was not one to have slippery fingers in the Bundesliga. Perhaps it is due to the fact that he is playing in a different country but his blunders against Bordeaux and Lyon made for painful watching.

Those domestic blunders are barely important given PSG's dominance (51 points halfway through despite having played 11 games away and 8 at home, 48 goals scored, 9 conceded and finishing a whopping 19 points clear of 2nd which is of course a Ligue 1 record) but Trapp also made a costly mistake against Real Madrid in the Champions' League group stage which cost PSG the top spot in their group thus making them unseeded for the 1st knock-out stage draw ("thankfully", PSG drew Chelsea). However, Trapp was still voted best goalkeeper of the Champions League group stage by UEFA and he saved a penalty at Caen in PSG's last game of the year.

Now Trapp has a new challenge: cut out the mistakes and make the decisive saves when it matters. PSG being dominant for a whole game means that Trapp has very little work to do, which makes his task even more difficult than for any other Ligue 1 keeper. He is after all Germany coach Joachim Löw's choice for Manuel Neuer's (the best goalkeeper in the world) understudy having beaten the competition of Barcelona's Marc-André Ter Stegen.

2015 has been a good year for Trapp but 2016 is undoubtedly the biggest of his career yet.



FABINHO

[33]
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Club: AS Monaco FC

Position: Defender

Born: Campinas

Date of Birth: 23/10/1993

Age: 22

"It is good to see my name associated with Barcelona."

– Fabinho

With one of the strangest early career paths of any footballer in living memory, Fabinho has proved that no matter how great the journey, a player can, with hard-work, reach the destination that his talent deserves to reach.

The young Brazilian spent the latter half of his youth career with Fluminense before he moved to Europe in 2012, joining Portuguese side Rio Ave. However, he failed to ever make an appearance for the club as he was immediately sent out on loan to Real Madrid Castilla, where he spent the rest of the season.

He impressed for Los Blancos B, making 30 appearances and scoring on two occasions. Fabinho also got an unlikely call-up to the first-team squad and even came on during their 6-2 demolishing of Malaga, where he set up Angel Di Maria for a goal.

It was but a small taste of what was to come in the future for the youngster, who then signed a two-year loan deal with the then heavily-backed Ligue 1 side Monaco. It was a move that flew under the radar as big names came through the door in the Stade Louis II at the same time, but he would prove not to be entirely overshadowed by the likes of Radamel Falcao and James Rodriguez.

Fabinho did not set the world alight in his first season, in 2013/14 but he certainly did enough to start regularly in his second year and it was then that he really shone. The right-back played 53 games in all competitions, scoring twice and being a major part of one of Europe's meanest defences.

They conceded just 26 goals in Ligue 1 during the 2014/15 campaign, the best record in the division, which included a run of eight clean sheets in a row between December and early February. Since the start of that amazing run they kept a total of 16 clean sheets, conceding just eight goals as they lifted themselves from a dreadful start into a strong third position.

The defence was also exceptionally stubborn in the Champions' League, where they conceded just once during the group stages. That form continued in the knockout rounds as they held Arsenal to just one goal at the Emirates, although they relaxed with the job done in the return leg, and only allowed eventual finalists Juventus to score once over the course of two legs.

The 22-year-old was a major force, able to play either at right-back or as a central defender and defensive midfielder if required, he excelled at performing his defensive duties. His game was often characterised by impressive positioning and ball retention skills that made him a potent attacking force.

Fast-forward to the 2015/16 season and Fabinho has only continued grow, adopting greater responsibility within the side including being made the primary penalty taker. He has also more frequently played as a defensive midfielder, with his obvious ability on the ball and intelligent positioning making him ideally suited for the role.

Whilst this position holds him back a little from developing his attacking skillset, the discipline that he has shown in this crucial position has shown maturity beyond his years.

In reality, Fabinho should be the clear heir to Dani Alves for the national team's right-back position. He has all the attributes, some might even say that he is better defensively while the Barcelona man is better in advanced areas, but he is of the required standard to be a success as an international.

Ligue 1 aficionados should enjoy his performances in early 2016 as it will not be long before the vultures circle up above. Good, defensively sound full-backs that can also contribute effectively in attack are very hard to come by and should there be a vacancy at a big club this summer, his name will be at the top of many teams' wish-list.

His excellence has attracted the attention of big European clubs like Manchester United over the summer and teams may make eyes again during the winter transfer window. His impressive displays have also not gone unnoticed by those in his birthplace and Fabinho played twice for Brazil in the lead up to the Copa Libertadores, although he served as an unused back-up to Dani Alves at the tournament itself.

Tall in size for a full-back, standing at 1.88m, Fabinho has all the attributes of a modern defender. Highly attentive and with good reactions, Fabinho's speed allows him to burst past opponents on the ball or to keep up with tricky wingers without it.

The statistics suggest that he is one of the most successful tacklers in Ligue 1; having averaged 2.7 tackles a game last season, which was a better total than any other defender in the fantastic Monaco back-line.

He has been hitting the same sort of numbers in the first half of the 2014/15 campaign, but he also shows off his positional awareness, having made an average of 2.9 interceptions per game too. Fabinho is willing to take a bit of a risk with the ball in advanced areas, with an ability to switch the play when needed but he does need to improve on his final ball.

His one assist in two previous seasons is troubling but with that tally doubled already this season, the signs are positive that he has also identified this as an area that requires some addressing. Having said that, it is perhaps understandable that Fabinho was not responsible for a large amount of assists in previous seasons because Monaco have only recently begun to rely on a target man as their central striker, a strategy that requires overlapping full-backs to provide crosses, having previously preferred to work the ball into the box.

The three yellow cards that he has picked up this season should not be seen as too much of a worry, he is a cool-headed customer who does not suffer from ill-discipline and the real positive is that he gets fouled as often, if not more often, than when he fouls an opponent. An added bonus, he can take a mean penalty, having dispatched three this season.

His best game so far this season came in the 2-1 win against Bastia, where he created an assist from a lovely dinked cross from just outside the box with his right foot for Lacina Traoré to finish. He won four tackles from his position in the middle of the park, tallied up an 82% pass completion percentage and showed off his qualities in an all-round display.

The next step that Fabinho must take in order to progress as a footballer might be a move away from Ligue 1, especially if Monaco cannot be more competitive and return to the Champions' League next season. For his progression, it is vital for him to be playing at the top level and that may be an ambition that he cannot fulfil at Monaco for much longer.



ÁNGEL DI MARÍA

[32]
*

Club: Paris Saint-Germain F.C.

Position: Midfielder

Born: Rosario

Date of Birth: 14/02/1988

Age: 27

*"I want to win the
Champions League
with PSG."*

– Ángel Di María

PSG's latest attraction has completed his first half-season. A good time to reflect on his move and indeed his 2015 as a calendar year.

Born in a modest environment, young Ángel is said to have had an unusually active temperament and was advised to start playing football at the tender age of 3. Like most South Americans, football was his life and his career path was quite clear from a very young age.

He started his career at Rosaria Central aged 18 but did not catch European attraction quite yet at that point. For that he needed to shine in the U20 World Cup with Argentina which he did with aplomb. Granted he was part of a generation of ridiculously talented individuals as he played alongside the likes of Sergio Agüero and Mauro Zárate.

Winning a youth World Cup does not necessarily translate into a move to Europe: only the best of the bunch receive that sort of treatment. In Argentina, Boca Juniors did bid \$6.5M for him but it was Portuguese giants Benfica who were able to sign Di María in July 2007. A good move for both parties as Portugal is the entry door of Europe from South America. Portugal is where these talents are nurtured, tamed for the European game before being sold at a major profit to a club in a bigger European league, if the player in question can undergo the transformation process in the Liga Sagres (Falcao can testify) that is. Di María found his position as a right-winger cutting inside and being very effective in an ordinary Benfica side (apart from Coentrão who was also special down the left). His talent was obvious in Portugal and big clubs came calling. Real Madrid had the honour of acquiring his services in what will become a much-publicised era of duel with Barcelona in the Mourinho vs Guardiola years.

Now before Di María's arrival in the Spanish capital city, Real Madrid were not even considered as Champions' League contenders: in the 2009-2010, they lost to Lyon 2-1 on aggregate in the 1st knock-out stage, an outcome that was seen as a clear underachievement. Once Di María was playing for Real, the team gained in talent, sharpness, technique and mental strength (granted, Mourinho may have had something to do with that). Still, with Di María at the club, Real Madrid went from Champions' League drop-outs once the going got tough to serious contenders. Mourinho was not able to win the Champions' League but he laid the foundation for Carlo Ancelotti to do just that in the decima success of 2014. In his 4th and final season at the Merengue, Ancelotti decided that Di María's input would be stronger as a central midfielder where he could organise the play (like a Xabi Alonso) rather than winger that likes to cut inside and shoot on sight (like Ashley Young). It worked like a dream.

After the success of 2014, which remains the pinnacle of the player's career so far, Di María was transferred to Manchester United for £59.7M. His solitary season in the midlands remains a stain in this fine player's résumé. His delivery was decent early with 3 goals in his opening 5 games but waned as the season went on. Then again, when you see how badly Louis van Gaal has Manchester United playing this term, Di María may have made good work of a tough task for a negative manager.

Which brings us to 2015. It began in an underwhelming fashion for the Argentine. Sure Manchester United were winning games most weeks but Di María was not enjoying his football. 6 of his 7 substitute appearances came between the end of March and the beginning of May, a telling fact that he did not have the manager's confidence. It was time for the central winger to leave the English giants.

Di María's stay in France is so far a better experience for him than his English adventure. He was bought as the annual Qatari folly of Nasser El-Khelaifi for a PSG side lacking inspiration at times last season with Zlatan not seeming to bother showing up on occasion during matches. This season, Di María's technique and vision has helped PSG unlock many an opposition's rear-guard. He made his debut at Monaco in August and his first touches of the ball were superbly crossed deliveries towards Edinson Cavani. The Uruguayan still lacks the killer instinct that Zlatan possesses in front of goal but he is certainly playing better than last season thanks to Di María's creativity. The Argentine is being played on the left wing by Blanc but PSG are given so much time on the ball that he has the license to roam around the pitch at will as long as he finds an opening (which he usually does).

His performance levels are welcomed by the PSG board especially since Lucas Moura has not been performing to the same standards on the right wing. Di María has also confirmed Lavezzi's stay on the bench. He is fully integrated to the squad and is one of the key players to PSG's superb form this season which could see them win the league by a record points tally (90+ maybe going as far as 100 if they keep up this winning ratio).

A year of transition for Di María then: from arguably the darkest days of his career to date at a gutless Manchester United side to a brave new world in Paris. Will Di María be the man that PSG need to finally make it to the very final stages of the Champions' League? Rendez-vous in 2016.



DIEGO ROLÁN

[31]
^43

Club: FC Girondins de Bordeaux

Position: Attacker

Born: Montevideo

Date of Birth: 24/03/1993

Age: 22

"This is a new era for the club, I hope to score."

– Diego Rolán

Diego Rolán began the year with hopes of capitalising on the breakthrough 2014 he enjoyed. After all, Bordeaux began the league campaign very strongly, and he had been an integral part of Willy Sagnol's surprisingly entertaining side. With an upcoming Copa America with his national team to look forward to, the onus was on the Uruguayan international to hit the accelerator.

While Les Girondins initially stuttered in the early exchanges of the year, Rolán had not. Sagnol's side had recorded just two wins in their first six Ligue 1 games of the year. They also scored a meagre four goals. Rolán was responsible for two of them. Sagnol had preferred Isaac Kiese Thelin up top, with Rolán pushed out on the right wing.

However, when the Uruguayan was moved into the centre, it did wonders for the Aquitaine club. Rolán scored the winner in the 1-0 victory over St Étienne courtesy of a wonderful run and finish that confounded Stéphane Ruffier. It ignited a purple patch of form in which he picked up an assist in the following match against Rennes.

It was in March in which he enjoyed probably his best month of the season. With Bordeaux struggling to hold onto their sixth position in the league (and a Europa League qualification spot), impetus was needed, particularly from the attackers to keep Bordeaux in the hunt. Against Caen, the 22-year-old stepped up.

His first goal epitomised his style of play. Attentive, determined and pacey – he pounced onto a fine cross to divert the effort for the opener. After Caen had equalised, the visitors looked nailed-on to be held to another draw. However, a stroke of luck was to come their way in the form of a late-penalty, as FCGB, led by Rolán piled on the offensive. It was the Uruguayan who stepped up, and scored to hand his side the win, in the 95th minute.

Rolán and co. followed up with a superb 3-2 victory over Paris Saint-Germain in a memorable 3-2 encounter at the Chaban-Delmas. Again operating up top, he turned in a neat low cross from Mariano to turn in a fine goal and seal the victory.

He notched a fourth goal in three – albeit in a 2-1 reverse to Toulouse – as Bordeaux continued to solidify their league position. Largely the beneficiary of a technical switch-up imposed by Sagnol, Rolán had scored 11 league goals up until that point. However, he was unable to find the net for the next five games. Though they contained wins over Marseille and Lens – this time, Sagnol kept the faith.

It marked a distinct change from the earlier on in the season. Consigned to a bit-part role when the performances were not flowing, he was later ejected from the squad for an internal incident. This time however, Sagnol continued to start the player, and for 90 minutes in a combination of his reluctance to field other players and also Rolán now turning into Bordeaux's number one striker.

Eventually, it paid off. A late flurry of high-end performances against Nantes, Lyon & Montpellier which brought two wins and confirmation of a place in the Europa League earned Bordeaux their season objective. Rolán was decisive in each match.

Against Nantes, it was another goal from the spot, before finishing off a quick pass from Enzo Crivelli, lashed high into the net. Again, while the finish itself was not appealing – it is again the quick thinking pounce that makes Rolán stand out. The attention & anticipation is what underlines the finish.

And to cap off his breakthrough season in Bordeaux, it was in the final game of the season – the first ever to be played at the brand new Stade Matmut Atlantique, built for Euro 2016.

Rolán had the honour of christening the new arena with the first ever goal scored, latching onto a perfectly weighted pass to evade the defence, and sent a powerful right-footed effort past the goalkeeper.

Before the first half was out, Rolán had his second goal. Take a look on YouTube – attention, anticipation again at play. A long effort was unfortunately spilled, and who else was quickest to send a remarkable diving header into the net.

Bordeaux got their win over Montpellier and ended the season on a high – as did Rolán. His 15 Ligue 1 goals placed him 7th on the top scorers chart, ahead of Nabil Fekir, Wissam Ben Yedder and Jordan Ayew.

Inevitably, as with top performing talents in French Football, a summer exit was rumoured in the media. Though with international duty coming up in the form of the Copa America, that was not entertained. For Uruguay, the prospect of having two in-form strikers coming from Ligue 1, may have compensated for the absence of Luis Suarez – the treble winner having been suspended for the tournament in its entirety.

Unfortunately, it was not to be. Playing all but 32 minutes of Uruguay's involvement in the tournament - they were defending champions, after all - he scored none as La Celeste bowed out of the tournament in the quarter-finals. A massive chance wasted, though at 22, the striker would undoubtedly have more chances to impress.

Back at club level, the second half of 2015 has not been plain sailing at all. The swagger has been somewhat lost, and results have similarly gone south for Sagnol's side.

Moreover, he has also crossed Sagnol once more, having returned from international duty late. The coach put on public record his anger with his young striker, who eventually apologised for his actions - and made it known that his boss could count on him for the upcoming fixtures.

In the 2015/16 campaign, Bordeaux have struggled. The performances of Rolán are funnily enough interlinked with the performances of his teammates. If he is on form and showing his aggression and confidence in the final third, FCGB can be an exciting team to watch.

It will be interesting to see if the ex-Defensor striker can reignite his form with Bordeaux in search for much-needed points. With Bordeaux unable to cede any more cash - the hope is their star from 2014/15 can point them in the right direction sooner rather than later.



MAXWELL

[30]
v 10

Club: Paris Saint-Germain F.C.

Position: Defender

Born: Cachoeiro de Itapemirim

Date of Birth: 27/08/1981

Age: 34

*"The Champions League?
It could be ours."*

– Maxwell

Scherrer Maxwell is the consummate professional who quite simply gets better with age. At 34 years old the elegant left-back is still very much an important figure in Laurent Blanc's team selection.

Maxwell's career started at Cruzeiro in his homeland of Brazil in 2000 before leaving for Europe a year later when he signed at Ajax Amsterdam. 3 years later he was named Dutch Player of the Year. As Maxwell's reputation started to grow, some of Europe's leading clubs began to track the left-back and in 2006 he signed for Inter Milan. It was during this period that Maxwell was deployed at both left-back and later on as a left midfielder when the Italians signed Cristian Chivu.

A move to Barcelona in 2009 materialised before signing for Antoine Kombouaré's PSG three years later.

Since Maxwell's arrival at Paris Saint-Germain in 2012, the veteran Brazilian has cemented his place in the team whilst fending off any competition that has come his way.

Maxwell brings many wonderful attributes to the PSG team and with stars such as Thiago Silva and Zlatan Ibrahimovic in the side, his importance is often overlooked.

The Brazilian brings a calmness and assurance to the PSG backline. His intelligence in both defensive and attacking situations have contributed to PSG's success and in the process, he has nullified the threat of some of the trickiest wingers in European football.

Maxwell has also been at his most dangerous in front of goal during his time at PSG. To date, the left-back has weighed-in with 9 goals in just under 4 years in the French capital; Maxwell scored a total of 11 goals with four different clubs in the previous 12 years.

The Brazilian has been shown just 8 yellow cards since his arrival in Paris and even more impressively, just 2 of those cards have come in 2015. Incredibly Maxwell has never been sent off in his career.

Although the much travelled defender has played for some of the world's biggest football clubs, arguably he has played some of his best football in Paris.

2015 has been a special year for Maxwell with success on and off the field with PSG. The Brazilian has helped his team claim a clean sweep of trophies in France and already PSG look likely claiming a fourth consecutive title in 2016. Maxwell has provided goals and assists and his link up play with Cavani and Ibrahimovic in attacking areas has been impressive. From a defensive standpoint, the former Barcelona man has once again showed solidity in a back four that has statistically been amongst Europe's best. Maxwell's timing and anticipation may only be matched by Thiago Silva in the PSG team which is reflected by his exemplary disciplinary record.

Maxwell has rolled back the years with consistent displays domestically and in Europe and the ageless defender still shows no signs of slowing down. His reliability is a huge reason why Laurent Blanc still sees him as his first choice left-back. He has fought off the challenge of French international left-back Lucas Digne who was signed by Blanc to eventually take over from Maxwell. The frustration for Digne led to the former Lille man opting for a loan move to AS Roma due to a lack of playing time caused by the consistent form of Maxwell.

Maxwell announced to PSG TV in 2015 that he would be leaving the Parc des Princes at the end of the season with his contract finishing with the champions in June 2016. It remains to be seen whether PSG will tempt him to stay by offering the defender a contract extension for another year however if the offer was to be made, there is no doubting that Maxwell, even at the age of 35 (next season), could handle the rigours of another gruelling season.

Looking ahead, 2016 is an uncertain year for Maxwell with just 6 months left on his contract in Paris. If the left-back does leave the French champions then it is likely that he will either go back to play in his native country Brazil or there have been rumours that the defender could retire from professional football.

What is clear is that PSG fans should enjoy the time there is left of Maxwell in rouge et bleu and his wonderfully efficient displays. Layvin Kurzawa, who will take over the left-back position, will be fully primed for the role after working with Maxwell this season and PSG will be in good hands for the foreseeable future with the ex-Monaco man filling the void. If this is the last ever GFFN 100 profile written for Maxwell, then it has been an honour to write it. A classy player off the field and on it, Maxwell typifies what QSI are attempting to do with PSG and the positive effects that it can have on French football.



AÏSSA MANDI

[29]
^ 21

Club: Stade de Reims

Position: Defender

Born: Châlons-en-Champagne

Date of Birth: 22/10/1991

Age: 24

*"I want Aïssa Mandi
in my squad."*

– Olivier Guégan

2015 was another large step for Reims' Aïssa Mandi. Following a stirring 2014 in which he featured at the World Cup for Algeria and continued a number of stirring performances in domestic competition, it was expected to be a major year for the 24-year-old, who might have been expected to leave Champagne-Ardenne for pastures new.

But at the time of writing, Mandi remains – however, for now. For it has been a 2015 that has seen the central defender go from strength to strength, and attract more than a passing glance from bigger sides in the Premier League. The likes of Arsenal and Chelsea have been credited with interest for some time.

His 2015 began with national duty at the Africa Cup of Nations in Equatorial Guinea, where his involvement left Reims dropping considerably. Three defeats in four games in his absence ruined the good work done at the tail end of 2014 that left the former giants of French football in the top half of the table.

His return was welcomed by the beleaguered Jean-Luc Vasseur as the club were faced with the prospect of a relegation fight. Mandi's early 2015 was a tough one in Reims' colours, with only one win recorded until mid-April, among a hatful of a draws and a run of four straight defeats.

Though much of it was due to an inability to convert numerous chances, and a surprisingly hap-hazard & leaky defence. The Algerian international was culpable for some errors, particularly a number of forgettable outings in consecutive 3-1 defeats to Montpellier, Monaco & Lille in March.

At that point, it seemed a world away from the defender who seemed likely to secure a move later in the year. Reims were in trouble, and the 24-year-old – in his favoured position at right-back was also experiencing difficulty.

Much has been noted that Mandi is not your typical full-back. While completely comfortable on the flanks, he much prefers to defend rather than attack. More potent in picking off pacey opponents in the final third than up at the other end. But that didn't come off in early spring, as the club shipped a concerning 17 goals in 7 games.

If the defending was not up to scratch, Mandi made amends where he could – up front. His movement and anticipation of situations remains one of his biggest competencies, and it was most evident in the 3-1 home win against FC Nantes, where a fantastic counter-attack saw the Algerian race up the length of the pitch to support a fledgling attack, before calmly slotting home to seal victory.

He was also pretty adapt at converting headers from set-piece situations, clinching two further goals against Bastia and Paris Saint-Germain as Reims eventually evaded relegation with a late-season surge. Wins against the Corsicans, Evian and Rennes late-on, in which Mandi was handed the armband for one of those fixtures by new coach Olivier Guégan, who had replaced Vasseur in mid-April after their spring slump. Guégan, who was assistant coach had eyed Mandi as a possible future captain of the club.

And so Mandi's stock began to rise as the 2014/15 season drew to a close, his versatility and ability to impress in uncompromising situations evident when he featured in the last three games of the season out of his usual position. Playing across the defence in the middle and on the left, he impressed in leading his side in the relegation six-pointer victory against Evian, who were consigned to the drop after that fixture. Such was Mandi's impact overall, he was the second highest scoring defender in Ligue 1 in 2014/15, behind Lorient's Raphaël Guerreiro with six goals – more than Javier Pastore, and Reims' second-highest scorer.

The summer would lead to increased speculation at his next destination. Would it be across the Channel in England? Or would he join former coach, and his mentor Hubert Fournier in Lyon, who had just clinched a spot in the UEFA Champions' League group stage?

Barely had the season ended when Mandi was being pursued by les Gones as their first summer signing. Reims' president Jean-Pierre Caillot had firmly implied that his prized defender would not be departing Stade Auguste-Delaune.

Mandi himself weighed into the issue in May. *"Frankly, I want to experience something different, another adventure."* After months of wrangling, when OL had decided to plump for Mapou Yanga-Mbiwa and pick up Jérémy Morel free from Marseille, the matter was put to bed. Over in England, no formal bid materialised.

And come August, he remained in Reims, though was quick to hide any disappointment at the failure of securing a move away. And any lingering disappointment was quickly eradicated after a superb fast start in 2015/16. Guégan had altered Reims' tactics, and so too Mandi's position as he moved into the centre. More so, he was named club captain – another testament to the belief held in him by the club's hierarchy.

Wins over Bordeaux, Marseille had catapulted Reims to second place, before another huge win against Lorient followed. A positive draw against runaway leaders and defending champions Paris Saint-Germain saw Reims sit pretty in fifth place, with just one defeat by the end of September. The plaudits returned, and so did once more talk of a move.

His worth at the club was underlined once again by how results dwindle when he is not playing. An injury against Angers put paid to action for five weeks between September & October, in which Reims lost four on the trot. His immediate return did not help much either, but once he returned to match-fitness did Reims steady the sheep with an unbeaten run of four games.

As 2015 draws to a close, it would appear that Mandi has outgrown his club. His defensive skillset, consummate professionalism and determination should see him become a defensive staple at a bigger club. A continued strong showing should see him be placed firmly in the window for scouts come the next six months. He has arguably been Reims' best player this year.



LAYVIN
KURZAWA

[28]
▼ 18

Club: Paris Saint-Germain F.C.

Position: Defender

Born: Fréjus

Date of Birth: 04/09/1992

Age: 23

"I am very proud."

– Layvin Kurzawa

On a purely year-by-year level, Layvin Kurzawa's 2015 was actually, in terms of performances, far less impressive than his 2014. This is a point that is reflected in his non-selection for the French national team in 2015, having failed to be chosen even once over the course of calendar year by France boss Didier Deschamps.

However, it is the immense ability and potential that he showcased in the previous year, 2014, that ensured the French international had an action-packed 2015.

The highlight of his year was undoubtedly his summer transfer window move from AS Monaco to PSG, a deal that very much typified the current state of affairs in Ligue 1. The fact that arguably the second most competitive team in France, aside from Les Parisiens at the end of 2015, were willing to sell one of their most precocious talents to the French champions spoke volumes about the rather unsavoury "profits first, compete later" attitude that has become a mainstay in the French top flight.

Nevertheless, the Principality side recouped at least €25m for the left-back, adding to the mounds of cash that they amassed under the Riviera summer sun, notably from the sales of Anthony Martial and Geoffrey Kondogbia.

As for Kurzawa, he had made the risky decision to lose the guarantee of first team football at AS Monaco to play, at least initially, second fiddle to Brazilian veteran and left-back Maxwell in the French capital. It was a move that did him little favours with regards to endearing himself to France boss Didier Deschamps, who is a big believer in the "no playing time for club, no national team" mantra.

Anyway, when Layvin Kurzawa made the move in August, the consideration of not playing regularly was most probably an afterthought. What was much more important for Kurzawa, was to rediscover his own form first, before thinking about challenging his new teammates for a starting spot.

After all, Kurzawa's on-pitch performances in 2015 have in main, left a lot to be desired for. Now, this is arguably not his fault at all, but one cannot deny the effect that several unfortunate injuries have had on his ability to progress. After sustaining a hamstring injury at the back end of 2014, Kurzawa was only able to return to competition for a couple of weeks in February before being forced out of action by another foible, this time a minor thigh problem.

When a player sustains injuries for the first time in his professional career, it can often be a shaky period for his club and of course the individual involved. One can never be sure as to how the player will react to an enforced period on the sidelines, nor whether or not the player will be more anxious with his game when he returns to full fitness. Kurzawa can perhaps be found guilty of the latter charge in 2015 and has, at times, performed as if he has the stabilizers on his metaphorical bike for mainly Monaco, but also PSG, over the course of the calendar year.

The Layvin Kurzawa of 2014 was a fearless and ferocious animal with an unmatched engine that allowed him to fly up and down the left flank, no matter what the nature of the opposition on the day.

The Kurzawa of 2014 played a vital role in the construction of Monaco's chances in the final third, with a willingness to take opposing full-backs on in order to supply an accurate cross. He was also enthusiastic to cut inside or even present himself as a target for a teammate within the opposition box to score goals for the Principality side.

The Kurzawa of 2014 did all this, remarkably, whilst fulfilling the defensive duties of a more conventional full-back. In October 2014, Kurzawa had achieved more successful one vs. ones in defensive areas (i.e. the first third) than any other player in the French top flight.

The Kurzawa of 2015, has ventured forward far less to join the attacks for both of the Ligue 1 sides that he has represented over the course of the calendar year. Now, perhaps this shift was instigated by a change in tactics from Monaco boss Leonardo Jardim. After all, the Portuguese coach places a large emphasis on defensive solidity.

Whether this change in Kurzawa's game is down to new tactics, to the initially intimidating atmosphere in his new dressing room at PSG or because the French international has lost a little confidence in himself following his injuries, you would have to ask him.

Yet there is no denying that something has changed: Kurzawa is far less decisive at both ends of the pitch, preferring to stand off opposing attackers more often in defensive areas and daring less to venture past the halfway line to join PSG attacks. Perhaps we are merely picking at straws here.

Perhaps the wonderfully raw talent that Layvin Kurzawa displayed in 2014 has merely undergone a refining process in 2015.

There is however no denying that the way in which a player reacts to the most difficult periods in his career often goes on to define him. Kurzawa has by no means thrown the towel in. Since his summer move to PSG, the Frenchman has waited patiently on the bench for Laurent Blanc to give him playing time opportunities.

When those opportunities have presented themselves, Kurzawa has taken advantage of them. While he might not yet be back to his best, he is certainly progressing in the right direction. His confidence is being rebuilt: his stunning half-volley in a Ligue 1 match against Troyes in late November said as much.

With Maxwell almost certainly leaving Les Parisiens at the end of the season, 2016 looks set to represent a milestone for Kurzawa: the year in which he becomes PSG's undisputed starting left-back. Unless Lucas Digne returns from his AS Roma loan to fight his compatriot for the spot, then Kurzawa will have all the resources necessary (full backing from his teammates and the club and regular playing time) to start a new chapter in his career. The chapter whereby he attempts to become the best left-back in the world.

This is not beyond Kurzawa; his talent is frighteningly enormous.



ROMAIN HAMOUMA

[27]
*

Club: AS Saint-Étienne

Position: Midfielder

Born: Lure

Date of Birth: 29/03/1987

Age: 28

*"We need to continue
to work hard."*

– Romain Hamouma

One player who has gone somewhat under the radar over the last 12 months despite putting in consistently high-level performances is St Étienne's winger Romain Hamouma. After a very impressive 2014/15 season in which he was one of St Étienne's standout players, especially in an attacking sense, he has continued his form with ASSE into the current season, deservedly earning his place in this year's GFFN 100.

Hamouma has the ability to affect games without really standing out, leading to him compiling some of the top attacking statistics in the league despite not being talked about in the same vein as some of the more popular stars of Ligue 1.

Hamouma's team St Étienne had a somewhat average 2015 on the domestic scene. After a poor start to the 2014/15 campaign, they were down in 10th place in the Ligue 1 table after 10 games. However, a much improved turn of form after the New Year, including a run of just one loss in their last 13 games, saw them finish in 5th place to earn a Europa League slot, just two points behind third placed AS Monaco.

This season has been more of the same, with the team currently in 6th place, just three points behind 2nd, again held by AS Monaco. If they can push themselves into securing a European spot, as well as maybe going on a good run in the Coupe de France or Europa League in 2016, then the season will be considered a success.

Romain Hamouma has had a very large part to play in St Étienne's performances over the last calendar year. Tasked as being one of the main creators in the team, over the last 12 months Hamouma has really grown as an attacking player, building on all sides of his game to make him very difficult to deal with for opposition defenders. He makes contributions to the team at crucial times; St Étienne have only lost two of the 21 games in which Hamouma has scored or made an assist over the last calendar year.

Individually, Hamouma's attacking statistics match up with those of the top Ligue 1 players. His eight assists over the course of the 2014/15 season rank him joint 5th amongst all players in the league, and 3rd behind Javier Pastore and Yannick Ferreira-Carrasco for players who played predominantly on the wing.

His combined tally of 11 goals and assists last season was second amongst St Étienne's players, behind only Max-Alain Gradel, who scored 17 goals and made three assists over the course of the season.

The impressive statistics Hamouma seems to be producing begged the question: how is he able to be such an effective attacking force? First of all, throughout his career he has been able to trouble defenders with his pace and trickery, allowing him to take players on and get into better positions from which he can score or set up a teammate.

Whilst not being the fastest of winger in French football, he still has more than enough about him for defenders to be nervous in one on one situations.

However, perhaps the most telling improvement Hamouma has made to his game is his ability to find the correct final pass in the last third of the pitch. In previous seasons, he would pick the ball up in dangerous areas, but was not able to deliver the ball to teammates in the right area for him to score.

In the last 12 months, though, he seems to have grown to understand his teammates better, and as a result was able to get as many assists as he did, with his final figure of eight more than twice that of any other St Étienne player.

This newfound confidence and know-how on the ball was in full evidence in perhaps Hamouma's standout performance of the last 12 months, in St Étienne's 3-2 away win over Metz, in which Hamouma got the assist for all 3 of his team's goals.

For the first goal, Hamouma broke down the right wing and put a pin-point cross into the box which Max-Alain Gradel volleyed into the back of the net. Then, just before half time, Hamouma split the home defence with a wonderful pass through to Erding, who finished with aplomb to double St Étienne's lead.

The third St Étienne goal, which turned out to be the winner, was a result of some more Hamouma magic, as the Frenchman played another slide-rule pass through to Mollo, who smashed a strike into the back of the net to all but seal the game for ASSE. It was an example of just how effective Hamouma can be when on his game.

If you could find a negative point in Hamouma's game over the last 12 months, it is that he has not scored as many goals as he would probably expect of himself. Over the course of the 2014/15 season, he scored just three times, compared to the nine goals he scored in the 2013/14 season. However, he has already netted three goals in the league this season, so he is well on the way towards improving his tally from last campaign if he keeps up his form in the remainder of the season in 2016.

Perhaps more to the point, he has been in good goal-scoring form in European competitions so far this season. Hamouma scored in the away leg of both of the Europa League qualifiers that St Étienne had to overcome in order to make the group stage.

He continued his form in the group stages, where he got the crucial winner in the away match against Dnipropetrovsk, and got another goal in the 3-0 home win over the same side. If Hamouma can continue his knack of scoring important goals in the Europa League, then St Étienne may well be able to go far in the competition, having already qualified for the knockout stages.

Overall, 2015 had been a year in which Romain Hamouma has gone from strength to strength. He has found something in his game that has allowed him to become a very efficient creator of goals, to add to his already impressive ability to go round players and score at crucial moments. Altogether, this makes him a very well rounded player, and hopefully, at the age of 28, he will make good use of 2016, as it may be one of the last years he is in his prime.

If his form in 2015 is anything to go by, but especially his form towards the end of the calendar year, then Hamouma has the ability to have an explosive next 12 months.



THOMAS MANGANI

[26]
*

Club: Angers SCO

Position: Midfielder

Born: Carpentras

Date of Birth: 29/04/1987

Age: 28

"I fish for sea bream."

– Thomas Mangani

One of the stars of the season so far has been Angers' diligent and technically-gifted central midfielder Thomas Mangani. The Angers number five has had an extremely impressive 2015 in the black and white jersey since he arrived at the club from Serie A outfit Chievo. His consistent performances have been a vital part of Stéphane Moulin's side's success this season and he will be looking to continue to have an impact on the third-placed side's fortunes as the campaign continues after the winter break.

2015 has been an incredible year for the twenty-eight-year-old midfielder. In 2013, the Monaco youth product made a permanent move to Nancy after a loan spell at the club, and his fine form in the 2013/14 season helped him to catch the attention of recruiters from Chievo. The Franco-Italian then spent a frustrating few months at the Veronese club, making just two appearances.

However in February, Mangani moved back to France, signing on loan until the end of the season with Angers. It would prove to be an inspired piece of business as Mangani would go on to play a prominent role within the club's push for promotion, making fifteen Ligue 2 appearances and scoring two goals.

Mangani has continued to be an influential player for Moulin's side this season. His main attribute is his gifted left-foot, which he uses to great effect. The twenty-eight-year-old poses a deadly threat from set-pieces and he has become to be known as somewhat of a free-kick specialist. In May, Mangani scored an excellent curled free-kick against Orléans at the Stade Jean-Bouin, gifting his side the three points in a narrow two-one home win, the influence of which is accentuated by the fact that Angers finished last season in third-place, just three points ahead of Dijon. Mangani also scored a similarly excellent free-kick this season against Nice this season at home in a one-all draw. He has also scored two penalties this season with his left-foot.

Aside from scoring directly from free-kicks, Mangani also uses his left-foot to provide excellent service from free-kicks and corners. Angers' ability to score from set-pieces this season has been one of their main strengths, with Romain Thomas, Ismael Traoré and of course Cheikh Ndoye providing Moulin's side with seriously dangerous aerial threats. Mangani has since provided three assists this season, including two from free-kicks. His crosses for Romain Thomas's goal against Marseille and Cheikh Ndoye against Lyon were absolutely exceptional. Mangani also provided two important assists last season, including one on the last day of the season for the now Créteil striker Sacha Clemence, in the three-nil win against Nimes which sealed the club's promotion.

At 1.83m in height, it is easy to see why Mangani started his career as a holding-midfielder. He has however developed into a more dedicated central midfielder for his side, and he has been omnipresent in the midfield, having made nineteen appearances this season.

He is a keen tackler and more than holds his own in the middle of the park, doing well to help the rhythm of his side's game through his use of his wide range of passing. He particularly impresses when his side are defending a lead, as he is capable of take the sting out of the game by playing carefully weighted passes out of the danger zone.

There are also areas of Mangani's game that hold him back. It would not be unfair to say that Mangani is a bit one paced. In comparison with some of the league's more dynamic midfielders, Mangani can at times a bit slow and static. Although he likes to tackle, he is not the type of midfielder who tends to chase down opponents to win the ball back and he would almost certainly struggle to have an impact in a side that pressed the opposition more than Moulin's side. His lack of pace at times also complicates his ability to mark players tightly, and if he was to play in a league with a higher level of intensity, he could struggle.

However despite these shortcomings, Mangani continues to exert his influence on the Angers midfield. He does not need a great deal of pace to fulfil his role in a side that does not set out to dominate the opposition, or that does not try to press the opponents high up the park. He has stood out as a result of his ability to provide quality service from set-piece situations and he has consistently performed well. In his own way, he is an industrious player and his commitment to the cause has never been called into question, which is an admirable trait.

Cheikh Ndoye has stolen the headlines this season so far with his goalscoring exploits, but the work of the rest of the Angers midfield should not be overlooked. Mangani, since his arrival at the club in February, has been of fundamental importance to the Angers midfield engine room, and we must also remember that he has been at the club longer than Ndoye. He has perhaps been a more influential aspect of Angers' rise to the top. The club's game plan is unlikely to change between now and the end of the season, and therefore Mangani's ability to pick out his side's aerial targets with his cultured left-foot will continue to be of notable importance.



CHRISTOPHE JALLET

[25]
^59

Club: Olympique Lyonnais

Position: Defender

Born: Cognac

Date of Birth: 31/10/1983

Age: 32

"The first reason was because I just was not playing much."

– Christophe Jallet

Christophe Jallet's recent return from a rib injury in the Coupe de la Ligue resulted in a win for Lyon. While the result, coming at home against second-division Tours was far from unsurprising, even given Lyon's recent poor run of form, it is perhaps the first step to what looks to be an arduous road to recovering the brilliant form of last year.

In the ten league matches in which the former Paris Saint-Germain right back has featured this season, Lyon have lost only once, netting a return of 21 points. In the eight in which he has not featured, the team have one just once, accruing five points. While unrest and injuries to other players, Samuel Umtiti chief among them, have also been key to derailing the club's season, it is more than coincidence that his arrival in Lyon last summer has coincided with a return to the Champions' League.

While Bacary Sagna may bafflingly remain the favourite for Didier Deschamps on the international level, that Jallet is even a squad regular again for Les Bleus since his arrival at Lyon is a testament to his work and dedication since arriving for the cut-rate price of just €1.5M in summer 2014.

The mooted arrival at the capital club of Serge Aurier, combined with the fact that he was already engaged in a battle with Gregory van der Wiel for his place meant that a move away from the over-salaried confines of the Parc de Princes was a wise one. Much like Henri Bedimo has done on the opposite flank since his own move from Montpellier in the previous summer, the move has been a tonic for a career that seemed to be on the wane.

Not the biggest player at just 1.78m, Jallet is nevertheless as dependable defensively as one could ask for a right-back, while still not sacrificing much, if any of the attacking ability that has become key for full-backs in the modern game. Possessed with good physical strength and enough pace to not be a liability, Jallet slotted into Lyon's lineup with ease last year, finally bringing some stability to a position that had been problematic for the club since the decline and eventual departure of Anthony Réveillère some seasons hence.

His relatively conservative approach for a full-back contrasted nicely with the directness of Bedimo on the opposite flank, and he easily and deservedly won a place in last year's UNFP team of the season, banishing memories of the likes of Mohamadou Dabo and Miguel Lopes to the past. While a repeat of that achievement is unlikely, owing not only to his own recent injury but the phenomenal play of Serge Aurier, Jallet had nevertheless continued to be a calming influence on a still-young side, providing reliability in a season short of it.

Born in Cognac in western France, Jallet moved through the youth system there before moving to Chamois Niortais in 1998, where he eventually made his professional debut before leaving to make the step up to Ligue 1 with Lorient. He continued to impress at the Breton club, earning a move to Paris Saint-Germain at the age of 26. In those pre-QSI days, Jallet was an instant hit, displacing the experienced Brazilian Ceara to become a first-team regular by season's end.

His time at PSG was filled with trophies, as in addition to a Coupe de France that first year, he also won the Coupe de la Ligue in 2014 and a pair of league titles. One of the few players pre-dating the Qatari investment in the club who continued to figure after their takeover, Jallet managed to impress even Carlo Ancelotti during his time at the club: *"Jallet is a player with great regularity. There is no tactical error, he is always focused, dynamic. I did not know Jallet but his performance has always been good. He is very professional. I think Jallet can be a good player for the national team."*

Despite having been named club captain after the departure of Mamadou Sakho to Liverpool, Jallet, like many other pre-QSI players, saw his playing time dwindling rapidly, especially under Laurent Blanc. Blaise Matuidi being the lone exception, and despite PSG having performed admirably, the likes of Jérémy Clément, Sylvain Armand, Mathieu Bodmer, and Clément Chantôme all sought greener pastures, leading to an influx of talent into the middle reaches of Ligue 1.

While Jallet is easily a cut above that quartet, all shared the same reasoning. With high-salaried foreigners becoming the desired template as the owners sought to increase the club's global appeal, the French players on the team had simply had no place, no matter how devoted they had been, and Jallet, despite having the respect of his playing peers, was soon to be in search of an exit.

At the time, despite the Italian's kind words, Jallet's playing time had dwindled to just thirteen league appearances under Laurent Blanc in the season before he left, and Jallet took his professionalism to Lyon. Under Hubert Fournier, he has been the model player, rarely putting a foot wrong defensively. He has an almost preternatural ability in the tackle, being not only one of the league's leaders in terms of tackles but also in terms of percentage of successful tackles. His powerful physique allows him to compete with most players, but he also has an excellent reading of the game, rarely conceding free kicks or picking up bookings.

Going forward, with the injury to Nabil Fekir, Jallet has been tasked with a bit more this season than in previous campaigns, and his understanding with Jordan Ferri, the right-sided midfielder has continued to develop in this way. While last season it was Corentin Tolisso who was the midfielder who racked up the goals, benefiting from the marauding runs of Bedimo, this season Ferri has been much more involved in the attack, as he and Jallet have begun to forge an even better understanding going forward.

Both are relatively small but powerfully built players, and together with Mathieu Valbuena, the way that they can move the ball about on the ground can be a thing of beauty. Jallet can deliver the odd cross, of course, but he is much more comfortable with the ball at his feet, his assist numbers surely negatively affected by the absence of Fekir and the departure of Clinton N'Jie, both like-minded players. Whether launching a counter-attack after winning the ball off an opposing winger or serving as a fulcrum for the likes of Valbuena to play a one-two, Jallet's eye for quick interchanges is second to none for his position in the league.

Even if his relative lack of pace can be a hindrance to Lyon on the counter at times, when he does get forward with the ball at his feet, he also rarely loses it, meaning that while the opposition may be afforded a bit more time to come back into the play, they are often at a loss to start their own counter-attack. That said, we should enjoy peak Jallet as much as we can over the next twenty-odd matches for Lyon.

While he has shown no signs of slowing down to date, he turns 33 in October, and even Lyon have to admit that they have the position's future in mind, having brought in Rafael from Manchester United. If his return to full fitness can continue apace into what is a busy January for Lyon, he will continue to have every opportunity to lead the club as he has done over the past eighteen months.

While the imminent returns of more high profile players (Valbuena, Lacazette, Fekir) from Lyon's casualty list will certainly garner most of the attention, the importance of Jallet's reintroduction should not be taken for granted.



PAUL-GEORGES NTEP

[24]
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Club: Stade Rennais F.C.

Position: Attacker

Born: Douala

Date of Birth: 29/07/1992

Age: 23

"I know how to sell myself."

– Paul-Georges Ntep

There are years that you want to be over as soon as possible and there are years you want to remember. For Paul-Georges Ntep, Rennes' most exciting player by far (not exactly a remarkable achievement), it has been both.

Paul-Georges has suffered five different kinds of injuries during the calendar year and the first one came on January 12th where he damaged his thigh due to a muscle strain. However, that injury only kept him off the pitch for two games (those two games were a goalless draw against St Étienne and a 1-4 hammering at the hands of Caen both at home). His return for an away game at PSG coincided with the end of a very bad run of results for Rennes towards the turn of the year (10 games without a win including 6 defeats).

After a rather honourable performance at the Parc des Princes (Rennes lost 1-0 and did not concede too many chances to the champions), defeats were turned into draws and Rennes' first win in 11 finally came against Lens.

That win was followed by another one against Metz and a good run of one defeat in 10 games followed with Ntep being the man to shine in most of the performances. Rennes coach Philippe Montanier managed his return from injury intelligently as he did not put Ntep on the pitch from kick-off in Ntep's subsequent games against Marseille and Toulouse but brought him off of the bench before starting him once his thigh injury was well and truly over.

After that, Montanier played Ntep in his natural position: as a left-winger in Rennes' 4-1-4-1 feeding the centre-forward Ola Toivonen. The pair scored 16 goals between them, which is more than the side scored on their travels.

The season ended sourly for Rennes as they did not collect a single point from their last 3 games, the summer vacation temptation being obviously too big to bear for the Brittany squad. Still there was an air of optimism due to some good runs within the squad.

After the off-season though, Ntep's 2015 took a catastrophic turn due to injuries. It started in August with a gashed leg that kept him in the stands in August (to be fair, he had to serve a suspension during that period). Ntep was only able to make his Ligue 1 start on August 29th at Toulouse as a substitute. The international break followed in early September and Ntep was able to play a couple of games in September before getting a foot injury that kept him out of an away game at GFC Ajaccio.

He may have been rushed back into the squad by Montanier due to the short-term period of the injury which turned out to be a costly mistake for the Rennes manager as Ntep suffered his third (!) injury of the season at Monaco coming off after 70 minutes due to another thigh strain (the same injury as in January 2015).

That particular injury kept him out for October but his return coincided with another international break (Montanier must have been pleased) and Ntep was able to play only one additional game against Bordeaux in which he also had to come off midway through the second half because of a calf injury. He has not played since.

The extent of his injury is unknown. On his Twitter handle, he said he had to undergo a series of tests just before Christmas, which will hopefully give us estimation on when Rennes can start playing attractive football. Indeed, Rennes have not won at home since hosting Toulouse in late August (a game Ntep came on as a substitute). Rennes have amassed just one win in 14 and are not in a relegation fight thanks to a good run of 4 straight wins in August. If this form continues, a relegation struggle beckons.

Montanier must be praying for a Christmas miracle in the form of favourable test results concerning Paul Georges Ntep's injury status. Ntep, on his day, is the most entertaining player to watch in Ligue 1 with an unparalleled dribbling ability, pace, power and desire to shoot.

He often takes it too far, disregarding the opportunity to pass the ball to a teammate in order to instead take yet another opposing defender on by attempting to use his skill to go past him. When that does not come off, his teammates rightly become frustrated with him, even if he is Rennes' most decisive player. Rennes need Ntep if the 2015/16 campaign is going to be anything other than yet another mediocre season.

Without Ntep's contribution in 2016, then Montanier's future will surely be more than in the balance. If he cannot deliver European football or at least a half-entertaining cup run with the money that he has spent transfer window after transfer window, then he will surely be given the sack.



JEAN SERI

[23]
*

Club: OGC Nice

Position: Midfielder

Born: Grand-Béréby

Date of Birth: 19/07/1991

Age: 24

*"God brought me
to Nice. He did not
make a mistake."*

– Jean Seri

Ligue 1 is a deceptively difficult division for outsiders to acclimatise rapidly to. Contrary to the warped perception of French football on the continent, Ligue 1 is a highly tactical league. Therefore, when a foreigner makes the move to France's top flight he is ultimately hit with a double-whammy of change.

Not only does he face the usual growing pains associated with moving to a brand new city and experiencing a different culture. He will also almost certainly be obliged to think about and do certain things on a football field that he has never experienced before.

The language barrier is also another factor associated with such a move, but I have neglected to mention it because it is not relevant for this member of the GFFN 100 2015, the Ivorian and francophone, Jean Seri.

The secret to success for a footballer playing in fifty years time will be as to how versatile he is. There is already a quiet revolution occurring within the game as you read this profile. Full-backs are now expected to be just as potent in attack as they are effective in defence. Soon, we will be talking about central midfield players who are just as technically brilliant and as creative as they are physical and defensively superb.

Jean Seri is one of the first central midfielders that we have seen in Ligue 1 who aptly and whole-heartedly fits into that new-age category that I have just described: the complete midfielder (Marco Verratti is perhaps another). Seri's wide-ranging abilities are best exemplified by the different types of midfield positions that he has occupied for Les Aiglons in the first half of the 2015/16 campaign.

He has been utilised as an enforcer alongside Nampalys Mendy. With his low centre of gravity and nippy tackling abilities, Seri has been able to intercept the ball effectively and this, married by his compact and physical nature which allows him to overpower onrushing, opposing midfielders, has enabled Nice to hang onto points in the latter stages of matches. Now, that set of abilities alone would make him a very effective Ligue 1 defensive midfielder.

What is so incredible about this Ivorian talent is that his defensive work is a mere fraction of the varied skill-sets that make him the remarkable footballer that he is today.

Seri has also been used as a deep-lying playmaker as part of a midfield three next to Mendy and the terribly exciting young prospect Vincent Koziello. He has excelled particularly in this role because of a surprising ability to construct OGC Nice attacks, both quickly on the counter and through the medium of defence-splitting passes during a period of sustained OGC Nice possession. His 90% pass accuracy in the first-half of the Ligue 1 campaign stands as testament to his passing mastery.

Unlike certain other midfielders within the top French flight, Seri does not play with the handbrake on when it comes to passing. He is adventurous with his attempts to move the ball on and displays great variety both with the distance and the form of his pass.

The raw temerity that Seri showcases with regards to this faction of his game is symptomatic of the beautifully rapid football that Les Aiglons have displayed in 2015/16, success that Nice would certainly not be enjoying to the same extent without Seri. The football is instinctive and addictive. Seri is instinctive and addictive to watch.

So, Seri is developing a passing repertoire that might prove to be second to none in France and has the classic defensive midfield qualities which would enable him to easily replace Nampalys Mendy if the sometime Nice captain decides to finally move on (he too has been nothing short of brilliant).

Yet there is a final element to Seri's game that has really set him apart in 2015. The former Paços de Ferreira man has also been deployed as an attacking midfielder in behind the enigmatic duo that is Hatem Ben Arfa and Valère Germain. In this role, Seri has been able to display an entirely different set of strengths that once again emphasise just how unique this player is.

OGC Nice's success in 2015/16 has, in the main, originated from retaining a very high percentage of the ball possession during matches. This has been achieved in two main ways. The first is the ball-playing intelligence of the midfield three that I previously alluded to.

The second derives from a rather less glorious tactic, but one that Seri has been integral to, especially when he has been deployed in behind the front two. That tactic is a very intense, high press. In the attacking midfield role, Seri is expected to pressurise the opposition's back four as they attempt to build from the back.

Seri's engine has proved to be relentless and the tactic has been a roaring success as the opponent invariably panics and punts the ball haplessly forward for Les Aiglons to collect.

When Seri occupies the attacking midfield role and Nice have possession, the Ivorian is able to display his unexpectedly impressive dribbling abilities and neat tricks that often catch opponents by surprise. It must be said that at times in this particular position, Seri's passing accuracy falters a little, usually because he sometimes struggles to match his wavelength with Ben Arfa and Germain, leading to the breakdown of an attack.

However, with time Seri will develop a greater understanding his new teammates. His intelligence on and off the ball is clear for all to see and it is this ability that has enabled Seri to bring all of his individual strengths together to put himself on the cusp of greatness.

The Ivorian had the world at his feet at the start of the 2015 summer transfer window, with a weighty list of clubs lining up to take him away from Portugal including the likes of Udinese, Monaco and Valencia, but in the end, Seri chose Mediterranean side Nice, perhaps because they had been courting him for nearly over a year before he eventually signed.

Seri must not become complacent. The hard work has only just begun, but OGC Nice fans better enjoy his performances while they still can. Footballers like Seri are the future greats of this sport.



CLAUDIO BEAUVUE

[22]
^ 23

Club: Olympique Lyonnais

Position: Attacker

Born: Saint-Claude

Date of Birth: 16/04/1988

Age: 27

"It was Lyon's ambition that convinced me to join them."

– Claudio Beauvue

2015 has quite simply been a rollercoaster for Claudio Beauvue and one that the 27 year old will not forget in a hurry.

After starting the year at Guingamp the Guadeloupean international was the subject of a headline move to Olympique Lyonnais in the summer, giving the striker the chance to showcase his talents in the Champions League and prove that he can rub shoulders with that category of world-class individuals in European football.

This the challenge despite joining the scene at a relatively late stage in his career when compared with his fresh-faced Lyon teammates surrounding him. Clearly the deal signalled the biggest move of his career to date but there was no doubt that the transfer was merited after a particularly strong 2014/15 season at the Stade du Roudourou.

Beauvue endured the finest season of his career to date, scoring 22 goals in the process (17 in the French top flight) and helping Jocelyn Gourvenec's side to a tenth place finish, arguably a massive overachievement for a side operating with one of the lowest budgets in the entire division.

Beauvue struck up an impressive partnership with the more physically imposing Christophe Mandanne who was also quit Guingamp last summer, when his contract expired.

Beauvue has always plied his trade in France and was given his first professional contract at Ligue 2 outfit ESTAC Troyes in 2008. After three seasons at the Stade de l'Aube, which were to pass by without much ceremony at all, Beauvue spent two years at Châteauroux before finally getting his chance in Ligue 1 on loan at SC Bastia. He netted just once in 15 appearances with the Corsicans, joining halfway through the 2012/13 campaign, but he showed good dynamism and his talents were noticed by several bottom of the road first division sides.

At the start of the 2013/14 campaign, Beauvue secured himself a permanent move to the then newly promoted side EA Guingamp. After a nomadic career, Beauvue had finally found a footballing home, at a passionate, small club where, most importantly, he received the full backing from his teammates, manager and fans. This positive atmosphere was crucial to Beauvue delivering his incredible goal and assists tally of the 2014/15 season.

After a promising start at Lyon, the Guadeloupean striker's form has become indifferent despite finding the net four times in Ligue 1. His partnership with Alexandre Lacazette is still yet to blossom the way that coach Hubert Fournier would have liked and to make matters worse newspaper reports have surfaced suggesting a conflict between the two players.

After a long-term injury to star man Nabil Fekir, the signing of Beauvue became even more important for Lyon and added to the pressure placed on the former Guingamp man.

Although Beauvue has not yet delivered the form that he showed at Guingamp, the difficulties lie with the Lyon team as a whole who have all been guilty of underperforming when compared to last season's exploits.

In truth, Beauvue's attributes have not been best utilised at Lyon. The striker has often been deployed out wide in a front three where he has been working in the channels whilst Lacazette has been taking up the central positions that are more natural to Beauvue.

On other occasions so far this season Beauvue has dropped to the bench to make way for Max Cornet and Clément Grenier to support Lacazette.

Whilst the striker's performances have been below par at times this season, there is still so much more for Lyon fans to see from Beauvue - if utilised correctly.

It remains to be seen what 2016 holds for Claudio Beauvue, with his performances so far for Lyon inconsistent and his long term status in the team unknown. If the striker can deliver the type of performances that he was delivering in Guingamp then there is no reason why he cannot be a big player for Les Gones.

What is clear is that he has an abundance of talent, an eye for goal and a fantastic work-rate that could be key for Lyon in their push for Champions League football next season. Alternatively Beauvue must start to pay back some of the price-tag that Lyon invested in him with better performances and more belief that belongs at the level he now finds himself at.

However, if Lyon refuse to show him the faith that his explosive talent deserves, then he might have to make the difficult decision of looking for the exit door. Lest we forget, this is a man with an attacking instinct rarely seen in the French top flight, but as 2015 came to an end, that talent was being suppressed by a total lack of confidence brought about by a treacherous new environment at Lyon. He is entering the business end of his career, after all.



DAMIEN DA SILVA

[21]
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Club: Stade Malherbe Caen

Position: Defender

Born: Talence

Date of Birth: 17/05/1987

Age: 27

"He was a kid. He was already a good size, powerful. A good kid, if rather introverted."

– Philippe Hinschberger

Born in southwestern France in the Bordeaux suburb of Talence and a product of Les Girondins' youth system, the career of Caen's centre back, Damien Da Silva, has been an itinerant one. A series of moves early in one's career is rarely a good sign, but Da Silva seems to be that rare breed of talent who, while not preternaturally gifted, only continues to improve with time. With Caen enjoying a surprisingly fine start to their season, much of the focus has been on new arrivals, of the likes of Andy Delort and Vincent Bessat. However, with Patrice Garande's counterattacking style much the same as last season, the improvement of the defence has made all the difference, and for that, Da Silva deserves more than a bit of credit.

Growing up in Pessac, another Bordeaux banlieue, Da Silva's parents connected with a youth coach at Bordeaux and managed to get the youngster a trial, where he stayed for more than a decade, until 2005. Training alongside the likes of Paul Baysse and Henri Saivet, his attempts to progress with the club were generally thwarted, and at seventeen, he made the bold move to Niort, some 200 km to the north and then playing in the 3rd division. While the club were hardly on the other side of the country, to seek a move, not only due to the distance but in dropping a level, for first team football at such a young age spoke volumes about the determination residing within the youngster.

Somewhat undersized for a centre back at six feet, at the time, Da Silva had spent his teenage years training as a defensive midfielder, looking up to players on the senior side such as the Brazilian international Eduardo Costa. Moving to Niort, in dropping down a level, da Silva would be gaining vital first team experience, and while he only played once in his first season, 2005/6, the club were promoted to Ligue 2. Now more experienced, Da Silva was given more of a run-out in the league the following season, figuring in three matches. His manager at the time, Philippe Hinschberger, remembers Da Silva thus: *"He was a kid. He was, what, 18? He was already a good size, powerful. A good kid, if rather introverted."*

Even if chances were still far and few between behind the more experienced duo of Johann Chapuis and Malik Couturier, Da Silva was not exactly labouring in obscurity, as his second season at Niort saw him included in the squad for an Under 19 European qualifier in October. While he failed to be drafted into the final squad for the tournament, losing out to the likes of Baysse and William Vainqueur, Da Silva did manage to notch a goal against Finland, and would have received a boost to his confidence given the availability of playing time at club level.

2007/8 saw even more playing time for Da Silva, with Hinschberger having moved to Stade Lavallois, replaced by Farouk Hadzebegic. However, despite his individual success, the club were relegated, even as the player featured in cup matches and fourteen times in the league as the club managed the playing time of the aging Chapuis.

The move back to the National resulted in even more time on the pitch for Da Silva, but the season was a disaster for the club, as, despite operating on the league's biggest budget, Niort suffered a second successive relegation. That summer, Da Silva sought greener pastures and left for Châteauroux. Despite leading the table early in the season, the club ended up in a relegation scrap and Da Silva featured just seven times. Although, considering the team had the division's poorest defence, perhaps this was not necessarily a black mark on his record.

The 2010/11 season proved to be somewhat of a watershed for Da Silva; after featuring just once in the season's first four months, he moved on loan to Rouen, then playing again in the Championnat. With Da Silva playing every match, the club finished comfortably mid-table, prompting a permanent move in the summer. With a host of financial improprieties, the 2011/12 season saw eight clubs promoted to the division, with few clear pre-season favorites for promotion.

Despite a promising start, Rouen finished six points adrift of promotion, a disappointing campaign for all concerned. The next season, despite finishing with what was one of the division's best defences and what would've been enough points for promotion before deductions, the club were relegated for financial mismanagement by the DNCG, and Da Silva was once again on the move, this time to Clermont, once again on a free transfer.

A more established club in the division, despite operating on a small budget and playing in one of the smallest grounds, Clermont had never been part of the French top flight. Despite a perceived lack of ambition, the club did fairly well in 2013/14, with several players who now ply their trade in Ligue 1 featuring. Besides Da Silva, his current Caen teammates Emmanuel Imorou and Jordan Nkololo as well as Angers' Pierrick Capelle and Guingamp's Yannis Salibur were also part of the squad.

Da Silva finally received his long-sought move to the top flight after this season, with Caen making a €300,000 move for the defender. Promoted back the top flight the previous season, the Norman club was, like Clermont, operating on a shoestring budget. Indeed, Da Silva was one of only two signings that summer to which a fee was attached, the other being Florian Raspentino, who was subsequently loaned to Dijon.

But more than money spent was the way in which Patrice Garande willingly let the stalwarts of the previously campaign depart. Molla Wague and Jean-Jacques Pierre had combined to appear in 54 matches, but the pair departed on a free to Granada and a loan to Angers respectively. Caen's sporting director, Alain Caveglia remembers the club's thoughts about the player thus: *"When we were promoted to Ligue 1, he was the first name on the list at the position. There wasn't a single doubt about his capacity at this level."* It was clear, then, that Da Silva had the confidence of the club's hierarchy, but how would he respond?

Last season, Caen finished the season with 55 goals conceded, a figure that obviously does little as an advertisement of the club's strength in defence. However, that figure should not by any means be read as a knock on Da Silva's abilities, but rather as a condemnation of the way that the club played football. With Patrice Garande favoring a counter-attacking 4-1-4-1 and midfield manned by the offensively-minded likes of N'Golo Kanté and Julien Féret, with the aging Nicolas Suebe in a holding role behind them, the defence was always likely to be exposed.

This, however, was instrumental in showing just how impressively Da Silva has developed. As previously stated, he is not the biggest as far as centre backs go, but played alongside the bigger and slower Aleaddine Yahia, the former Clermont man is asked to operate as almost as secondary defensive midfielder, his pace aiding both Yahia and Seube by acting as a conduit between the two. Originally a central midfielder, he is skilled enough on the ball to make this work, executing the odd foray forward with the ball at his feet, and alongside the likes of Samuel Umtiti and David Luiz, is probably one of the division's best in this regard.

Of course, Da Silva also excels as a more conventional centre back. Despite his shorter stature, he averaged more than three aerial duels won per match, at a success rate of better than 75%, a rate that stacks up well against the likes of the more highly regarded Thiago Silva and Loïc Perrin. Where he really excels though, is in terms of anticipation, as he is rarely beaten by opposing attackers, his tackling success rate exceeded only, again by Silva and Perrin. While there is of course some subjectivity here, what is clear is that the players to whom Da Silva most closely compares statistically are generally regarded as being the division's best centre backs.

Why, then, is he not rated as highly? Two reasons are most apparent. One is passing; both Perrin and Silva often display a great range and vision in terms of their distribution and playing long passes. Da Silva lacks, or at least has not fully developed that side of his game. I say has not fully developed, because even from last season to this, Da Silva's passing numbers show dramatic improvement, particularly with long balls. As he has risen through the ranks in French football, he has consistently displayed development in all facets of his game, and if he can burnish this particular aspect, then he can fairly be mentioned as being at the very top level.

That said, passing is only one aspect of Da Silva's game that requires work; the other is discipline. Having become such an important part of Caen's defence, his presence is of utmost importance as the club tries to take advantage of what is probably Europe's most open division below Paris Saint-Germain. Already having received a straight red once this season, against Lyon, Da Silva did the same last campaign, with one dismissal and another match missed for accumulation of yellow cards. While central defenders are often booked more than other players on the field, the very best (Perrin and Silva, again) are rarely cautioned or sent off. Thus, if Da Silva could focus on improving his passing and discipline, he would not only be talked about as one of Ligue 1's best defenders, but in the world at large.

Truly, with central defenders continuing to be at a premium across Europe, if Da Silva continues along this path, he will not be at Caen for long. Although contracted until 2018, his combination of age, continued improvement and evident desire make him a desirable target. As a final thought, his profile could yet increase were he to be called into action for the Portuguese national team.

Eligible through his father, and with his path into Les Bleus blocked by a host of younger players, (Raphaël Varane, Mamadou Sakho, Kurt Zouma, Eliaquim Mangala) A Seleccao could do worse than drafting Da Silva in to replace the aging likes of Jose Fonte, Pepe, Bruno Alves and Ricardo Carvalho. For now, though, observers of Ligue 1 should be happy to consider themselves once again in the know when it comes to spotting another rising talent.

40-21 RECAP

- 40 - Stéphane Ruffier (AS Saint-Étienne)
- 39 - Thiago Motta (Paris Saint-Germain F.C.)
- 38 - Hatem Ben Arfa (OGC Nice)
- 37 - Lassana Diarra (Olympique de Marseille)
- 36 - Serge Aurier (Paris Saint-Germain F.C.)
- 35 - Michy Batshuayi (Olympique de Marseille)
- 34 - Kevin Trapp (Paris Saint-Germain F.C.)
- 33 - Fabinho (AS Monaco FC)
- 32 - Ángel Di María (Paris Saint-Germain F.C.)
- 31 - Diego Rolán (FC Girondins de Bordeaux)
- 30 - Maxwell (Paris Saint-Germain F.C.)
- 29 - Aïssa Mandi (Stade de Reims)
- 28 - Layvin Kurzawa (Paris Saint-Germain F.C.)
- 27 - Romain Hamouma (AS Saint-Étienne)
- 26 - Thomas Mangani (Angers SCO)
- 25 - Christophe Jallet (Olympique Lyonnais)
- 24 - Paul-Georges Ntep (Stade Rennais F.C.)
- 23 - Jean Seri (OGC Nice)
- 22 - Claudio Beauvue (Olympique Lyonnais)
- 21 - Damien Da Silva (Stade Malherbe Caen)



CORENTIN TOLISSO

[20]
*

Club: Olympique Lyonnais

Position: Midfielder

Born: Tarare

Date of Birth: 03/08/1994

Age: 21

"We need to learn from the mistakes that we make."

– Corentin Tolisso

2015 has been a year of two halves for Lyon, with a respectable title challenge during the first half of the year followed up by a very ropey last few months, but their versatile academy graduate Corentin Tolisso has shone throughout it all. The 21-year-old has been an ever present over the last 12 months, appearing in every one of Lyon's league fixtures, and has subsequently become one of the brightest young talents currently plying their trade in Ligue 1.

Tolisso, like so many of Lyon's current squad, is a product of their famed academy. He joined the club's youth ranks in 2007, at the age of 13, and made his way through the youth teams until making his senior debut in August 2013, against Nice. Numerous sporadic appearances followed throughout the 2013/14 season, in which he scored his first senior goal, a last minute winner against Bordeaux, and it was not long before he became a regular in the first team.

Granted, his place in the first eleven was initially a consequence of necessity rather than free will, as an injury crisis in midfield left Lyon without both Clément Grenier and Gueida Fofana for an extended period of time. But when Tolisso was handed the chance, he took it with both hands, impressing everyone with his ability to control a game despite his young age. And when Grenier and Fofana recovered from their injuries, they found themselves unable to dislodge Tolisso from the starting line-up; such was his impact in the team in their absence.

He went on to play in every one of Lyon's 38 league games in the 2014/15 campaign, scoring seven goals, four of which came in 2015.

His first of the calendar year came at the end of January, in a 2-0 win over Metz. The youngster scored his side's second goal, seven minutes from the end, with an impressive long-range effort that flew past the keeper and into the corner of the net.

And during the end of February and early March, Tolisso scored in back to back matches, against Lille and Montpellier respectively. He scored within the opening three minutes away at the Stade Pierre-Mauroy, but Lille hit back with two second half goals to win 2-1. Circumstances were much better the following week though, as he bagged a late goal in Lyon's 5-1 demolition of Montpellier.

His final goal of the season came towards the end of April, in a 4-2 victory over Reims away from home. Tolisso opened the scoring in the second minute, taking advantage of a loose ball in the box to head into an empty net.

But those goals were not the most impressive part of Tolisso's season. The impact he had on the team throughout the campaign was what caught people's eyes the most, as he proved to be a driving force behind Lyon's ultimately unsuccessful title challenge. Indeed, Lyon were on top of Ligue 1 for a while, between January and April to be exact, but in the end they succumbed to the might of PSG.

It was a mightily impressive campaign for the club though, whose success was based primarily on their own academy products. Tolisso was just one of many of Lyon's own who contributed throughout the season, along with the likes of Clément Grenier, Anthony Lopes, Alexandre Lacazette, Jordan Ferri, Nabil Fekir and Samuel Umtiti.

And although Lyon as a team have not reached the same heights this season, Tolisso, as ever, has continued to impress.

He scored his only goal of the campaign so far against Bastia in late September, helping his side to a 2-0 victory. Tolisso's goal came late in the game, two minutes from time to be exact, and ended Bastia's faint hopes of taking anything away from the Stade de Gerland. Lyon attacked with pace and Tolisso took advantage of a lucky deflection in the box to fire home.

Just like in the 2014/15 season, Tolisso has been an ever present so far, appearing in every one of Lyon's league games heading into the winter break. In addition, he also played the full 90 minutes of Lyon's unsuccessful Champions' League campaign. Although Lyon crashed out of the competition, finishing bottom of their group, the experience of playing in Europe's premier competition can only have been beneficial for a young player such as Tolisso.

The club as a whole have struggled this campaign, languishing in ninth place in Ligue 1 at the halfway point of the season. It is a far cry from last season's title challenge and a tough learning curve for many of Lyon's young players.

Tolisso, though, has maintained his form throughout, impressing everyone with the way in which he dictates play in the midfield area. Tolisso is very assured on the ball; a calming presence that would usually be associated with a player many years his senior.

He is the perfect link for Lyon between defence and attack, transitioning seamlessly between the two positions and keeping the ball moving. Tolisso is the type of player whose work often goes unnoticed, as he quietly keeps things ticking over in the background; you only really begin to notice the effect he has on a game when you see the team play without him.

Tolisso is also a player who pops up all over the field; he is extremely versatile and can play in a range of positions in defence and midfield. This season alone, Tolisso has been deployed at right-back, defensive midfield, central midfield and on the left. His primary position, though, is in the centre of Lyon's midfield, where he has a license to protect the back four and advance forward in equal measure.

Like with all young players, however, there remains room for improvement. Tolisso has said himself in interviews over the last year that he has not claimed enough assists and that a player playing in his position should be more incisive with his final balls. He has just six assists to his name from 95 Lyon appearances to date.

On the international front, Tolisso is a regular with the French Under 21 squad, captaining the side on two occasions during their European Under 21 Championship qualifiers. All three of his goals for the side came in 2015, as he netted against Estonia, Netherlands and Scotland.

The aim now for Tolisso will be to make the next step and advance to the senior set-up, although in all probability this will have to wait until after EURO 2016.

The future, though, looks extremely bright for the 21-year-old and with his current rate of progression; it looks like Lyon have yet another home grown star on their hands.



LUCAS MOURA

[19]
v 3

Club: Paris Saint-Germain F.C.

Position: Midfielder

Born: São Paulo

Date of Birth: 13/08/1992

Age: 23

"It is a bit difficult to stay on the bench..."

– Lucas Moura

After showing huge promise with youth teams Clube Atletico Juventus and later on Corinthians, the tricky young winger Lucas Moura sealed a move to São Paulo in 2005. It was not until 2010 when Lucas Moura made his full debut and in his first season he found the net 4 times in 25 appearances. The following season Lucas scored 9 goals in 28 appearances and provided 4 assists which propelled his reputation in South America.

As his stock began to rise, Lucas was attracting the attention of some of Europe's leading clubs with firm interest coming from Inter Milan, Manchester United and Paris Saint-Germain.

In August 2012, it was French giants PSG who won the race for the exciting Brazilian for a reported £44 million. Much was expected of the young winger and when he arrived in January 2013 and even though PSG were well on their way to a first Ligue 1 title in 19 years, Carlo Ancelotti was confident that the winger could help propel PSG to the next level.

Lucas was given the chance to showcase his talents with a full pre-season behind him in the summer of 2013 and it did not take him long to show why PSG paid huge money for him. In September 2013, Lucas scored his first Ligue 1 goal in a 2-0 away win at Bordeaux.

Since signing in the French capital, Lucas has won 3 Ligue 1 titles, 1 Coupe de France and 2 Coupe de la Ligue titles with Les Parisiens and has provided the PSG fans with some wonderful moments: from his mesmerising run from inside his own half through the entire Marseille team to his wonderful strike at Caen in September 2014. Although Lucas has entertained the audiences, he has also struggled to show PSG fans his best, with a string of frustrating performances for the champions.

In truth, Lucas Moura has only shown glimpses of his talent during his time at PSG. When chances have presented themselves to him to claim a starting place in the team, he has failed to take them. Competition for places is fierce and because of Blanc's preferred 4-3-3 formation, it has been Cavani, Ibrahimovic and Lavezzi or Di Maria who have been Blanc's preferred starters.

The performances of the Brazilian international suggest that he has been more effective as an impact player coming off the bench. Whilst this notion will not please the winger, he has to seize his opportunity if he is going to give himself the chance of starting matches. Lucas has rarely performed in consecutive games for PSG and paid the price for this when he was dropped from Dunga's Brazilian national squad.

With Cavani and Lavezzi going through spells of indifferent form there have been calls from the Parc des Princes faithful to start Lucas in their place especially when the winger has previously come off the bench to impact a game. When Blanc has answered those calls, Lucas has again failed to deliver.

Lucas is a gifted player, blessed with speed, agility and skill and there are very few players in world football with such attributes at their disposal. There is no doubt that a level of sustained consistency could cause food for thought for Laurent Blanc but the winger unfortunately has been incapable of such form.

In reality, the opportunities are there for Lucas to force his way into Blanc's starting line-up. Since the start of the 2015/16 season, the Cavani, Ibrahimovic, Di Maria three pronged attack has been slow to flourish in the way that had been expected.

In hindsight, If Lucas had performed more consistently, and in doing so convinced Blanc of his capabilities to be a starter, then Laurent Blanc might not have needed to splash the cash on Angel Di Maria from Manchester United this past summer.

Lucas Moura's International career has mirrored his PSG form and just like Laurent Blanc, Dunga and previous Brazil manager Luiz Felipe Scolari have both sporadically called the winger up to the Selecao. When Lucas has performed, then he has been rewarded but this has not been a regular enough occurrence for a player of his ability especially at a time when Brazil is arguably not producing the same level of attacking talent as in previous years.

Lucas Moura's individual goals for 2016 should centre on his consistency in a PSG shirt. The winger must be able to perform in four or five consecutive games to give himself any chance over being a regular starter in the current PSG side. The Brazilian has now been in Paris for almost 3 years, he is settled, speaks the language and is a popular member of the squad; he has to show more belief in his own ability and that he warrants a starting berth.

2016 is sure to be a big year for Lucas, as PSG go in search of domestic and European glory as well as growth on and off the pitch and it is imperative that the tricky Brazilian hits the ground running. Blanc will likely further strengthen the squad and it is important that Lucas does not become the forgotten man.

Should that be the case, then maybe the Brazilian might see his future away from the French capital. If that was to happen then there would be a host of potential suitors for the winger as interest remains from England and Italy. Based on Lucas Moura's indifferent form for the French champions, it seems unlikely that PSG would re-coup anywhere near the money spent acquiring his talents.

Lucas should also look to improve his goal scoring statistics after weighing in with just 7 goals in all competitions in 2015.

Even though the pacey attacker has missed game time due to injury in 2015, Lucas's goal return is bleak for a player who is involved in so much of the Champions' attacking play. Why, you might ask, is Lucas Moura so highly placed within the GFFN 100 this year?

When he is on form and singing from the same hymn sheet as even just one or two of his teammates during a match, what he produces is often extraordinary. There are not many players in France, nay the world that can boast such ability. 2015 has also seen Lucas improving his positional awareness, with the Brazilian more intent on finding teammates in space rather than necessarily driving into these pockets alone. His shooting accuracy is improving, as indeed is his crossing ability.

Moura remains a special talent. It is important to remember that he is still only 23 therefore there is still time for development in his game and if the winger can add much the needed enhancements then there is no doubt that observers of Ligue 1 will be able to see the very best of the Brazilian. There is no doubting the talent of the man and with some small adaptations, PSG fans should be able to see some return on the £44 million that PSG paid São Paulo for his services.



ALEXANDRE LACAZETTE

[18]
v 12

Club: Olympique Lyonnais

Position: Attacker

Born: Lyon

Date of Birth: 28/05/1991

Age: 24

*"His behaviour hurt
and disappointed me."*

– Alexandre Lacazette

Ah, the complexity that is Alexandre Lacazette. Twelve months ago, he could have credibly ranked as one of the best players, and certainly the best centre forward plying his trade in Ligue 1. Six months later, while his form had fallen off a bit, a long season was coming to an end, and he had battled injuries throughout the run-in, a combination that was sure to stymie his production.

Another six months on and with Lyon winless in the league in six on the back of a road loss to promoted Gazelec Ajaccio, he and strike partner Claudio Beauvue rank highly among the targets of blame for the club's poor run of form. Of course, there are certainly other mitigating factors and targets for the fans' ire as well, ranging from the injury of Nabil Fekir to the poor performances of a back line that has struggled with injuries to an almost absurd degree.

While the potential of Nabil Fekir may have eclipsed Lacazette's star to some degree, the former's injury notwithstanding, he and fellow academy product Clément Grenier were the vanguard of Lyon's recent youth-driven resurgence. Born in the city and signed by Lyon in 2003 from the now-defunct ELCS Lyon, Lacazette's rise through the youth ranks for both club and country was meteoric.

Scorer of the winner at the 2010 Under 19 European Championships, Lacazette might have felt aggrieved not to be named in the team of the tournament, as he finished as the second-leading scorer. The following summer, he was joint-leading scorer at the Under 20 World Cup, having made his professional debut in a crucial match against Auxerre in the league that May, just weeks before his nineteenth birthday.

While playing time for the first team continued to prove hard to come by even after his international success, he was talked up by those around the club as the natural successor to Sonny Anderson, a key figure early in Lyon's run of seven successive titles. However, with Bafétimbi Gomis and Lisandro Lopez both firmly ahead of him the pecking order, his chances were few and far between, although he did see himself included in most matchday squads, especially towards the back end of the season. In 2011/12, his chances were once again increased, and he became a vital component for the team, playing on the wing in Remi Garde's 4-4-2, notching ten goals across all competitions.

In 2012/13, one might be tempted to look at Lacazette's return of just three goals as a regression, but the truth was far from that. Now firmly established as the club's preferred option on the right wing, he notched up a fine season, demonstrating a continued improvement with the ball at his feet as well as a nascent defensive work ethic. His hard work that campaign was rewarded towards its tail end by a first call-up to the national team, as he featured in a friendly against Uruguay as a late replacement for the injured Jérémy Ménez.

In Remi Garde's final campaign, Lacazette was finally played in his preferred position, partnering Bafétimbi Gomis at the top of the diamond 4-4-2 that has become the club's hallmark of late. Recording fifteen goals in the league, Lacazette was named in the Ligue 1 Team of the Season, adding a further seven goals in European and cup competition.

Despite a fine season from the player leading up to last season's monumental campaign, there were worrying signs in place as regarded Lacazette's attitude. Over the course of the season, he notched up a somewhat alarming seven bookings, being sent off in two matches in the process.

While his willingness to work and defend from the front should obviously be lauded, Lacazette has too often played with the sort of unnecessary intensity that hinders his team, demonstrating why the phrase "striker's challenge" is needed to describe his tackling acumen. Indeed, even last year, with Clinton N'Jie doing most of the legwork defensively in terms of pressing opposing defences, Lacazette racked up six cautions, which only failed to lead to a suspension owing to their occurrence within the campaign.

Before starting any teardown of Lacazette's abilities, his goal-scoring prowess should first be recognized along with his other attributes. Right-footed but able to finish with his left when called upon, at just 1.75m, Lacazette has to rely upon his pace and touch to put the ball in the back of the net, preferring to work the ball along the ground with his fellow attackers as opposed to scoring from a cross or a set piece.

Last season, this was on fine display with his combination play with Fekir and N'Jie, as he added six assists to his considerable goal haul, holding up the ball to allow the speedy duo to run onto the ball and showing his underrated physical presence in the process. However, what makes Lacazette a potentially world-class forward is his first touch, allowing him to spin past powerful defenders and pacy full backs with equal aplomb. With this being the case, there really is no bad position for Lacazette to receive the ball, as he can be a threat either with his back to goal or running at defenders.

So, with all of these attributes at his disposal, why has this season such a dip in his form? Two reasons are most apparent: the first is Lacazette's attitude, while the second is how the club have been set up tactically, which also has a knock-on effect on the first as concerns his performances.

Over the summer, Lacazette was linked a half-dozen or more of Europe's biggest clubs, and given his mobility and finishing instincts, it was easy to see why. Even with many of his goals in the back half of last season having been penalties, his numbers from open play were still impressive, especially in a league whose hallmark is a dry, physical football.

While he did eventually sign a contract extension tying him to the club through 2019, in the aftermath, he came out strongly against the club's president, Jean-Michel Aulas for having been overly combative as regarded the negotiations. The bad taste in his mouth from those discussions, as well as an early-season back injury, led to Lacazette starting the season in what must have been a poor mental state, leading to a general malaise on the pitch.

However, while a player's general attitude is down to the individual, Hubert Fournier has done little to aid circumstances. Looking at last season and this statistically, Lacazette's numbers are remarkably similar with three exceptions. One is obviously goals, but the other two are aerial duels won and passing percentage. The first shows a marked improvement, while the latter has taken a rather precipitous dip.

What these changes indicate is that Lyon simply are not playing to Lacazette's strengths. Naturally with Claudio Beauvue having replaced N'Jie as Lacazette's striker partner, crosses should be a more natural part of the way that Lyon play this season, especially when factoring in Fekir's absence. But more than that, Beauvue is not nearly the worker that N'Jie was defensively, forcing Lacazette to run more as opposed to sharing the defensive responsibilities.

Mathieu Valbuena has replaced Fekir as playmaker, but his contributions in terms of facilitating the attack have been poor as well, drifting wide to launch crosses as he had during his time at Marseille, forcing his undersized strike partnership out of their comfort zone instead of playing the ball along the ground. His use of space is also a source of frustration, as by pulling wide, he then ends up occupying the space in which Lacazette likes to operate, forcing the academy product to take up a more central role.

Clément Grenier and Lacazette seemed to enjoy a good understanding prior to the former's long injury lay-off; if Grenier can replace Valbuena behind a partnership of Lacazette and a more mobile alternative to Beauvue, perhaps Maxwell Cornet or Aldo Kalulu upon his return, the agonizing wait for Fekir to be fit again will not seem so difficult.

After all, as Lacazette demonstrated in his sublime hat-trick against St Étienne that he still has all of the tools to be a top-level attacker; he merely needs to feel supported on and off the pitch.

Call it immaturity, call it a lack of focus or of effort, or blame Fournier's tactics; until Lacazette is back amongst the goals, no matter who gets the blame, he simply is not the player of last season.



VINCENT ENYEAMA

[17]
v 4

Club: Lille OSC

Position: Goalkeeper

Born: Akwa Ibom

Date of Birth: 29/08/1982

Age: 33

*"I fought a good fight
for 13 years, but now I
have finished my course."*

– Vincent Enyeama

If you get praise from Diego Maradona and Lionel Messi, objectively two of the best that have ever graced the beautiful game with their presence, then you must be at the very least a pretty accomplished footballer.

The recipient of such effusive praise is Lille goalkeeper Vincent Enyeama, who helped his Nigeria side keep the Barcelona star scoreless in his nation's 1-0 defeat to Argentina in the World Cup of 2010. It was a sensational performance, possibly the best of his storied career, one that really kick-started his career in Europe.

After spells at a few clubs in Nigeria and Israel, Enyeama was brought to France in 2011 from Hapoel Tel Aviv. He played sparingly for Lille in his first year before being loaned to Maccabi Tel Aviv, with whom he won the Israeli Premier League in his only season.

The 2012/13 campaign was fantastic for the Nigerian, not only picking up a title with his club but also leading his country to the African Cup of Nations title, finishing as the goalkeeper of the tournament. After such an award-winning season, it was only going to be a matter of time before he finally broke through at the Stade Pierre-Mauroy.

The start of the 2013/14 season saw the end of Rudi Garcia's tenure at Lille and the arrival of René Girard ensured that the Nigerian international was placed into the first-team squad and since then, the Nigerian has barely looked back. He started every single league game in the 2013-14 season, conceding just 26 goals, a feat beaten only by the champions Paris Saint Germain.

In that time period, he went 1,062 minutes without conceding a goal in Ligue 1, a spell that spread over 11 games and three months. The defence in its entirety was excellent but a goalkeeper in outstanding form backed them up, and with him as security they looked for the longest time like they would never concede again.

The following season was not quite as fruitful for Les Dogues who conceded 42 goals, with 25 of those coming in the first half of 2015. While Enyeama's exceptional form of 2013/14 was perhaps not replicated in 2014/15, he continued to pull off a number of quality displays, and the culprits of Lille's disappointing campaign were the side's gutless attacking players rather than the former Nigerian national team captain.

The start of the 2015-16 season has seen a real return to form for Lille's backline and with Enyeama in goal, they have conceded just nine goals in 14 games at the time of writing. From a personal perspective, the second half of 2015 has not been without its blemishes, especially when Enyeama was sent off against Rennes for a late challenge. Other than that slight miscue, domestically, he has brought his usual quality to the table.

The other considerable low-point in 2015 for Enyeama was his decision to step down from the national team set-up, a move of which he felt almost compelled into by manager Sunday Oliseh. The Super Eagles boss stripped Enyeama of his captaincy for a friendly in October hours before kick-off and just a month after he took a leave of absence to grieve the loss of his mother. He ended his international career as the most capped player in Nigerian history, with 101 appearances since 2002.

Back on the field, his best display so far this year was in the 0-0 draw away at Lyon, where he pulled off a string of saves that helped his side earn a valuable point away at the Stade de Gerland. Enyeama himself may admit that he got a little lucky as the frame of the goal came to his rescue twice but with six saves in total, it is hard to deny his influence on the final scoreline.

A fantastic one-handed save to deny Mathieu Valbuena and a great reaction save to tip a Samuel Umtiti header over the bar were the top-drawer highlights of a fine display. What many Lille fans will tell you is that this is not just a one-off for their goalkeeper, these show-stopping performances occur on a regular basis.

The greatest quality that Enyeama has is his athleticism. He has the ability to close down the space to on-rushing attackers, he gets across his line well and can then dive to reach any part of the goal that he needs to in order to make a save. It is impressive, especially considering that he turned 33 at the start of the season and it is a trait that helps get him out of jail if he is slightly out of position.

This is also linked to his excellent shot-stopping ability, as it allows him to be able to reach any strike at goal if he is in the right position. He reaches strikes that he has no right to and has terrific reactions, able to dive quickly on a close-range effort and act quickly to any deflections on long-range shots to somehow keep them out.

Again, this lends to another great attribute, Enyeama is really difficult to beat from the penalty spot. If the ball is not placed in any of the corners, Enyeama has the ability to reach it, enabling him to hold off and react to the penalty-taker's shot rather than dive early and merely guess, trusting his athleticism, allowing him to go the right way more often than not.

Enyeama is good with the ball at his feet too, comfortable with making short passes and playing out of defence. The Nigerian can also hit a target man up front with a long pass, he has got the necessary quality when he clears his lines and tends to know when the pressure needs to come off his defence by clearing it up field.

Like many good goalkeepers, Enyeama is regularly communicating with his defence both during when the ball is in play and ahead of set pieces. He commands his area well, ensures that his defenders are aware of the dangers surrounding them and the effectiveness of his leadership skills are clear to see.

Simply put, Vincent Enyeama is a very reliable goalkeeper. There are some top goalkeepers in Ligue 1, a position that has the most depth in the entire league, but there are not many that can pull off match-saving feats like the Nigerian while limiting the blips that every goalkeeper has.

It might be a little late for Enyeama to make the move to a bigger European club, especially with the depth of quality around at the moment and the fact that he is not getting any younger. He could prolong his club career now that he is no longer available for international selection and while it is sad for it is a sad way for the Nigerian to bow out of duty for his country, Lille fans will be more than happy to reap the benefits as he heads into a period which many may see as his prime.



LOÏC PERRIN

[16
v 9]

Club: AS Saint-Étienne

Position: Defender

Born: Saint-Étienne

Date of Birth: 07/08/1985

Age: 30

*"I am not surprised to
have not been selected
for the national team."*

– Loïc Perrin

The silver-haired statesman of St Étienne, Loïc Perrin has been a stalwart at the Stade Geoffroy-Guichard ever since he joined the youth setup in 1997. He is part of the furniture, a local lad who epitomises the "give it your all" mould and with that, comes the acclaim of being one of Ligue 1's most consistent centre-backs in 2015.

Since he broke into the side 12 years ago, Perrin has played 320 games for St Étienne in all competitions, scoring 24 goals. He has been there during the high moments, when the team won the French Cup in 2012/13 against Rennes and he has suffered through the lows, being a key part of the squad that got them promotion out of Ligue 2 during the 2004/05 campaign.

In recent times, he has kept up the consistency that has been a hallmark of his entire career. In the second half of the 2014/15 season, his side conceded an average of a goal a game in their final 17 league matches and managed to reach the semi-finals of the French Cup and the quarter-finals of the Coupe de la Ligue, where they were eliminated twice by Paris Saint-Germain.

He was the centrepiece of a defence that let in just 30 goals in all season, second only to AS Monaco. It is almost a signature of a Christophe Galtier side, they remain tough to score against but all of that is centred around their captain. He also managed a goal in the early half of 2015 against Nice with a powerful diving header from a Max-Alain Gradel corner.

It is never a surprise to see Perrin score a header, he is such a danger from set pieces and he has shown that again at the start of the current campaign. Another thumping header started off his season against Toulouse, before scoring a tap-in after a flick on against Bastia.

The defender showed good awareness in the box as he tucked away his strike after a long-range effort rebounded off the bar. It is proof that he is just as great a danger in the opponent's area as he is an asset defensively within his own 18-yard box.

However, so far this season, St Étienne's defence has struggled a little more when compared with their 2014/15 campaign. Ligue 1 sides are breaking a little too easily through the usually strong Les Verts midfield, a trend that has exposed Perrin's lack of pace at times, allowing certain outfits to overwhelm them on the counter.

Frankly porous performances defensively allowed Nice and PSG to put four goals past Les Verts each, who also succumbed to an Alexandre Lacazette hat-trick in the derby, all three of these results occurring in the latter half of 2015. Four clean sheets so far in 2015/16 is also arguably unacceptable for a side who relies heavily on defensive solidity to make up for their often uninspired attacking displays and Perrin needs to help pull his side together defensively, as he so usually does, so that they can become the backbone of this football team again.

Perrin did excel particularly however during one of the team's recent clean sheet displays, winning the man of the match award in a 3-0 win against Reims in October. During a superb display, he was excellent in possession and dominated against the away side's front-line, winning four aerial duels and making six successful tackles throughout the game.

The Frenchman is a very traditional defender, strong in the tackle and in the air. Even though he stands at 1.80m, the 30-year-old possesses a great leap and, more importantly, superb timing, enabling him to increasingly dominate the aerial duel when he comes up against physical opposition, despite his relatively slender build.

Rarely outmuscled, he is a player who relishes the feeling of the striker breathing down his neck and accompanied by that belief that he can go toe-to-toe with anyone, it makes him a very difficult proposition for Ligue 1 attacker. Perrin is just as successful at dealing with wilier, quick attackers too.

His intelligent positioning allows him to cut down the distances that he has to cover in any eventuality and much like the approach of a goalkeeper, Perrin has a very interesting charge-down technique that aims to cut down the angle at which an attacker can shoot from, enabling Perrin to intercept or block the ball to prevent any danger.

There is however only so much that one can do to combat an individual who is simply quicker than you, and the faster players in the league have now opted to stand off him to such an extent that they can make successful runs in behind him. He does not have an impressive enough recovery pace to make a challenge in these instances and unfortunately, Perrin is only going to become weaker in this area of his game as he continues to age.

Another asset to Perrin's game that has certainly developed with age is an ability to be deft with the ball at his feet. He rarely "wastes" possession, preferring to lay the ball off to the two deeper midfielders that are usually in St Étienne's starting line-up rather than simply risking the constancy of ball retention by hoofing the ball forward.

Having said that, Perrin's marksmanship when executing the longer, more complex passes has been notable, creating 12 assists in his career, the majority of which emanated from his own half.

This latter attribute has also meant that Perrin has occasionally operated as a defensive midfielder. While this is not a position that he has adopted recently, owing to his now slightly decreasing mobility and especially as the club have an abundance of players in that position, his experience in that role have added to his passing abilities and overall awareness.

It was no surprise to see him being linked with likes of Arsenal in January 2015, given their weakness in defensive areas and the Frenchman's versatility to play in that holding role should they have been short in that area of the field.

It seems unlikely that Arsenal's name will crop up in the French gossip columns again in January, but it would be the kind of step-up that Perrin could acclimatise himself to quickly, unlike many other strong defenders in Europe.

The fact that Perrin has never represented his country at national level is almost criminal. Despite there being a relatively strong group of French centre-backs in and out of the national set-up throughout his career, it remains very surprising that he has been never made a single appearance internationally when he clearly has the capabilities to compete at that kind of level.

His chances of an international cap are now sadly only minimising, with the likes of Raphaël Varane and other young defenders coming through but if an injury crisis occurs in his position, Perrin would have every right to expect a long shot at the France EURO 2016 squad. It would be great for Didier Deschamps to write a long-term wrong dealt to a very talented central defender.

Another surprise in a very good career for Perrin is that there has never been a concrete move for his services from a bigger club in Europe. No disrespect to Les Verts but he has shown time and time again how good of a defender he is and looking at the level of some centre-backs, even at the big clubs, makes it incredibly alarming.

Putting that aside, even if he does see his career out with St Étienne, he certainly has a lot to hold his head up high about. A consistent thorn in opponents' sides, a rock at the part of a regularly stern defence for years and the bedrock of a famous French club. Perrin really is one of a kind. Long may he continue to shine with his hometown football club.



MATHIEU VALBUENA

[15 *]

Club: Olympique Lyonnais

Position: Midfielder

Born: Bruges

Date of Birth: 28/09/1984

Age: 31

"At the beginning, I felt he was annoyed. Very annoyed."

– Karim Benzema

On the 20th September 2015, the day had come for Mathieu Valbuena to return home. Playing with his new side Lyon, he travelled to play Marseille at the Stade Olympique, the club for which he had made 325 appearances and where he had virtually spent his entire footballing career. As a result of the circumstances of his departure, Valbuena would probably have been naive to expect a universally affectionate welcome. But what to come was probably beyond even his worst nightmare...

Mathieu Valbuena's calendar year of 2015 has probably been the most eventful of his footballing career, both on and off the pitch. On the pitch, he spent the first half of 2015 in Russia, playing for Dynamo Moscow, after his move away from Marseille to the Russian side in the summer of 2014. Last summer, he ended his foreign adventure, and returned to France, this time not with Marseille but Lyon, who had ended a very impressive 2014/15 season in 2nd place behind winners PSG.

Off the pitch, he was embroidered in a controversy that threatened to risk his place in EURO 2016, as Karim Benzema was accused of encouraging Valbuena to pay blackmailers demanding money for an alleged sextape.

But Mathieu Valbuena earns his spot in the GFFN 100 solely for his performances on the pitch over the last 12 months, which have seen him give the kind of consistent performances in his attacking midfield role that we have become accustomed to seeing for so many years. He was a crucial part in the Dynamo Moscow side which finished 4th in the Russian Premier Liga, which would have been enough to earn them a European spot had they not been banned from all European competitions at the time.

Now at Lyon, he has played 14 of their 18 Ligue 1 games and, despite the team sitting a lowly 9th in the table, they are just six points away from 2nd place Monaco, so it is all to play for during the second half of the season after the winter break.

Since Mathieu Valbuena has been at Lyon, he has scored one goal and made two assists, which suggests he has not exactly hit the ground running. However, those statistics slightly miss the point, because Valbuena has still been very effective, it is just that to some extent his teammates have not been very efficient in front of goal.

In particular, Valbuena has created 40 chances in 14 Ligue 1 games, one of the highest ratios in the league, but has only two assists, suggesting that his teammates only convert one in 20 chances that he creates for them. Whilst Valbuena has probably not hit his top form immediately at Lyon, his lack of assists is certainly down to those around him also.

Above all, Mathieu Valbuena has shown tremendous character in 2015, both on and off the pitch. When he returned to Marseille on the 20th of September, the home fans had prepared a surprise, something that would shock not only Valbuena but even the rest of French football fans. When the teams walked out of the tunnel, the Marseille fans put up a huge effigy of Valbuena, which depicted the Frenchman dead having been hung from the stands, and with it the words 'Nothing but a traitor' on display on a banner. For Valbuena, who clearly retained a lot of respect for the club that raised him, it must have been the hardest of pills to swallow.

In fact the game was so bad natured, largely because of the return of the 'traitor' Valbuena, that the players had to be taken off the pitch in the second half as a result of fans throwing items onto the field. This prompted Lyon President Jean-Michel Aulas to state that his players would not be coming out onto the pitch again. However, under heavy police presence in the crowd, the players resumed the game, which finished as a tight 1-1 draw.

In addition to emotional moments on the pitch, controversy off the pitch came to a head when it was revealed that French teammate Karim Benzema was involved in the famous sextape scandal. It would have been easy for Mathieu Valbuena to make some ill-judged comments in the immediate aftermath of the story blowing up in the press, but the 31 year old took his time and made a considered public statement.

He was sensible, claiming Benzema *'wasn't aggressive, and he didn't speak to me firmly,'* but also added that he was *'very, very, very disappointed'* with Benzema and could *'only accept that my relations with Karim were not as sincere as he makes out.'*

It appears the ordeal will affect Benzema more than it will Valbuena; the midfielder is likely to make the French squad for EURO 2016, while the Real Madrid striker faces missing out as a result of the allegations.

Ultimately, though, Mathieu Valbuena is a quality footballer, and he can do special things on the field, as he has shown in the last calendar year with both Dynamo Moscow and Lyon. At Lyon, he has showed flashes of the brilliance he can consistently produce - his goal against Toulouse was a superb strike from the edge of the box, and his assist for Sergi Darder in that same game showed great vision and ability in the final third.

If he is able to produce that level on a more consistent basis, then he could inspire Lyon to big things in the coming year.

And speaking of the coming year, it promises to be a year of excitement for all involved in French football as the country host EURO 2016, with France expected by many to be one of the countries to be challenging for the trophy.

Mathieu Valbuena will likely be a major part of Didier Deschamps' plans, if his appearances in Les Bleus' recent matches are anything to go by. Since the 2014 World Cup, Valbuena took part in 14 consecutive games with the national team, only missing out on the latest two friendlies with Germany and England because of the sextape scandal developing at the time. Valbuena himself targets the Euros as a tournament in which he wants to play a major role, seeing as, at the age of 31, it may be one of the last international competitions that he may play a starring role in.

He has gone on record as saying he 'cannot wait' until EURO 2016 begins and, such is the promise of the French national team; neither can many of the fans supporting the country. As a result, 2016 has all the makings of a special year for both Valbuena and his Lyon and France teammates.



WAHBI KHAZRI

[14
^27]

Club: FC Girondins de Bordeaux

Position: Midfielder

Born: Ajaccio

Date of Birth: 08/02/1991

Age: 24

"You must not underestimate us."

– Wahbi Khazri

SC Bastia have always been, but particularly now under Ghislain Printant, a rather dour affair. Survival has been scraped rather than easily achieved, and few of their players who have displayed any promise have stayed, the club relying on a mix of aging veterans, loanees and their own unproven youngsters to drag themselves over the line.

There have certainly been exceptions, including Floyd Ayité at present, but in general football in Corsica has been a hammer and tongs affair, the raucous crowd at the Furiani being as important as any individuals on the pitch or touchline. Think, then, how the club could look in attack at present were they to have retained all of Wahbi Khazri, Florian Thauvin and Ryad Boudebouz. While the trio would still need some sort of outlet up top, the combination of pace and dribbling ability would certainly provide for entertaining football. Then again, any opposing full-back would more than fancy their chances on the counter, and one could easily imagine a flurry of 5-3 score lines, with Bastia on both ends.

While this imagined trio of attackers would likely never see the pitch even when they were all still at the club, they serve as a fine metaphor for the careers of each individual as well. Each have had brilliant stretches of play alternating with sluggish and indifferent performances, looking like world beaters one moment and ineffectual luxury players the next.

However, with Thauvin struggling to make an impact at Newcastle and Boudebouz arguably still yet to find his feet at Montpellier, perhaps there is hope yet in the shape of Khazri, whose play has been a barometer for the success of Bordeaux since his arrival in the southwest some eighteen months ago.

Born in Corsica, as are most of Bastia's youth products, Khazri started out training for Ajaccio-based side Jeunesse before moving to the island's most historically powerful club in 2003. He eventually made his debut for the first team in 2009, his playing time and goals and assists rising as he gained maturity and confidence, eventually firing Bastia into the top flight on the back of nine goals and seven assists from 33 appearances in 2011/12.

His creativity was instrumental in keeping the club up for the next two seasons, but as has been the case with Boudebouz and Thauvin, the club was in dire financial straits and was forced to sell him to Bordeaux in the summer of 2014.

While generally an attacking midfielder, Khazri is an exceptionally versatile player, as he is able to play wide on either flank or even up top, his decent height (1.82m) and wiry strength allowing to handily battle opposing centre backs. Quick, if not remarkably so, he is at his best with the ball at his feet, able to not only take defenders on himself but also to shoot from distance, favouring his right foot but being adept enough with his left so that he does not really have a weak side.

This talent is in evidence at free kicks as well, as whether it is going for goal or floating in a ball for the likes of the powerful Cheick Diabaté, his dead ball deliveries have been one of the best assets of his play, the basis of four of six assists in the league. That being said, even though he does have a powerful foot, his shooting accuracy could certainly be improved upon, although he has bettered himself in that respect since the beginning of the season.

Besides the previously stated inconsistency, or lack of focus, Khazri has a few other foibles which have kept him from maximizing his obvious talent. The first is likely his selfishness. Given that he has never really had to battle for a place in a given starting eleven throughout his career, there is something natural about this.

If a player is an automatic selection week after week, season upon season, whether or not a manager is actively boosting a player's ego, the subconscious absorbs the fact that most other teammates, especially those in similar positions are of a necessarily lower quality. This, in turns leads not only to an inflated sense of one's own ability but also to a lack of trust in teammates.

On the pitch, this manifests itself in Khazri's game via an eagerness to shoot when a pass might be the better option, running at defenders when trying to link play along the ground could be more productive and expressing open disgust when his teammates fail to convert chances he has manufactured for them.

Even though his numbers for goals and assists are considerable, especially on a per-minute basis for teams who are not exactly elegant in attack, if he embraced a more truly creative role, while he might score a bit less, he would likely rank among the league's leaders in assists.

Granted, he has done better in this respect this season and last, forming a very copacetic relationship with Bordeaux's quartet of young strikers, willing to let his relative experience be their guide, but even in that period, he has still gone dark for long periods of time. He has only notched only one assist since early October. In that time frame, Bordeaux have won just three times in the league, two of those being against Guingamp and Troyes, current residents of the relegation zone.

While the Europa League and a host of injuries and suspensions have certainly had their role to play in Bordeaux's poor Ligue 1 season, the unevenness of Khazri's form, particularly as the club have no credible option to replace him is the most obvious target.

Beyond this inconsistency, Khazri has also generally demonstrated a marked lack of willingness to exert himself defensively. While last season's 4-3-1-2 was built around his opportunistic play, shielding him from most of his duties in terms of tracking back, the current campaign has seen a more holistic approach necessitated by the team, and not only has Khazri not been helpful, his discipline has further added to the club's malaise.

Never one to be far from an entry in the referee's notebook, Khazri has taken his exploits to a new level this season, receiving five cautions in the league, as well as a dismissal in Europe. In a young team short on leadership, if Khazri is really to prove himself to be the type of figure who can create a consistent positive impact on a club, he will need to curb his impetuosity.

All the ingredients are present for Khazri to become one of Europe's leading attackers, not just a better than average presence in Ligue 1. At 24, though, he is no longer a prospect, and playing with maturity in all phases of his game is sorely needed for him to push on from his current level.



JULIEN FÉRET

[13 *]

Club: Stade Malherbe Caen

Position: Midfielder

Born: Saint-Brieuc

Date of Birth: 05/07/1982

Age: 33

*"He is very humble
and has an enormous
amount of qualities."*

– Julien Féret

It is difficult for French football enthusiasts not to romanticize over a player like SM Caen's Julien Féret. In truth, this exceptionally talented attacking midfielder should certainly not still be plying his trade in Ligue 1 at such a late stage in his career. However, there are always certain individuals who seem to slip through the rest of Europe's net as they continue to scout Ligue 1 so vigorously and aggressively. At the age of 33, if Féret had any dreams of experiencing football outside of France, then it is fair to say that those have been dashed, unless he fancies a year in the Middle East. The retention of Féret in Ligue 1 has enabled him in 2015 to become talismanic and instrumental to humble SM Caen's success in the French top flight. He is at the core of a project that could potentially shock everyone in the fight for European places when we reach the business end of the 2015/16 campaign in 2016.

Up until 2015, Féret remained criminally undervalued in Ligue 1 circles. In 2014, he decided to leave Rennes on a free transfer after losing his starting spot in Philippe Montanier's setup, with the former Real Sociedad manager preferring youth to experience. What a mistake that was. Anyway, you might have expected the rest of the French top flight bar the big four (Lyon, Marseille, Monaco and PSG) to form an orderly line for Féret's services in the summer of 2014. However, recruiters pointed to the player's age and decided not to take the "risk". In truth, SM Caen manager Patrice Garande arguably saved Féret's blushes when he snapped him up for nothing in the middle of June. Garande's promises to Féret upon the latter's signature were crystal clear: let me build an attack around you.

Having played a mere 16 times for Rennes in 2013/14, these were exactly the words that Féret wanted to hear. With the weight of responsibility that comes with leading the attacking line of a newly promoted Ligue 1 side, Féret had an exciting new challenge to sink his teeth into. Boy, did he do just that.

On the face of it, you would be right to raise eyebrows at such a high placing for an attacking midfielder who has managed just nine goals and seven assists in the league in the last 18 months for Caen. However, Féret is perhaps the perfect example of how statistics can never quite tell the full story in modern football.

Féret brings much more to the Caen setup than merely the final products. One simply has to marvel at the undisputed respect that he commands from his teammates, paralleled with the wonderfully quick feet that he has which allow him to move the ball faster and with greater accuracy than the vast majority of individuals playing in his position for other Ligue 1 sides. This enables Féret to get the ball out rapidly to Vincent Bessat for example on the wing, who can then attempt to supply a cross for Andy Delort who will look to score. Féret, in this respect, is the assister of the assister, a category and a trait that remains underexplored and undervalued by the major football statistics companies and members of the French football community alike.

At 1.82m, Féret is far from your typical attacking midfield player. Despite his slender build, he is dreadfully difficult to out-muscle and therefore possesses great advantages over the other, smaller and more brittle attacking midfielders in the French top flight.

To say that Féret is well aware of this would be an understatement and it gives him the confidence to attempt to surge past opposition defenders into goal-scoring positions rather than simply passing the ball on. Just because he is not the quickest footballer in the division does not make him an easy proposition for defenders. He is crafty with his movement too. He likes to run into the opposition box just at the last moment, bamboozling the opposing defensive midfielder and ensuring that a defender in the process does not pick him up, leaving him unmarked to score if his teammates can pick him out. In these positions, Féret can display one of his more understated positive characteristics: the art of shooting. Féret is not just a master at getting a clean strike on the ball, but he is also able to manipulate the ball's trajectory to devastating effect as it races towards goal.

To answer Féret's critics who claimed that in 2014 he was already "past it", I would merely refer them to his goal in November against Guingamp. Féret picks the ball up on the halfway line before dribbling all the way into the penalty area to fire home past a bemused looking Jonas Lössl. Yes, but can he do it every week I hear them cry? Féret has missed just one league game since he joined SM Caen and was forced to sit out due to suspension only. Otherwise he has played in every single encounter that Patrice Garande's men have competed in during their Ligue 1 stay thus far.

Yes but is he quick enough? In the middle of October, Féret scored his second league goal of the 2015/16 campaign, in a move whereby he had to sprint half of the length of the pitch to catch up with Andy Delort on a lightening counter attack against Reims. He did so with aplomb, Delort putting the ball square into the six yard area just at the right time.

Caen's success lies with their ruthless counter-attacking football. Féret is not playing a part in that. Rather, he is orchestrating it. Those Féret doubters should now have learnt to keep quiet as Caen's brilliant silver fox seeks to lead the Normandy outfit to the unexplored heights of continental football in the second half of 2015/16.



JOÃO MOUTINHO

[12
^46]

Club: AS Monaco FC

Position: Midfielder

Born: Portimão

Date of Birth: 08/09/1986

Age: 29

"I want to play in a team that plays in competitions to win them."

– João Moutinho

The phrase "And then there was one...", could conceivably be applied to the case of João Moutinho as his club AS Monaco continue to scale back the very project that catapulted them to the fore of European football in the summer of 2013.

But in 2015, Moutinho's unique, and often lauded collective focus has very much dwindled. And this is despite a strong 2015 in which the Portuguese international has prospered significantly. In the league, in Europe and for his national team. But the Moutinho of early 2015 has been replaced by a sulkier individual. A player who still highlights flashes of quality in the middle of the park, but no longer does it with the panache of old.

After a 2014 in which Monaco lost their crown jewels in Falcao & James Rodriguez amongst others, they still remained a formidable force. Still in all four competitions - most importantly still in the Champions' League, as they progressed to the knockouts.

Ok, so it was not all perfect at the beginning of the calendar year. But Monaco, under the stewardship of Leonardo Jardim were punching above their weight. While Moutinho - now 29 - joined the club as one of its new 'galacticos', he was now seen as a torchbearer alongside the evergreen Ricardo Carvalho to complement the club's numerous exciting young talent. The likes of Yannick Ferreira-Carrasco, Geoffrey Kondogbia, Anthony Martial made for an exciting transition period.

So, Moutinho had no pressing concerns, and performances highlighted a fierce opponent as ever. Monaco began the year in fifth place, stuttering - but one would point out that they were getting into gear after a turbulent period. And their central midfield icon replicated the club. Performances were not pretty, but it did the job heading into the winter break.

However, the Monegasque club accelerated in early 2015, and this was in no small part to the efforts of Moutinho. His position as the anchor in Monaco's midfield alongside Jérémy Toulalan paid dividends. The starting point of the attack, picking off opponents and forcing open opportunities for the likes of Bernardo Silva, Martial and Ferreira-Carrasco was almost always the predictable passage of play preceding a Monaco goal.

If Toulalan was the defensive guard in front of the back four, then Moutinho was the deep-lying passing master. His creative movements and confident style was unorthodox in the position he often played, but it worked - especially in the absence of Geoffrey Kondogbia who was absent until February. Monaco had only lost once in Ligue 1 (to Guingamp) until late April.

Upon Kondogbia's lauded return, Moutinho was once again able to fully exercise his creative skills in midfield. And Monaco were beginning to ascend up the table too. If Moutinho excelled going forward, he was also doing an astute job in helping out at the back too, as ASM eked out positive draws against then league leaders Lyon and the future champions Paris Saint-Germain.

But the real impression was made in the bright lights of Champions' League action where Monaco - who secured their passage with three wins and a meagre four goals scored - were drawn to face Arsenal. The first leg at the Emirates Stadium proved to be the highlight of Moutinho's year in club colours.

A superb performance, both individually and collectively saw the 29-year-old help his side to a shock 3-1 victory in north London. He nabbed an assist for Kondogbia, picking up the ball from the right and seeing the oncoming Frenchman in acres of space. What followed was a rocket from 25 metres which set Monaco onto their famous victory.

And a star was reborn. In the English press at least. His profile across the Channel had soared after that performance, with the English media scratching their heads at why such a player was not plying his trade in the Premier League. More on that later....

Back to the domestic scene. What was surprising was Moutinho's ability to even better his performances despite the number of fixtures that were now accumulating. He missed only one game - a French Cup tie against Rennes - and came off the bench once - again in the quarter-final of that competition away to Paris Saint-Germain. Indeed, he played 90 minutes in all other competitions in the first half of 2015 bar one.

And the performances were becoming of increased quality too, with three assists in three games in March, as well as passage into the Champions' League quarter-final and French Cup semi-final.

Monaco rose into the Champions' League positions (3rd) in Ligue 1 too, having finally climbed their way up from a low of 19th earlier on in the season. Moutinho was shining and so were his club.

The Principality club eventually faded, going out of Europe at the hands of eventual runners-up Juventus, while a surprise penalty kicks defeat to Bastia denied them a place in the French Cup final. But given that this was officially classed as a transition season at Stade Louis II, acceptable progress was made.

Late April saw Monaco work hard to qualify for the Champions' League - the Portuguese international contributed with a fine goal against Marseille at Stade Velodrome (though they eventually lost against their UCL rivals). But at the last, they won when it mattered in Lorient to return for a place in the 3rd qualifying round.

If Moutinho left Monaco in the summer thinking that he would return to another exciting side to emulate their 2014-15 exploits, he was wrong. Monaco sold its core of enticing young players destined for the top, and pocketed a scarcely believable €155 million in the process.

But testament to his professionalism, Moutinho got to work, helping Monaco dispatch Young Boys in the summer with a pair of assists ahead of the new season. And each week, someone was out of the exit door at Stade Louis II. Kurzawa, Falcao (again), Abdennour, Kondogbia, Ferreira-Carrasco and then late on transfer deadline day, Anthony Martial.

And it was too much for Moutinho, who did not join them despite sustained interest all summer from England.

Asked about Monaco's new project after a spate of new youngsters were brought in, he replied: *"It's no longer the one that I came for but that's the way it is. There's naturally a bit of frustration. I don't feel misled, but I was upset."*

Those words, coupled with Monaco's early UCL exit has made for a limp end to the year. Internationally, he contributed superbly with two goals to seal Portugal's passage to Euro 2016. But much like his club's stadium, the atmosphere has gone flat, the passion dwindling quickly. It will be a surprise if he remains at the club after the summer.



LUDOVIC BUTELLE



Club: Angers SCO

Position: Goalkeeper

Born: Reims

Date of Birth: 03/04/1983

Age: 32

"We shall remain humble."

– Ludovic Butelle

Consistency has been key to Angers' success this season, and one of the club's most consistent performers has been their stopper, Ludovic Butelle. The thirty-two-year-old has started every Ligue 1 games this season for Stéphane Moulin's side, and should he leave the club before the end of the season, his absence would be sorely felt.

In a first half-season that has been dominated by praise for Angers' collective team spirit and well-organized united performances, Butelle has stood out as a truly individual performer, whose displays in France's top-flight have been of fundamental importance to the club's excellent defensive record. After Paris Saint-Germain, Angers currently have the league's best defensive record this season, and 'Ludo' has been central to this success.

Like Cheikh Ndoye and Ismael Traoré this season, in the summer of 2014 Butelle was another inspired Ligue 2 signing made by Angers' recruitment department. He made the move north to the Pays de la Loire after three successful seasons with AC Arles-Avignon in which he was twice elected as the best goalkeeper in Ligue 2, and he became an instant hit with his new side.

Butelle played a crucial role in his new club's successful push for promotion in a campaign in which he made thirty-four starts in France's second-tier. Butelle brought with him a wealth of experience to the Stade Jean-Bouin, having played at France's highest level in Ligue 1 with Metz and Lille, and also in Spain's top-flight during his spells with Valencia and Real Valladolid.

In terms of his positive attributes, what strikes you first about Butelle is his shot-stopping ability - he is an agile goalkeeper, whose ability to block and respond to shots quickly with his lightning-quick reflexes has made him stand out this season. One of Angers' most impressive results in the first of the current season was their goalless draw against the champions and runaway league leaders, Paris Saint-Germain. He is quick to leave his line to deal with danger, and he shows no fear when rushing into one-on-one situations. Butelle has demonstrated on several occasions his intense concentration which enables him to stay alert and respond to danger as quickly as possible.

This was most obviously in evidence when he pulled-off an excellent eighty-fourth minute save which rescued the historic point for his side against PSG. Zlatan Ibrahimovic's free-kick from the edge of the Angevin box rebounded towards the keen and always eager PSG midfielder Adrien Rabiot. The France Under 21 international directed a well-placed low shot towards the goal. Butelle, who was completely blind-sided by his wall and a number of PSG players in his box, reacted quickly to dive to his right-hand side and push the ball away for a corner.

Butelle is clearly a goalkeeper who has developed well as a result of his vast experience of football in Spain and in his native France, and as a result his playing style can be described accurately by UK-based onlookers as 'continental'.

As aforementioned, he is keen to deal with danger quickly, but at times this means that he prefers to clear danger as quickly as possible. This in turn means that when dealing with crossballs and long-range shots, Butelle often elects to punch or parry the ball away, as opposed to holding on to it.

Although this practice is commonly accepted and even trained into young French goalkeepers, it does seem out of place in UK-based football, and if he was ever to play on the other side of the channel, this could be a trait that goalkeeping coaches would be keen for the thirty-two-year-old to get rid of.

There are however few goalkeepers in European top-flight leagues who have had as impressive a first-half of the season as Butelle.

On the pitch, his athleticism and his prowess between the posts has earned him well-deserved praise and he has frustrated even the most gifted attackers in the top-flight of French football this season - Zlatan Ibrahimovic, Alexandre Lacazette and Lorient hotshot Benjamin Moukandjo have all failed to breach his goal line this season. But away from the pitch, it is the stopper's resilience and determination that has marked him out as different to many of his contemporaries.

Despite now appearing to be on top of his game, Butelle confessed in a recent interview with So Foot that he has taken a lot of blows during his career. Whilst at Valencia, Butelle's first-team chances were limited, as he was used mainly as a replacement option for club legend Santiago Canizares.

At the age of just twenty-one, Butelle would face his most serious challenge. The young goalkeeper suffered internal bleeding following a ruptured spleen caused by a collision with Parma striker Tonino Sorrentino in a friendly match at the Mestalla. He would face months on the sidelines, but he remained determined to return to first-team action.

Having eventually returned to France to sign for Lille, the former France U21 and Coupe Gambardella winner faced yet another setback when he was also be forced to be understudy to France international Mickaël Landreau after his signature at the club.

Butelle did not remain despondent. He showed good strength of character when deciding to leave the club to join Ligue 2 side Nimes on loan, and the first-team experience he gained in this period would have a massive impact on the rest of his career.

In 2015, Butelle has demonstrated the fact that he is a resilient character. He has bounced back from multiple set-backs to once again establish himself as a regular first-team starter in Ligue 1. His displays at times have been of the highest quality, and he has deservedly been considered as one of the top form goalkeepers of the championship so far. It is no surprise that bigger clubs than Angers have since been linked with his services.

For the club's head coach, Stéphane Moulin, he has been an extremely dependable figure within his squad's ranks, and one that he has singled-out on numerous occasions for specific praise. The fact of the matter is that, without Butelle, Angers' success both last season in gaining promotion, and in this season in achieving a top three place in the first half of the campaign, would not have been possible.

At times he has appeared unbeatable and the club's continued success in the following half of the campaign could depend on whether the directors can manage to keep a hold of their star goalkeeper until after the January transfer window.



MARCO BAŠA

[10]
^2

Club: Lille OSC

Position: Defender

Born: Trstenik

Date of Birth: 29/12/1982

Age: 32

"It does not depend on me."

– Marko Baša

For a side who opt for a more defensive approach to football, it is imperative that you have consistently unyielding defenders. Lille certainly have that in Marko Baša, a man who offers a commanding presence in defence. Standing at 1.90m, the Montenegrin international has a powerful aerial aura, and is particularly adept at defending set pieces; flinging himself at the ball with determination and desire. The same can be said for his presence in the opposing penalty area, as he is a potent attacking threat from corners. Arguably Baša's greatest strength though is the way he reads the game. The former Lokomotiv Moscow man is rarely caught out, and the number of interceptions that he makes per match, is nothing short of remarkable. Not a player to dive into tackles and with his ability to predict the moves of his opponent, it is no surprise that in his last 38 starts, he has picked up just three yellow cards and given away only 27 fouls.

Since signing for Lille in 2011, the big Montenegrin has made 123 appearances and scored 10 goals in that time. 36 of those appearances came in the 2014/15 campaign, during which Lille competed on four different fronts. He played 30 times in Ligue 1, and featured in all six games of a tough group stage in the Europa League, coming up against Everton, Krasnodar and Wolfsburg. Baša managed just the one goal in that season which came at eventual champions PSG. Despite being dismantled 6-1 by Les Parisiens, there is no doubt that Baša will remember that game with more fondness than the rest of his teammates: he netted the fifth goal of a game dominated by an Ezequiel Lavezzi hat-trick.

That season, Lille managed to finish 8th, which is a decent return in a league with plenty of competition for European places. Les Dogues may not have been particularly happy with 8th place, but it was a fair reflection of their ability. Their attack has not been prolific since the likes of Eden Hazard departed and therefore most of their success is dependent on their back line. Baša and company managed to keep 14 clean sheets in the 2014/15 campaign which was one more than PSG. One cannot give all the credit to Marko Baša of course, he had a fantastic central defensive partner until this summer in Simon Kjær and a brilliant goalkeeper in Vincent Enyeama behind him. However, it is a certainty that the Montenegrin international is the leader in that back line and the lion's share of the credit must fall upon his shoulders. Lille's defensive record was particularly formidable at their home stadium, Stade Pierre Mauroy, where they kept 11 clean sheets in just 19 games, which is a record bettered by no other side in Ligue 1. Lille may perhaps have offered even better defensive statistics if it was not for an unfortunate injury suffered by Baša, after just 20 minutes at home to Lorient. Lille's favoured centre back had to be substituted. Lille would go on to win that game comfortably by a 2-0 scoreline, but they had to live without their talismanic defender until he returned in the Europa League, in a 1-1 draw with Krasnodar of Russia.

The man who wears the number 25 shirt in Lille, has had an unfortunate start to the new season. He played the first eight games of this campaign, in a run that allowed Lille to accumulate four clean sheets. At this stage Lille were defensively impregnable, but unfortunately Baša suffered an injury in October that has kept him out of every fixture since. His injury is reported to be an adductor strain that is not overly serious, and we should see Marco Baša back in action come the new year. The absence of the 32 year old is a more than noticeable one, in the first eight games this season in which Baša played, Lille conceded just four goals. The 11 that he has not played in, Lille's defence has been breached 11 times. A simple comparison can clearly be made, with Baša in the team, Lille concede on average 0.50 goals per game. Without Baša, they concede an average of 1.00 per game, which is more than double. The importance of Marko Baša is obvious, without him Lille are not the same side. English Premier League side Watford were reportedly interested in him during the summer, this comes as no surprise when you consider his obvious quality.

Not only an excellent player domestically, Baša has had a wonderful year with the Montenegrin national side. Although Montenegro failed to qualify for EURO 2016, Baša had an enjoyable time coming up against some of the best players in Europe. His side had a tough group that saw Austria, Russia and then Sweden via the playoffs eventually qualify. Fellow Ligue 1 star Zlatan Ibrahimovic got the better of Baša's defensive unit on three occasions across their two meetings, no doubt the Lille man was left disappointed by that. Plenty of uncertainty has surrounded Marko Baša in terms of his international career. His loyalties have at times been questioned, he was eligible for both Montenegro and neighbours Serbia and it took him until 2009 to make his debut for his country in a match with Italy. He had previously played for Serbia in friendlies back in 2005, and when offered the chance to represent Montenegro in 2007, he decided not to play having been called up by the then manager, Zoran Filipović. Now under new management, Baša is a mainstay at the heart of Branko Brnović's defence. At the age of 32 and due to Montenegro's failure to qualify for Euro 2016, it is likely Baša will not get the chance to represent his country at a major international tournament.

Baša is no doubt looking forward to a return to football in 2016 following injury. With Lille currently occupying 11th spot, Frédéric Antonetti will be looking at one of his most experienced players to fire Lille to some more positive results. Despite the fact Baša has turned 33, there is no doubting his importance to Les Dogues. His level of performance has never yet dropped since he joined Lille in 2011 and Baša shows no signs of slowing down. An experienced head in a Lille squad brimming with young talent, the Montenegrin international will have a key role to play in ensuring that Lille finish in a respectable position in the league table.



DANIJEL SUBAŠIĆ

[9]
^30

Club: AS Monaco FC

Position: Goalkeeper

Born: Zadar

Date of Birth: 27/10/1984

Age: 31

*"Maybe I would have
been in the mafia."*

– Danijel Subašić

One of the outstanding performers over the calendar year of 2015 is Monaco's Croatian goalkeeper Danijel Subašić who, at 31 years of age, has arguably had the best 12 months in his career. In the 2014/15 season, he was part of a Monaco defensive unit which was grabbing headlines not only in France, but across Europe as well.

Subašić's performances in goal for AS Monaco led the side to maintain by far the best defensive record in Ligue 1 last season, and was crucial in underpinning Monaco's run to the quarter-finals of the Champions' League.

The 2014/15 season was to be one of surprise success for AS Monaco. After a change of strategy from the rich owners, they were without their two best attacking players for the season: Radamel Falcao had been loaned to Premier League side Manchester United for the season, and James Rodriguez, after a fantastic World Cup in Brazil with his country Colombia, had been sold to Champions' League holders Real Madrid for a minor fortune.

Now the club had to rely on the likes of youngsters Ferreira-Carrasco and Anthony Martial, as well as the ageing Dimitar Berbatov, for their supply of goals. Somewhat foreseeably, their attacking threat was considerably diminished, and as a result the success of the side relied strongly on the performance of their defence, led by Danijel Subašić...

To say that the defensive unit stepped up to the task at hand would be an understatement. Subašić conceded only 25 goals in the 37 Ligue 1 games he played, with Monaco's record of only 26 goals conceded in the season being only five goals more than the all-time Ligue 1 record of 21, held by the dominant Marseille team of 1991/92.

It was the fewest goals conceded by a team who finished outside the top two in Ligue 1 history, which shows just how impressive Monaco's defence was compared to their struggling attacking unit, who scored fewer goals than 13th place SM Caen. Subašić was a crucial member of that back line, keeping 20 clean sheets in the season, including 16 in his last 22 games and a run of eight in succession in mid-season. He provided the last line of defence on the rare occasion in which the opposition was allowed a shot on goal.

But Monaco were not only drawing attention domestically; their defensive record in Europe was also drawing plaudits. During the group stage of the 2014/15 season, in a group with Bayer Leverkusen, Benfica and Zenit St. Petersburg, Monaco conceded only one goal.

This was not only the best defensive record of all teams in the competition, but also the fewest goals ever conceded in the group stages of the Champions' League in the competition's entire history. They would go on to upset the odds to beat Arsenal in the last 16, before being knocked out by eventual runners-up Juventus 1-0 on aggregate in the quarter-finals.

Subašić was in the form of his life in the 2014/15 season, but what made it so difficult for opposition players to beat him when they got a shot on target? First of all, as with many top goalkeepers, Subašić cuts a towering and intimidating figure in front of the sticks.

Standing at 1.91m tall, Subašić has the height required to safely cover the large majority of the goal, meaning that strikers have very little area to aim where Subašić will not be able to reach the ball. His height also allows him to be a commanding presence in the area when crosses come into the AS Monaco box. This season, he has had a 92% success rate when going to intercept crosses, which helps take pressure off his defenders by preventing opposition players from challenging them in the air.

Perhaps most important for goalkeepers is to get their positioning spot on before a shot comes in, allowing them to make very difficult saves look easy. Subašić is not the flashiest of goalkeepers, and does not tend to make diving reflex saves, but that is because he does not need to go to the trouble all that often, as a result of almost always being in the right position to make a save. This allows him to maintain a fantastic level of consistency, which was in evidence in particular during the second half of last season.

During the first half of the 2014/15 season, Subašić made 1.67 saves per goal conceded, which was a solid, if not particularly impressive, figure. However, he improved his game to a more than creditable extent during the second half of the season.

In the process of conceding just seven goals in 18 appearances, Subašić made an amazing 4.86 saves per goal conceded, helping propel Monaco into 3rd place in the Ligue 1 table, behind only Lyon and champions PSG. Whilst Monaco's defenders of course should take a lot of credit for that fantastic record, it is clear that Subašić's outstanding improvement in form in goal was a crucial factor in the team's success.

This season, Monaco's defensive record has not been quite so impressive, with the team having conceded 23 goals in the league despite sitting in second place behind runaway leaders PSG. However, Subašić has maintained his impressive performances in goal, and the slip in form is more to do with the loss of centre back Abdennour in the summer, who was a crucial stalwart of the 2014/15 season.

This can be seen by the fact that, while last season Subašić made 1.73 saves per game, this season he has made a considerably higher 2.63 saves per game, showing that the defence in front of him was not as effective as it was last season.

At 31 years of age, Subašić is pretty much in his prime as a goalkeeper, and there is nothing to say that he will not keep performing at such a high level for years to come.

With so many years in football comes a wealth of experience, and Subašić is able to use that to help the defenders in front of him, and last season this leadership was rewarded in a game against Toulouse towards the end of the Ligue 1 season. After injuries had affected the side, Subašić was given the captain's armband, and skippered the side to a 4-1 home victory to cement their position of 3rd in the Ligue 1 table.

Overall, Subašić has had an outstanding calendar year of 2015, being the standout goalkeeper in French football, both on the domestic and the European stage. He also had a standout year on the international stage, helping his country Croatia to qualify for EURO 2016, which is of course to be held in France, so the 31 year old will certainly have a summer to look forward to in the coming year.

He fully deserves his spot in the top 10 of the GFFN 100, and if he is able to reproduce his form in 2015 over the next few seasons, he will surely be regarded as one of the top goalkeepers in European football.



SOFIANE BOUFAL

[8]
*

Club: Lille OSC

Position: Midfielder

Born: Paris

Date of Birth: 17/09/1993

Age: 22

*"They know that I
want to have a full
season here."*

– Sofiane Boufal

2015 has been quite simply a life-changing year for Sofiane Boufal. The twenty-two-year-old moved to Lille from then mid-table Ligue 2 side Angers in the January window, and since then, his rise from promising Ligue 2 pépite to one of Ligue 1's hottest and most exciting products has been nothing short of incredible.

His career so far has been the stuff of Hollywood movies – the young kid from a working-class area hit the big time with his local side before moving onto bigger and better things with one of the country's biggest clubs, Lille. Boufal is not yet the finished product – but the potential is there. If he continues his career in the same manner in which he has started, he will surely go on to be one of the best French-born players of his generation.

Boufal first broke onto the scene in the first-half of the 2014/15 season, when he dazzled potential recruiters with his skills in France's second-tier, Ligue 2. On one particular occasion, he gave a clear indication of things to come on a cold November evening, when he scored a sublime solo effort in a home match for Angers against Dijon. The three points won in the game would eventually go on to have a massive effect on the club's promotion hopes.

Picking the ball up the left-wing, the then twenty-one-year-old cruised in from the sideline to effortlessly glide by four opposing defenders before slotting the ball past the helpless goalkeeper. It was a goal that not only caught the imagination of the Angers support, but one that also made pundits and recruiters alike realise that Boufal was more than just your average bright young prospect. Having previously scored two goals before against Créteil and Laval, 'Soso' as his family, friends and teammates know him, would go on to score another goal against Orléans for his boyhood heroes before he made the move north to Lille just two months later.

In the face of transfer offers from overseas, Boufal showed great maturity in electing to sign for Lille, highlighting the importance of the opportunity to play first-team football in his decision. It has proven to be a decision that the youngster has not lived to regret, as since his move he has played twenty-nine times in Ligue 1.

He moved to the club for a fee believed to be in the region of €4m, and he committed to Les Dogues for a period of four years. This will surely prove to be an extremely shrewd investment, as Boufal has not only proved to be an inspired signing on the pitch, he is more than likely to be sold on in the future for a fee which will command a rather heavy return on the modest sum with which he was signed from Angers.

The characteristics that first caused attention to be drawn to Boufal are still there. He delights with his composure on the ball, and the ease at which he appears to drift by opponents, even when he is being double-marked by opposing sides, at the behest of coaches who realise the potential threat the young Franco-Moroccan poses. His consistently impressive form has earned him the well-deserved reputation of being considered as a technically-gifted player, as he is equally comfortable using either foot, and he uses this ability to aim both well-directed longshots and pick out crosses and passes from both sides of the park.

Though he is equally comfortable playing on either flank, Boufal's most exciting dimension is the potential he could offer playing in the number ten role. With his ability to almost effortlessly beat players, his pace, his ability to shoot with success and his ability to thread complex passes through defences, he could develop into a truly world class central attacking midfielder. He has evolved from the skilful winger that he was at Angers, into one of the most versatile attacking midfielders in the league, as he is comfortable playing anywhere across the three in a 4-2-3-1 formation.

One area in which Boufal has notably improved has been his ability to score – the twenty-year-old has netted eight goals since joining from Lille, and his tally of five goals this season so far is certainly likely to increase in the second part of the season. If his goal on matchday 19 against Toulouse is anything to go by, Boufal's ability to shoot is becoming increasingly clinical.

At the moment, Boufal can be comfortably described as one of the most exciting prospects in French football, but if he is to turn that potential into truly world class ability, there are certainly some specific areas of his game that need to be evaluated and improved. Boufal has always impressed with his humble nature on and off the pitch and he has largely managed throughout his young career to keep his emotions under control, but he recently let himself down when he lost his temper against SC Bastia.

In a pressure-filled match, emotions appeared to get the better of Boufal when he recklessly stamped on Mathieu Peybernes' outstretched leg. This resulted in an instant dismissal, and Boufal would later receive a three-match ban for the offence. His playing style dictates that he often draws fouls from the opposition, but this season he has begun to increase his own foul count himself.

The midfielder has committed a staggering thirty-two fouls in just fifteen Ligue 1 games this season, and having received six bookings already, he is one of the top-flight's most booked players. If he is to become a top player, he will need to show perhaps a little more reserve when he plays in order to avoid further dismissals that could cost his side dearly.

Criticism could also be levelled fairly at the twenty-two-year-old in terms of his sometimes apparent reluctance to come back down the pitch and help defend - with his pace and stamina, this is a task to he should be more than able to fulfil comfortably, and with more experience, one which he should fulfil instinctively.

Last season, Boufal stood out as a result of his unique creativity in a Lille side that at times was criticised for its lack of ingenuity. With his ability to spot key complex final passes in the final-third, and his two-footed crossing ability from the wings, Boufal managed to rack up an impressive tally of five assists in his first half-season in Ligue 1. This equated to an assist every three games.

However this season the Lille number seven has only managed to create one assist, serving Djibril Sidibé with a clever in-field pass from the wing in LOSC's three-nil win against Lorient on matchday 18. Given his form last season in terms of creating chances, few would have expected that Lille fans would have to wait so long for Boufal to provide his first assist of the season, and he will be hoping to increase this tally in the second half of the campaign.

Boufal is a modest character - his main objective remains to be his ambition to make his family proud of his performances - but he is also self-assured and believes in his own ability, and given his form over the past couple of seasons, he has every right to do so.

He is also ambitious - just a year on from making headlines from the first time with Angers, Boufal revealed in a recent interview with France Football that receiving a call-up to French international set-up is one of his firm ambitions.

The criticisms levelled at Boufal in this report are not unfounded, nor do they take anything away from his incredible potential. If Boufal can address the areas in his game to which he draws criticism, he truly could become one of the best European-born players of his generation.

If 2015 has been the stepping stone with which Boufal has reached the limelight, 2016 could be the year in which he truly begins to shine.



JAVIER PASTORE

[7
^19]

Club: Paris Saint-Germain F.C.

Position: Midfielder

Born: Córdoba

Date of Birth: 20/06/1989

Age: 26

"I understand that I have to work & fight for this team every single day."

– Javier Pastore

There are few players in world football who can create moments of brilliance out of nothing, causing fans to get up from out of their seats to applaud, for no reason other than to sound their appreciation at a piece of individual skill in the middle of an attacking move. There are even fewer players who have the ability to render onlookers into producing gormless facial expressions with a killer pass of effortless efficacy. And there are even fewer players who can do both, at least in the way that Javier Pastore does.

Eric Cantona has suggested that the Argentinian is the best player in the world and the 2014/15 campaign was a raving success for Javier Pastore by all accounts. He became the vital lynchpin between midfield and attack, spraying balls left and right, far and short in as graceful a manner as ever. Laurent Blanc even shifted from his favoured 4-3-3 formation to a 4-3-1-2 in order to accommodate Pastore, who is incidentally one of Blanc's favourite players at the club. It seems remarkable to think that PSG fans wanted the Argentinian to be sold as recently as the summer of 2014.

At that point, they were however right to be frustrated with one of QSI's first ever signings. In the early months of 2014, Pastore failed to show any signs of life, appearing repeatedly dejected and physically weak on the ball for the then Ligue 1 champions.

It was only at the start of the 2014/15 campaign that Pastore burst into life. Before then, he had only been able to show flashes of brilliance, such as his wondergoal in the Champions' League against Chelsea in April 2014. Pastore received the ball far out on the right-hand side of the pitch and dribbled past several players before slotting the ball home from a tight angle. In truth, it was these flashes that kept the Argentinian in the reckoning in an otherwise painful 2013/14 for PSG fans when it came to Javier Pastore.

Anyway, the point is that Pastore's 2015 has been a tale of two halves. His exceptional form and prominence at the start of the 2014/15 campaign continued into the new year and the Argentinian finished the season with 34 Ligue 1 appearances, a quintet of league goals and had amassed the second highest chances created tally within the division, behind only Dimitri Payet, then of Marseille fame.

His luscious strokes of the football and incredible passing volume ensured that he won back the hearts of all of those previously frustrated PSG fans and for the first time confirmed his potential as one of the best attacking midfielders in the world. Pastore's change in mentality certainly went a long way to facilitating his improvement in form.

Previously, with the crowd on his back and low on confidence, the Argentinian possibly felt that the only way to justify his inclusion within the side was to come up with assists and goals. By focusing on that extensively, Pastore forced his game unnaturally, shooting from difficult positions and playing his passes too early.

Pastore's focus changed in 2014/15 to the point where he concentrated less on validating his selection and began to relax into his game more on the pitch, unfortunately for PSG's opponents.

He endeared himself to the Les Parisiens faithful to such an extent that a movement called "Pastorisme" was even created. The movement aims to celebrate some of Pastore's favoured technical tricks and the player as a whole, and there is not a single other PSG player who can boast to have had anything comparable to it created for them.

Ask anyone within French football circles who has the sense to look past Zlatan Ibrahimovic's intimidating goal-scoring tally and they will tell you that Javier Pastore was PSG's best player of the season in 2014/15. And it is this reality that makes what has happened in the second half of Pastore's 2015 so undeniably tragic.

The elegant, sexy-football-playing attacking midfielder has somehow found himself back on the bench for PSG in 2015/16. The irony is that the man who has taken Pastore's place in the starting XI is an individual that Pastore had publicly displayed a desire for to join PSG. His name is Angel di Maria.

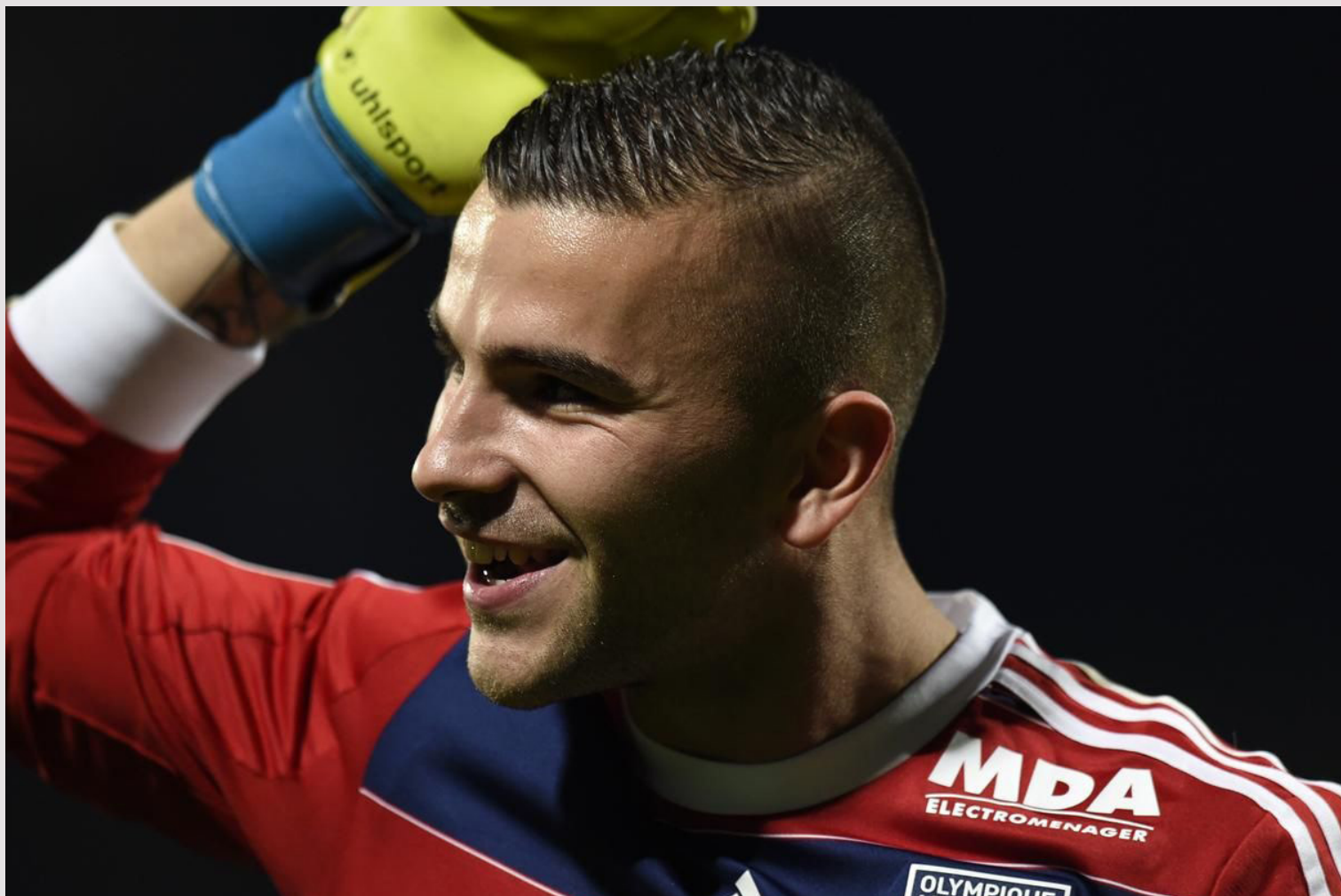
The former Real Madrid and Manchester United man joined the PSG project in the summer for a show stopping €65m. Laurent Blanc, in what can only be described as a grave betrayal of Pastore's brilliance, has reverted to his preferred 4-3-3, with Angel di Maria out on the left and Edinson Cavani once again operating between the right and central offensive channels.

As a result, Javier Pastore has been on the periphery of the action for PSG in their momentous first half of the 2015/16 campaign. He has also suffered from an odd string of injuries in the final two months of the calendar year, including thigh, hamstring and even eye problems, which have prevented the player from attempting to win back his place in the starting XI.

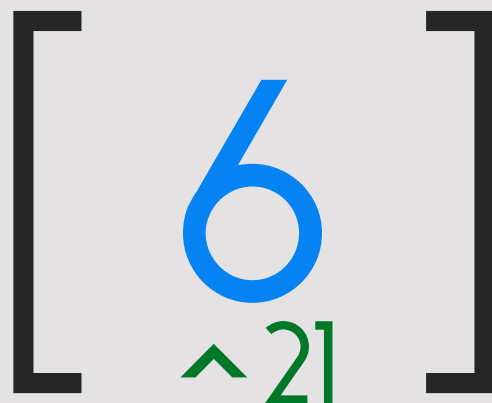
At 26 years old, Javier Pastore's 2016 could be career defining. He is often painted as a psychologically fragile individual and after a spate of injuries, PSG and French football fans alike fear that we will never see the Argentine in another purple-patch of form similar to the renaissance that he underwent during the 2014/15 campaign. Pastore needs to come out of the blocks in 2016 fighting to win back his place and to help PSG to reach new horizons in the Champions' League.

He needs to prove that the glorious renaissance that he enjoyed in the first half of 2015 was no accident and that we do not look back on it as his golden age. He must work effectively so that we view it as the beginning of the truly exceptional stage in the career of one of the most talented attacking midfielders in modern football. Angel di Maria is a fantastic footballer, but Javier Pastore must believe that he is a better one.

This time, hopefully PSG fans will aid him to reach his former level of excellence, rather than hinder his progression.



ANTHONY LOPES



Club: Olympique Lyonnais

Position: Goalkeeper

Born: Givors

Date of Birth: 01/10/1990

Age: 25

*“Watching Gregory
Coupet in training helped
me enormously.”*

– Anthony Lopes

While not of the reputation of France international and Marseille goalkeeper Steve Mandanda, nor as hyped a prospect coming through the youth ranks as the likes of an Alphonse Areola or a Benjamin Lecomte, Olympique Lyonnais' Anthony Lopes has surely but slowly come into his own as one of Ligue 1's most exceptional players at the position.

Rightly not spoken of in the same breath as the likes of Lyon's other recent academy prospects, having turned 25 in October, Lopes has patiently waited his turn to become Lyon's number 1, with first Hugo Lloris and then Rémy Vercoutre presenting themselves as obstacles to his ambition. Now firmly ensconced as the club's first choice goalkeeper, Lopes has been a superbly reliable stopper, one of a very few players who have displayed any level of consistency in the season to date. Since bringing in Gregory Coupet in 1997, Lyon have, with Vercoutre's lone season as first-choice as an exception, been privy to a remarkable run of world-class goalkeepers, with Coupet replaced by Hugo Lloris and now Lopes.

Born in the Lyon bedroom community of Givors, Lopes is of Portuguese heritage and had represented that country as early as at the Under 16 level, even as he worked his way slowly up the ranks at Lyon. While he has much to do to be mentioned in the same breath as Coupet and Lloris, all of the signs are present that he has the ability and drive to do so.

Having joined Lyon in 2006 following a six-years spell at local amateur side Olympique Saint Genis Laval, Lopes laboured for the club's various youth teams before becoming part of the B team in 2008. Playing alongside the likes of current first-team teammates such as Alexandre Lacazette, Clement Grenier and Maxime Gonalons, Lopes faced stiff competition at that level as Mathieu Gorgelin, currently his deputy who was promoted alongside him, and both were battling against Joan Hartock for time on the pitch. Despite this, Lopes' contributions had already been made tangible, as the Under 19s had been finalists the previous season.

While with the B squad, Lopes proved a revelation, unseating the older Hartock and becoming a major contributor to all three successive reserve titles. In a video interview from that time, Gilles Rousset, the club's youth goalkeeping coach, describes Lopes' qualities, *"He is simply a complete goalkeeper. That is to say, he hates giving up goals. He is decisive. He has great qualities in goal. He wants to work more to become a professional player. He is a very interesting boy. He has the ideas, the passion, the courage. He is a rising goalkeeper, a little crazy, but it's a craziness which is a good thing."* Even in 2010, to a man of Rousset's experience, Lopes' qualities were apparent, but he still had to wait his chance to make a real impact at the club.

The doors slowly but surely began to open for him in the summer of 2012, when Hugo Lloris became one of several first team players sold in the wake of failing to qualify for the Champions' League. At that point, Lopes had already played his first competitive match for the club, appearing in a 2012 Coupe de France semifinal against Gazelec Ajaccio. He did not have too much to do in the match, as the third division club had had a man sent off and provided little opposition, Lyon running out comfortable 4-0 winners.

Nevertheless, the experience boded well for the youngster, as the match was played in Corsica, making his initial run in the first team an exciting one, being as the Stade Francois-Coty was packed out to the gills. Highlights show that the Corsicans certainly did their best to test the debutant, and he makes several fine saves, including a magnificent block of a free-kick late in the first half with the match still scoreless.

When Lloris departed for Tottenham in the summer though, Lopes' wait to be first choice was set to continue. Rémy Vercoutre had been Lyon's backup goalkeeper for several years, a strong, physical presence, dependable if unspectacular. While not the reflex goalkeeper that Lopes is, his performances in the current season at Caen have clearly demonstrated his ability; Remi Garde was clearly picking the older player on merit and not some arbitrary hierarchy or seniority. Things went on in that manner until late in the season, Lopes making the odd cup appearance but mostly being second choice. Then, in April, his chance arrived in the form of a ruptured cruciate ligament on the part of Vercoutre.

At the time, Lyon were embroiled in a desperate fight for third place and a much-needed return to the Champions' League. Paris Saint-Germain were well clear of Marseille in the race for the title, although OM looked beyond the chasing pack as well; second place was not really an option, and Nice and St Étienne were also in the mix. St Étienne in particular were a dangerous proposition. Propelled by Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang, the club went on a long unbeaten run to make themselves surprise European contenders. Nice, for their part, were in their first season under Claude Puel, who had done so well three seasons prior to lead Lyon to the semifinals of the Champions' League. With five matches to go, both remained on the fixture list for Lyon, as well as a visit to the Stade Gerland from PSG. In their most crucial and difficult stretch of the season, the club would have to rely on an inexperienced goalkeeper.

To make one's first league start in a crunch race for European places is one thing, but do it against your club's biggest rivals is quite another. Lopes was less than stellar in that match, conceding a goal that was perhaps down to some bad marking from a corner, to Kurt Zouma, but even in his nervousness, the signs that he could become of Ligue 1's finest keepers were there. With Vercoutre still a long-term absentee to start the next season, Lopes started 2013/14 as the unqualified first choice, and despite a poor team effort in the crucial Champions' League play-off against Real Sociedad, the season saw the club finish once again among the European places, embarking on an impressive run to the Europa League quarterfinals along the way. Injuries and a green set of defenders led to Lyon having a poor defensive record, but Lopes was fairly strong, conceding only 34 goals in the 32 matches in which he played in the league.

Last season, his improvement continued apace, being nominated as one of the league's best goalkeepers in their year-end awards by the UNFP. He lost out to Steve Mandanda, but most would argue the Marseille keeper's win was largely political, as Lopes was one of only several who had a legitimate claim to have had a season surpassing that of the French international.

This year, he has continued with more of the same. Lyon's defensive record has tailed off from their starting the season with the fewest goals conceded, undone by injuries to Milan Bisevac, Samuel Umtiti and Christophe Jallet, as well as some rather bizarre personnel choices on the part of Hubert Fournier.

Through it all, Lopes has been superb, not only further cementing his reputation as the league's best at reflex saves, but also improving his command of the area on set pieces, his confidence continuing to grow as he matures. Against Paris Saint-Germain this past weekend, although Lyon were on the wrong end of a 5-1 scoreline, it could easily have been several more if Lopes had not been quicker off his line, playing the sweeper as the champions peppered the defence with a succession of balls over the top.

Despite his age, this is still only Lopes' third full season as a number one, and his improvement should continue with more time. His "goals conceded" statistics are not stellar, especially for a league as defensive as Ligue 1, but with Lyon lacking continuity, this is hardly his fault. While Danijel Subasic and Salvatore Sirigu (despite not starting for PSG) can also lay claim to the title, for now, it is only fair to call Lopes the league's best. The hope here is that he can continue to develop in the relative obscurity, and that his performances fail to catch the eye of some bigger club.

Lyon failing to advance to the knockout rounds of the Champions' League will probably do much to keep him in the shadows for the time being, but it can not be long before he is spirited away to a bigger club, especially if he can dislodge Rui Patrício as Portugal's number one. For the time being, though observers of Ligue 1 and Lyon should enjoy another well-kept secret.



BERNARDO SILVA

[5]
*

Club: AS Monaco FC

Position: Midfielder

Born: Lisbon

Date of Birth: 10/08/1994

Age: 21

“Bernardo Silva is an incredible talent.”

– Valère Germain

When the news came last winter that Monaco's loan of Benfica's Bernardo Silva had been made permanent for an eye-watering €15.75 million, there was surprise in many quarters. After all, with only two goals and assist to his name at the time, while the Portuguese youngster had demonstrated considerable potential, consistency had eluded him.

As he had not even become a regular starter until late November, the investment seemed a monumental display of faith, especially for a club attempting to scale back their ambitions in the wake of Dimitri Rybolovlev's financial woes. While the move failed to make waves around Europe, the fee for Silva given to Benfica by Monaco represented the highest amount paid by a French club aside from Paris Saint-Germain in the year, and the fifth-highest in Europe in the January window.

Almost a year on, the move seems to have paid off handsomely. Silva kicked into form in a fabulous way in the run-in, scoring seven goals and adding two assists as Monaco lost only once in their final fourteen matches. The club's turn of form also needs to give some degree of credit to Silva's erstwhile teammates Anthony Martial and Yannick Ferreira Carrasco, to be sure, but even though his running mates were the ones that earned the big-money moves away, it was perhaps the diminutive Portuguese whose play was most integral in terms of Monaco reaching the all-important third place.

Looking back on his career prior to his arrival in the principality, though, should we really have been so surprised to see him come good in such a big way? After all, he had already won several impressive individual awards, having been named in the team of the tournament in the 2013 Under 19 European Championships, and been a three-time Segunda Liga Player of the Month whilst playing for Benfica's B team in 2013/14.

But still, despite having been brought in at considerable cost, he had failed to impress in any meaningful way up until that point in time. However, around the time of his emergence in Ligue 1, manager Leonardo Jardim had made some key changes to the squad, prioritising the attacking trident of Silva, Ferreira Carrasco and Martial, allowing the pair to have free rein in a blinding counter-attacking 4-3-3.

A stark contrast to the stifling 4-4-2 diamond used upon his arrival at the club and during Monaco's tactically limited spell under Claudio Ranieri, the more aggressive and expansive football not only helped the club's league performances but also allowed them to reach the quarterfinals of the Champions League, where they were perhaps unlucky to be eliminated by Juventus.

This season has started a bit less brightly for Silva, as he has failed to progress statistically, having scored only three goals and is yet to record an assist heading into the 2015's final round of matches. Surely some of this unevenness can be put down to having to acclimate to a raft of new teammates alongside him in attack, as the likes of Thomas Lemar, Ivan Cavaleiro, Stephan El Shaarawy and others are all summer arrivals.

Injuries have also played a part in Monaco's lack of consistency, as Nabil Dirar, Thomas Lemar, Helder Costa and other have all missed significant amounts of time due to various problems. This has, of course, necessitated a raft of enforced changes for Jardim, not only personnel-wise, but also tactically.

While last year saw a dynamic and aggressive 4-3-3 used during Monaco's best periods, the squad on show this year would seem to dictate a 4-2-3-1 would be more effective, owing to the departures of Geoffrey Kondogbia, Lavyin Kurzawa and others. Jardim has rarely, however, had his full complement of options available to him and has been forced to make do. Silva, of course, is one of the club's most versatile attackers, able to play in any attacking position except centre forward.

To this end, he has not been given the same opportunity to establish a relationship with his fellow attackers over a number of matches that he had over the course of 2014/15, meaning that at his best, he is still every bit the incandescent presence last seen driving Monaco up the table, rather than the inconsistent player who has not even been a regular starter his season. He did continue his excellent performances with Portugal's youth teams, being one of the key players in his country's run to the Under 21 European Championship final this past summer, being included in the team of the tournament alongside Ivan Cavaleiro and Lorient's Raphaël Guerreiro.

With recent rumours linking Silva to Chelsea, and his impressive placement in this document, a closer analysis of his style of play is certainly warranted. A rarity, at least these days, in Benfica's buy-low sell-high model, Silva was born in Lisbon and was signed to the club at the age of eight, a stark contrast to the raft of South Americans that have lately graced the club's books.

His steady progression through the club's youth ranks was rewarded on his 19th birthday with his professional debut making the first appearance of what would be an exceptional campaign for the club's B team. He would make his debut for the first team that season as well, but his rapid development was certainly hastened by being given opportunity to play, even in Portugal's second division, rather than riding the bench.

With James Rodriguez making his exit in the summer of 2014, Monaco were in need of a creative spark of the likes of which the Colombian had provided, and Silva was looked to as a potential answer. A diminutive presence at just 1.73 metres, Silva is nevertheless the complete attacking midfielder. Blessed with fine close control and dribbling abilities, and a wicked left foot, Jardim's use of him on the right-hand side last season was a near-perfect match, as he was able to cut inside and shoot.

Despite his small size, he has shown no fear with regards to taking opponents on, even in a Ligue 1 that is surely a big step up in terms of physicality from the Portuguese second division. While his range of passing and decision-making could be improved, meaning that his long-term future likely lies on the right and not as a classic number 10, Silva's talent is undeniable, making him, along with Nabil Fekir and Sofiane Boufal, one of the division's most promising attacking players.

His size prevents him from being a great crosser of the ball, but he is superb at linking play along the ground, and has shown a great work ethic. Under Jardim, defensive contribution is paramount, (one of many reasons El Shaarawy has not been used as often) and Silva has shown no shortage of willingness to track back when called upon, something that bodes well for his versatility and ability to develop on the wing.

While he has been in and out of the starting eleven this season, Jardim has been prioritising the European competitions much more this season, and Silva has started every single European match bar the qualifiers against Young Boys, a statistic that speaks to his importance more than his involvement in Ligue 1.

While he has not exactly set those competitions alight, it would come as no surprise if Monaco, now eliminated from the Europa League, were to see a reprise of the type of form from Silva which he displayed towards the back end of last season. Were that to be the case, Monaco, second to Angers only on goal difference at the time of this writing, would become prohibitive favourites for second place. If that occurs, Silva himself would be, like Martial, Kondogbia and the club's other summer departures, likely not at the club for much longer.



BLAISE MATUIDI

[4]
v 2

Club: Paris Saint-Germain F.C.

Position: Midfielder

Born: Toulouse

Date of Birth: 09/04/1987

Age: 28

*"My life is my children
and my wife!"*

– Blaise Matuidi

If he were four years younger, he would be playing in the Premier League by now. So goes the old tale about Blaise Matuidi, Paris Saint-Germain's classically late-blooming midfield dynamo. It is not that his talent has not been recognized from a young age; he was, after all, called into Paris' prestigious Clairefontaine academy and was also a member of the French youth setup at Under 19 and Under 21 levels.

However, Matuidi was 23 before he made his first appearance for Les Bleus and it was not until 2013 that he became a first team regular, the indiscretions of Yann M'Vila and the retirement of Alou Diarra aiding his case for inclusion. While he surely would have become a regular squad member, M'Vila is still only 25, and with the rise of Paul Pogba, the competition for midfield places for France has been a contentious one.

Born to an Angolan father and a French mother of Congolese descent, the young Matuidi took to football naturally, following in the footsteps of an older brother and signing on with local club Fontenay, also turning out for the youth ranks of Vincennes and Creteil before Clairefontaine came calling.

During this period, he turned out occasionally for the youth sides of France, progressing through the age groups, but not really distinguishing himself, as the teams of which he was a part were already shorn of the likes of Samir Nasri and Karim Benzema due to their participations with the senior squad. A heart-breaking loss in the play-offs for the 2008 European Under 21 Championships was as close as Matuidi would come to a national tournament until last year's World Cup, having missed Euro 2012 through injury.

The failings at international level were no fault of the player's, though, as he had been quite busy making a name for himself professionally. Despite being pursued by Lyon, Matuidi eventually plumped for Troyes, signing a reserve contract with the club in 2004. That first season, he flitted between the reserves and the first team, who managed to earn promotion to Ligue 1. By the time the next campaign had started, Matuidi, despite being just 18, had earned himself a place as a regular starter under Jean-Marc Furlan, figuring in more than thirty league matches in each of his first two seasons.

The manager was quick to praise his young midfielder, stating, *"He was already very mature, with a great awareness of the tactical plan; a manager might only come across three or four players of his quality in their career. He is hardworking, with a great sensibility for and reading of the game."* Furlan was astute in his assessment of Matuidi, but despite the manager's best efforts, Troyes were relegated in 2007, with the player taking his talents to the Rhone valley to join St Étienne. There, he would re-join his former ESTAC teammate Bafetimbi Gomis, who had spent six months on loan at the northern club in 2005.

With Gomis banging in the goals and Matuidi striking up a formidable partnership in midfield alongside Loïc Perrin, the club finished an impressive fifth in his first season, a far cry from their relegation struggles of the past few seasons. However, the next season's European exertions soon proved too much to bear as manager Laurent Roussey was dismissed in November with the club in the relegation zone. Despite their poor domestic form, (safety was only confirmed on the last match day) Les Verts did well to get out of their group in the Europa League, advancing as far as the Round of 16.

Roussey's replacement, Alain Perrin could do little to improve the club's performance, despite an impressive young core that also included Bakary Sako, Emmanuel Rivière and Dimitri Payet. With considerable investment in the summer in the form of the disappointing striker Gonzalo Bergessio, Christophe Galtier arrived in December to try his luck at the club. Keeping the outfit in the top flight was challenging, but the following season, St Étienne were the early season surprise package, a victory in the Rhone Derby in Week 7 taking the club to the top of the table.

Matuidi was key to an improved attack, his dynamism linking the defence with the pacey attacking combination of Sako and Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang. With the club tailing off towards the end of the season though, when the club of his boyhood dreams came calling, it was too difficult for Matuidi to say no.

Already capped for France, though not yet a first-team regular, the move to Paris would give Matuidi the chance to play for a club with grand ambitions, and with the retirement of Claude Makélélé, there was ample opportunity for Matuidi to make his mark. Of the initial wave of signings under QSI, only Matuidi and Javier Pastore remain important parts of the first team squad.

That first season, despite struggling with discipline, (four bookings in his first eight matches) Matuidi continued to improve, earning a starting place Antoine Kombouaré with ease. The arrival of Carlo Ancelotti on the bench and Thiago Motta to midfield proved only a minor speedbump as by season's end, Matuidi, initially displaced by the Italian, fought for his spot, eventually settling into the right side of the same 4-3-3 that the club continue to employ.

Left footed, Matuidi now operates on the left side of the formation, with Marco Verratti on the right, and the two, along with Motta, have combined wonderfully to make PSG's midfield one of Europe's most formidable. Once again, Furlan's thoughts on Matuidi were prescient, *"He doesn't present the typical characteristic of a midfielder, in his athletic level, but he knows how to anticipate and retain the ball in possession. He is a great provider for the creative types. He knows how to play deep, but he has great passing skills."*

In the former Troyes manager's words, the crux of what Matuidi is all about is presented. Despite unending rumours, Paris Saint-Germain can not sell him, because while other players may be more talented, there simply is not an adequate replacement for Matuidi in terms of what he brings to the table as regards to his energy and work rate. Toni Kroos and Luka Modric may come close, but neither offers as much of a goal threat, nor a tactical flexibility. Increasingly cultivated in the tackle, quick but not to the point of having his speed be his only defensive attribute, Matuidi is also an exceptionally perceptive player.

His positioning and anticipation allow him to operate with a consistent level of energy over the course of a match. Despite his many exertions for club and country, he has shown no signs of slowing down, even after ten seasons of club football, including more than fifty appearances for PSG in each of the last three seasons.

This is not, of course, to imply that Matuidi is the perfect player. While he has done fairly well for his country in terms of contributing goals from midfield, he is still perhaps a little lacking in that department for his club. A minor quibble, but with Zlatan Ibrahimovic likely moving on in the summer, how the club will line up next season remains a source of speculation.

While his finishing might not be the most precise, as his scoring rate suggests, Matuidi does have a powerful shot, as Serbia discovered when they clashed with France in a recent friendly. His relatively short stature also means that Matuidi is at a disadvantage in terms of the ball being played off the ground, but with the height of his teammates at club and country, this is something that is difficult for teams to exploit in any meaningful way.

While loyalty to the club under the Qataris has not exactly been repaid, as the likes of Clément Chantôme, Christophe Jallet and Mamadou Sakho found after being frozen out of the side, Matuidi has been an inspirational ever-present. Even as fellow French internationals such as Jérémy Ménez and Kevin Gameiro have come and gone, Matuidi remains the only regular at the club to have been formed in Ligue 1, his play a testament to the quality of player development in France.

Even as Serge Aurier, formerly of Toulouse and Layvin Kurzawa, late of Monaco continue to develop their careers with the capital side, it is Matuidi who remains the gold standard for French-trained players at PSG; his success for both club and country, even on the biggest stages is a testament not only to the quality of player on offer in France but also to his own work ethic.



MARCO VERRATTI

[3]

Club: Paris Saint-Germain F.C.

Position: Midfielder

Born: Pescara

Date of Birth: 05/11/1992

Age: 23

*"In a football sense,
I feel more French
than Italian."*

– Marco Verratti

In 2012, Carlo Ancelotti made the bold move to bring a young, relatively unheard of Italian midfielder to Ligue 1 to join arguably the most ambitious project in world football.

Verratti's promise was spotted early on in his short career to date when he made his Serie B debut with home town club Pescara at the age of 16 in the 2008/09 season.

Verratti started his career as a playmaking central midfielder at Pescara and was given the full backing of manager Zdenek Zeman despite such a tender age. Verratti's first successes came in his final season at the club when Pescara were promoted to Serie A as champions. After helping Pescara to promotion to Serie A, Verratti received the 2012 Bravo Award for the best player under the age of 21 in Europe. Furthermore he was chosen as the best player of the 2011/12 Serie B season.

As his stock rose in Italy, and with plenty of suitors such as Juventus and Napoli showing an interest, it was Paris Saint-Germain who stumped up a reported £8 million to secure the services of the young midfielder.

It did not take long for Verratti to impress his new teammates with a string of mature performances despite his lack of experience, which enabled Verratti to quickly cement himself in a new look PSG midfield.

In his first season, the pint-sized Italian international helped his new side to their first Ligue 1 title in 19 years and started an impressive 23 league games.

Marco Verratti the player can be best described as a combative midfielder who is a fundamental link between defence and attack. Verratti is also an intelligent playmaker and has been a key ingredient for PSG's attacking players such as Edinson Cavani and Zlatan Ibrahimovic with a string of intelligent assists for the pair.

The Italian could best be described as an opposing midfielder's worse nightmare. His predatory instincts give his rivals no time and space to think or play due to his sharp, aggressive style - similar to his countryman, the now retired Gennaro Gattuso.

It would be unfair to put Verratti completely in the same mould as Gattuso, as in reality and even at the tender age of 23, Verratti has so much more to his game than the ex-AC Milan man.

Marco Verratti's range of passing, quick thinking and positional sense has seen him likened more to the elegance of Andrea Pirlo in his homeland and he is viewed as the man to fill Pirlo's boots in the Azzurri midfield for the foreseeable future.

If there is an area for development in Verratti's game then it is his discipline on the pitch. The Italian international often finds his way into the referee's notebook and more often than not for reasons that could have been avoided. It can be argued that if Verratti adapted his game to improve his disciplinary record, then it would take away some of the combative elements of his game. However, in contrast a little more maturity in certain situations could mean that former Pescara man would not need to change his tenacious approach.

Statistics show that Verratti has been in the thick of the midfield duels since his move to France. He was shown 13 yellow cards and 1 red card in all competitions in the 2012/13 season and he went one better with 14 yellow cards and 1 red card the following campaign.

Last season he totalled 19 yellow cards in all competitions with Laurent Blanc regularly substituting him late on in games to avoid a potential dismissal. So far this season Verratti has amassed 4 yellow cards in all competition, potentially showing signs of improvement in this area.

Although Verratti's performances have helped him to gain recognition around Europe and cement his place in the Italian national squad, it should be noted that the midfield partnership he has with fellow Italian Thiago Motta and the hard-working Frenchman Blaise Matuidi has given Verratti the opportunity to express himself in both Ligue 1 and the Champions' League. Verratti is one third of an exciting midfield that compliments each other and allows all three individuals to flourish. Thiago Motta brings a calmness and a vision in front of the back four, Matuidi brings tenacity and energy leaving Verratti to bring the aforementioned attributes to the team.

2015 for Marco Verratti has been a continual progression for the midfielder and one where his talented performances were able to come to fruition as Paris Saint-Germain made history in the 2014/15 season by winning an unprecedented domestic quadruple of trophies in France.

The Italian was also able to weigh in with a couple of goals for the capital club with strikes against Metz and Evian Thon-Gaillard in Ligue 1.

Verratti has arguably become the most important player on the PSG team sheet and when he is not selected, the PSG team is noticeably affected by his absence.

There is nobody in the PSG squad that can fill in the role that Verratti does so effortlessly. He is just as important to Thiago Silva in defence as he is to Zlatan Ibrahimovic in attack.

There is no doubt that PSG have a gem in their possession, some may say a rough diamond of great raw talent who is yet to hit his peak. If that is the case and if Verratti's yearly progression continues then there is no doubt that we could be looking at the best midfield player in the world, in years to come.

Marco Verratti has continually been linked with some of the world's biggest football clubs such as Juventus, Real Madrid and Barcelona but the Italian has reinstated his desire to stay in the French capital for the foreseeable future. He is settled, speaks the language and feels that Paris Saint-Germain match his own ambitions. With the success of the PSG project so far, there may only be 3-4 clubs in world football that Verratti might see as a step up from PSG and until any of those situations arise it remains to be seen whether or not Verratti is happy to continue in Ligue 1 long-term.

If in 2016 Verratti continues to perform the way he has this year, or better, and with the continued success of Laurent Blanc's men then maybe an offer might come in for the Italian. If a bid does come in, it will have to be an enormous one to prise the youngster away from the Parc des Princes.

The midfielder's goals and ambitions for the next calendar year will be to continue to put in excellent displays for club and country and to further establish himself as a top class footballer. Verratti will also want to try to stay injury free and limit the time spent on the sidelines due to suspension.

2016 is an important year for Verratti, with the European Championships in the summer, he will be vying for a starting berth in the Italian national team. But before that he has the opportunity to make further history with Paris Saint-Germain. He will play a large role in helping his team mates try to get beyond the quarter finals of the UEFA Champions' League as well as retaining all of the domestic honours that PSG swept up in 2015.

What is clear, is that the longer that this wonderful talent plays in Ligue 1, the better the league will be for it and it seems that a Ligue 1 Player of the Year award might not too far away for the Italian in the not so distant future.



ZLATAN IBRAHIMOVIĆ

[2]
✓ 1

Club: Paris Saint-Germain F.C.

Position: Attacker

Born: Malmö

Date of Birth: 03/10/1981

Age: 34

*"I felt like there were
11 babies around me."*

– Zlatan Ibrahimović

Zlatan Ibrahimović. Even on paper the name looks grand and intimidating. How could you question a man of such imperious talent and empowering personality? Well, over the last 12 months, Ibrahimović was probably questioned more than he has been in his entire career. Were his powers fading? He was not getting any younger, and the media and critics were waiting with baited breath to report on his downfall. But for a man who is renowned for his comments off the pitch, in 2015 Zlatan Ibrahimović would let his actions on the pitch do the talking.

2015 was a year of resounding success for Zlatan Ibrahimović and his PSG side. The team won all domestic trophies available to them: Ligue 1, the Coupe de la Ligue, the Coupe de France and the Trophée des Champions to stand on a level above every other team in French football. This season, PSG have continued their complete dominance on football in France, building a remarkable 19 point lead over 2nd place AS Monaco at the halfway stage of the Ligue 1 season.

The team have only lost one competitive game all season - a narrow 1-0 away defeat to Real Madrid in which the French side were by many accounts the better team. PSG's successes over the last 12 months has been greatly reliant upon the performances of their star man Ibrahimović leading the strike force to devastating effect.

Despite missing many more games than he would like over the last 12 months, Ibrahimović's goal-scoring record has remained comparable with almost anyone in world football. In Ligue 1, he has managed 26 goals in just 27 games over the last 12 months, and is second in the league this season for assists, behind only teammate Angel di Maria. The fact that he continues to be an almost unstoppable force in front of goal, at least domestically, at the age of 34 says a lot about the greatness of Ibrahimović.

If there is a regret for Zlatan Ibrahimović in 2015, it will be a sense of disappointment that he could not have the effect he desired in the Champions' League with PSG. The group stages of the 2014/15 season did not go completely to plan, as he missed half of the games with a heel injury.

Then, matters were to come to a head in PSG's last 16 clash with Premier League leaders Chelsea. Ibrahimović was largely ineffective in PSG's 1-1 draw with Chelsea at the Parc des Princes, but it would get worse in the return leg at Stamford Bridge. With around half of the first period gone, Ibrahimović went into a 50-50 challenge on Oscar. Despite replays suggesting it was in fact the Brazilian who had gone in more dangerously, perhaps as a result of the partisan home crowd and the Chelsea players running to the referee to complain, Ibrahimović was given a straight red card and PSG were reduced to 10 men.

Whilst his PSG teammates put in a stunning performance to progress on away goals, Ibrahimović's red card was not overturned, and he missed the first leg of the next round against Barcelona. By the time Ibrahimović was available for the away leg, PSG were 3-1 down on aggregate and the tie against the eventual winners of the competition was all but over as a contest. The Swede will be looking for a more successful run in this year's competition, both individually and for his side PSG.

However, despite all of Ibrahimović's hardships and successes with his club side PSG, the standout moments of Ibrahimović's calendar year actually came with the Swedish national team. Having missed out on the World Cup in the summer of 2014 in Brazil as a result of being beaten by Portugal over the course of a two-legged play-off, Zlatan Ibrahimović was more determined than ever to ensure Sweden qualified for EURO 2016, especially considering the fact that it was to be held in France, where Ibrahimović played all of his club games.

The qualifying campaign was tough, as it often is for a country that is not one of Europe's superpowers, but, with the help of eight goals in eight games from talismanic captain Ibrahimović, Sweden were able to secure a play-off place, and the shot of qualifying for EURO 2016.

When the draw was announced, and Sweden were to play Denmark, both sides knew it would be a close contest. In the run up to the games, all the talk was about whether Ibrahimović would retire if Sweden were not to make it past Denmark. Privately, Ibrahimović found the comments disrespectful, but he decided, once again, to let his performances on the pitch do the talking.

In the opening home leg, after Sweden had already grabbed a one-goal advantage, Ibrahimović expertly dispatched a penalty to double Sweden's lead. However, a crucial late Jorgensen goal pulled the score back to 2-1, and meant the visitors had every chance of qualification with just the tie in Denmark to go.

Before the game, talk of a potential international retirement for Ibrahimović ramped up, as Sweden prepared for their biggest game since the loss to Portugal around two years previously. However, Ibrahimović was to produce one of his best performances of his season one the biggest of stages.

Before the game, talk of a potential international retirement for Ibrahimović ramped up, as Sweden prepared for their biggest game since the loss to Portugal around two years previously. However, Ibrahimović was to produce one of his best performances of his season on the biggest of stages.

In the 19th minute with the game goalless, Ibrahimović escaped his marker from a corner and directed a shot into the bottom corner to open the scoring for Sweden with a vital away goal. Another goal would leave Denmark requiring four to progress. In the 76th minute, with the score at 2-0, Ibrahimović produced a moment of absolute magic. Sweden won a free-kick 25 yards away from goal, and Ibrahimović stood behind it to try and beat Kasper Schmeichel.

The towering striker then curled a fantastic effort right into the top corner, past a helpless diving Schmeichel, to all but send his side into EURO 2016. His celebration was one of his most animated - running all the way towards the Sweden bench and getting mobbed by his fellow players and staff on the field. It was the crowning moment for Ibrahimović's calendar year.

After the game, Ibrahimović was in just as fine form off the pitch as he was on it. Responding to claims that he was going to retire had Sweden lost the tie, Ibrahimović quipped "*there was the thought that this game could send me into retirement. I sent their entire country into retirement.*" Ibrahimović's actions off the pitch are perhaps almost as famous as those on the pitch, and that tongue-in-cheek comment was an example of exactly why.

Overall, Zlatan Ibrahimović has had another stellar calendar year over the last 12 months. After his heel injury, many began to question whether his career was coming to an end. However, as his match-winning performances with PSG and, in particular, Sweden have shown, even at the age of 34 Ibrahimović is a devastating goalscorer. With the knockout stages of the Champions' League and, at the end of the season, EURO 2016 both to come in the next year, Ibrahimović will have ample chance to, as he has done throughout his career, prove that he is one of the best football players in the world.



THIAGO SILVA

[1
^16]

Club: Paris Saint-Germain F.C.

Position: Defender

Born: Rio de Janeiro

Date of Birth: 22/09/1984

Age: 31

*"We could have written
Brazilian history..."*

– Thiago Silva

It was a close run thing, but the mighty Swede that is Zlatan Ibrahimovic has finally been toppled from the dizzy heights of the Get French Football News 100 top spot, having ranked as the best player in French football in the 2013 and 2014 editions of this publication. A new top dog therefore emerges, in the form of the very deserving Brazilian central defender Thiago Silva.

Thiago Silva was not only the best player in French football in 2015, but he was also arguably the most consistent central defender in world football. The best players in football react to setbacks by responding on the football pitch through showcasing a better level of performance than ever before.

Over the course of the last 18 months, Thiago Silva has achieved exactly that and finishes 2015, by his own admission, in the form of his life. Unfairly scapegoated by the media in his own country for the catastrophic semi-final fallout that Brazil suffered at their own World Cup in 2014 in the semi-finals against Germany (need we remind you that Thiago Silva actually did not play a part in that match as he was injured), Silva was forced into a period of soul-searching. Rightly or not, the defender as captain of his country's football team accepted and felt great responsibility for what was frankly an embarrassment on home soil.

The rest of 2014 was difficult to put it lightly for Silva. He arrived at PSG having missed the majority of pre-season training and was confirmed as injured shortly after the first competitive game of the season, a 2-2 opening draw against Reims. He actually sustained the injury, a hamstring problem, in a rather oddly timed friendly match against Napoli, which occurred a week after the domestic season had commenced.

All that Silva had wanted to do following a summer of disappointment was to get back to club football and prove his worth on the pitch. As a central defender, consistency is king and the rest of that calendar year played out in a fairly unceremonious fashion for the Brazilian, who was only able to make a return to competitive football in mid-October.

Fast-forward a little into 2015 and, from a PSG point of view, things could hardly have gone any better. Aside from a tough two-legged affair against eventual Champions' League winners Barcelona, whereby Les Parisiens were second best to perhaps one of only two sides who boast a more world-class squad in Europe player-by-player, PSG won everything. Laurent Blanc's side were relentless, grabbing every prize on offer domestically to do an historic quadruple and Thiago Silva was at the heart of it all.

At PSG, Thiago Silva is not just the model ball-playing defender but he is also the captain and leader, a role that many forget about. With the ever-growing South American contingent at the club, Silva is the important cohesive force that brings those from his own continent together with the rest of the squad. The PSG dressing room has often been criticised, most recently by Kingsley Coman, for being disjointed and cliquey.

While this was probably a fair criticism of PSG during the 2013/14 campaign when the French attacking prospect was still a part of the club, it is an unfair one to level at the current Les Parisiens setup. This is because the then recent arrivals have now become more accustomed to the French language and Laurent Blanc and Thiago Silva have been more forceful in instigating the fruition of a motivated dressing room that is conducive to on-pitch success.

At the end of the day, it is the club captain Thiago Silva that can take the biggest responsibility for this change within the PSG dressing room and the positive effects on PSG's collective performances have been obvious for all to see. Personal differences between teammates have been put aside: Zlatan Ibrahimovic is now happy to pass to Edinson Cavani, for example. The egos have been put into check and for the first time since QSI's arrival, the team during this 2015/16 campaign appears to be unerringly and incessantly motivated to win, no matter what the opposition, no matter in which competition.

PSG's incredible Ligue 1 points haul in the first half of the 2015/16 season stands as testament to their newfound attitude. Not just content with first place, but setting objectives such as going the entire season unbeaten in the league and putting more than one hundred points on the table, PSG have 51 points to their name at Christmas time. Whether PSG were playing away to Monaco or at home to Troyes, they have shown greater respect to their domestic opposition by attacking the game with high intensity from the off and have sought to score as many goals as possible, as opposed to resorting to lethargic mode after going two goals ahead.

Thiago Silva has been able to translate his personal desire, to prove to the globe following Brazil's 2014 World Cup debacle that he is in fact the best defender in the world, to his teammates who have responded by taking PSG in 2015 to a level that we have frankly never seen before.

A fantastic leader, Silva's performances in defence have also improved considerably in 2015. His partnership with David Luiz was already tried and tested before the latter individual joined in 2014 from Chelsea, and the ability of the two Brazilian defenders to work with each other every day in training and not just on occasion with the Brazilian national team, has only worked to improve their understanding. The success is in the statistics: since the start of the 2015/16 campaign, Silva has played a part in 25 matches and PSG have kept a quite extraordinary 19 clean sheets in the process.

Some might attempt to downplay Silva's success on account of the league that he plays in, but if you take his statistics from the Champions' League in isolation, you will find that Silva's PSG have conceded just once during the 2015/16 group stages, keeping five clean sheets in six games, with one of those coming up against Real Madrid no less.

In truth, PSG should not have conceded a single goal in the Champions' League group stage and only did so because of a howler from newly introduced goalkeeper Kevin Trapp.

Silva, or O Monstro as he is nicknamed in his native Brazil, has added decisive leadership to his already impregnable skill-set that includes world-class passing, aerial duel and tackling abilities in 2015. Silva has not tried to forget the World Cup 2014 experience, he has sought to learn from it and he has come back stronger for it. In 2016, Silva will hope to return to action for his country Brazil, something that the current manager Dunga presently bars him from doing.

With regards to action with PSG, 2015 was a record-breaking year, but 2016 is all about the final frontier that is the Champions' League and repeating previous domestic success. Greatness in football has very little to do with specific moments. Greatness is achieved through being consistently better than anyone else. With his incredible performance levels, Silva has proved that throughout his entire career to date. Now PSG must follow their captain's example in 2016.

10 TO WATCH IN 2016

A selection of some of French football's most exciting emerging talents that we tip to have a breakthrough year in 2016.

VINCENT KOZIELLO (20)

| Club: OGC Nice

Koziello had been on the periphery of OGC Nice manager Claude Puel's first team plans already in 2014, but 2015 was the year during which the baby-faced Frenchman began to install himself as an integral part of Les Aiglons' midfield trio. With a formidable ability to read play far beyond his years, Koziello has been able to boast some of the most impressive pass completion statistics in the entirety of Ligue 1 in the first half of the 2015/2016 campaign. This, coupled with an impressive work-rate that often gets a shaky Nice back four out of jail defensively, Koziello is proving that while he might not be the strongest midfielder in the French top flight physically, he is certainly one of the most intelligent.



CASIMIR NINGA (22)

| Club: Montpellier HSC

Montpellier's terrible start to the 2015/2016 season was fundamentally down to an inability to score goals. Step forward Casimir Ninga, the slippery attacker who has revitalised Rolland Courbis' side's Ligue 1 campaign. The deceptively lanky-looking forward has during the latter stages of 2015 showcased excellent awareness, pace and power as his goals have often single-handedly won Montpellier points. What separates Ninga from the other attackers at his stage of development is the impressive composure he shows when faced with a good goal-scoring opportunity. This is a sign that he has the necessary ruthlessness to affirm himself as one of Ligue 1's most potent attackers in 2016.



RÉMI WALTER (20)

| Club: AS Nancy Lorraine

This left-footed midfielder looks all set to become one of Ligue 2's most impressive individuals. Undoubtedly his greatest asset is the quality of his decision-making, both in terms of picking out passes of any range and in terms of making vital interceptions to break up opposition attacks. Walter is far from hot-headed, a trait that he deserves credit for when one considers the combative nature of his position and the division in which he currently plies his trade in. Not only does his technical mastery make his game appear effortless, but his mobility has improved to such an extent in 2015 that he could just as easily fit in to a box-to-box midfield role in 2016. It is no wonder that Ligue 1 sides already tried to sign the player in summer.



GEORGES-KÉVIN N'KOUDOU (20) | Club: Olympique de Marseille

It was too late for the former Nantes attacker in terms of making the GFFN 100 in 2015 as he produced some of his best football only during the final matches of the calendar year. N'Koudou is however, after a settling in period at Marseille, establishing himself as a consistent goal-scoring threat for Michel's side, forcing the likes of Lucas Ocampos out of the starting XI as a result. The winger has always been blessed with fantastic pace and trickery, but in 2015 he has begun to learn when best to use these abilities and to a more devastating effect. He must also be praised for the boundless enthusiasm and energy that he puts into his performances, with successful pressing of the opposition defence and following up loose balls being two origins of goals for the youngster in 2015.



JORDAN SIEBATCHEU (19)

| Club: Stade de Reims

Reims boss Olivier Guégan is responsible for launching Jordan Siebatcheu's career in 2015, having previously been in charge of the youth setup at the Champagne region side. And what a calendar year it has been for the imposing young striker, winning the 2014/15 French Under 19 title and signing his professional contract with Reims in the space of less than six months. Siebatcheu certainly has the potential to go on to typify what we might possibly go on to call the brave new world of Ligue 1 strikers, a physical yet rapid unit who relies on instinct in front of goal as he continues to develop his intelligence and understanding of the game. No wonder that the United States national team is already hoping to pounce...



ALBAN LAFONT (16)

| Club: Toulouse FC



The 16 year old became the youngest goalkeeper to start a game in Ligue 1 for over 25 years when he made his professional debut in late November 2015. Toulouse, having previously been fed up of incompetency from the likes of Ali Ahamada and Mauro Goicoechea in between the sticks, made a radical decision towards the end of the calendar year to deploy the untested teenager in Ligue 1 and he was an instant hit, keeping two clean sheets in his first two games. Lafont has displayed great athleticism and shot-stopping ability in his short professional career so far, but has also been caught out several times with misjudgements of which direction an opponent was shooting in, costing Toulouse goals on at least one occasion. This is perhaps more than understandable when one considers his lack of experience. If Toulouse do not sign a goalkeeper in the January window and Lafont is given consistent playing time at the highest level, then he certainly could become something special.

MAXWEL CORNET (19)

| Club: Olympique Lyonnais



This FC Metz youth product has been unfortunate to be on the fringes of first-team action with Lyon since his move at the beginning of 2015, but with Hubert Fournier going out of the exit door, 2016 could be the year that this frighteningly complete talent can burst onto the scene. The quality of the intelligence of his runs in and around the box distinguishes him from the other young attacking talents that Lyon currently harbour, including Aldo Kalulu and Romain Del Castillo. Cornet is a rapid forward player, very similar in stature and dribbling style to Anthony Martial, but is perhaps more confident in his shooting ability than the Manchester United man is, at least from outside the area. Should Alexandre Lacazette leave Les Gones in 2016, expect Cornet to take up the challenge of replacing him successfully.

ADAM OUNAS (19)

| Club: FC Girondins de Bordeaux



Perhaps the most exciting of all the players on this list, Adam Ounas has only come to French football's attention in final three months of 2015. The diminutive, versatile attacker who has often been deployed on the wing by Willy Sagnol might quite simply have it all. He is certainly one of those players who are very pleasing on the eye, with an incredible locker of skills and tricks up his sleeve that bamboozle opposition defenders. His dribbling technique is unforgiving, unwavering and frankly stunning. Despite his tender age, he appears constantly threatening when he has the ball at his feet, with the shooting ability to match, having already scored an incredible goal against ESTAC Troyes on the half-volley. His instinctiveness on the ball is matched by awareness off of it. His goal against Lorient, a header, was only possible due to his intelligent near-post run, giving him an untested chance on goal. In terms of a comparison, Riyad Mahrez springs to mind, but with the potential to be far better.

ZINEDINE MACHACH (19)

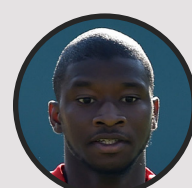
| Club: Toulouse FC



Like Ounas, Machach is of Algerian descent, but unlike Ounas, Machach plays as a more traditional central midfielder, even if he has the potential to become a unique breed of player. Technically gifted but with an aggressiveness and intensity of a more physically orientated player, Machach has the skill-set required to become one of the most complete midfielders in French football. If he is to have a successful 2016 then he will need to focus on eradicating moments of ill-discipline from his game and on improving his final ball. All of the core attributes including pace and power are at Machach's disposal. Now it merely depends on whether or not he manages to develop them.

ALMAMY TOURÉ (19)

| Club: AS Monaco FC



With Andrea Raggi ageing and with Fabinho showing more and more promise in the defensive mid-field role, expect 19-year-old right-back Almamy Touré to feature much more heavily in Ligue 1 in 2016. A man who undoubtedly encompasses the attributes of the future, modern full-back, unparalleled pace, fitness and an intelligent approach to attacking play, Touré broke onto the scene during Monaco's famous 1st leg victory vs. Arsenal in the Champions' League. His performance on the night was gritty and mature, as he prevented himself from getting carried away bombing forward and from attempting tackles of an over-athletic nature that might have led to him giving away fouls. Juventus are already big fans of him. With the two goals that he scored against Marseille in a recent Ligue 1 game, Touré also showed that he could transform the composure that he adopts during his defending when in a goal-scoring situation of his own.

QUOTES

- 1 - *"We could have written Brazilian history..."* - Thiago Silva looks back wistfully at Brazil's failed 2014 World Cup campaign in an interview with L'Équipe - March 2015
- 2 - *"I felt like there were 11 babies around me."* - The big Swede gives a post-match interview with the Daily Mail following PSG's 2nd leg triumph over Chelsea in the Champions' League in a match that Ibrahimovic felt he was unfairly sent off in. The babies reference is in relation to the Chelsea players who surrounded the referee following the challenge that Ibra made on Oscar that provoked the red card - March 2015
- 3 - *"In a football sense, I feel more French than Italian."* - Marco Verratti comments on his style of play in an interview with La Gazzetta dello Sport - December 2015
- 4 - *"My life is my children and my wife!"* - Blaise Matuidi in an interview with L'Équipe's Sport and Style Magazine - October 2015
- 5 - *"Bernardo Silva is an incredible talent."* - Valère Germain, the current OGC Nice loanee and previous teammate of Bernardo Silva speaks about the Monaco youngster in an interview with So Foot - November 2015.
- 6 - *"Watching Grégory Coupet in training helped me enormously."* - Anthony Lopes lifts the lid on the secrets to his goalkeeping success in an interview with Lyon Plus - March 2015
- 7 - *"I understand that I have to work & fight for this team every single day."* - Javier Pastore talks about how he has changed his game to become a better player in an interview with Get French Football News - January 2015
- 8 - *"They know that I want to have a full season here."* - Sofiane Boufal talks about his future in a recent interview with La Voix du Nord - December 2015
- 9 - *"Maybe I would have been in the mafia."* - The Croatian international jokes about what he would have done had he not become a footballer in an interview with AS Monaco TV - December 2015
- 10 - *"It does not depend on me."* - Marko Baša dresses questions surrounding his future in an interview with L'Équipe - May 2015
- 11 - *"We shall remain humble."* - Ludovic Butelle attempts to calm down the media hype surrounding Angers following a victory away to Marseille in Ligue 1 - September 2015
- 12 - *"I want to play in a team that plays in competitions to win them."* - João Moutinho shows his frustration at the changing nature of the AS Monaco project in an interview with L'Équipe - October 2015
- 13 - *"He is very humble and has an enormous amount of qualities."* - Former teammate at Rennes Romain Alessandrini praises Julien Féret in an interview with So Foot - February 2015
- 14 - *"You must not underestimate us."* - Wahbi Khazri attempts to send a message to the rest of Ligue 1 at the start of the season in an interview with Bordeaux's official website - August 2015
- 15 - *"At the beginning, I felt he was annoyed. Very annoyed."* - Karim Benzema gives official testimony to the court regarding his alleged involvement in the blackmail of French international teammate Mathieu Valbuena over a sextape - December 2015
- 16 - *"I am not surprised to have not been selected for the national team."* - Loïc Perrin takes a dim view of his chances of making the French national team in the future in an interview with Le Progrès - September 2015
- 17 - *"I fought a good fight for 13 years, but now I have finished my course."* - Vincent Enyeama announces his decision to retire from international duty with Nigeria via his Instagram account - October 2015
- 18 - *"His behaviour hurt and disappointed me."* - Alexandre Lacazette talks about Lyon President Jean Michel Aulas' media outbursts concerning his possible contract extension during the summer in an interview with L'Équipe - September 2015
- 19 - *"It is a bit difficult to stay on the bench..."* - The Brazilian winger lets his frustrations known in an interview with RMC - November 2015
- 20 - *"We need to learn from the mistakes that we make."* - Corentin Tolisso speaks to L'Équipe following a 6-0 summer friendly loss to Arsenal - July 2015
- 21 - *"He was a kid. He was already a good size, powerful. A good kid, if rather introverted."* Damien Da Silva's former boss (Philippe Hinschberger) at Niort speaks about the player's development at the age of 18 in 2005 - February 2015.
- 22 - *"It was Lyon's ambition that convinced me to join them."* - Claudio Beauvue in an interview with L'Équipe discusses his decision-making process behind his move to Lyon - July 2015
- 23 - *"God brought me to Nice. He did not make a mistake."* - Jean Seri discusses his decision to join OGC Nice during the summer transfer window in an interview with L'Équipe - November 2015
- 24 - *"I know how to sell myself."* - Paul-Georges Ntep discusses his future in an interview with Journal du Dimanche - May 2015

- 25 - *"The first reason was because I just was not playing much."* - Christophe Jallet explains his departure from PSG in an interview with Canal Football Club - November 2015
- 26 - *"I fish for sea bream."* - Thomas Mangani lets French football magazine So Foot into the secrets behind his life away from football - October 2015
- 27 - *"We need to continue to work hard."* - The St Étienne man reacts in a post-match interview with En Vert et Contre Tous following a league match against Rennes - December 2015
- 28 - *"I am very proud."* - Layvin Kurzawa speaks about his move to PSG in an official interview with his new club's website - August 2015
- 29 - *"I want Aïssa Mandi in my squad."* - Reims manager Olivier Guégan makes the importance of Mandi clear at the start of the 2015/16 campaign in an interview with France Bleu - July 2015
- 30 - *"The Champions League? It could be ours."* - Maxwell underlines PSG's ambitions for what is likely to be his final season at the club in an interview with RMC - October 2015
- 31 - *"This is a new era for the club, I hope to score."* - Diego Rolán comments on his sentiments ahead of Bordeaux's first match in their new stadium in an interview with Bordeaux's official website - May 2015
- 32 - *"I want to win the Champions League with PSG."* - Ángel Di María tells fans of the Parisian side exactly what they want to hear during his unveiling press conference following his move from Manchester United - August 2015
- 33 - *"It is good to see my name associated with Barcelona."* - In an interview with L'Équipe, Fabinho spoke about speculation surrounding his future at the club - April 2015
- 34 - *"There is too much speculation about my personal life."* - Kevin Trapp comments on rumours about his private life suggesting that he might be dating pop-star Rihanna in an interview with Le Parisien - December 2015
- 35 - *"The Europa League, it is better than nothing."* - The Belgian international, reacts to OM TV following Marseille's finish outside of the Champions League places - May 2015
- 36 - *"This is my home."* - Serge Aurier explains why he chose to move to PSG despite having been the subject of courting from some of Europe's finest in an interview with Foot Mercato - January 2015
- 37 - *"I am happy to be back."* - Lassana Diarra tells Marseille's official website that he is happy to return to football following confirmation of his transfer to the Ligue 1 club - July 2015
- 38 - *"I am in heaven."* - Hatem Ben Arfa reflects on his first half season with OGC Nice in an interview with Téléfoot - November 2015
- 39 - *"This PSG team is the best that I have ever played for."* - Thiago Motta is effusive with his praise for Les Parisiens' 2015/16 squad in an interview with Canal Football Club - December 2015
- 40 - *"I am a competitor."* - Stéphane Ruffier speaking to Le Parisien - February 2015
- 41 - *"I live one day at a time."* - Edinson Cavani talks about his life at PSG in an official interview with the club's website - September 2015
- 42 - *"I asked myself if I was ever going to play football again."* - Nabil Fekir explains his emotions during his recovery period from the ACL injury that he suffered in an international friendly against Portugal in an interview with L'Équipe - November 2015
- 43 - *"I need to progress in all areas."* - Benjamin Lecomte enjoys a period of self-reflection in an interview with Goal.com - November 2015
- 44 - *"To be called up for France, you have to play well for your club."* - Maxime Gonalons discusses his chance of making the French national team in a press conference - January 2015.
- 45 - *"It feels good to be back."* - Nicolas Maurice-Belay comments on his return from injury in an interview with Bordeaux's official website - November 2015
- 46 - *"We are always obligated to win."* - Rémy Riou speaking in an interview with FC Nantes' official website ahead of a league game against Lorient - December 2015
- 47 - *"I said to myself that I was not respected."* - Benjamin Moukandjo explains to Ouest-France why he quit Reims for Lorient for free in summer - August 2015
- 48 - *"When I am given a chance, I do everything to take it."* - Thomas Lemar speaks to AS Monaco's official website - September 2015
- 49 - *"PSG is the club of my heart."* - Clément Chantôme reacts wistfully upon his departure from PSG in an interview with Le Parisien - March 2015
- 50 - *"I would come back as a shark to be the strongest."* - Raphaël Guerreiro on the animal that he would most like to be reincarnated as in an interview with FCL Web - October 2015

- 51 - *"I want to be able to look myself in the mirror."* - Jérémy Toulalan talks about his future and his achievements in an interview with Libération - March 2015
- 52 - *"When I was young, I was really good at French, History and Geography."* - Abdoulaye Doucouré discusses his academic exploits in an interview with So Foot - December 2015
- 53 - *"This is my home now."* - David Luiz comments on Paris in an interview with the Daily Mail - February 2015
- 54 - *"At SC Bastia I have found joy again."* - Sébastien Squillaci talks about his remarkable transformation from pitied individual at Arsenal to rock at the heart of SC Bastia in an interview with France Football - December 2015
- 55 - *"I am not going to speak about my future."* - Nicolas N'Koulou attempts to force the media to focus less on speculating about his future in a pre-match press conference - September 2015
- 56 - *"We need to show desire."* - Floyd Ayité provides the media with a solution for SC Bastia's poor form in the 2015/16 campaign - December 2015
- 57 - *"Our game is based on runs, on movement, on dynamic play."* - In an interview with Ligue 1.com, Nampalys Mendy discusses OGC Nice's playing style - November 2015
- 58 - *"I want to go back to a time where I only had to worry about my Pokemon evolving..."* - Nicolas Benezet reacts to the horrendous terrorist attacks in Paris on November 13th via his Twitter account - November 2015
- 59 - *"If you gave me the choice, I would prefer to play outfield than as a goalkeeper."* - Clément Maury reveals in an interview with So Foot that he would have preferred to not play as a goalkeeper - October 2015
- 60 - *"Once a Corsican, always a Corsican."* - Giovanni Sio sends a message to the SC Bastia fans to remind them that he remembers what they did for him via social media networking platform Twitter - December 2015
- 61 - *"It is nice to know that Manchester United are interested in me."* - Marquinhos reacts to interest from one of English football's giants in an interview with L'Équipe - February 2015
- 62 - *"We have done something that nobody thought we could do."* - Rémy Vercoutre talks about Caen's 2015 revival as the 2014/15 campaign comes to an end in an interview with So Foot - May 2015
- 63 - *"Let's not get ahead of ourselves."* - Nicolas De Préville following Reims' win against Lille - September 2015
- 64 - *"Our difficulties at home have nothing to do with our fans, who are exceptional."* - Steve Mandanda speaks out about Marseille's poor home form in the first half of the 2015/16 campaign in a post-match interview following a victory away to St Étienne - August 2015
- 65 - *"We really do laugh a lot."* - Andy Delort comments on the atmosphere in the Caen dressing room in an interview with 20 Minutes - October 2015
- 66 - *"It is no secret. We need to win regularly."* - Jimmy Briand talks victories in an interview with La Dépêche.fr - November 2015
- 67 - *"To be in a great club and to earn lots of money is not enough."* - Adrien Rabiot risks sounding like a spoilt brat in an interview with Téléfoot where he questioned the playing time that he was receiving in the French capital - December 2015
- 68 - *"I try to be an example through how I play."* - Hilton discusses his attempts to lead Montpellier in an interview with 20 Minutes - May 2015
- 69 - *"I needed to play, I needed to score."* - In an interview with Foot Mercato, Valère Germain explains his departure from Monaco - October 2015
- 70 - *"There is never a good time to be injured."* - Benoît Costil comments on the injuries that he suffered in August and September which kept him out of action for a period of time over the course of the first half of the 2015/16 campaign in an interview with Rennes' official website - September 2015
- 71 - *"It is up to us to take matters into our own hands."* - Adrien Regattin affirms that matters are in Toulouse's own hands in a press conference - September 2015
- 72 - *"I must confirm my performances whilst being more decisive for the team."* - Jonas Martin looks ahead to the 2015/2016 season in an interview with France Football - June 2015
- 73 - *"He is an excellent player and an excellent person."* - Former OGC Nice man Carlos Eduardo speaks about Nice's new boy Ricardo Pereira - August 2015
- 74 - *"Maybe we are a bit stressed out."* - Romain Alessandrini talks in a press conference about a rough patch that Marseille were going through at the beginning of the 2015/16 campaign - October 2015
- 75 - *"Can somebody tell me what the point of the police is?"* - Martin Braithwaite takes to social media to complain about the inaptitude of the local police in Toulouse after he suffered from one robbery and three attempted robberies on his house over the course of a year - July 2015.

- 76** - *"Last season, I played with 5 different central defenders."* - Nicolas Pallois has an indirect dig at his situation at the heart of Bordeaux's defence in an interview for Toulouse Football Club's official website - September 2015
- 77** - *"There are no stars in this Angers team."* - Romain Thomas establishes the secret to Angers' success in Ligue 1 in an interview with 20 Minutes - October 2015
- 78** - *"I like to pass and bring things forward in an attacking sense."* - Samuel Umtiti explains the offensive side of his game in an interview with 20 Minutes - October 2015
- 79** - *"My head in the stars, my dreams... those are over."* - Jérémy Sorbon paints a sobering picture of the reality of his situation at Guingamp in an interview with L'Équipe - July 2015
- 80** - *"Concerning Ben Yedder and others, I am watching them."* - French national team coach Didier Deschamps speaks about Wissam Ben Yedder in a press conference - January 2015
- 81** - *"I am at an age where I know that the individual comes second in football."* - Gaël Danic speaks to L'Équipe following a league loss against Nice - September 2015
- 82** - *"Signing a contract extension would be a good thing."* - Benjamin Mendy responds to speculation on his future in an interview with Le Phocéen - June 2015
- 83** - *"I feel more liberated."* - Bryan Dabo explains his sentiments as he takes on a more important role in the Montpellier squad in an interview with Montpellier's official website - March 2015
- 84** - *"For me it was real progress to come here."* - Mexer speaks to Ouest-France about Rennes - August 2015
- 85** - *"There is a good atmosphere in the group, a good sense of cohesion."* - Rio Mavuba talks ahead of the first game of the 2015/16 Ligue 1 season in an interview with Lille's official website - August 2015
- 86** - *"I am keeping my feet on the ground."* - Cheikh Ndoeye on his and Angers' incredible start to Ligue 1 life in an interview with Xalima.com following his side's exceptional 2-0 victory over Lyon - December 2015
- 87** - *"I love football even more than before."* - The Montpellier man comments on how he has dealt with the first major injury of his career in an interview with BeIN Sports - December 2015
- 88** - *"In Mali, everyone who is called Adama is called Noss."* - Adama Traoré clears up what he prefers to be called on a day-to-day basis in an unofficial interview with his previous club Lille - January 2015
- 89** - *"In 2010, I wanted to stop playing football."* - Fabien Lemoine opens up to So Foot about an on-pitch accident with Raynald Lemaître that forced him to consider quitting football at the age of just 23 - June 2015
- 90** - *"If I am starting at Bordeaux today it is thanks to Laurent Blanc."* - Grégory Sertic thanks PSG coach Laurent Blanc for believing in him as a youngster in an interview with Canal + - November 2015
- 91** - *"This could be my last season."* - Ricardo Carvalho admits that the 2015/16 campaign could be his last in an interview with L'Équipe - August 2015
- 92** - *"I am ready to play for Senegal."* - Youssouf Sabaly sends a message to the African nation's recruiters in an interview with Stades - August 2015
- 93** - *"I did not sign a four year contract extension to leave in the summer."* - Salvatore Sirigu comments on his future at the end of the 2014/15 campaign, a view that he took before the arrival of Kevin Trapp in a post-match interview with L'Équipe - May 2015.
- 94** - *"I know that I have reached another level."* - Djibril Sidibé in an interview with 20 Minutes - March 2015
- 95** - *"I would have liked to play for Barca... whilst keeping my life in Troyes."* - Benjamin Nivet speaks about his previous aspirations in an interview with Eurosport - May 2015
- 96** - *"I am very proud to join Stade de Reims."* - Hamari Traoré cannot contain his delight in his unveiling press conference as a Reims player during the summer transfer window - July 2015
- 97** - *"I feel as if Lorient is the best club for my progression."* - Didier Ndong gives his first interview to Lorient's official website following his move from CS Sfaxien - January 2015
- 98** - *"Sometimes, I think about stopping the whole thing."* - Ezequiel Lavezzi admits in an interview with Marca that he has considered quitting football altogether - January 2015
- 99** - *"We are going to attempt to rival PSG."* - Sergi Darder with hindsight might have been a little too optimistic upon his arrival at Lyon in August in this interview with Foot Mercato - August 2015.
- 100** - *"I am a fighter and I want to play."* - Gregory van der Wiel speaks up about his lack of playing time situation at PSG in an interview with Goal.com - September 2015

THE GET FRENCH FOOTBALL NEWS TEAM 2015

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Note: All statistics powered by Opta, WhoScored and Squawka.