

# THE MODERN FOOTBALLER

GFFN FRENCH PLAYER  
OF THE YEAR 2021

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IT'S BEEN A THRILLING YEAR OF FRENCH FOOTBALL. LES BLEUS STUTTERED AND SPLUTTERED TO A DRAMATIC EURO 2020 LAST 16 PENALTY EXIT TO SWITZERLAND, BUT WERE SUPERB IN WINNING THE NATIONS LEAGUE. DOMESTICALLY, MEANWHILE, LIGUE 1 MADE HUGE STRIDES ON THE PITCH, DESPITE GROWING OFF-FIELD ISSUES SURROUNDING CROWD VIOLENCE AND FINANCES, AS LILLE WON THE TITLE AND LIONEL MESSI SIGNED FOR PSG.

STARTING WITH A 30 MAN SHORTLIST, INCLUDING FRENCH PLAYERS FROM ALL OVER EUROPE'S 'BIG 5' LEAGUES, VOTES WERE SUBMITTED FROM ACROSS THE GET FOOTBALL TEAM TO DECIDE THE WINNER OF GFFN'S INAUGURAL FRENCH PLAYER OF THE YEAR AWARD. WHO SHOULD BE OUR INAUGURAL WINNER? FIND OUT IN THE PAGES AHEAD AS WE COUNT DOWN THE BEST 20 FRENCH PLAYERS IN THE WORLD THIS YEAR.

EDITOR, ADAM WHITE

*\*All stats correct of original publication dates.*



# GFFN FRENCH PLAYER OF THE YEAR AWARD 2021



The Final Top 20 Ranking:

- 20th – Dayot Upamecano (Bayern Munich)
- 19th – Lucas Hernández (Bayern Munich)
- 18th – Raphaël Varane (Manchester United)
- 17th – Amine Gouiri (Nice)
- 16th – Gaëtan Laborde (Rennes)
- 15th – Christopher Nkunku (RB Leipzig)
- 14th – Téji Savanier (Montpellier)
- 13th – Paul Pogba (Manchester United)
- 12th – Jonathan Clauss (Lens)
- 11th – Jules Koundé (Sevilla)
- 10th – Antoine Griezmann (Atlético Madrid)
- 9th – Wissam Ben Yedder (Monaco)
- 8th – Dimitri Payet (Marseille)
- 7th – Benjamin André (Lille)
- 6th – Aurélien Tchouaméni (Monaco)
- 5th – Theo Hernández (AC Milan)
- 4th – Mike Maignan (AC Milan)
- 3rd – N’Golo Kanté (Chelsea)
- 2nd – Kylian Mbappé (PSG)
- 1st – Karim Benzema (Real Madrid)





dayot



20th

upamecano



' IF ANYONE CAN ELEVATE THEIR GAME TO SUCCEED IN NEW ENVIRONMENTS, IT'S THE 23-YEAR-OLD. ON THE CONCRETE PITCHES OF HIS NATIVE ÉVREUX IN NORTHERN FRANCE, YOUTH COACH ROMARIC BULTEL HELP A TEENAGE UPAMECANO HONE HIS SKILLS.'

**It's a daunting task to lead a brand new backline for Bayern Munich. Especially if you're new yourself. But that's the challenge Dayot Upamecano faced as he made the 361km journey from RB Leipzig to Bavaria last summer. It's been tough at times during this first third of the 2021/22 campaign but the French defender has shown enough to suggest he can become a permanent fixture for many years to come. Indeed, that was what Bayern were hoping for when they announced an agreement to pay his €42.5m release clause back in February.**

It was easy to see why Die Roten decided to move quickly. The 23-year-old's 6'1 height allows him to physically compete with the most imposing of forwards while also being quick enough to match the fastest of wingers when defending counterattacks, making Upamecano the ideal centre-back for Bayern's high defensive line. Against dribbling opponents, he's won 75% of his duels so far this season, underlying his ability to handle one-on-one situations.

Meanwhile, Upamecano's on-ball skills are elite compared to many of his peers, completing nearly 91% of his passes so far. A talent for bypassing opposing presses using his accurate forward passing is crucial to his team's build-up play. In October's 5-2 away win over Union Berlin the defender showed an ability – that also caught the eye as a young player at RB Salzburg – to carry the ball forward and break through lines. Dribbling from his own half, Upamecano glided past the Union midfield before setting up Thomas Müller for the visitors' fifth goal. That was his fourth assist this season, incredibly only four Bundesliga players had more after 12 games this season.

Of course, it helps to be reunited with Julian Nagelsmann, the German head coach who aided the Frenchman's development at Leipzig. Unlike his teammates, Upamecano was already up to speed with the different defensive patterns introduced by the new manager. Speaking about his first months in Bavaria with Goal, Upamecano explained: "It's never easy at the beginning at a new club. But I knew the coach, and that was an advantage. He's implemented a lot of the things we did in Leipzig – only better. That made it easy."

Nevertheless, there's still plenty to learn. Upamecano's defensive positioning is suspect at times, occasionally finding himself nowhere near the opposing attacking play which leads to a big chance. His decision making also seems to be a work in progress as was underlined by an errant pass that led to Filip Kostić's winning goal in a 2-1 defeat to Eintracht Frankfurt in

October. A low-point in an unconvincing display for the centre-back.

Indeed, whenever Bayern have been under pressure this season, Upamecano has looked shaky. A few weeks after the Frankfurt defeat, Bayern suffered a shock 5-0 loss to Borussia Mönchengladbach in the DFB Pokal. Gladbach forward Breel Embolo gave Upamecano such a torrid time that the defender was subbed after just 55 minutes. Outmuscled and caught napping throughout, he looked a pale shadow of his usual self. That performance attracted a lot of criticism but Nagelsmann stressed the French international would bounce back, suggesting he would have to adapt his defensive style of play.

"Of course, it's difficult for any centre back to play against physically strong and fast players," Nagelsmann said. "That's normal, everyone has a hard time there. Against physically robust players, he has to choose a different way of defending. It's about getting into a smart defensive stance in certain moments." Improvements are needed as Upamecano adjusts to the brightest spotlight of his career with perfection expected by the 31-time German champions. A greater consistency not previously shown during the player's short career will be required.

However, if anyone can elevate their game to succeed in new environments, it's the 23-year-old. On the concrete pitches of his native Évreux in northern France, youth coach Romaric Bultel help a teenage Upamecano hone his skills. In an interview with Bundesliga.com, Butel said: "He wasn't a natural talent; the abilities he has now weren't there when he came to us. He worked hard and listened. He even worked with us outside of training, practicing ball control, working on his speed and tactical aspects of the game. That's how he overcame that initial deficit."

A shy character off the pitch, that training help the Frenchman build his confidence and mental strength, both helped him flourish during his first years as a professional. Now, facing arguably the biggest challenge of his career, it will be down to the player to again make the necessary adjustments to disprove concerns that Bayern were mistaken in anointing him as a defensive leader for the future. In the best training environment, surrounded by world class teammates and a supportive coaching mastermind in Julian Nagelsmann, Upamecano has all the tools he needs to succeed in Munich. Starting from now, he needs to use them.

*Josh Sim*



# LUCAS

19th



# HERNANDEZ



'OVERALL, LUCAS HERNÁNDEZ HAS HAD A SUPERB 2021. DOMESTICALLY, HE'S ASSISTED BAYERN IN WINNING A PRESTIGIOUS TENTH BUNDESLIGA IN A ROW WHILST CLAIMING THE CLUB WORLD CUP. ON THE INTERNATIONAL STAGE, ALREADY A WORLD CUP WINNER THE DEFENDER ADDED THE NATIONS LEAGUE AND WORLD CUP 2022 QUALIFICATION. IT'S NO WONDER THAT HERNÁNDEZ FEATURES ON THIS LIST AS ONE OF FRANCE'S BEST PLAYERS DURING THIS CALENDAR YEAR.'

**If you're playing for one of Europe's biggest clubs, you'd think you'd get a lot of attention. However, in the case of Bayern Munich defender Lucas Hernández, his exploits often go under the radar despite having won a considerable amount during his relatively short career. It's often strikers and creative midfielders who grab the spotlight while the more defensive players do the dirty work in the background. In terms of Lucas Hernández, this is too often the case and it's especially apparent when reviewing his 2021.**

A regular in Bayern Munich's defence, Hernández played a pivotal role in helping the Bavarians claim their tenth Bundesliga title in a row. Often playing at left-back or centre-back, Hernández was a leader on and off the pitch as he supported Bayern by aiding the keeping of clean sheets whilst Robert Lewandowski did the business up top. At the turn of the year, Hernández also reached the Club World Cup Final with Bayern.

Playing the role of centre-back in the final, Hernández assisted Bayern in winning 1-0 against Tigres UNAL of Mexico. It was perhaps a game where the German side could have scored more but looked comfortable at the back with Lucas and Co. keeping the Mexican side quiet.

Domestically, the Frenchman played 13 times in the Bundesliga last season this side of Christmas. It would have been more if it wasn't for a rib injury but he still made an impact as, in all 13 games Hernández featured in, Bayern didn't lose. As that little known fact suggests, when you scratch below the surface, it's clear that Hernández doesn't get the credit he sometimes deserves.

Standing at 6'0, Hernández has been dominant in the air whilst still providing some clever footwork when needed. At time of writing, this season the Frenchman had already won over 80 tackles and 20 ariel duels.

His mobility on the ground is backed up by the 75km he's covered in just his first eight appearances for Bayern this

season. Hernández appears to have settled in well since moving to southern Germany in 2019. This will be his third season in the Bundesliga and he'll be looking for his third consecutive title. The 25-year-old has become accustomed to winning trophies and this continued during 2021.

After a disappointing Euros for France, in which Hernandez appeared in the opening two games against Germany and Portugal, in October, Hernández help Les Bleus to the National League title. In the semi-final, the defender played the full 90 minutes as France made a thrilling comeback to defeat neighbouring Belgium 3-2 before France lifted the trophy in Italy after seeing off Spain 2-1 in the final.

This was the first time that Lucas and his brother, Theo, had both been selected by Didier Deschamps. They featured at left-centre-back and left-wing-back respectively during the semi-final win. A proud moment.

In helping France secure qualification for next year's World Cup in Qatar, Hernández has tallied over 30 appearances for his country and there's many more to come. When looking at his trophy cabinet for both club and country, it's important to remember that Hernández is just 25.

You'd imagine there will be a seat for him on the plane en-route to Qatar and perhaps more glory awaits him there on the biggest stage of all.

Overall, Lucas Hernández has had a superb 2021. Domestically, he's assisted Bayern in winning a prestigious tenth Bundesliga in a row whilst claiming the Club World Cup. On the International stage, already a World Cup winner the defender added the Nations League and World Cup 2022 qualification. It's no wonder that Hernández features on this list as one of France's best players during this calendar year.

At 25, the defender is yet to reach his full potential for both club and country and, in the year's that follow, you'll need to get used to hearing the name Lucas Hernández.

*Jamie Allen*



18th

RAPHAËL  
VARANE





'HE'S A RISK-TAKER WHO BETS ON HIMSELF. HE FEARLESSLY JOINED REAL MADRID AT 18, AFTER JUST ONE TOP-FLIGHT SEASON, AND BECAME AN UNDOUBTED SUCCESS. TEN YEARS LATER, HE LEFT MADRID AS A CLUB LEGEND WITH OVER 300 GAMES PLAYED AND OVER 15 TROPHIES WON.'

**When you have pretty much won it all by the age of 25, it's hard to imagine your motivation levels remaining at their peak. Four Champions League titles, two league titles and one World Cup triumph would be beyond the wildest dreams of most players across an entire career. Players who reach that level of success early on tend to look for ways to reinvent themselves or challenge themselves at the top level. It took three years but Raphaël Varane finally moved on this year. It was time.**

There may be many who won't understand Varane's decision to leave Real Madrid, a club at the pinnacle of the sport, at 28 to join this version of Manchester United, a club full of problems in management structure and coaching. Why not stay put and look for ways to motivate yourself in Madrid? There would be a lot less to lose by not making such a risky move, one that could affect your legacy should you struggle with the dysfunction.

Raphaël Varane, however, is not that man. He's a risk-taker who bets on himself. He fearlessly joined Real Madrid at 18, after just one top flight season, and became an undoubted success. Ten years later, he left Madrid as a club legend with over 300 games played and over 15 trophies won.

Despite all Varane has achieved, this year marks perhaps the most pivotal year in his career to date. It may be absurd to say he has anything to prove, but that is the case. Doubters have slowly amassed in 2021, as if all he had done over the last decade was a fluke.

That noise got even louder as he joined Manchester United, with many – who don't seem to have watched him play over the last ten year – predicting he would struggle in the Premier League. Those naysayers are now clutching at straws. So far, Varane has been excellent – to the point where United's defence falls apart without him.

Varane has had to do a lot in the short time he's spent in England. Often, he's outnumbered and forced to cover a remarkable amount of space. In applying his wealth of experience – again underlining his success at Madrid was no accident – he has dealt admirably with many of those situations. It's no surprise that Manchester United haven't conceded more than one goal in any of his nine games to date while he was on the pitch.

Without him, they conceded five against Liverpool, four against Leicester, three against Atalanta and two against Manchester City. At the time of writing, that was more than United have conceded in all of the Frenchman's minutes so far this season. It also shows how poor the now departed Ole Gunnar Solskjær's

defensive structure was without Varane's heroics. One man should not have to be that much of a difference maker defensively, especially at a club like Manchester United.

EURO 2020 presented a chance for Varane to once again lead from the back for France. Expectations were high for the world champions and tournament favourites. After a man of the match performance against Germany in the opening game, France defensive personnel started to fluctuate. Lucas Digne came in at left-back for the 1-1 draw with Hungary in place of Lucas Hernandez.

Against Portugal, Hernandez was back but Benjamin Pavard was replaced at right-back by Jules Koundé. In the second round exit to Switzerland, Pavard returned but Deschamps opted for a back three, with Clement Lenglet coming in and Adrien Rabiot unusually slotting in as a wing-back on the left to replace Hernandez.

Such instability certainly affected performances and Varane was no exception. Hard as he tried, mistakes were made. France conceded six goals in four games at the tournament, a far cry from the defensive solidity that made Les Bleus so successful at the 2018 World Cup. Naturally, Varane was criticised, as were others, especially centre-back partner Presnel Kimpembe.

The UEFA Nations League finals offered redemption. Although France eventually triumphed, showing character to come back from deficits in both the semi-final and final, there were still issues defensively. France conceded twice against Belgium and once against Spain after Varane went off injured. Despite winning the Nations League, Les Bleus had kept just one clean sheet in eight games.

Those issues could largely be attributed to instability. Eight different defenders played for France in Italy. Considering the circumstances, Varane certainly deserves a lot more credit than he received for his leadership and for the amount of work he did as France faced high quality opponents in EURO 2020's 'Group Of Death' and in the Nations League finals.

All in all, it has been an interesting year for Varane. In moving from Madrid to Manchester, via two international tournaments, he has largely excelled. There have been forgettable, even disappointing, moments but ultimately, he can hold his head high. The on-pitch adversity has been endless all year, with injury problems also creeping in and he should be praised for maintaining a consistent standard while delivering some top quality performances.

*Astorre S. Cerebrone*



17th



A M I N E  
GOVIRI



'WHETHER IT BE FREE-KICKS, CUTTING IN FROM HIS FAVOURED LEFT-HAND SIDE, INTELLIGENT LINK-UP PLAY WITH TEAMMATES OR PENALTIES – GOUIRI IS OFTEN AMONG THE GOALS. SUCH VARIETY AND UNPREDICTABILITY IN HIS GAME IS ONE OF THE KEY REASONS FOR HIS SUCCESS.'

**If you rewind 18 months, things were a lot different for Amine Gouiri. The French U21 international was left frustrated on the periphery of Lyon's first team with the majority of his football played in the reserves. Fans of Les Gones were frustrated by the absence of the hometown marksman from first-team action and feared the eventual outcome. Nice acted upon Gouiri's lack of minutes and were able to pry him away from Parc OL for a mere £6.3m. Since his arrival on the Cote d'Azur, the 21-year-old hasn't looked back.**

2021 has been an excellent year for the Lyon-born forward; becoming one of the best young talents in France and catching the attention of some of the biggest clubs in Europe. Nice have shown their ambitions in the transfer market since being acquired by British businessman Jim Ratcliffe and chemical company INEOS with the Gouiri signing becoming one of Ligue 1's best acquisitions in recent years.

Not only will Nice profit greatly from any future transfer fee but they've also profited enormously from the former Lyon striker's on-pitch presence. At the time of writing Gouiri's scored an average of 0.47 goals per 90 minutes since his debut in August 2020. Goal scoring is one of the main facets of his very well-rounded skill set.

With 15 goals in 2021 by late November, the Nice marksman ranks as the eighth-highest scoring Frenchman in the world this year. It's an impressive record for someone playing just their second full senior season. Gouiri's variety of goal scoring is a real problem for Ligue 1 defences.

Whether it be free-kicks, cutting in from his favoured left-hand side, intelligent link-up play with teammates or penalties – Gouiri is often among the goals. Such variety and unpredictability in his game is one of the key reasons for his success.

The Frenchman has also been recognised by the international setup in 2021, playing eight times for France's under 21 side. He was a part of Sylvain Ripoll's underperforming UEFA Under 21 European Championship squad which received significant criticism for its premature quarter-final exit to the Netherlands but Gouiri has rediscovered some international form in qualifying matches of late managing to net twice in four appearances.

In the 2021/22 season, Gouiri's impressive goal scoring form has continued eight goals in 14 league appearances at time of writing, after 12 in 34 last season. His current xG of 0.58 per 90 minutes ranks him among the top 13% of forwards in Europe, showing the quality of the chances and positions he finds himself in.

A -0.13 underperformance in the xG department also shows there is room for improvement. The French under 21 international has also shown his quality on the European stage, netting four goals in five Europa League matches for Nice last season.

However, there's much more to the former Lyon forward's game than just being a handy finisher. Gouiri's passing is remarkable. Averaging 1.89 key passes per 90, with 1.24 passes per 90 into the penalty area, there aren't many forwards with better passing precision in the attacking third. With 12 assists to his name since arriving on the south coast of France, Gouiri has been a key creative spark for Patrick Vieira, Adrian Ursea and Christophe Galtier at Nice.

Gouiri is crucial to Nice's set-up and their successes so far under Galtier. The reigning Ligue 1 winning coach's style owes much of its effectiveness to an emphasis on quick transition play from attack to defence – Gouiri is key to this. The speed and ease with which the versatile forward moves with the ball is an asset and has seen Gouiri take the lead when it comes to launching attacks and executing Galtier's gameplan.

His 6.67 progressive carries and almost two dribbles per 90 this season highlight that effectiveness in attacking transition and in moving the ball quickly. His 4.97 shot-creating actions, ranking him among Europe's elite, underlines Gouiri's creative threat as does some audacious skill.

Amine Gouiri is a complete forward with high levels of technical ability and an eye for goal as well as creative vision and silky feet. Despite his age, his impressive start to life has seen him become one of the most talked about talents in Europe and one of the most promising forwards France has seen in recent years. His stellar 2021, unquestionably puts him among the best players in the country and, at just 21, it's crazy to think how good he could still yet become.

*Liam Wraith*



16th



G A Ë T A N  
LABORDE



**By late November, Gaëtan Laborde had amassed 14 goals in 20 appearances this season and looks worth every bit of his €15m move from Montpellier to Stade Rennais. He first evinced his talent in the 2016/17 season, at Bordeaux, where he slowly moved out from the shadow of Jérémy Menez, scoring thirteen goals in all competitions. He had been a solid enough performer on loan spells to lower division clubs but, at 23, he was seemingly becoming less of an elite prospect but rather more of a player best suited to life in the lower leagues.**

Laborde's career would then take a major step back the following season. While Menez had departed Bordeaux that summer, the exit of coach Jocelyn Gourvennec mid-season, combined with a metatarsal fracture that kept him out for more than three months, had hamstrung his season. Bordeaux had improved under Gus Poyet but he was often an unused substitute come season's end. The following summer saw him leave his first club for Montpellier in a transfer that would ironically enrage Poyet and even hasten the Uruguayan's departure. It was there that Laborde began to really blossom. Playing alongside Andy Delort in a 3-4-1-2, Laborde used his running and aerial ability to burnish the former Caen striker's game and Montpellier were only kept out of the top five, and a putative European place, by a cruel defeat to Marseille on the season's final day. Only the top four had better goal differentials and, under Michel Der Zakarian, La Paillade were beginning to look increasingly like one of France's most attractive sides going forward.

In the summer, the club invested heavily, making Delort's move from Toulouse permanent and breaking their club record to sign midfielder Téji Savanier from Nîmes. Despite that spending spree, and the additions of Swiss international goalkeeper Jonas Omlin and Dijon forward Stéphy Mavididi the following summer, Montpellier's financial state, like many clubs in France, was put under threat by the pandemic. As a result, when the proverbial glass ceiling of European play couldn't be broken after three successive seasons, he and Delort were sent on their way this summer. Laborde joined a Rennes side who have shown ambition of late but were also in flux having parted with ways with once-promising young manager Julien Stéphan in March despite his having guided the club to both their highest-ever finish and the 2019 Coupe de France.

Stéphan had been replaced by Bruno Génésio, formerly of Lyon, and it made for an interesting combination. Génésio was a man thoroughly steeped in the milieu of the Rhone club, but had been derided for his tactical irresolution, even as he helped guide the club to a Europa League semi-final and regular participation in the Champions League. He had briefly been employed in China with Beijing Guoan prior to rocking up in Brittany. He thus seemed, if not an uninspired choice, at the very least a peculiar one. That said, his impact in Rennes was immediate, as the team's only losses under his stewardship last season were to Bordeaux in a match in which they played with ten men for virtually the entire encounter, and to PSG and Monaco, both of whom were well battling hard for a place in the top three at the time.

This summer brought more heavy spending from chairman Nicolas Holveck. No club, save PSG, spent more than the nearly €80m that Rennes did, but things hardly had started smoothly. After a decent start, three successive losses in the league had left the team sixteenth. Even if injuries to Jérémy Doku and Majer had meant that the team were missing some key ingredients, it seemed that Génésio, despite the team's considerable outlay in the summer, was perhaps not quite up to the task. It was in Laborde's third match with the club, having arrived at the eleventh hour from Montpellier, that things shifted. In a midweek round against a promoted Clermont side, Rennes put six past the Auvergne side as Laborde scored his first league goal for the club, playing on the right side of a three, as he had through much of his time at his previous clubs. Usually paired with another striker such as Menez, Delort or Martin Terrier as it was here, Laborde has rarely been used as a proper central striker. This had always been a curious choice, as Laborde's work rate, aerial ability and overall physical presence make him a rather complete centre forward, but he's never seemed unhappy in this role while becoming an adept creative presence, averaging roughly an assist every fourth match.

With Doku's absence, though, Laborde became the best option to lead the line, playing for the first time as a genuine focal point. No longer playing a supporting role, Laborde has blossomed in a way that his physical gifts have always hinted at, scoring in four straight league matches starting against Clermont. Now on nine goals in the league, only Jonathan David has more in Ligue 1 this season, and he's also the Europa Conference League's top scorer. In the spell since that Clermont match, Rennes have won ten and drawn three times in all competitions, rocketing to second place in the league and top spot in their European group ahead of Vitesse Arnhem and Tottenham. While there are other factors to be sure, Laborde being anointed the focal point of a capable attack for the first time in the top flight is paying palpable dividends, showing that rather than be playing second fiddle, he deserves pride of place.

With a deep squad and no European football of consequence again until mid-March, Rennes are well positioned to solidify a top three spot domestically and, with the various absences that they've suffered, much of that is down to Laborde and his consistent scoring touch. If Rennes can hold on to him in January (Lyon have been linked ahead of the Africa Cup of Nations), a return to the Champions League for the club looks a distinct possibility, no small matter for a player who was scrapping for playing time at a middling Bordeaux side not so long ago. His ascent even has him tipped as a potential option for Didier Deschamps' national side. That conversation seems more than well-merited, given the middling form of the likes of Wissam Ben Yedder and Anthony Martial. Whether it ends in a Champions League place, a title in the Conference League, or even on a plane to Qatar, Laborde's rise has been truly meteoric. His is hardly a traditional path to success and he thus also offers a reminder that just because a player doesn't evince their talents from the off, or play a certain role, that doesn't mean that a shift in tactics or philosophy can't wring the best from them, despite their being middle-aged in footballing terms.

*Eric Devin*



15th

CHRISTOPHER  
NKUNKU





'DESPITE NKUNKU'S IMPRESSIVE PERFORMANCES AND THE QUALITY HE HAS SHOWN, HE HAS YET TO RECEIVE AN INTERNATIONAL CALL-UP FOR FRANCE. FRANCE NATIONAL TEAM HEAD COACH DIDIER DESCHAMPS HAS MADE IT CLEAR THAT NKUNKU IS A PLAYER HE HAS HIS EYE ON BUT, AS OF RIGHT NOW, THEY ARE PRIORITISING CONTINUITY IN THE SQUAD. HOWEVER, IT FEELS LIKE 'WHEN' RATHER THAN 'IF' FOR NKUNKU'S AND LES BLEUS.'

**Christopher Nkunku's season has been defined by being a consistently shining star in an inconsistent team. For a side that many tipped to compete for the German title, RB Leipzig has fallen well short of expectations. At the time of writing, they sat seventh in the Bundesliga after winning only five of their first 12 games. However, Nkunku's performances have stood out. By the end of November he'd scored five goals and provided seven assists in those 12 games while also netting seven goals in five champions league games this season. A wonderful start.**

For many, Nkunku's performances will not be a surprise. After signing for Paris Saint-Germain as a teenager, Nkunku cemented his status as one of the most exciting prospects in France and, after fine performances with the youth team, he earned a spot in PSG's first team squad.

As most young players have found out in Paris, opportunities can be hard to come by. Over his three seasons in the first team, Nkunku played only 55 league games, many of them as a substitute. In his two and a bit seasons at RB Leipzig, he's already played 72 Bundesliga games.

To get the required game time, Nkunku signed for Leipzig in the summer of 2019 for a reported £11m. This move was wildly applauded as Leipzig is a place known for developing young talents such as Timo Werner, Marcel Sabitzer, and Nkunku's French compatriots Dayot Upamecano and Ibrahima Konaté.

In his first season, Nkunku proved his talent and potential, recording five goals but impressively assisting his teammates 15 times in 32 Bundesliga games. Statistically, his second season was not as fruitful as he scored six goals and created a further seven goals, but there was a feeling that he was on the cusp of having a breakout year.

His third season has proven to be just that. In his first 20 games Nkunku has scored 13 times and added 12 assists across all competitions, impressively saving his most productive outings for Champions League games. Three of his seven UCL goals came against Manchester City away from home. Although Leipzig lost 6-3, Nkunku's performance against one of the best teams in Europe impressed many.

It's not just fans and pundits that have been impressed by Nkunku's performances. RB Leipzig Head Coach Jesse Marsch said Nkunku "doesn't have a weakness." while his former manager Julian Nagelsmann explained, as the then RBL coach, that, "he's versatile and has real quality in attacking one-on-ones. He also fits perfectly with our transfer DNA as a young player with great potential who can take steps forward, just like us as a club. He's hungry for success and we're glad to have him on board."

Nagelsmann's assessment of Nkunku is accurate. He's been described as an attacking midfielder, but he has shown the ability to play in multiple positions, frequently playing on either wing as well as dropping into central midfield.

He's even played as a false 9. Nkunku's standout performance this season came as a false 9, scoring and then assisting the winning goal to help Leipzig beat Dortmund. He was also awarded the man of the match award for his performance. Along with the multiple man of the match awards earned this season, Nkunku was also awarded the Bundesliga player of the month for October, beating the great Robert Lewandowski.

Despite Nkunku's impressive performances and the quality he has shown, he has yet to receive an international call-up for France. France National Team Head Coach Didier Deschamps has made it clear that Nkunku is a player he has his eye on but, as of right now, they are prioritising continuity in the squad. However, it feels like 'when' rather than 'if' for Nkunku's and Les Bleus.

If Nkunku continues to perform at this level a move away from Leipzig is likely. He's already been linked with several bigger teams across Europe, including Manchester City, Arsenal, Real Madrid and Liverpool. If one of those sides were to realise their interest, they would be getting a player performing at a high level that is yet to fulfil his potential.

Barely 24-years-old, Christopher Nkunku has considerable time to make good on that potential – a terrifying thought for his opponents.

*Nadim Bart-Williams*





14th

T É J I

SAVANIER





' SAVANIER IS A ONE MAN ATTACK. ONE THAT MAKES EVERYONE AROUND HIM BETTER. WITH ONE OF THE BEST RIGHT FOOTS IN LIGUE 1, HE'S DEADLY FROM SET PIECES, THE QUALITY OF HIS DELIVERIES BEING COMPARABLE TO ANYONE IN FRENCH FOOTBALL RIGHT NOW, OR FOR MANY YEARS BEFORE. A FOOTBALLER'S FOOTBALLER, COMPARED GLOWINGLY TO ZINEDINE ZIDANE BY BOTH TEAMMATES AND COACHES, SAVANIER IS A LETHAL ATTACKING MIDFIELDER WHO HAS IT ALL. '

**With the 'big names' on this list, Téji Savanier's fourteenth place in our French Player Of The Year Award ranking for 2021 may come as a surprise to many non-Ligue 1 viewers. However, Ligue 1 faithful have long known the quality of this jewel of a midfielder.**

For Savanier, this year was the culmination of a steady climb that the 29-year-old's career has been so far. From the start of his first Ligue 1 campaign with Nîmes in 2018, Savanier has shown he's a player to be recognized as one of France's top products and 2021 only solidified Savanier as one of the best all-around players in France and, on certain levels, one of the best all-around players in the world.

Without the now common overnight stardom as a young player or slew of ensuing endorsements, Savanier has worked his way up from the French second division to the national team. Many outside France first took notice of Savanier during the 2018/19 season when he led Ligue 1 with 14 assists, outperforming the likes of Ángel Di María, Nicolas Pépé, Kylian Mbappé, Memphis Depay and Nabil Fekir – a total that compared well across Europe. The following season Savanier would break the transfer record of his hometown and boyhood club Montpellier.

This most recent calendar year would see Savanier achieve one of his greatest accomplishments so far, even if it was symbolic in nature. As one of the most underrated players in the world, Savanier more than deserved his call up to the French team sent to the Olympic games this summer, where he scored the winner against South Africa in a 4-3 victory.

That win proved to be the highlight of Les Bleus' tournament, however, exiting at the group stages. France's poor performance may have had more to do with how the Olympic tournament was handled as a whole rather than any individual player's fault. Nevertheless, Savanier received the honour that he deserved and even captained France at one stage.

Savanier is a one man attack. One that makes everyone around him better. With one of the best right feet in Ligue 1, he's deadly from set pieces, the quality of his deliveries being comparable to anyone in French football right now, or for many years before. A footballer's footballer, compared glowingly to Zinedine Zidane by both teammates and coaches, Savanier is a lethal attacking midfielder who has it all.

Long balls, touch, speed, technical ability, dribbling and he can score from anywhere on the pitch, as was proved by his goal of the season contender from the half way line against Dijon while with Nîmes. Savanier's range of passing mirrors Neymar's or Dimitri Payet's, and is equally effective in play-making.

Some say true number tens are disappearing from the game, with only a handful of players effective in that position. Savanier is certainly in that handful. An ability to use both feet to pass and score combined with his insatiable dynamism sees Savanier wreak havoc in Ligue 1 midfield every week. Stats alone can not describe his on-field dominance.

His work rate and technical ability allows him to elude the high pressure of Ligue 1's physical defences, which is particularly impressive considering the difficulties players like Neymar and Lionel Messi have encountered when playing as a number ten in France compared to their successes on the more spacious wings.

Savanier's 2021 highlights would compare to many players' career highlights, a better attacking midfielder couldn't be created in a video game.

Despite his growing reputation, as Didier Deschamps' flirts with the idea of a full international call up for the midfielder, Savanier's name still may not be one that comes up in conversation when discussing the world's elite midfielders. But, as 2021 has again proven, it should.

*Tony-Thomas DesRois*





13th

P O G B A



'WHEN A TEAM DOESN'T HAVE SUCCESS PEOPLE TEND TO LOOK FOR REASONS WHY, AND THIS IS WHERE **POGBA** FINDS LIFE DIFFICULT IN THE **PREMIER LEAGUE**. THE REALITY IS THAT HE IS AN ATTACKING MIDFIELDER PLAYING IN A LEAGUE THAT NO LONGER MAKES LIFE COMFORTABLE FOR PLAYERS OF THAT TYPE.'

**2021 has been a year of mixed fortunes for Paul Pogba, with his domestic displays and his international performances showing a clear split. Yet, with that being said, the French midfielder remains one of the most prodigiously talented of his era.**

Ole Gunnar Solskjaer leaned on Pogba heavily at times throughout his tenure as Manchester United coach, citing his experience of working with the French international with United's under-23 team, and for the most part this was a success.

It's difficult to gauge Pogba's progress because the team he was playing in didn't necessarily achieve the success that they should have done. Finishing second in the Premier League was a fine achievement when you compare the United team to Manchester City, but it's hardly something to write home about.

When a team doesn't have success people tend to look for reasons why, and this is where Pogba finds life difficult in the Premier League. The reality is that he is an attacking midfielder playing in a league that no longer makes life comfortable for players of that type.

Mesut Özil found this, Juan Mata too and only David Silva was able to escape the changing trends of the English top flight, mainly due to being coached by Pep Guardiola. In 2020/21, Pogba missed 12 Premier League matches but still managed to contribute by scoring three goals and adding five assists. It was hardly a record-breaking year for a player of Pogba's talent, but it was enough to ably support Bruno Fernandes.

Euro 2020 followed and the former Juventus midfielder would once again shine, unsurprisingly next to N'Golo Kanté. Les Bleus would suffer a disappointing penalty shoot-out exit to Switzerland in the round of 16, a match where we would see the best and worst of Pogba. On the ball and in the opposing team's half, Pogba is one of the most valuable players in world football. He makes things happen.

His passing is intricate, he can hold defenders off and drag them out of position, and, as we saw in that aforementioned match against the Swiss, he can fire a shot from distance into the top corner. However, Pogba would then make a catastrophic mistake, losing the ball inside his own half and

failing to track back, which led to the Swiss pulling a goal back and setting up the mother of all comebacks.

Unfortunately, for all his technical talent, Pogba has struggled to truly find his role when his team isn't in possession of the ball. Didier Deschamps has counter-balanced this with his use of Kanté next to Manchester United's record signing, but he still has lapses of concentration in him.

It is these lapses which keep Pogba out of the top 10 on this list, with his team often having to suffer through long periods of matches because of his lack of defensive effort with the promise of an eventual piece of game-changing brilliance.

Manchester United's 2021/22 season has been played against a backdrop of poor results and contractual uncertainty with regards to the former Juventus playmaker. His current deal ends in June 2022 and he has done his chances of earning a move little harm with his displays this far this term.

Starting the season with seven assists in nine Premier League matches has been impressive, but once again circumstance has acted against him. An awful challenge in the 5-0 defeat to Liverpool saw Pogba handed a three-match suspension and a subsequent thigh injury could keep him on the side-lines until the new year.

By then Pogba will be able to speak to clubs outside of English football about a Bosman deal, as well as sign a pre-contract agreement. Few teams can now justify spending a huge transfer fee on a luxury player like Pogba, but when there is no transfer fee attached, he becomes an altogether more attractive prospect.

Ralf Rangnick's arrival at Manchester United will signify a new era at Old Trafford, with high-pressing and intensity being the modus-operandi moving forward. Even the most ardent Pogba fan will admit that doesn't necessarily play to the midfielder's strengths.

As such, it's likely Pogba will leave Manchester sooner rather than later, and this is a good thing for French football. The midfielder needs to pick his next destination wisely, he has to go to a club that has a midfield packed with energy and talent, so he can showcase his extraordinary technical skills without the responsibility of leading a team.

*Chris Winterburn*



A stylized, high-contrast illustration of a man with a beard and mustache, wearing a red and yellow striped shirt and blue shorts. He is lying down on a wooden surface, with his arms outstretched. The background is a warm, golden-brown color with a wood grain texture. The man's expression is neutral, and he has a slight smile.

12th

J O N A T H A N

CLAUSS



'2021 HAS TRULY BEEN A BREAKOUT YEAR FOR **C**LAUSS, STARTING AS A RELATIVE NOBODY, TO BECOMING ONE OF **L**IGUE 1'S SHINING LIGHTS, HE'S TAKEN GREAT STRIDES IN ALL FACETS OF HIS GAME. **L**ENS HAVE UNEARTHED A TRUE GEM.'

**Vauban Strasbourg, SV Linx, US Raon-l'Etape, US Avranches, Quevilly Rouen, Arminia Bielefeld and Lens. Those are the clubs that Jonathan Clauss has played senior football for. It's far from an impressive list and certainly not on the level of Paul Pogba's Juventus and Manchester United, or Raphael Varane's Lens, Real Madrid and Manchester United. Nevertheless, the flying right-back has finished higher than both of those superstars in our French Footballer Of The Year Award for 2021, and for good reason.**

Now 29, Clauss' first taste of top flight football only came when he made the switch from Bielefeld to Lens in summer 2020, but it certainly didn't look like it. For someone used to playing in the lower echelons of French football before joining Arminia, his adjustment to Ligue 1 action went as well as it could have. Arriving after five goals and eight assists in the German second division, helping Bielefeld to promotion, Clauss' attacking intent was again evident last term.

Constantly providing a threat in the final third, he was the outlet Lens most often looked to hit. His turn of pace allows him to overlap his winger and get to the by-line before delivering a cross. Clauss has variation to his game too, his wicked deliveries from deep are Lens' secret weapon and he's unerringly consistent in finding teammates.

Not only does he have the pace and power to get around his opponent on the outside, Clauss also has the technical proficiency to drive inside with the ball and enter midfield. It's an underrated trait in full-backs, with many becoming hesitant and indecisive in central areas.

Playing as the right-wing-back in Franck Haise's 3-4-1-2 system, Clauss is given license to stay high and wide and, due to Lens' ability to get the ball to him so quickly, he often catches opponents unaware. It's a credit to Haise's system, but also to Clauss himself. The tactical side of a wing-back's game is never really considered, but it takes strong match intelligence to play the role well and Clauss has the footballing brain needed.

Donning the number 11 shirt, you'd be forgiven for thinking Clauss is a right winger but, while he's often found inside the opponents' final third, he doesn't ignore his defensive responsibilities.

Not only is he Lens' primary attacking outlet but Clauss is also their most aggressive and front-footed defender. His 4.6 tackles and interceptions per 90, according to WhoScored, ranks first of Lens' regulars, underlining his true box-to-box capabilities.

PSG's Achraf Hakimi is currently Ligue 1's superstar full-back but, in 2021/22, the Moroccan has been outshone by Clauss. Second in Ligue 1 for assists at time of writing, the Lens man is having the season of a lifetime. With Didier Deschamps altering his France system to a 3-4-3 in recent games to accommodate Theo Hernández, Lucas Theo Hernández and Jules Koundé in their favoured positions, while enabling a front three of Kylian Mbappé, Karim Benzema, and Antoine Griezmann, Clauss is a viable option for Deschamps as right wing-back.

None of France's current squad really suit the role, yet it perfectly compliments Clauss' style. If his form continues, a first ever call-up should be on the cards.

Clauss genuinely has it all. He pairs defensive nous with 2.3 key passes per 90, more than Mbappé and Lens' creative midfielder Gaël Kakuta. Although he isn't much of a dribbler, he compensates with his vision and enticing deliveries. Lens' entire system is built almost exclusively around getting the ball wide to Clauss, as the final game before the November international break demonstrated. The Frenchman scored once and picked up two assists in a truly excellent individual display as Lens swept Troyes aside in a 4-0 victory.

2021 has truly been a breakout year for Clauss, starting as a relative nobody, to becoming one of Ligue 1's shining lights, he's taken great strides in all facets of his game. Lens have unearthed a true gem.

Not particularly flashy, Clauss does plenty of his work in silence, yet he almost always stands out. Lens as a whole have been one of the standout Ligue 1 teams of 2021 and Clauss has certainly helped.

For a side only promoted after the initial outbreak of COVID-19 forced Ligue 2 to be halted early in 2020, they have thoroughly impressed. For a team punching above their weight, it's perhaps fitting that someone like late developing Clauss is shining brightest.

*Cameron Smith*



11th

# JULES KOUNDE



**"What about the other guy?" Monchi asked reporters. After the famed former keeper turned sporting director extraordinaire returned to Seville from a failed fling in Rome, the Andalusian club's squad was re-designed in summer 2019. Almost an entirely new team was signed, including a new centre-back pairing made in Ligue 1. Although the powerful former Nantes' defender Diego Carlos took much of the initial attention, Monchi chose to focus on then 20-year-old Jules Koundé. Such has been the Frenchman's impact since, that Barcelona, Manchester City and Chelsea have registered serious interest. It seems Monchi wasn't alone in asking that question.**

Born in Paris "a reserved, shy boy who takes time to trust others," as the defender describes himself, Koundé moved to the Bordeaux area as a small child. "I loved to laugh, tease and make fun too, but above all, I have always loved football." Koundé explained to Onze Mondial last year. Young Jules' love for football was so all-consuming that his mother was forced to enlist a therapist to help her son deal with defeats.

"When I started playing football in my village we had a bad team," Koundé recalled. "I couldn't stand losing, it was driving me crazy. I had a period when I was 8 or 9 when I was terrible with my mother. It was impossible to talk to me, I was even mean... My mother went to see someone for advice because she couldn't handle me." Eventually Koundé moved clubs, his mood settled and he was spotted by former Bordeaux forward Yannick Stopyra at under 13 level.

Naturally a centre-back, Koundé was often moved to right-back during his time at Bordeaux's academy due to his relatively diminutive stature. Frustrated initially, Koundé learned to adapt. "Growing up, it was often said to me that my size could be a problem for managers," the player said. "It's true that sometimes at my height you can't always challenge in aerial duels but you can always manage the opponent. I've always had good timing, I like aerial duels and I jump relatively high, so that really helps."

Initially thrown into the first team as Jocelyn Gourvennec's disastrous Bordeaux reign came to an end, although Koundé's first senior start was in a humiliating Coupe de France defeat to fourth tier Granville in January 2018, the incoming Gustavo Poyet was impressed and Koundé quickly became an undisputed starter. Although often a rare source of pride for FCGB fans in turbulent times, the growing pains of a young defender remained obvious as a wasteful and timid display in the 3-3 draw with newly-promoted Nîmes that year showed, as did a pair of errors in the 2-1 Europa League loss at Zenit in late 2018. Despite impressing from the outset, sloppiness characterised Koundé's early low points, a failing the player has been quick to admit. "I lack consistency in my concentration." Koundé conceded last year. "During brief moments I lose focus. Tactically, with my positioning, I still have some progress to make. Sometimes I compensate because I move relatively fast and because I have a good sense of anticipation. But I know I'm not always in the right place at the right time."

With Bordeaux, Koundé's performances often fell into one of two categories. At his best he was a rumbustious, intelligent, technically gifted defender who dominated his third of the pitch. However, still young and inexperienced, Koundé could also retreat into his shell and lose concentration, aggression and presence, which in turn bred some poor decision-making. Nevertheless, despite some outliers, such as the wayward display in the loss to Lyon which drew a 2/10 rating from L'Équipe, by the end of the 2018/19 campaign a consistent, classy and imposing performer was starting to emerge.

Given Monchi's penchant for identifying cost-effective yet high quality talent, the fact that the €25m Sevilla spent on Koundé is still a club record underlined the player's potential. "We trust him and we believe that he is a player of the present with a great future." Monchi explained upon Koundé's arrival in Seville. "He's not tall but he is good in the air, aggressive, fast and has good ball movement... Those who know him know that there is less risk than there may seem." Monchi insisted that "Sevilla have made an important investment... He is very calm and does not give a damn if he is the most expensive or not."

Despite an undulating start, notably conceding a penalty in an all-round shaky display against Eibar, in just one season Koundé became one of the best centre-backs in La Liga. Mistakes were slowly eradicated as he exuded a new-found fiery intensity which was often lacking in Ligue 1 which led to the moniker 'Cafu.' After the "catastrophic" Eibar game, Koundé reassessed. "I just thought, 'Why is this happening? What did you do wrong? Were you well prepared?' The answer was 'no.'"

Now, instead of shying away from pressure, the young Frenchman actively welcomes it. "I win more head-to-head duels than Sergio Ramos because the opponents don't dare play long to Ramos," Koundé recalled. "They say to themselves that it will be easier against Koundé, and that motivates me."

Although still a little forgetful off the field, "I am a bit of a dreamer," Koundé admitted, "I lose my keys all the time. I've already lost my passport three or four times," the defender's thoughtful persona is exemplified by his social media presence, often speaking out on issues of social injustice. "If I didn't, it would be denying who I am," Koundé says. "There are things that piss me off in this world and I cannot hide from them. There are too many injustices."

After a failed bid from Manchester City last year, Marca reported that City director Txiki Begiristain was supposedly "in love" with Koundé. And who can blame him? There's a lot to love about Jules, and with Chelsea routinely linked after an unerringly consistent year in the centre of defence for a side challenging on all fronts while also breaking into the France national team, the mammoth transfer fee needed to secure his signature may start to look more appealing too.

Wherever Jules Koundé's career may lead, one thing is for sure – he's no longer just "the other guy".

*Adam White*





10th

A N T O I N E  
G R I E Z M A N N



'THAT ENTIRE RUN WAS CLASSIC GRIEZMANN, A MIXTURE OF A NEVER-SAY-DIE ATTITUDE AND A DECISIVENESS THAT KEPT HIS TEAM BELIEVING. IT MAY HAVE JUST BEEN THE COPA DEL REY, BUT IT SHOWED THAT GRIEZMANN WAS STILL ONE OF THE BEST PLAYERS IN THE WORLD.'

**Antoine Griezmann's talent has never been in question. Consistently one of the best players in the world, especially during his first stint at Atlético Madrid, the diminishing of his reputation since moving to Barcelona was unexpected. Maybe one could have predicted that the system there may not have suited him, but no one could have predicted how much he would struggle to replicate the form he showed at Atlético, and the numbers too.**

For many, he remains a truly world class player, and one thing that world class players always do is find a way to excel in any circumstances. For nearly two years, the added baggage of the two clubs butting heads over his €120m transfer notwithstanding, the Frenchman failed to do this, and criticism hit a new level. In 2021, however, he has silenced many who'd concluded his best was behind him.

Griezmann's struggles were more about the environment at Barcelona than the man himself, as has been shown by the fact he remained an integral part of the France setup despite all that happened in Spain. Maybe he's not been the Griezmann of EURO 2016 or the 2018 World Cup in terms of pure numbers, but his overall play has barely suffered compared to his Barcelona form.

This year, Griezmann has turned on the style and once again proven himself. It had been coming, as his work ethic only doubled the more he struggled. When he couldn't impact the game in attack, he always made sure that he ran himself into the ground and worked harder than anyone. He was everywhere, chasing down opposition players, diving into challenges, pressing relentlessly and generally being a menace. That type of attitude, especially during fallow periods, always leads to rewards.

It's hard to remember the last time Barcelona won a trophy without Lionel Messi being the main protagonist. One might have to go as far back as 2006. Yet, that's what happened this year after a trophy drought that lasted almost two years. Unlike every trophy Barcelona have won in the past fifteen years, it was Griezmann, not Messi, who led the way to the Copa del Rey triumph last season. While Messi certainly contributed immensely, the most decisive moments that ensured Barcelona stayed alive belonged to Griezmann.

A goal down to Rayo Vallecano in the last 16, it was he who stepped up to assist Messi's equalizer in the 69th minute. They went on to win 2-1 via a Frenkie de Jong goal. In the quarter final, Barcelona were on the verge of elimination, 2-0 down with three minutes to go against Granada but Griezmann delivered a

sublime goal and an assist for Jordi Alba to force extra time. In a game in which most of his teammates had given up, he kept going. The Frenchman scored the goal that gave Barcelona the lead in extra time. Granada soon equalised but he was not to be denied. After de Jong scored to take them 4-3 up, Griezmann assisted Jordi Alba for a fifth goal that settled the game. It might not have come in the Champions League as was hoped but it was the kind of performance that Barcelona had shelled out all those millions for.

It was a turning point in Barcelona's season. When everything was pure chaos, with the team looking dead and buried, Griezmann kept the prospect of ending the season with silverware alive. The two-legged semi final tie against Sevilla saw Barcelona on the verge of elimination once again. After a 2-0 first leg loss, Griezmann and co were desperately searching for a goal to send the game to extra time while 1-0 up in the second leg. In the final minute, the French forward popped up to assist Gerard Piqué's goal that again ensured his team remained alive. Martin Braithwaite's extra time goal was enough to put Barcelona through. In the final against Athletic Club, Griezmann again proved decisive, scoring a goal to give Barcelona the lead. They went on to win 4-0.

That entire run was classic Griezmann, a mixture of a never-say-die attitude and a decisiveness that kept his team believing. It may have just been the Copa Del Rey, but it showed that Griezmann was still one of the best players in the world.

Although EURO 2020 ended in disappointment, Griezmann played brilliantly. It began with a fantastic performance in the win over Germany where he combined well with Kylian Mbappé and Karim Benzema before Griezmann's emphatic equaliser got France back into the second game with Hungary. It ended 1-1 but the 30-year-old ran the game for France, notably completing 10 out of 11 long balls. During the last 16 tie with Switzerland, Griezmann put in a brilliant performance, again combining well with the front two, but was subbed just before Switzerland equalised. Maybe France would have prevailed with Griezmann on the pitch, but Les Bleus eventually lost on penalties.

Barcelona's financial problems meant that Griezmann returned to Atlético in the summer, the club where he has most excelled. Despite a slow start and a struggle to win the fans back after his controversial move to Barcelona, he is already back to somewhere near his best. Redemption for Griezmann finally came in 2021. It has been remarkable. With 26 goals and 11 assists in 2021, compared to 17 goals and 3 assists in 2020 at time of writing, it is safe to say we have got our Antoine back.

*Astorre S. Cerebrone*





9th

WISSAM  
BEN YEDDER  
EDCOM



'IN THE PREVIOUS CAMPAIGNS, BEN YEDDER'S ABILITY TO PROGRESS THE BALL INTO THE FINAL THIRD WAS A KEY ASPECT OF HIS PLAY BUT BALL PROGRESSION NUMBERS HAVE TAKEN A HIT THIS SEASON. MONACO'S CHANCE CREATION AS A TEAM HAS COME DOWN AND THEIR EXPECTED ASSISTS TALLY FOR THE CAMPAIGN IS, AT THE TIME OF WRITING, THE ELEVENTH BEST IN LIGUE 1 SO FAR.'

**The 2020/21 season was always going to be an important one for Wissam Ben Yedder. A player who falls in the 'nearly' category when talking about top-class strikers, Ben Yedder headed into a season which could've defined his career at the top level. Despite finishing the turbulent, truncated 2019/20 campaign at Monaco with 19 goals and 10 assists across 31 games in all competitions, the former Sevilla man had something to prove under new boss Niko Kovač.**

Monaco finally came to terms with their deteriorating situation in the 2019/20 campaign, as coach Leonardo Jardim left in December for the second time. Roberto Moreno was appointed, despite the Spaniard having no experience in managing a top-tier club.

The team went through constant formation changes in that period, where Jardim stuck to his 4-2-3-1 or a 4-4-2 and the occasional 3-5-2, Moreno used a more expansive 4-3-3, and results were inconsistent in the second half of the campaign. Ben Yedder would often play beside Islam Slimani in Jardim's two striker shape, but Moreno's arrival saw him play as the sole forward while Slimani operated on one of the flanks. The Frenchman proved lethal in both the approaches.

Kovač's hiring came after the arrival of Paul Mitchell as sporting director as the revival began. Kovač brought a levelling up of Moreno's expansive brand of football, as the players generally had the skillset to stick to Kovač's alignments on positional play, vertical progression and pressing high up the pitch. Monaco evolved. 2021 has seen the coming together of what was being built since Ben Yedder joined in August 2019.

Different approaches to the game under different managers improved the Frenchman as a footballer and he now finds himself playing for a manager who's comfortable with a front two or a single striker shape. Now club captain, the 31-year-old's ability to conduct play and drop between the lines has been used constantly by a manager who has always emphasised space manipulation and using half spaces or those that exists between the lines.

The 2020/21 campaign under Kovač ended with Ben Yedder contributing to ten goals in the last two months to take the club to the Champions League qualifiers having incredibly been in

contention for the title on the final day of the season. While the months before that were riddled with inconsistencies, the Frenchman's contributions were often still decisive. At the start of 2021, he famously got a brace and an assist in the 3-2 win over Montpellier before scoring another decisive brace in a 2-1 win over Nice.

There were questions marks over his consistency early on in the 2021/22 campaign as Ben Yedder went goalless in the first five games. But he caught fire from the Nice game onwards and managed seven goals in ten.

Despite Ben Yedder overperforming his expected goals metric consistently at Monaco, international football has remained scarce for the 31-year-old as he has been restricted to sporadic appearances from the bench in the last year. France's squad depth in the front line has only grown of late, making it next to impossible for Ben Yedder to become a regular.

While the current campaign has been slightly disappointing by his usual standards in terms of goals per 90 minutes and assists per 90 minutes, he has overperformed on his non-penalty xG – by 2.0 at the time of writing. He performed in line with his xG in the 2020/21 campaign, while coming up with an overperformance of 4.1 in the 2019/20 season, a reflection of his quality as a goal scorer.

In the previous campaigns, Ben Yedder's ability to progress the ball into the final third was a key aspect of his play but ball progression numbers have taken a hit this season. Monaco's chance creation as a team has come down and their expected assists tally for the campaign is, at the time of writing, the eleventh best in Ligue 1 so far.

That's a considerable drop keeping in mind that they were third in the table in that department. Progressive passing hasn't been an issue for them with those numbers being much closer to last season, their inability to create has been a main issue.

Ben Yedder has suffered as a result but, although that has led to question marks over his consistency, the 31-year-old has already done enough to prove that he's one of the most reliable forwards in Europe. He remains hugely important for Monaco going into 2022.

*Kaustubh Pandey*





8th

DIMITRI  
**PAYET**



'EACH MANAGER THAT PASSES THROUGH OM ALSO SEEMS TO ENTICE PAYET BACK TO FORM JUST WHEN HE SEEMS TO BE LOSING FOCUS, WHETHER THAT BE THROUGH THE FAITH HE HAD IN MARCELO BIELSA'S DYNAMISM OR THE TRUST SHOWN IN HIM BY ANDRÉ VILLAS-BOAS.'

**He's often portrayed as a monster in a monstrous world. This reputation will never evade him as long as he remains in Marseille. There is no denying, however, that Dimitri Payet has delighted the masses with his charm on the pitch for many years. 2021 was no different. More rotund in the twilight of his career, Payet still captivates audiences like no other on his day. Former Marseille coach André Villas Boas once said of his playmaker, "Barcelona are Messi dependent, Juventus are Ronaldo dependent. If we're Payet dependent, we're Payet dependent."**

Such is the weight of Payet's talent, misgivings are often overlooked by managers. Jorge Sampaoli, Marseille's current boss, is no different and is forged from the same fire as the Frenchman. Following Payet's devastating injury in the 2018 Europa League final – he subsequently missed out on France's World Cup victory that summer at the age of 31 – with his international future effectively over, many wondered what his motivation might be like going forward. However, at the ripe old age of 34, by the start of December Payet had registered 13 goals and 14 assists this calendar year.

For all his glorious talent, Payet has always drawn ire from opposition (and often his own) supporters. Most recently hit by a bottle thrown by a fan during Marseille's abandoned match against Lyon, Payet and his space buns have been a frequent target for opposition fans in 2021.

Similar incidents occurred both on the opening day of the season against Montpellier and against Nice, where Payet was again struck by a projectile. On that occasion he reacted by returning the object back into the crowd with force. While there's obviously no defence for Payet's actions in that instance, he has been let down by the league, who have consistently failed to identify security risks in French stadia – a common theme so far this season.

The current commotion around Marseille, dangerous and unpleasant as it is, serves to drive Payet. He feeds on the chaos of it all. Having already tallied six goals and seven assists in Ligue 1 this season by the start of December, his form appears undeterred by outside forces.

Of course, the man from Réunion has always had a chequered history within French football. Rejected by Le Havre at the age of 16, Payet admitted that he was not fully committed to the standards of professional football. "I don't blame Le Havre. Back

then I wasn't an easy person to handle. I was always one of the first to mess around," he explained.

However, his consistency this late into a career often bellies his professionalism. Teammate at West Ham, goalkeeper Darren Randolph, admitted that eyebrows were raised when he first joined the club. "The first couple days of pre-season we had to do some running. He was in the back with me. But as soon as the footballs came out, we knew straight away we had a player."

Payet wowed West Ham fans with his creativity and established himself as one of the elite players in the Premier League during the 2015/16 season. However, questions still remained as to why he joined a mid-tier Premier League club as opposed to one of Europe's elite.

After lighting up Euro 2016, and claiming a nomination for that year's Ballon d'Or award, Payet opted to re-join Marseille, taking a pay cut to do so. Something about the turbid seas of the Mediterranean seem to draw him back as his career often mirrors the glorious chaos of Marseille.

Each manager that passes through OM also seems to entice Payet back to form just when he seems to be losing focus, whether that be through the faith he had in Marcelo Bielsa's dynamism or the trust shown in him by André Villas-Boas.

In Jorge Sampaoli, Payet has a manager who reflects his fervent enthusiasm for free-flowing, attacking football. They mesh well, even if their enthusiasm often boils over as seen in their recent altercations at Nice following the mass brawl that ensued after the projectile throwing incident. On that occasion, Payet had to escort a clearly agitated Sampaoli from the pitch.

While he may have latent hopes of making a late career cameo for the national side, Payet has all but conceded that domestic and European competition with Marseille is his only objective. OM currently sit 3rd in the Ligue 1 table, two points off the automatic Champions League spot with a game in hand over their immediate rivals. Boosted by the arrival of Arsenal loanees Mattéo Guendouzi and William Saliba, as well as the €20m signing of Brazilian midfielder Gerson, Marseille will look to return to Europe's elite competition next season.

For the talismanic Frenchman, he will be hoping for one more swan song before he slips into the black, oily panic of the Mediterranean night.

*Ciarán Brennan*



7<sup>th</sup>

Benjamin  
**André**



' THROUGH SHEER CONSISTENCY AND ATTITUDE, BENJAMIN ANDRÉ HAS BEEN A ROLE MODEL TO HIS FELLOW PROFESSIONALS. HEADING INTO HIS MID-THIRTIES, IT'S UNLIKELY A HUGE PAYDAY WILL ARRIVE FOR ANDRÉ BUT NO ONE IN THAT LILLE SIDE THOUGH DESERVES THE ACCLAIM AND AWARDS MORE THAN HIM.'

**Out of all the names in the GFFN's Player Of The Year ranking, Benjamin André's is the most obscure. He's mostly unknown outside of France, and he's often seen as an unfashionable defensive midfielder to others inside. After all, he's scored just a single goal in 2021. Make no mistake though, the 31-year-old fully deserves praise similar to that which Kylian Mbappé and N'Golo Kanté have received these past 12 months. Benjamin André has long been the heartbeat of Les Dogues and Lille's title success couldn't have been achieved without him.**

Coming into the new year, Lille were the edgy outsiders in the increasingly close Ligue 1 title race. They had 36 points, but were only a point ahead of PSG in third. So, when André's Lille were defeated on matchday 18 in January 2021 by Angers, a dip in form seemed likely. But Lille went up a gear, and so did Benjamin André. With 60 points available from Lille's remaining 20 games, they picked up 47. André missed just two games, both through yellow card suspensions. This was hardly surprising, as André averaged more than two fouls per game – part of the scruffier side of the game at which he excels.

When Lille played Lorient in February, André made his 300th Ligue 1 appearance. Since 2011, when the Frenchman made his way into the first team at Ajaccio, no other midfielder has won more duels (over 2500) than André in Ligue 1 according to Opta. Lille's then manager, Christophe Galtier, described André as "our locomotive. When you want to defend going forwards, he's one of the best examples. He covers a lot for his teammates, he barks out the instructions and gives off a lot of energy."

Lille's locomotive certainly provided that energy in 2021. Only four other players finished the season with more completed tackles and interceptions according to FBREF, and, from February onwards, André was as energetic as ever. At the start of April, André put in a man-of-the-match display against PSG in a game that effectively clinched the title for Les Dogues. He finished the game with the most tackles and interceptions (11), the most blocked shots (3) and the most successful pressures (12) as per FBREF.

Let's be clear, though, André is far more than just numbers. His battling mentality is infectious, although perhaps less so to his opponents. His hounding and hustling of PSG in that clash drove Neymar to the point of laying a hand on André's face – a booking offense that crucially led to the Brazilian being sent off later in the game. That fighting spirit goes back to his childhood in Nice. After losing his father aged 10, André had to grow up quickly, and always showed a desire to win and fight. Going past

PSG and into the final six games of the 21/22 season, it's that spirit seen across the Lille squad which carried them to the title.

André showed other sides to his game too. Against Montpellier, two weeks after the PSG win, the Frenchman attracted praise for carrying the ball through the pitch like a box-to-box midfielder. Then, hosting Nice in May, with the away side down to ten after an early red card, André helped calm Lille down and control the tempo of the game with his intelligent passing. With a place in the UNFP Team of the Year confirmed, a win against Angers was all that was needed to secure André's first major career honours, as well as Lille's first title since 2011. Yet there was a touch of uncertainty around Angers' Stade Raymond Kopa that evening.

José Fonte, veteran defender and Lille captain, who had played more minutes than all but four Ligue 1 outfielders in 20/21, was suspended. Who better though, to take up the mantle of skipper on Lille's decade-defining moment, than Benjamin André. It's poetic that the unfashionable, modestly talented midfielder led out an equally modest and hardworking side as their figurehead on such an occasion. A team built on a strong mentality and spirit, André embodied the identity of that famous Les Dogues side more than anyone else.

Even after lifting the title, there was no romantic call-up to the French national team. André is yet to be awarded a senior cap after a decade in Ligue 1. Instead, André quietly got on with his summer before starting the new season by adding his third career trophy to his cabinet in August after Lille ground out a win in the Trophée des Champions against PSG in Tel Aviv.

Of course, Lille's form has dropped off in 2021/22. They picked up just 24 points from their first 17 Ligue 1 games and eight from five in the champions league. André once again, though, has been ever-present. He's missed just two games in all competitions. Perhaps if Lille had performed as strongly as they did at the beginning of the year at the end of it, André could rank even higher on this list.

Through sheer consistency and attitude, Benjamin André has been a role model to his fellow professionals. Heading into his mid-thirties, it's unlikely a huge payday will arrive for André but no one in that Lille side though deserves the acclaim and awards more than him.

André became the heartbeat of a team that will go down in French football history, and his brilliant year will not be forgotten.

*Alex Barker*



6th



Tchouaméni



'TCHOUAMÉNI HAS QUICKLY ASSERTED HIMSELF AS ONE OF LIGUE 1'S TOP DEFENSIVE-MINDED MIDFIELDERS. ACCORDING TO FBREF, HIS 2.56 INTERCEPTIONS PER 90 MINUTES OVER THE COURSE OF THE LAST YEAR PUTS HIM IN THE TOP 2% OF MIDFIELDERS ACROSS EUROPE'S TOP FIVE LEAGUES. ADD THIS TO HIS 3.86 TACKLES PER 90 (TOP 3%), AND YOU QUICKLY GRASP HOW EXCITING THIS YOUNG FRENCH TALENT REALLY IS.'

**2021 has been a good year to say the least for Monaco central midfielder Aurélien Tchouaméni. From solidifying his place as a Monaco starter, after a tough first half season at the club, to gaining a call up for France's under 21 EURO 2021 squad, to winning his first seven caps for Les Bleus, the 21-year-old is now undoubtedly one of France's, and Europe's, hottest young talents.**

Born in Rouen in January 2000, Tchouaméni spent most of his early life in Bordeaux and joined the Bordeaux academy at age 11 from amateur youth side SJ Artigues. Also eligible for Cameroon through his parents before declaring officially for France in September 2021, the hard-working midfielder signed his first professional contract with Les Girondins in November 2017 at the age of 17.

He would, however, have to wait until the following July to make his professional debut against Latvian outfit FK Ventspils, who were later suspended from European competition for match fixing, in the second qualifying round of the Europa League. He scored his first goal in the next round against Ukrainian side FK Mariupol before making his Ligue 1 debut three days later in a 2-0 defeat to Strasbourg.

After a successful start to the 2019/20 season, Tchouaméni signed for Monaco in January 2020. Such was his importance, Bordeaux failed to win any of the five league games the midfielder didn't feature in up until his departure that season. With Tchouaméni, Bordeaux managed a 50% win ratio across 18 games, far from terrible for a club which in recent seasons has been fighting at the wrong end of the league table.

Despite that good form, the young midfielder only managed three league appearances at Monaco before COVID-19 prematurely curtailed the season. The following year, Tchouaméni nailed down his spot in the Monaco starting eleven under newly appointed manager Niko Kovač, starting 36 league games.

Tchouaméni truly announced himself as one of the rising stars of the game. At just 21, he already has close to 100 Ligue 1 appearances, as well as having his first taste of Champions League football with Les Monégasques. In the summer, he was

called up to Les Espoirs by Sylvain Ripoll for the under 21 European Championships, playing in all four games for France, who were knocked out by the Netherlands in the quarter-finals.

Just a few months later, Didier Deschamps called Tchouaméni up to the senior squad for September's World Cup qualifiers against Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ukraine and Finland, the Monaco man made his debut in the 1-1 draw with the Bosnians in Strasbourg. He would go on to feature in all six subsequent internationals this year, playing the full 90 minutes in France's dispatching of Spain in the Nations League final in October.

Tchouaméni has quickly asserted himself as one of Ligue 1's top defensive-minded midfielders. According to Fbref, his 2.56 interceptions per 90 minutes over the course of the last year puts him in the top 2% of midfielders across Europe's top five leagues. Add this to his 3.86 tackles per 90 (top 3%), and you quickly grasp how exciting this young French talent really is.

Despite his current role in the AS Monaco midfield being to sit deeper while Youssouf Fofana does most of the more attacking work, he's shown in previous years that he can provide support to his strikers when necessary too – added two goals and four assists in the league.

This season-and-a-half of good form for club and country has not gone unnoticed. Reports have linked Monaco's key man to almost every major European club in the last six months. Manchester Evening News reported in November that 'Manchester City are open to talks', while Marca reported that there is strong interest from both Real Madrid and Chelsea – the former being after long term replacements for the now 36-year-old Luka Modrić and 31-year-old Toni Kroos.

You get the feeling that Tchouaméni has dreams of playing for 'bigger' clubs, though he remains committed to Monaco. He admitted earlier this year to L'Équipe that he wants to win titles, become the best and leave a lasting impact on football.

It's clear that he will not want the Monegasque club to get in the way of his career should a sizeable bid come in for him in January or next summer.

*James Evans*



5th

TALO

19

Theo  
Hernández



'IN JUST OVER 100 GAMES FOR MILAN, HERNÁNDEZ HAS SCORED 16 GOALS AND MANAGED 18 ASSISTS, HELPING THE MILANESE CHALLENGE FOR THE SCUDETTO THIS CAMPAIGN. THERE'S A BELIEF THAT THE ROSSONERI HAVE THE ABILITY TO MIX THE EXPERIENCE AND YOUTH IN THEIR SQUAD INTO A POTENT FORCE AND HERNÁNDEZ HAS BEEN THE STANDOUT PLAYER IN THEIR FORMULA.'

**If you asked any Serie A fan last season who were the most successful and entertaining full-backs, the answer would have been clear. On the right, Inter Milan's Achraf Hakimi and on the left, Theo Hernández of AC Milan. Whilst he may have burned out a bit in the first half of this season, there's no doubting Hernández's quality. With an incredible penchant for finding the net and immense physical and technical abilities, the Frenchman doesn't just have the potential to be the best left-back in Serie A, he has the potential to be the best in the world.**

AC Milan coach Stefano Pioli has been far from quiet on Hernández's importance in the Milan squad. The left-back has been electric since arriving at San Siro but, recently, his form has dipped. Rather than criticise his player, the coach spoke of how he gave the wing-back a week without games just so he could recharge his batteries. There's nobody at the same level capable of replacing Hernández's influence at both ends of the pitch.

It always looked like Theo would be a professional footballer. His father Jean-Francois was a defender for Atlético Madrid and his brother, Lucas, plays for Bayern Munich at centre-back and left-back. With the boys growing up in the Atlético youth system it was no surprise that their careers would be successful.

When Theo signed for Real Madrid, it looked like he'd made it. However, by his own admission, he struggled and played too little, ending up on loan at Real Sociedad. Milan, however, saw his ability, and Paolo Maldini travelled to meet the player and persuaded him to move to Italy.

Theo had been "insulted and criticised" in Madrid but when Maldini made the time and effort to sign him, he felt wanted. "It's an honour. Paolo made football history, and not just at Milan, with me he was very convincing. I didn't take long to accept the offer. I spoke with my agent and immediately we were in agreement." From then on things changed as Hernández went from a potentially good full-back to an elite one.

Already possessing an ability to dribble at a phenomenal pace, complementing his great speed off the ball, he's able to get up and down the pitch and, like Hakimi at Inter, make it feel as

though he's everywhere.

Those attacking qualities were obvious but his defensive game needed work. Here, Theo stood up and matured, there were no moods as there had been in Madrid, he listened and learned and improved drastically.

In just over 100 games for Milan, Hernández has scored 16 goals and managed 18 assists, helping the Milanese challenge for the Scudetto this campaign. There's a belief that the Rossoneri have the ability to mix the experience and youth in their squad into a potent force and Hernández has been the standout player in their formula.

At 24-years-old his tactical intelligence is well-honed, but he still has one weakness. The better he gets, the more he wants to do as he gains an understanding of how much he means to the side. This means that Hernández is often all over the pitch which has led to burn out and a few mistakes have slipped into his game. However, game management is something he will be taught and there's no doubt that the coach will also keep a close eye on this.

The Frenchman's contract is up in 2024 and Milan are desperate to negotiate a new deal with a much higher salary. Teams like Chelsea are making noises about offering £40m the full-back and it will be in the Rossoneri's best interests to act quickly and ward off any bids.

He's also looking like becoming a consistent part of the French national team setup and there's a strong argument to say he should already be a guaranteed selection, especially given France's troubles in full-back areas.

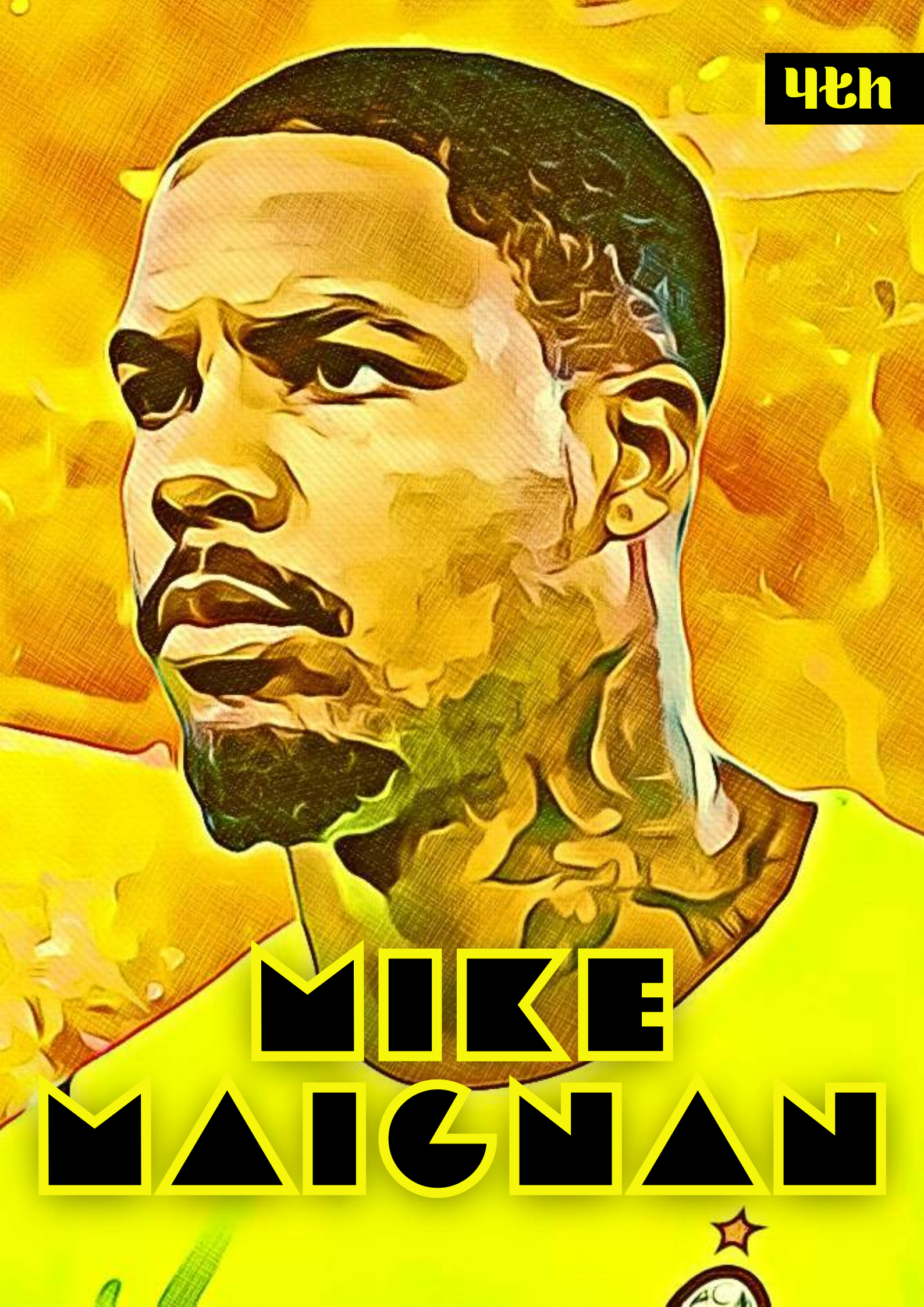
Theo Hernández may not have the trophies that his brother has but he has the potential to be even better than him. Perhaps if Real Madrid had put an arm around him more he would have progressed even more quickly but Milan have been the team that have benefited from making those efforts and in tutoring the player.

The full-back is certainly one to watch and, in his current surroundings, there's no doubt he will only get better.

*Richard Hall*



4th



MIKE  
MAIGNAN





'PLAYING EVERY MINUTE OF EVERY LIGUE 1 GAME FOR LILLE UNDER GALTIER LAST SEASON, IT'S NO WONDER A CLUB THE SIZE OF MILAN POUNCED ON LILLE'S FINANCIAL WOES TO BUY THE GOALKEEPER AT A BARGAIN PRICE. IN THE 2019/20 SEASON, HE WAS AN EVER-PRESENT FOR LILLE TOO AND WAS NAMED THE UNFP GOALKEEPER OF THE YEAR HAVING KEPT 17 CLEAN SHEETS.'

**A commanding, dominant presence is required for goalkeepers to be truly at the top of their game. They need to not only have respect from their defenders, they must demand it. Some goalkeepers can command their authority immediately, for some it isn't so easy. But for AC Milan goalkeeper Mike Maignan, it's as natural as anything.**

Maignan isn't afraid to be vocal, he isn't afraid to command his area and he's more than capable of rushing out off of his line to close down an opponent. His positional sense is outstanding and seems to have an ability to read the shot way before it's left his opponent's boot.

He's also more than capable of coming for crosses, playing out from the back and, perhaps most importantly, he represents incredible value for money for Milan having joined to replace Gianluigi Donnarumma. For €15m, Maignan's move may have been last summer's best in terms of value for money.

His start to life in Milan has been mixed due to an injury he picked up in mid-October, keeping him out for nine games. A penalty save from Mohamed Salah at Anfield in the Champions League prior was a highlight prior, however, as his assured performances left some wondering if Milan had gotten the better end of the deal in Donnarumma's departure.

Donnarumma is a top-quality goalkeeper but Maignan is more than capable of making the Milan number one shirt his own over an extended period. The 26-year-old played every minute of Milan's first seven Serie A games, winning six and drawing 1-1 away at Juventus. Maignan and his defence only conceded five times, in Milan's next five Serie A matches without him they conceded six.

Maignan's first half of 2021 was outstanding too for Christophe Galtier's Lille, who shocked Europe to pip Mauricio Pochettino's Paris Saint-Germain to the Ligue 1 title. Lille's performances surprised many but Maignan was simply continuing an upward trend that he had been on for a while.

After leaving PSG in 2015 to join Les Dogues, his stock rose every season after Marcelo Bielsa chose Maignan as his number

one over Vincent Enyeama in 2017. Maignan's performances were world-class as Lille won Ligue 1 and, such was his form, there were calls for him to be made France's number one in place of experienced captain Hugo Lloris.

Playing every minute of every Ligue 1 game for Lille under Galtier last season, it's no wonder a club the size of Milan pounced on Lille's financial woes to buy the goalkeeper at a bargain price. In the 2019/20 season, he was an ever-present for Lille too and was named the UNFP Goalkeeper of the Year having kept 17 clean sheets.

While keeping 21 clean sheets in 38 Ligue 1 games last season, one short of the record, Maignan was becoming one of the best goalkeepers on the planet.

With Maignan continuing to perform after his return from injury in recent games, other clubs in Europe will be looking at Milan in envy, asking how such a good 'keeper slipped through their nets.

When Tottenham want to replace Hugo Lloris, they'll be wanting someone like Maignan but, despite previous reported interest, didn't jump at the chance to sign Maignan at a cut-rate price. Arsenal, meanwhile, decided to spend a hefty chunk of money on Aaron Ramsdale instead of saving money on a better goalkeeper in Maignan.

But Maignan is too good to be sat waiting for Lloris to retire or to be competing with Bernd Leno and Ramsdale to be Arsenal's number one – he's already an elite level goalkeeper. His performances suggest that nothing will stand in his way of becoming widely regarded as one of the best goalkeepers in Europe during the next few years.

Clubs will rue not paying him the attention he deserved and, as those clubs look on, Les Bleus and Milan will be content in knowing just how good Maignan is, and that they listened when Mike Maignan's 2021 performances demanded their respect.

*Tom Scholes*



3rd

Lanté





'KANTÉ ALWAYS DELIVERS IN THE BIG GAMES FOR CHELSEA – AND MAY'S CHAMPIONS LEAGUE FINAL IN PORTO WAS NO DIFFERENT. THE FRENCHMAN DIDN'T CONCEDE A SINGLE FOUL IN THE 90 MINUTES, COMPLETING 100% OF BOTH HIS TACKLES AND TAKE-ONS, WINNING THE MOST DUELS IN THE GAME (11) AND COMPLETING THE MOST RECOVERIES (10).'

**N'Golo Kanté has continued his meteoric rise in football into 2021; adding the Champions League and UEFA Super Cup to a haul of silverware that includes two Premier League titles with two different clubs, the FA Cup, Europa League and the World Cup. In this timeframe, the Frenchman has also picked up various individual awards – the PFA Player of the Season and French Player of the Year, just to name a few, and his nomination for this year's Ballon D'or, eventually finishing fifth, is a testament to his superb 2021, an integral asset for both club and country.**

Kanté struggled with a recurring hamstring injury in the early months of 2021 – and his absence from the Chelsea side was sorely missed in the league. Of the 14 league games he played in towards the end of the 2020/21 campaign, Chelsea won 10 and only lost one; to Pep Guardiola's Man City in one of Frank Lampard's final games as manager, whilst Chelsea lost to West Brom, Leicester, Arsenal and Aston Villa when he was unavailable – conceding 10. In Thomas Tuchel's 3-4-3 setup, Kanté flourished in the 'double pivot' role alongside Jorginho or Mateo Kovačić, a role the Frenchman is familiar in – he won the league alongside Danny Drinkwater for Leicester City in a midfield two in 2015/16, and the following year alongside Nemanja Matić in Antonio Conte's 3-4-3.

With Jorginho operating in the deeper regista role – setting the tempo with a series of neat passes, receiving the ball from the centre-backs, Kanté could venture forward and create space for attackers with his clever movement and runs (exemplified by his role in Emerson's goal against Atlético), combining this with his typical defensive output. Since joining Chelsea in 2016, Kanté has averaged a phenomenal tackle, interception or ball recovery every 5.8 minutes.

Kanté saved his best form for the Champions League campaign, a competition the Blues progressed into the quarter-finals of for the first time since 2014. Kanté only played a combined 206 minutes in the round of 16 and quarter-finals – his workload managed due to injury concerns, as the Blues cruised past Atlético Madrid and FC Porto convincingly. However, Kanté played every single minute in the semi-finals and final as Chelsea won the competition for the second time in their history – a crucial contributor towards this immense accomplishment, named UEFA Player of the Match in these three games, as well as in the Atlético second leg.

Across the two Real Madrid semi-final ties, Kanté averaged an

86.5% pass completion rate – completing more take-ons in the first-leg than the entire Real team (6 v 5), before putting in a fantastic performance in the second leg at Stamford Bridge. The midfielder won 100% of his aerial duels (impressive given his 5'6 height), made four penalty area entries, completed six interceptions and recoveries, and created three chances (the most on the pitch), playing a fundamental role in Mason Mount's goal to make it 2-0.

Kanté always delivers in the big games for Chelsea – and May's Champions League final in Porto was no different. The Frenchman didn't concede a single foul in the 90 minutes, completing 100% of both his tackles and take-ons, winning the most duels in the game (11) and completing the most recoveries (10). It came as no surprise that Kanté was named UEFA Champions League Midfielder of the Season, the first Chelsea player to receive this award since Frank Lampard in 2007/08. His club manager was delighted with his performances, Tuchel saying: "If you have N'Golo, you have something that everybody is looking for, you have everything that you need in midfield."

Kanté also played a central role for France at this summer's Euros. He played every minute for his country as Les Bleus lost on penalties to Portugal in the last-16 – averaging a 91% pass completion rate, and completing 14 interceptions across the tournament, second only to Chelsea teammate Jorginho (25). Kanté evidenced his versatility by operating in a 4-2-3-1 setup under Didier Deschamps – his partnership with Paul Pogba working to stellar effect.

This season, Kanté missed four of the opening 11 league games with a combination of coronavirus and a groin issue, as Chelsea look to seriously challenge for the Premier League title. However, he exhibited his class in the 3-0 win over Tottenham in September; in 45 minutes, he won three of four ground duels, completed 100% of his dribbles and long balls, and scored his first goal of the season. Stats don't tell the full picture, but they certainly help; across the last year Kanté ranks in the top 5% for midfielders in Europe's 'top five' leagues for blocks per 90 (2.32), tackles and interceptions per 90 (2.43), and dribbles completed per 90 (2.06).

Kanté has had an exceptional 2021; and was rightfully in contention for the Ballon d'Or given both his individual and team performances and achievements – particularly in the Champions League, the pinnacle of the European game.

*Absolute Chelsea*



2nd

Mbappé





'THE NUMBERS ARE CONSISTENTLY ASTONISHING. BUT THAT IS EXACTLY WHY WE ARE NO LONGER ASTONISHED. HE'S SO CONSISTENTLY EXTRAORDINARY THAT MORE OFTEN IT'S WHEN HE DOES SOMETHING ORDINARY, SAY, MISS A PENALTY OR EXPERIENCE A GOAL DROUGHT, THAT MBAPPÉ'S ON-FIELD EXPLOITS BECOME NEWSWORTHY.'

**Right now, Kylian Mbappé is one of the most appreciated footballers in the world. After Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi, he's among those under the highest levels of scrutiny. Currently functioning as the focal point for both his club and his country, his shoulders bear significant weight. And for good reason.**

The Parisian has a collection of fourteen trophies, two-thirds of which have come from his time at PSG, alongside a swathe of prestigious individual awards. He still holds the record as the most expensive teenage transfer ever and, given the €200m offering laid down by Real Madrid this summer, he's arguably the most valuable player in the world right now.

Mbappé has become such a staple of French football that it's easy to forget that he is still only 22-years-old. Five years ago, his only trophy was the under 19 European Championships of July 2016. So, when reflecting on his year, it's crucial to bear in mind just how extraordinary the Frenchman is.

2021 has been a strange year for Mbappé, maybe even a disappointing one. The standout stories have been negative: no goals, a missed penalty and early elimination from Euro 2020; contractual problems and failed attempts to get out of Paris; an underwhelming Champions League output. But what goes under the radar is his consistency. For each of the last three seasons, Mbappé has been the top scorer in Ligue 1, with 33, 18 (2019/20 was cut short due to Covid) and 27 goals.

This calendar year, he's netted 39 goals in domestic competitions, which places him as the highest scoring Frenchman while outscoring Messi (34) and Ronaldo (32). Only Robert Lewandowski and Erling Haaland have scored more club goals (53 and 41 respectively) in 2021.

The numbers are consistently astonishing. But that is exactly why we are no longer astonished. He's so consistently extraordinary that more often it's when he does something ordinary, say, miss a penalty or experience a goal drought, that Mbappé's on-field exploits become newsworthy.

Even if our expectations are extremely high, Mbappé did, by his own admission, have a tough summer. "To experience both a crucial missed penalty and a failed transfer in quick succession tests your mental strength, it tests your limits," he said following November's World Cup qualifier against Kazakhstan. Indeed, the frustration of the nation fell on his shoulders as Les Bleus were eliminated from EURO 2020 in the last 16 on penalties by Switzerland.

'Devastated' was L'Équipe's headline. Le Parisien plastered 'Disillusionment' above an image of Mbappé. 'Catastrophe' was

employed in much the same way by La Provence. Disgracefully, some of this disappointment took an ugly form, as the 22-year-old was targeted by racist abuse.

While you could blame such criticism by the press on excessive expectations, it's also true that England's Harry Kane, another world-class goalscorer, experienced a similar downturn towards the end of June. He too had not scored a group stage goal and was looking to leave his capital city club. Although Kane's international form improved, neither achieved the move they were hoping for.

While Kane's knock-out goals relieved the pressure on him, it seemed as though Mbappé's comparatively poor form leaked into the new season. But, 245 minutes of club football later, he opened his account for 2021/22. By now, there can remain very few doubts around his form, especially given his emphatic four-goal performance against Kazakhstan, earning him a rare 10/10 rating from L'Équipe. After which he explained his summer experience "made me stronger too. Now, I am more confident than ever."

With French expectations of Mbappé sky-high, global expectations of Paris Saint-Germain are just as great, if not greater. Messi's acquisition this summer has created one of the most anticipated attacking forces in the history of the game but PSG have been notably ordinary over the last three months. This is partly due to a lack of game time. Messi, Neymar and Mbappé have only started a handful of league games together this season, which includes PSG's only domestic loss at Rennes.

But it's also due to genuine underperformance. In Ligue 1 for example, Messi has scored once but has gathered an xG of 3.8 while Mbappé has scored seven from an anticipated 10.3. Everyone thought PSG would be blowing teams out of the water. Instead, they've scraped through most matches, regularly stealing wins in the dying minutes.

Nevertheless, PSG were 11 points clear at the top of Ligue 1 after 17 matchdays. They've also qualified for the next round of the Champions League, albeit via second place in their group. What's more, France's golden boy has quietly made his way to the top of Ligue 1's assists chart with eight, one more than the much-discussed Lens man Jonathan Clauss.

So, although neither Mbappé nor his side are tearing it up, they are, for now, getting the job done. And there's time, and certainly room, to improve. While there is plenty to criticise about Mbappé's 2021, it remains undeniable not only that he belongs among the French élite, but also among the very best in the world.

*Jack Wadding*



**Winner**



**BENZEMA**



**"I was really happy to sign, but I had no idea what playing for Real Madrid meant in terms of mentality. Madrid, the team, the people, the pressure. When I was at Lyon, the president protected me, but here I was alone." Much like his childhood surroundings of Terrailon, a Lyon neighbourhood regularly named on the French gendarmerie's list of Zones de Sécurité Prioritaires, Karim Benzema's first few years at the Santiago Bernabéu were far from idyllic. "I arrived and all of a sudden I was sharing a dressing room with the best players in the world and I couldn't communicate with them because I didn't speak Spanish. If you don't feel good off the pitch, performing well on it becomes a lot more complicated" Benzema told Jorge Valdano in an interview for Spanish television in October 2020.**

Concerns about the young Frenchman's compatibility with the club were raised before his arrival in the Spanish capital. "When we met up to discuss his contract with us, Karim turned up with a couple of friends. To tell you the truth, they scared me", recalls a former employee of Madrid who took part in the negotiations to sign Benzema in 2009. The 34-year-old's past has never been too far behind him, and has often clashed with the whiter-than-white image that players of the club are expected to project. From run-of-the-mill rumours regarding his private life to far more serious accusations, his early years at Madrid are littered with incidents and examples of behaviour that, more often than not, have allowed his critics to place him on the villainous side of a moral tightrope.

Benzema's on the field impact that year was, to a great degree, lost among the general noise which surrounded the second wave of Florentino Pérez Galácticos as Madrid's already-existing star system was bolstered by the arrivals of Cristiano Ronaldo, Xabi Alonso and Kaká alongside other established professionals.

In March 2013, his inability to connect with his audience at club and international level arguably reached its low point. After several months in and out of the matchday squad due to injuries, Benzema was an unused substitute as José Mourinho's side secured an impressive 2-1 victory over Manchester United at Old Trafford; leading the more radical and unforgiving elements of the Madrid support to question the Frenchman's place at the club.

Three weeks later, in a disappointing 1-0 defeat against Spain, an underwhelming France team are outclassed by the European champions at the Stade de France. With the undesirable distinction of a thousand minutes without a goal with the national team hanging over his head, Benzema was booed by the fans, for whom frustration at his lack of decisiveness in front of goal was only compounded by his and teammate Franck Ribery's apparent inability to sing La Marseillaise.

The 2013/14 season would prove to be a significant turning point in his career in the Spanish capital. In January 2014, he netted his 100th goal for Madrid in a 5-0 victory against Real Betis at the Estadio Benito Villamarín. He went on to make the

headlines two months later in El Clásico, linking up brilliantly with Ángel Di María to put two past Víctor Valdés in less than five minutes. Benzema was also part of Real Madrid's starting eleven in that unforgettable Copa del Rey Final against Barcelona at Mestalla, providing the assist for Di María's opening goal before Gareth Bale's heart-stopping winner with five minutes to go put the lid on a spectacular performance from Los Blancos.

A week later, Benzema himself scored the winner in the first leg of Madrid's Champions League semi-final against reigning champions Bayern Munich, before picking up his first winners medal in May. A year after some had hinted that he was surplus to requirements at the club, Benzema had written himself into Real Madrid history. The BBC tridente of Bale, Benzema and Cristiano had finished the season with 97 goals between them.

The recent developments in the Mathieu Valbuena blackmail case have brought back memories of Benzema that the man himself has made a conscious effort to get away from in recent years. While November's revival of the incident which led to his exile from the national side for more than half a decade has undoubtedly added fuel to the conviction of those in France who remain unwilling to bring him in from the cold, Benzema is viewed as something of a reformed character by the sporting press on the other side of the Pyrenees.

An article published in November by Orfeo Suárez of El Mundo lends an almost religious quality to Benzema's conversion from sinner to saint: 'The immature, baby faced, slightly podgy Karim Benzema who once willingly threw himself into the public eye as he ran off in pursuit of his latest romantic conquest has nothing to do with this Benzema who, at 33 years of age, possesses the bearded, cadaverous face reminiscent of the subject of an El Greco painting.'

From muscular electrostimulation and kickboxing to microalgae supplements and soy milk, Benzema's physical transformation is more likely the result of a radical change in diet and habits rather than anything of the divine. However, the comparison does provide those outside of Spain with an idea of the regard in which the 34-year-old is now held at the club. He now cuts the figure of a kind of elder statesman; a leader on the field in terms of goals and a wise, calming influence off it. Eduardo Camavinga has spoken of how Benzema regularly invites him to have lunch in the Valdebebas canteen to offer advice. As someone from a similar background whose formative years at the club were at times unnecessarily convulsive, the 19-year-old has stated that Benzema's presence has had a stabilising effect on him.

On the pitch, having spent the best part of a decade resigned to the fact that he would have to play second string to Cristiano Ronaldo, Benzema's ability to reinvent himself following the departure of the Portuguese has objectively been nothing short of incredible. "I had a guy playing alongside me who I knew would score two or three times as many as I was ever going to, so I adapted. My job was to provide the assists, so I put my innate desire to score goals to one side and completely



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changed my game to suit him. Now that he's gone, I play with more freedom."

Freedom is certainly one of the words that spring to mind when one looks at what has happened to Benzema's scoring record in recent years. In his first La Liga campaign without Ronaldo, he went from 5 goals in the 2017/18 season to 21 goals in 2018/19. He would go on to repeat this achievement the following year. In a collective sport such as football, individual performances are too often hailed as defining factors in both victory and defeat; yet if one bears in mind that, under Zinedine Zidane, Benzema was deployed as a lone striker, it's difficult to argue against the claim that his consistency in front of goal was the ultimate reason that Madrid ended the season as champions that year ahead of Barcelona.

Perhaps more than some kind of spiritual transformation, it is more feasible to conclude that the key to Benzema's success

has been his ability to adapt to new situations. Back at his hometown club of Bron Terrailon SC where he began his football career at the age of eight, he continues to be viewed in a positive light. The decision to leave Benzema out of the national side led to a boycott of Les Bleus in the neighbourhood.

"We were all surprised by Deschamp's decision to leave him out because it was simply unfair" states Samir Hachi, director of Sporting Club de Bron Terrailon. "Karim is a reflection of the family he comes from – simple, humble and low-key. He's very important to all of us here. Before Karim, nobody ever had a good word to say about this place, but his success has shone a more positive light on us." A highly complimentary evaluation, and given where it comes from, it's one that the man himself has every right to be extremely proud of.

*Tommy Hay*



# WRITERS



Adam White / @\_Adam\_White\_

Eric Devin / @ericdevin\_

Alex Barker / @EuroExpert\_

Cameron Smith / @\_CameronSmith10

James Evans / @Jevans6799

Liam Wraith / @liamwraith22

Ciarán Brennan / @cicibrenbren00

Jack Wadding / @jack\_wadding

Astorre S. Cerebrone / @cerebrone

Tommy Hay / @TommyHay94

Absolute Chelsea / @AbsoluteChelsea

Tom Scholes / @\_TomScholes

Richard Hall / @RichHall180

Kaustubh Pandey / @Kaus\_Pandey17

Chris Winterburn / @cmwinterburn

Tony-Thomas DesRois / @tony\_leroi

Nadim Bart-Williams / @nadimbw

Jamie Allen / @J\_AllenWriting

Josh Sim / @JoshSim8







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