



THE GFFN

100

2016

WHAT IS THE GFFN 100?

The Get French Football News 100 comprises of our selection of the top one hundred talents that French football has to offer, judged solely on their performances in 2016.

To be eligible for the GFFN 100, the player must have been a registered squad member of a Ligue 1 or a Ligue 2 club on the 31st December 2016.

For example, Zlatan Ibrahimovic is ineligible despite playing half of the calendar year at PSG because on the 31st December 2016 he was plying his trade at Manchester United.

However, Mario Balotelli is eligible for the GFFN 100 despite having joined OGC Nice in the summer of 2016 because on the aforementioned date he was a registered squad member of theirs.

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

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

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

RÉMY CABELLA

POSITION: MIDFIELDER

CLUB: MARSEILLE

AGE: 26



2016 has not exactly been a vintage year for Rémy Cabella, rejected by Newcastle United, and still massively short on confidence at an out-of-sorts Olympique de Marseille, the Corsican now seems a long way from the dazzling trickster we saw light up Ligue 1 with Montpellier only three years ago.

The Frenchman was undoubtedly relieved not to be a part of the Magpies' demotion back to the Championship last season, having scored just once in 34 games on Tyneside, but things are not exactly rosy at the Vélodrome either. Marseille sensationally just avoided the drop themselves last season, finding themselves again in the lower half of the table until the very end of the first half of the 2016/2017 campaign.

The year began in auspicious circumstances for the Ajaccio native, an abdominal strain reported on the first day of the New Year put the midfielder out for a fortnight, as his club Marseille continued to find themselves lagging mid-table. On January 24th he smashed a low drive to open the scoring away to Lyon, but despite the heroics of now-departed custodian Steve Mandanda, the Southerners had to settle for a 1-1 draw.

Cabella was making a habit of scoring against the big clubs, and bagged a stunning equaliser at home to PSG a fortnight later, however again les Marseillais couldn't hold on, making it 10 games without a victory at home. That game would also start a winless run of 11 for the Vélodrome side, and as they got closer to the bottom, Cabella's game time significantly decreased.

The midfielder would play just over an hour combined in the three games (1-1 v Nantes, 1-0 v Angers and 1-0 v Reims) that would ultimately steer Marseille to safety. However despite Cabella's disappointing season, OM decided to make the former Montpellier midfielder's move permanent, for a

reported €8m.

It was another disastrous transfer window for Marseille, who again had a talismanic striker depart in Michy Bathsuayi, while goalkeeper and leader Steve Mandanda finally left OM to pursue a career in England. Young talent Georges-Kevin N'Koudou left for Spurs and midfielder Benjamin Mendy went down the A7 to Monaco.

Apart from the rushed loan signing Bafétimbi Gomis from Swansea, caretaker boss Franck Passi and ex-President Vincent Labrune found themselves out-fought once more at the negotiation table.

Much like the season before, Cabella, Marseille's biggest signing of the transfer window, was given a front-and-centre spot in the OM midfield, and again has shown himself not meeting standards.

Left out of games against Nice, Metz, and PSG, Cabella's only goal in 11 games was against Lorient in August, and since then he has been resigned to mainly a role on the bench with Maxime Lopez and Zinedine Machach preferred behind Thauvin.

Three years ago; a league win, French caps, and a big move to Newcastle, it seemed like the world was at Rémy Cabella's feet. This very publication said that year: *"His eye for a pass and serenity in front of goal is currently the only thing stopping Montpellier from being in serious trouble."*

The same sadly cannot be applied to Marseille's current situation.

CÉDRIC CARRASSO

POSITION: GOALKEEPER

CLUB: BORDEAUX

AGE: 34

In many ways, Cédric Carrasso is the epitome of the goalkeeper's goalkeeper. With Ligue 1 long the province of bright young things, his steadfast presence has been a reliable one, even if his club have struggled at times.

He has appeared almost 300 times for Bordeaux, with a further 120 matches among Guingamp, Toulouse, and the club where he developed, Marseille. His 35th birthday is fast approaching, but it is no coincidence that even with Jérôme Prior and Paul Bernardoni, his two understudies at club level, being touted as integral parts of France's future, his commanding performances have made all the difference when he has appeared.

He has struggled with serious knee injuries in the recent past, but his return to the first team earlier this season coincided with a dramatic improvement in Bordeaux's defensive form. Considering the turnover that the club have endured as regards to their back four in the recent past, this is no mean feat.

This summer was no exception, as Polish international Igor Lewczuk has replaced Pablo as Nicolas Pallois' regular partner. After conceding six goals in their first two matches, the second a heavy loss to local rivals Toulouse, Carrasso stepped into the first team in place of Prior, conceding the same amount of goals over the team's next eight matches.

Another injury followed, however, and Bordeaux's recent defeat to Monaco underscores Carrasso's importance; Prior made several fine reflex saves, but also evinced poor communication with Pallois on a handful of occasions, gifting chances to their opponents unnecessarily. Prior is admittedly a superb 'keeper when it comes to saves, but Carrasso is no slouch in that department either, despite his advancing years. He is also a fine distributor of the ball, allowing Bordeaux's attack-minded full-backs, Diego Contento and Youssef Sabaly, the opportunity to get forward at will.



Despite his size and physical presence, he sometimes struggles with his command of the area, particularly from corners, and can also be guilty of punching, rather than catching, but his intangible leadership more than makes up for the odd flap.

He could also do better in terms of his positioning, as his age has made him more of a liability in this regard. That said, these are but minor quibbles, and the palpable difference in the quality of *Les Girondins'* play is manifest.

Unlucky to have had both Hugo Lloris and Steve Mandanda ahead of him in the pecking order, Laurent Blanc's move to Paris Saint-Germain was a death knell for what would have been a promising career for *Les Bleus* in the absence of the established top two.

Nonetheless, out of contract at the end of the season, if Carrasso does decide to end his stint with the club, he can look back proudly on his time with Bordeaux and point to a sequence to the Champions' League quarter-finals and a 2012/13 season which saw a decent run in the Europa League and Coupe de France success.

Rumours had swirled surrounding a move to the Premier League or Marseille prior to the season, and if the veteran does opt for one of those routes, he will undoubtedly continue to be a paragon of leadership for his new club. The kind of steady veteran presence who can be the difference.

JULIEN PALMIERI

POSITION: DEFENDER

CLUB: LOSC LILLE

AGE: 30

Starting his career with SC Bastia in 2005, Julian Palmieri has hit one of the brighter periods of his career at the age of 30. As somewhat of a French football journeyman, Palmieri played for a number of clubs in his early career, such as Crotona, Istres and Paris FC, before finally re-signing with his first team, Bastia, in 2012. He went on to make over 132 appearances for the island's *Les Bleus* over four years.

Winning many plaudits for his sturdy defending and clever decision-making, Palmieri became somewhat of a stalwart in Bastia's back line over the years, perhaps proving them wrong for shipping him out in 2006 after just three appearances.

Creating 20 chances in his 34 appearances for a struggling Bastia side last season, Palmieri stood out as not only a key player, but a wise head in what was for most of the season, a relegation battle. Getting up and down the flank, supporting his winger with pace often, Palmieri was an impressive attacking full-back, considering his age, and it came as little surprise to see the French defender get snapped up by Lille over the summer.

A club in desperate need of more reliable defenders, and someone who can match the consistent attacking runs of right-back, Sébastien Corchia, Julian Palmieri seemed like an obvious choice for Frédéric Antonetti over the summer, and so far for *Les Dogues*, has looked like a shrewd bit of business.

Making just 14 appearances for Lille this season at the time of writing, Palmieri has at times struggled with fitness concerns, but when playing 90 minutes, the full-back has looked both defensively sturdy and impressive going forward. Creating 11 chances for *Les Dogues* over those 14 games, and contributing with a goal in Lille's 4-1 hammering by Leonardo Jardim's AS Monaco, Palmieri has proven himself so far to be an excellent player going forward for his new side.



However, at times Palmieri's individual performances have been over-shadowed by what has been, so far, an underwhelming and underachieving Lille side.

After struggling for most of the season so far under Antonetti, *Les Dogues* have finally made the change that some at *Get French Football News* suggested should be happening much earlier in the season, parting ways with their manager. Antonetti's persistence with formations that do not suit his players, most notably his insistence on playing a 4-3-3 without any proper wingers or a holding midfielder, has cost his former side plenty of points this season.

But with Antonetti gone, and the possibility of Marcelo Bielsa arriving to take over as head coach in the New Year, things are looking up for *Les Dogues* and, by extension, Palmieri.

Once Lille's performances start improving, as you would hope and expect them to do now that they have parted ways with their former manager, some of Palmieri's defensive and attacking displays will hopefully begin to pick up more credit. Picking up a deserved place in GFFN's top 100 this year, the future is still looking bright for the 30-year-old French defender, who appears to have found a good place to call his new home.

CLÉMENT CHANTÔME

POSITION: MIDFIELDER
 CLUB: RENNES
 AGE: 29



A common fixture in the GFFN 100, Clément Chantôme once again makes the list for the calendar year of 2016. The Frenchman's career to date has been unconventional to say the least. Having spent seven seasons in the French capital at PSG, as the club were taken over and money began pouring into the team, Chantôme found himself further and further away from the starting line-up. A loan move to Toulouse in the 2013/14 season was followed by another few months of small morsels of playing time at PSG, which proved to be the final straw for the Frenchman. His long relationship with Les Parisiens ended when he moved to Bordeaux in the January transfer window of 2015, a move which he hoped would get his career back on track.

And as a matter of fact, this is exactly what happened. Starved of playing time for so long in the French capital, he was almost instantly a regular in the Bordeaux starting line-up. When he joined the club halfway through the 2014/15 season, Bordeaux were enjoying a good start to their campaign, sitting in 6th place in the Ligue 1 table. Chantôme integrated flawlessly into the team, dictating the pace of the game from central midfield, and helped the outfit capitalise on their good start to maintain their position of 6th at the end of the Ligue 1 season.

However, the 2015/16 season was to be considerably tougher for *Les Girondins*. Chantôme missed seven out of their 19 league games before the winter break due to a combination of injury and suspension, and the club struggled in his absence, finishing the calendar year just four points above the relegation zone. Admittedly, their fortunes turned in the New Year of 2016.

With Chantôme acting as the central metronome from a slightly deeper midfield role, Bordeaux rallied during the second half of the season to drag themselves out of the relegation battle and finish a comfortably in mid-table. To highlight the importance of

Chantôme to his team's fortunes, in 2016 Bordeaux's win percentage without the Frenchman was a meagre 20%, compared to 43% with him in the side.

So what makes Chantôme so important to the fortunes of a side? Well, the 29-year-old has always had the gift of precise and effortless passing, and when he is in his central midfield role almost everything will go through him. Last season for Bordeaux, he made by far the most successful passes in the team, over 200 more than 2nd place Jaroslav Plasil, all despite missing 11 games over the course of the campaign.

Perhaps even more impressively, he maintained the highest pass completion percentage (at 89%) amongst the regulars in the team as well. This goes to show that, when given a consistent run in a team, Chantôme can become its beating heart, such is his ability on the ball.

During the summer of 2016, Chantôme decided to change clubs once again, this time joining Rennes on a free transfer. However, the 2016/17 season has not gone to plan so far. During the first game of the season against OGC Nice, Chantôme was forced off with a shoulder injury before the half hour mark.

Unfortunately for the Frenchman, it turned out that he needed surgery on his shoulder, which has seen him miss every game since that day. Despite this, Chantôme showed during his time at Bordeaux that given the responsibility and trust, he will produce results, and we are sure he will be able to do the same at Rennes in 2017 when he recovers from his injury.

MAXWEL CORNET

POSITION: ATTACKER
 CLUB: OLYMPIQUE LYONNAIS
 AGE: 20



For as young a player as he is, Maxwel Cornet already seems to have a knack for stepping up on the big occasion. He scored in Lyon's 2-1 win over Paris Saint Germain in February, bringing to an end the champions' 36-game undefeated run in their first visit to the newly inaugurated Parc OL, as well as earlier this season in the first European match to be played at the new stadium – a 3-0 victory over Dinamo Zagreb.

Having only just turned 20 in September, over the past 12 months Cornet has already imposed himself as a key attacking option for Bruno Génésio, and on the evidence of his performances there is much more to come from him.

Bought for the meagre sum of €400k in 2015 from a Metz team with which he won the Ligue 2 title, Cornet notched 12 goals in his first full season and has so far impressed with his piercing runs and adept finishing. Just as comfortable in a more central attacking role as he is on the wing, Cornet has been used by Génésio to particularly good effect in a diamond 4-4-2 formation partnered with Alexandre Lacazette on the frontline.

On occasion, he has even acted as cover for the club's star striker. As a result, until now he has played the role of an attacking trick-card for Lyon, filling in wherever he might be needed, be it on the wing or up front.

Having played for France at every youth level – most notably scoring eight goals for the under-19 team – Cornet was fully expected to eventually break into the full French national team. However, earlier this year it was reported that he was contacted by the Ivory Coast, his native country, and the promise of regular international football that the African nation can offer may sway him, given that even in Cornet's own age group France have a wealth of options in his position.

For example, Ousmane Dembélé and Thomas Lemar, who despite Cornet's progression this year are ahead of him in terms of development, having both starred in their respective teams' Champions' League runs, leading to call-ups from Didier Deschamps.

Nevertheless, Cornet is more than capable of catching up and at Lyon he has found the perfect environment in which to do so, surrounded by other young players and playing for a club which puts a strong emphasis on developing them. If Lacazette's success in his position is anything to go by, Cornet is on the right track as long as Lyon continue to put faith in him and he carries on receiving regular playing time.

Overall, though, while Mathieu Valbuena's recent resurgence has meant that he and Rachid Ghezzal have maintained a monopoly over the spots on the wing in Lyon's line-up, it is clear that over the last 12 months Maxwel Cornet's career has come on in leaps and bounds.

Should Lacazette leave in the coming transfer windows, Lyon will have a ready-made replacement for him in Cornet, albeit one who still requires improvements, notably in his collective play and linking up with team-mates.

BILLY KETKEOPHOMPHONE

POSITION: ATTACKER
 CLUB: ANGERS SCO
 AGE: 26



Born in Champigny-sur-Marne, Billy Ketkeophomphone, known throughout Ligue 1 as the player with the trickiest name to pronounce, is a French footballer of Lao origin. Starting his career with Racing Club de France, Ketkeophomphone joined INF Clairefontaine in 2006, leaving just a year later to sign for RC Strasbourg. Here, Ketkeophomphone began to make a name for himself, and in the summer of 2008, the striker was promoted to the reserve team, eventually making his debut against SC Bastia in December 2009.

Impressing many with his pace and creativity, Ketkeophomphone signed a huge five-year-contract with Swiss Super League side FC Sion in 2011, but after making just one appearance, the French forward departed for Tours. Scoring 21 goals in his time with Tours, Ketkeophomphone was again beginning to draw attention, and in 2015 the eyes of recently promoted Angers SCO were caught, signing for Stéphane Moulin's side after three years at the French Ligue 2 outfit.

Making 35 appearances for Angers in the last campaign, Billy Ketkeophomphone played a major part in Moulin's side's sensational season. Despite not always being prolific in front of goal, Ketkeophomphone adds pace and creativity to Angers' front-line. Scoring five goals for his side last season, Ketkeophomphone was by no means a star forward especially by the standard of strikers in the French top flight, nor was he even a star striker for his own club. However, through the creation of 38 chances over the course of the 2015/16 campaign, the French forward played a major part in Angers impressive counter-attacking style, contributing more to the team than many would give him credit for.

Comfortable playing both through the middle and out wide on the flanks, Ketkeophomphone flourished in Angers' 4-3-3 system last season, playing in a number of forward areas. His main attribute is his

pace, terrorising Ligue 1 full-backs on a number of occasions, most notably in Angers' 1-0 win against SC Bastia last season, the side that the French forward made his debut against back at RC Strasbourg. Scoring one of the goals of the season to give his side all three points, Ketkeophomphone became somewhat of a fan favourite at Angers for his diligence and excellent human qualities.

However, this season has been a somewhat different story for the forward. Appearing only four times for Angers this season, and playing 90 minutes just twice, Ketkeophomphone has found his place in the side usurped by the side's new forward signings, Karl Toko-Ekambi and Famara Diedhiou, after suffering a brutal ACL injury.

Unfortunately for Ketkeophomphone, even when he recovers, as a forward his performances and place in the side will always eventually come down to the amount of goals he contributes, and after just five last season and none before his injury in the 2016/17 campaign, there is absolutely no guarantee that manager Moulin will see it fit to bring Ketkeophomphone back to the starting line-up.

In any case, the formation that Moulin has adopted since Ketkeophomphone was placed on the treatment table, a 5-3-2, is not one that the latter would suit, as so much of his game relies on playing as a wide forward, part of a more fluid 4-3-3.

Billy Ketkeophomphone's future with Angers will depend on two things: Whether the side's style changes upon Ketkeophomphone's return, or whether the exciting attacker can fully heal from his nasty injury and adapt to a new style of play.

RAMY BENSEBAINI

POSITION: DEFENDER

CLUB: RENNES

AGE: 21



At 21, Ramy Bensebaini has slowly started to turn heads across France thanks largely to his appearances for Rennes in the first six months of this season.

Joining from Montpellier in July 2016, Bensebaini is a versatile defensive talent, who can play across the entire back line and can even cut it in front of the defence in a holding midfield role. However, the Algerian excels most in the heart of the defence, despite playing twice at left-back and twice as a defensive midfielder for Rennes this campaign.

At the tail end of last season, Bensebaini certainly did not end his career at Montpellier in the best possible way. During the last seven games of the Ligue 1 campaign, Bensebaini did not make a single appearance for the first team, only managing to make the bench for his last time with the squad in April for a 2-2 away draw to Guingamp.

Despite the poor end to the 2015/16 campaign, Rennes saw potential in the 21-year-old and parted with just under €2m to bring him to Roazhon Park in July.

Since arriving, Bensebaini has made eleven Ligue 1 appearances plus one in the Coupe de la Ligue at the time of writing, showing that at the start of the season Rennes manager Christian Gourcuff believed in Bensebaini enough to give him immediate responsibility by deploying him in various positions.

Despite a good start to life at Rennes, however, Bensebaini suffered a slight leg injury that kept him out for two games against Bordeaux and Nantes and since then Bensebaini hasn't quite fully recovered. A start against Paris Saint-Germain resulted in the Algerian being hauled off just after the hour mark as the game seem to pass him by in the holding midfield role, and this performance meant that he did not feature in the match day squad against Angers following the international break.

Ever since that fateful day at the Parc des Princes, Bensebaini has not been his usual self. A recent red card against Lyon having played the entire match as a centre back supports the notion that Bensebaini has finished 2016 in poor form.

Having said this, he certainly has the skills to work his way back into the side. The Algerian Under-21 international is dangerous in the air from attacking set pieces and defensively the averages show that more often than not, he dominates the aerial battle. An emerging attribute among modern centre backs, Bensebaini is also becoming very skilled in the art of the long, diagonal ball.

With defenders such as Toby Alderweireld and Leonardo Bonucci standing out as the best diagonal defensive passers in the game, Bensebaini is following the trend of attempting to match physical dominance with exceptional technique.

2017 will be the year in which Bensebaini wishes to become a fully-fledged Algerian international, but maybe it is a bit too premature to force his way into the squad for the upcoming African Cup of Nations tournament.

In order to break into the national team, Bensebaini will need to force his way back into a starting contention at club level, holding down a single position and making it his own. A move away from the "utility man" label will likely be the best for Bensebaini's development at this stage of his career.

LUCAS LIMA

POSITION: DEFENDER
 CLUB: FC NANTES
 AGE: 25



The skill-set of the full-back in modern football has evolved considerably over recent years and in some cases, this new wave of players can only really be nominally described as 'defenders'. They are fast, technically adept, and are taking on increasing responsibility in the attacking third, often largely used as auxiliary wingers. Despite the shift in design, often overlooked is the fact the previous generation of full-backs regularly offered similar outlets and although this was arguably just the previous link in the evolutionary chain, full-backs have forged forward for some time. Gary Neville, Michael Salgado and Gianluca Zambrotta are all names of adventurous full-backs that sprung to mind before Pep Guardiola and the tiki-taka-ering likes of Dani Alves and Jordi Alba pushed the definition a step further.

Nantes' Lucas Lima, despite being 25 and part of the generation characterised by Alba, Alves and others, has far more in common with Zambrotta and Neville. Not to be confused with the Seleção forward and São Paulo number 10 of the same name, Lima has the abilities of an 'old school' 90s left-back. He is aggressive, stocky and muscular, confident on the ball (if a little wasteful at times) and can actually defend. His greatest asset however, much like many of the 90s vintage, is his crossing ability. From deep, the byline or a dead-ball situation, Lima is capable of providing deliveries with pace, whip and accuracy that can often add an unpredictable dimension to the attack. A fact quickly realised earlier in the campaign by then Nantes boss, René Girard, who swiftly appointed his new Brazilian signing as Les Canaris set-piece specialist.

Despite their wayward and rather barren run at the Beaujoire this year, Lima has been one of Nantes' standout performers, quickly settling into life in Eastern France and hitting the ground running in the win over Dijon on the opening day while continuing to outshine his underperforming colleagues with his smash-mouth style of play. This success, despite his

talents, remains a little surprising after a somewhat nomadic career to date. Having spent his formative teenage years in Grêmio's youth system, Lucas made his senior debut in the Brazilian third tier for Criciúma in 2009.

After only a pair of first team outings, he was quickly swept up by Porto Alegre giants Internacional before being sent out on loan in 2011 to Parana in Serie B without a league appearance for the former side. A successful year in the second division, at still just 21, saw Botafogo snap him up where he was an intermittent part of the first team either side of another loan spell, this time with Goiás.

The 2015 season saw him sign with ABC, again in the second division, after unpaid wages, a saga which saw the courts become involved, led to his Botafogo contract being rescinded. Just a handful of league appearances later, Lima was off to Portugal, specifically Arouca, where, finally, he would find a home.

The unfancied and unfashionable Arouca had a superb campaign, leading them to take a surprise 5th place before Nantes came calling. Lima is an exciting and talented performer. The potential his physicality and skill-set offers is high, even if he did appear to lose his way in October and November under René Girard as his displays became increasingly inconsistent, despite an excellent start. However, with fellow Portuguese speaker Sergio Conceição recently installed as manager and the prospect of a more aggressive, all-action and attacking style to come, Lucas Lima may just be the man to watch for Nantes in 2017.

CLÉMENT LENGLET

POSITION: DEFENDER
 CLUB: AS NANCY LORRAINE
 AGE: 21



To have been named captain at the age of 20, in a dressing room that features the likes of Benoît Pedretti and club legend Youssouf Hadji, Clément Lenglet could not be your average centre back. Having made his Nancy debut in 2013, Lenglet, courted by Juventus for a long time, has imposed himself as the leader of the team's defence after an initial struggle in his first six months of professional football, and by the start of this year was already one of French football's most promising central defenders.

The French U-21 international, who already has 79 club appearances to his name at the time of writing, would go on to be a key element of Nancy's league-winning season in the second tier, a campaign in which he marshalled the league's best defence, conceding only 32 goals.

It was evident that, despite his rejection of Juventus' offer the preceding year - mainly on Pierre Mankowski's advice and his own feeling that his career would benefit from more playing time - Nancy would have a hard time holding on to him. Nevertheless, the logical step up to regular Ligue 1 football seemed to be enough for him to stay on.

Lenglet's regular playing time in the top flight, against what he himself recognises as a higher calibre of attackers, has allowed him to fine-tune some of the features of his defensive game that have propelled him to the top of the national scene.

His technical ability in particular has helped him stand out from his counterparts, highlighted through his ease with playing either long balls forward or playing out from the back on the ground. Lenglet has also excelled in aerial duels, something which has been particularly recognised this year as he adds to his defensive skill-set.

Nevertheless, Lenglet's maiden Ligue 1 season has not been a roaring success so far. While Nancy's

league position, generally hovering above the relegation zone, should not come as a surprise, recent high-margin defeats to a currently free-scoring Monaco side, where he gave away the penalty for the second goal (6-0) and a revived Marseille (3-0) showed in many respects that, despite being let down by his team-mates as well, the 21-year-old still has much to improve on.

Despite this, he has, in other games, shown signs of building on his performances from last year's success - namely in an emphatic 4-0 win over Metz.

As the season goes on, and it becomes increasingly clear that Clément Lenglet will be plucked from his formative club by a bigger team come the end of the season, he will no doubt continue to polish his defensive play by facing some of the best forwards in the league.

Making the transition to top flight football with a familiar squad could go on to be crucial in his career development, giving him the experience of a full season at this level preparing him for the next step, as there is little doubt that he will have various offers waiting for him at the end of the campaign.

KÉVIN THÉOPHILE-CATHERINE

POSITION: DEFENDER
 CLUB: SAINT-ÉTIENNE
 AGE: 27



Versatility is a valuable yet underappreciated asset in modern football, and Kevin Théophile-Catherine is a perfect example of this. The French defender will never grab the headlines, nor will he ever win any individual accolades to his name. Despite this however, Théophile-Catherine has become a vital part of a Saint-Étienne team that places a huge emphasis on defensive quality.

Théophile-Catherine's career began with Rennes where he spent his formative years before making the leap into the first team. He would go on to become a key player for Rennes, playing across the backline for an outfit that was consistently achieving top ten finishes in Ligue 1. In 2013, Théophile-Catherine moved to the English Premier League to newly promoted Cardiff City, every French players' dream. Despite their best efforts, Cardiff struggled throughout the campaign and were relegated. After being offered around by the Welsh club on loan, Théophile-Catherine opted to return to the familiar grounds of Ligue 1 and joined Saint-Étienne for the 2014/15 season. He alternated between playing as a right-back and a centre back for Saint-Étienne as they secured fifth place in Ligue 1. Théophile-Catherine's performances were impressive enough that at the end of the season, Saint-Étienne quickly made the loan deal a permanent one.

After missing most of the first half of the 2015/16 season due to injury, Théophile-Catherine returned at the beginning of 2016 and immediately became a vital part of the Saint-Étienne defence. Alternating between right-back and centre back, Théophile-Catherine became an essential part of one of the league's best defences that for one period did not concede a goal for five straight games. Théophile-Catherine's positive influence was shown by the fact that during the time he was injured Saint-Étienne conceded an average of 1.1 goals per game, after his return, that number reduced to 0.83 goals per game. While it would be overly simplistic to state

that the reduction of goals conceded was solely because of Théophile-Catherine's comeback, especially as the aforementioned period also coincided with the return of club captain Loïc Perrin from injury was also imperative as it allowed Théophile-Catherine to play in arguably his best position of right-back.

The 2016/17 campaign has not been a good one for Saint-Étienne fans so far. The club have drawn far too many games and have struggled to create and score goals. Théophile-Catherine has also had a less than desirable start to the season. The rise of Kévin Malcuit at right-back coupled with an injury that kept Théophile-Catherine out for two weeks has ensured an inconsistent start to the season for the French defender. However, Théophile-Catherine has once again showed his versatility by returning to the centre back position on many occasions this season.

Standing at 6', Théophile-Catherine is solid in the air and is also physically very strong. Théophile-Catherine is also extremely quick, despite his more senior age, which has allowed him to play as a full-back throughout his career.

If Théophile-Catherine has one major weakness, it is his on-ball ability. He often struggles with his passing and dribbling and is probably the most susceptible to giving away possession in dangerous positions in a trio of central defenders when Saint-Étienne deploy a 3-5-2 owing to his shaky touch. Théophile-Catherine is extremely capable defensively, but would almost certainly struggle in a team that emphasizes passing the ball from the back.

An unsung hero of French football, Théophile-Catherine's consistency and professionalism have and will continue to be a huge asset to whatever team he plays for.

JÉRÉMY SORBON

POSITION: DEFENDER
 CLUB: EA GUINGAMP
 AGE: 33



After playing almost 300 games for Caen and with his contract expiring, it looked like it could have been the last that we would see of Jérémie Sorbon in Ligue 1. However, with Guingamp picking him up from the free transfer market, he has repaid that faith with some really strong performances.

Since Jocelyn Gourvennec moved on to pastures new and Antoine Koumbouaré came in to replace him, the Breton outfit have transformed into a club ready to be more than just content with staying in the division.

They have added some solidity in the middle of the park, given freedom to the attacking players and at the time of writing, they are even in and around the European places. The 33-year-old Sorbon is a part of that metamorphosis, giving them some classic steel at the back along with some extra consistency that a club in transition desperately needs.

What has really established him at the club is his excellent rapport with his centre back partner, Christophe Kerbrat. Both are seasoned combatants with a great understanding of each other's game, knowing when one should approach the player with the ball and which one should cover in any given situation.

That also lends to his positional awareness, highlighted by the 2.5 interceptions per game that Sorbon has accumulated in both of the last two seasons. He is aware of his limitations, especially as he is getting older, so he is consistently using his experienced mind to keep up with the play around him.

Sorbon is strong in the air, his 88.3% pass completion rate shows his ability to maintain possession. The latter statistic is especially impressive in a Guingamp team that rarely plays from the back and often adopts a direct style. Sorbon's 5.5 clearances per game perhaps highlight this point, with the big Frenchman not afraid to adopt the "safety first"

adage. All of these ingredients are the makings of a quietly impressive Ligue 1 defender, earning points for his team, rather than attempting to make a splash personally.

What was however a troubling experience was watching Sorbon against Saint-Étienne in the 2-0 defeat in early December. He was consistently caught out pushing towards the opposition's right flank, attempting to cover for Guingamp's attacking full-back Marçal and was easily beaten by Kévin Malcuit for the opener.

Not only that, Sorbon appeared frightened to put a boot in whenever an attacker with pace ran with the ball at him. He would back off and back off until he either allowed them to slide in a pass behind him or gain a free-kick with Sorbon lazily throwing a leg out to resemble something like making an acceptable challenge.

Although Sorbon might appear, on the back of such a fixture, as a slight anomaly in concerning French football's top 100 talents in 2016, Sorbon has undeniably been at the heart of an ever-improving Guingamp outfit over the last 12 months. Admittedly, it is hard to deny that father time is creeping up on him and when you are a footballer who fits the bill of a jack of all trades, master of none, it can mean a steep slope of decline.

It was evident in the Saint-Étienne game, especially against a team that have struggled offensively at times this season, that Sorbon has peaked.

A worthy servant of Ligue 1 for many years but if Guingamp realistically want to reach the next level, they might need an upgrade on Sorbon despite him still being serviceable for the time being.

MALANG SARR

POSITION: DEFENDER

CLUB: OGC NICE

AGE: 17

There cannot be many better ways to introduce yourself to your fans by scoring the winner on your debut – not least in the way Malang Sarr did on the first day of the season against Rennes.

Born and raised in Nice, he would go on to dedicate his goal to the victims of the Bastille Day terrorist attacks that happened just a month prior to the game, in which the team was wearing commemorative shirts to honour the victims of this senseless act of violence.

Should Nice go on to win the title in May – or, at least, qualify for the Champions' League – 17-year-old centre back Malang Sarr will have had more than his part to play in their success. The 17-year-old was one of those who benefited greatly from Lucien Favre's arrival to the club, who, on seeing him play for the youth squad, wasted no time in fast-tracking him to the first team and handing him his debut on the first day of the season.

Forming an unlikely partnership with one of Nice's marquee summer signings, ex-Bayern and Wolfsburg centre back Dante, he has been able to develop over the course of the start of the season alongside a player 16 years his elder, with which comes a wealth of experience that would have helped Sarr settle into top flight football.

While it would have been hard to imagine a better introduction than scoring the winner in his first professional match – especially given the extra-sporting circumstances – Sarr has been impressing with his consistency, having played in all of Nice's league games so far.

Alongside the likes of Yoan Cardinale and Wylan Cyprien, there can be little argument that Sarr has been one of the breakout stars of Nice's season. Adding to the already established young players at the club such as Vincent Koziello and Alassane Pléa



as well as the acquisitions of the more established Dante, Belhanda and Balotelli, it is clear to see that Favre has struck the perfect balance in his squad.

One of the features of his game that have led to him making such a premature start to professional football is his astute reading of the game, often stopping attacks before they develop by intercepting any forward play from the opposition.

Sarr has also been noted to be more of a ball-playing defender, and one who anticipates the game rather than rushing into tackles, a style of play which has already become evident 20 matches into his career. Sarr also has two assists to his name – including one in the Europa League, although the less said about Nice's performances in Europe, the better.

Overall, it is clear that 2016 has been Sarr's breakout year – perhaps a little earlier than he himself would have expected – and while there are several aspects of his game which remain unpolished, such as his often questionable decision-making and lack of physicality, this is forgivable given his age.

As he continues to impose himself as one of Europe's brightest young defenders, he will undoubtedly be able to put them right in the future.

ALBAN LAFONT

POSITION: GOALKEEPER
 CLUB: TOULOUSE FC
 AGE: 17



In November 2015, Toulouse were in the midst of a goalkeeping crisis. Ali Ahamada's form was shifting from the wayward to the terrible, Uruguayan summer signing Mauro Goicoechea's start in Ligue 1 had been inconsistent at best while, and despite over a decade at the club, Marc Vidal continued to be overlooked for the first choice role.

However, then manager, Dominique Arribagé had a wildcard ready to play. During the international break, Alban Lafont, all of 16 years of age, took to the field in northern Spain for a friendly at Eibar. Les Violets lost the game 3-1 but Arribagé had seen enough to convince him to make one of the boldest selection decisions that any manager in Ligue 1 took during the 2015/16 campaign. One further poor performance from Ahamada at Guingamp and Lafont, still three months shy of his 17th birthday, was in.

Without a win since the opening day of the season, Toulouse welcomed Nice to the Stade Municipal in desperate need of points, and young Lafont was thrown in at the deep end along with fellow teenager Issa Diop at centre back. Toulouse won the game 2-0, aided by a trio of superb Lafont stops, and embarked on a mini-revival that arguably did just as much for their survival hopes as the incredible run they underwent when overseen by Pascal Dupraz as the season drew to a close.

Lafont, the undisputed first choice since that win over Nice, has grown and matured at an alarmingly rapid rate and is now one of the first names on the inspirational Dupraz's teamsheet.

Like a deer calf, in his early outings Lafont showed himself to be a nimble and agile stopper, even if with that came a hint of haphazardness. Despite his shot-stopping prowess being abundantly clear, he was fortunate to get away with some simple errors. The ball would bounce off of him without his knowledge and away to safety while, although effective,

some of his technique was overtly unorthodox. His youthful naivety and inexperience was as apparent as his talent. But, nevertheless, much like his Milanese teenage goalkeeping counterpart Gigi Donnarumma, the confidence that Lafont had in his own ability shone through, not afraid to police his area with the assuredness and gumption of a wily professional.

Under Dupraz, Lafont has blossomed into one of Europe's premier goalkeeping prospects. Where he once seemed a little naive, he is now commanding and powerful, his confidence has only grown, assuming the mantle as one of the most solid and reliable goalkeepers in the league. His cat-like spring and lightning reflexes remain, lending themselves to a number of outstanding displays in recent months.

One such performance against PSG, which included two gravity-defying saves, helped Toulouse beat the capital club to go third at the time, while the routinely high standard of keeping across his 40 or so outings to date have won his side points and kept them in games where before they would have fallen behind.

In January, Alban Lafont turns 18, but after less than 50 professional appearances, he continues to espouse the cool attitude, commanding nature and consistency of a keeper with a decade's worth of experience at the top level of European football and, perhaps most creditably, he is still improving.

A long Ligue 1 career? Clairement, oui. A future French number 1? Absolument.

JULIEN FÉRET

POSITION: MIDFIELDER

CLUB: SM CAEN

AGE: 34

One for the romantics, Julien Féret is the type of footballer that we could watch all day long. He may not have numerous YouTube clips that show off his skills to his name, he may not have football's next generation trying to emulate his performances across the globe, but if you ever needed an example of an accomplished, wily, creative force, look no further than Féret.

What was more of a surprise back in 2014 was that nobody appeared willing to take the cool-headed Frenchman on board. Disposed of at Rennes by former manager Philippe Montanier as the latter looked towards youth, it took until mid-June for SM Caen manager Patrice Garande to gleefully sign him up to the Normandy outfit and build around Féret in the proceeding weeks of the transfer window accordingly.

It worked superbly for the Normandy side, with his goals and assists helping them gain momentum after a slow start in the 2014/15 season. That carried into a sensational 2015/16 campaign, where his four goals and eight assists helped the side finish a dizzying seventh, with the club winning seven of their first 10 games.

Almost like a painter, Féret uses his right foot as if it were a brush to etch a masterpiece that others simply cannot even fathom to create. Able to spot a pass and execute it from seemingly anywhere on the pitch, he can unlock defences before they even realise what is unfolding before them and he is still continuing to surprise opponents even as he enters his mid-thirties.

Despite being of a slender build and frame, he creates the perception of always having time on the ball. Everything appears to travel in slow motion when you watch Féret play, opponents seem to bounce off of him and he regularly drifts into the space required when he needs to produce something



typically inspirational in a side that has relied on him to be his creative self.

There is a clear reason as to why a player like Féret has slipped so far down from last season's GFFN 100, as father time seems to have finally caught up with him. The mercurial talent dodged him for a number of years but time has a yet unbeaten record and he looks to have claimed another victim.

With the modern game seemingly getting faster, Féret, especially in 2016, appears to be missing a yard of pace which can result in him becoming isolated in the middle of the park without protection.

Combined with Caen's struggles this season and their tactical switch to three at the back, Féret no longer has a veritable attacking squadron to marshal, preventing him from being the real heartbeat of the team and leaving his talents to be slightly wasted. Caen are no longer playing between the lines, opting for a swift counter-attacking system instead that is heavily reliant on attackers pulling out wide, notably Ronny Rodelin.

That is not to say that Féret is simply walking off into the sunset just yet or that his powers have completely diminished. The legs may be slowing but the mind is still there, the technique never leaves you and as long as there is grass to play on, he will continue to make football look like an incredibly easy game.

JEMERSON

POSITION: DEFENDER
 CLUB: AS MONACO
 AGE: 24



From a club's point of view, money generated from TV rights in France can be seen as considerable now but in the past, French clubs in January and in summer went shopping abroad, because it was cheaper to do so. Brazil has always been a destination for major clubs to send scouts, analysing the top leagues for the next big thing. French clubs have a good track record of doing so, specifically in the centre back position: Edmilson and Caçapa to Lyon and César for PSG, for example. Once a French club has honed in on a target, they are usually ready to pay the typically uninflated price to sign their man.

Jemerson started playing football at the top level in Brazilian Serie A for Confiança back in 2009. He only stayed there for one season as he later joined the Atletico de Mineiro reserves having failed trials at Palmeiras, Santos and Vasco de Gama. Jemerson was thus loaned to Democrata where he made his full professional debut and for whom he played 12 games.

Back at Mineiro in 2014, an injury to a fellow defender gave him the chance to shine that he had been waiting for for so long. Jemerson would never relinquish that first team status again. A year later, he had played his 100th (and last) game for the club and left with a decent goal-scoring record from corners, netting six times there.

Funnily enough, it was not Monaco whose scouts first noticed Jemerson in Serie A. Ex-Lyon defender Claudio Caçapa was lining up a deal for Les Gones to buy him in the summer of 2015 but his stock was quite high at the time (€25m) and Jean-Michel Aulas preferred to heavily court Nicolas N'Koulou instead. Targeting an established Ligue 1/European centre back rather than a South American one seemed to be a wise move at the time, but hindsight may prove that Aulas probably got that one wrong as N'Koulou is often injured and has not been as assured as he was for Marseille. N'Koulou incidentally did not join Lyon in 2015, but in the summer of 2016 on a free transfer following the expiry of his contract with Ligue 1's other Olympique club.

Anyway, Lyon passed on the chance to sign the Brazilian defender and Jemerson's stock fell to €10m six months later, allowing Monaco to buy him in January 2016.

A bit less than a year ago, Monaco were hardly blessed with the form they are in now. They were defending well (five goals conceded in February) but very few goals

were scored. Still, it was a formula that was working vis-à-vis the rest of the league as a consistent stream of points were picked up each weekend by the Principality side, and PSG aside, there was no other team who were producing such dependably positive results. Jardim used the second half of 2015/16 to blend Jemerson into the squad, hoping to allow the Brazilian to acclimatize himself to the South of France and to begin to learn the language.

Jemerson made his debut at the Parc des Princes in late March as a right-sided centre back in a 3-4-3 playing next to Ricardo Carvalho (quite a baptism of fire). It worked very well as Monaco won on PSG's turf 2-0. However, Jardim then played Jemerson as a right-back and that seriously backfired. In Jemerson's next two appearances in Monaco's starting line-up, Monaco got trounced 1-4 at Lille and 1-6 in the big game for 2nd spot at Lyon.

Jardim knew that Jemerson was a better centre back than a full-back so more investment in the defence was needed in the summer of 2016. He bought Djibril Sidibé from Lille, Benjamin Mendy from Monaco and Polish sensation Kamil Glik in from Torino.

The 2016/17 season did not begin brilliantly immediately, as the four defenders had never played alongside each other but at least Mendy and Sidibé had Ligue 1 experience and had previously established themselves as two of the best full-backs in the division.

Of course, it took time for Glik and Jemerson to gel and form what is now a formidable partnership. Jemerson has played the whole 90 minutes in 14 of Monaco's first 17 league games, usually next to Glik, having to be especially adept with the Monaco full-backs pushing forward a lot, leaving the central defensive pairing with more ground to cover than most individuals in their position would have to at another Ligue 1 club. Admittedly, Glik and Jemerson have been aided enormously by Tiemoué Bakayoko, who shields the defence well.

If anything, Jemerson is an unspectacular figure in this Monaco side. He is yet to score in the league and does not have the licence to roam forward due to Monaco playing a 4-4-2 this season. However, he is quietly efficient. Not much more is asked of him than that at this juncture given the talent surrounding him.

ROMAIN HAMOUMA

POSITION: MIDFIELDER
 CLUB: SAINT-ÉTIENNE
 AGE: 29



Romain Hamouma has not had the most enjoyable 2016. After a superb couple of seasons during which he dazzled Ligue 1 playing on the wing for Saint-Étienne, 2016 has served as a reminder that the life of a footballer is incredibly unpredictable. Following a solid return of five goals and seven assists in Ligue 1 during the 2015 calendar year, Hamouma has struggled to recreate his form during 2016 and has only scored 2 goals and given 4 assists during the whole of 2016 at the time of writing.

So what has caused Hamouma's dramatic drop in form?

As is the case with so many footballers, Hamouma has struggled with injuries over the last two seasons. Hamouma has made just 15 out of a possible 36 appearances over the course of 2016 in Ligue 1 and has already missed a significant portion of Saint-Étienne's 2016/17 campaign because of injuries.

Another reason for Hamouma's drop in production over the last couple of seasons could be the team that he is playing for. During the 2014/15 season, Saint-Étienne scored a total of 51 goals over the course of the Ligue 1 season. This gave them a respectable average of 1.34 goals per game. During the 2015/16 season this figure decreased as *Les Verts* only scored 42 times, with an average of 1.11 goals per game. This decrease has continued this season. At the time of writing, Saint-Étienne have scored 17 goals in 17 games at a rate of 1.00 goals per game. If this trend continues, then Saint-Étienne will finish the season with 38 goals, which is a huge drop in comparison with the 2014/15 season. These numbers help explain Saint-Étienne's struggles this season and to a certain extent evidence Hamouma's drop in production over the last year.

Another explanation which fits this narrative is that Hamouma's best season in Ligue 1 was during 2014/15. Throughout the 2014/15 season, he benefited from playing alongside Max Gradel and Mevlüt Erdinç. Gradel and Erdinç scored a combined 26 goals in Ligue 1 with Hamouma registering 11 assists. During the 2015/16

season, however, Saint-Étienne's top scorer was Nolan Roux with nine Ligue 1 goals. The lack of an obvious goal-scorer could be another reason as to why Hamouma has struggled to recapture his 2014/15 form. As a creative talent, you want to be developing a relationship with your most dangerous finisher. It has not been clear if Saint-Étienne have actually had one in the last two years, and if they have, then who exactly is it? Difficult questions that Hamouma has had to wrestle with in 2016. He appeared to be forming an understanding with Robert Beric for a time, who actually looked dangerous in and around the six-yard box, but the front-man suffered an unfortunate ACL injury during the previous campaign, ending any hopes of continuing to improve a blossoming relationship with Hamouma.

Despite all of this however, it would be unfair not to mention that when fit and injury-free Hamouma has remained one of the most dangerous players in Ligue 1. Generally regarded as one of the most creative players in the league, Hamouma has shown consistent improvement in his decision-making and quality of his final ball over the last few campaigns and this has continued throughout 2016. Hamouma is also extremely dangerous in one-on-one situations and has used this to his advantage to create opportunities for his team-mates. The biggest criticism Hamouma has endured has been his paltry goal-scoring record, despite the fact that he is predominantly utilised as a right-winger by manager Christophe Galtier. However, Hamouma has responded to this by becoming a more consistent goal threat this campaign and has already scored two goals in the French top flight this season, almost equaling his total of three that he reached in the entirety of the previous campaign.

After a tough year, Hamouma will be eager to put 2016 behind him and prove during 2017 that he has not lost his touch and remains the player who so consistently struck fear into Ligue 1 defences.

YANNIS SALIBUR

POSITION: ATTACKER
 CLUB: EA GUINGAMP
 AGE: 25



Making the GFFN 100 for the first time in his career is Guingamp's dynamic 25-year-old winger Yannis Salibur. Over the course of the last 12 months, Salibur has surprised many by becoming one of Ligue 1's most electric wide players, combining his natural talent with a growing maturity, a blend which is essential if he is to establish himself as a household name over the coming years.

As a left-footed player plying his trade almost exclusively on the right wing, Salibur gives full-backs an age-old problem. Salibur can either cut inside the defender onto his favoured foot and drive straight at goal or, if the full-back overcompensates, dart down the line and set up a team-mate inside the box. What is even more challenging is the fact that Salibur combines his natural gift of speed with a technical ability that makes it very difficult for defenders to anticipate what is coming their way.

This ability to trouble defenders was perhaps most clearly evident during last season's 2-2 league draw with Montpellier. Salibur latched onto a stray pass in Montpellier's final third and ran straight at their centre back William Rémy. As he advanced at pace, he gave a little body feint as if to continue down the line, but instead cut inside onto his left foot, causing Rémy to lose his footing and fall. Then, still just outside the box, Salibur unleashed a stinging drive past the helpless Jourden and into the top corner of the Montpellier net.

Whilst glamorous goals such as this will likely get all the attention, in the current 2016/17 campaign Salibur's game has taken on a somewhat more subdued efficiency, making him arguably even more effective than he was last season. Whilst last season he produced headline-grabbing efforts on the way to helping Guingamp stave off relegation, this season his contribution has helped the small club reach exceptional heights, currently standing at 6th in the Ligue 1 table. Perhaps the most useful addition to

Salibur's game has been his ability to create chances for team-mates. During the second half of last season, the 25-year-old managed to create just 10 chances Guingamp, at 0.67 chances per game. This season, however, at the time of writing, he has already created 17 chances, at a drastically improved 1.21 chances per game. In fact, amongst Salibur's Guingamp team-mates that puts him behind only full-back Fernando Marçal, showing that he is one of the most creative players in the Guingamp squad.

In addition to his newfound panache for chance-creation, Salibur has added an ability to provide clinical finishes in areas he previously would not take up. In the current campaign, all three of the Frenchman's league goals have come from almost identical scenarios. Against both Marseille and Nantes, he arrived late into the box to get on the end of a cross from the left-hand side and steered a shot into the bottom corner of the goal. His effort against Lyon also came as a result of wandering off of his flank and stroking a shot first-time into the back of Anthony Lopes' net.

Overall, Yannis Salibur is one of the most exciting young talents in the league. Capable of the extraordinary, as evidenced by his stunning free-kick against Reims from over 40 yards, the Frenchman has natural ability that makes your mouth water. What has taken him propelled him to new heights, though, is a growing consistency in his game. If Salibur and his team Guingamp finish the season as they have started it, we could be talking about them for a long time to come.

MARIO BALOTELLI

POSITION: ATTACKER

CLUB: OGC NICE

AGE: 26



Mario Balotelli has gone from zero to hero over the course of 2016. After a miserable season at Liverpool in which he only scored four times in 28 appearances and was judged by a majority of this English media to have been the worst signing of the 2014/15 season, Balotelli joined his former club AC Milan on loan. Milan had recently appointed Siniša Mihajlović as manager after his excellent work with Sampdoria. Balotelli had arguably played the best football of his entire career at AC Milan and there was a hope that the enigmatic striker could regain his best form under Mihajlović's "tough love" approach.

The season started promisingly for Balotelli as he made several positive substitute appearances. The Italian forward made his first start of the season for Milan against Udinese on match-day four, going on to score a thunderous free-kick as *I Rossoneri* won 2-3 with Balotelli involved for the game's entirety.

It seemed as if Balotelli was beginning to work towards the explosive form that he last showed at EURO 2012 for Italy. He was duly rewarded with another start during the next match against Genoa. However, football is a cruel game and Balotelli suffered an injury during that fixture, which required surgery and ruled him out for three months.

During the time that Balotelli was injured, Carlos Bacca established himself as an indisputable starter in Mihajlović's 4-4-2 formation essentially leaving one spot for the trio of Balotelli, Adriano and Niang to compete for. After his return from injury, Balotelli struggled for playing time with Mihajlović often preferring Niang to play next to Bacca. Balotelli seemed unfit and unfocused in his substitute appearances and his zero league goals after his return from injury work to prove that. During the latter parts of the season, Mihajlović seemed to lose trust in the Italian with the manager publicly questioning his work-rate.

After returning to Liverpool, it soon became apparent that Balotelli had no future at the English club and he joined OGC Nice on a free transfer. Despite his earlier struggles at Milan, Balotelli has been an unmitigated success thanks to the trust placed in him by Lucien Favre and his Nice team-mates with eight league goals to his name in his first eight league appearances.

Throughout his career Balotelli has played best when deployed as a lone striker and has always struggled when having to share the most advanced positions of the pitch with a partner. This helps explain his struggles with regards to playing in Mihajlović's 4-4-2 system. For Balotelli's Nice debut, Favre chose to play the Italian forward next to Alassane Pléa upfront against Marseille. Despite the 3-2 win and Balotelli's two goals, Nice lacked balance because Pléa and Balotelli often invaded each other's space. After resting Balotelli against Montpellier he was back in the line-up for a crucial fixture against fellow title chasers AS Monaco.

This time however, Favre chose to partner Balotelli with Younes Belhanda, who sat just behind the rambunctious former Manchester City man. Belhanda, who is a midfielder, was much more willing to drop deep and receive the ball, countenancing Balotelli as the focal point up top. The result of this switch was a resounding 4-0 win with *Super Mario* scoring another brace. Since the Monaco match, Balotelli has struggled with fitness issues and injuries. However, this is to be expected considering how little football Balotelli has played over the past two years. When he has featured however, Balotelli has shown Ligue 1 why he was earmarked as a potential superstar so early on in his career. If Balotelli can maintain his form, then the sky truly is the limit for *Super Mario* and his exceptional technical and shooting ability.

OLE SELNÆS

POSITION: MIDFIELDER
 CLUB: SAINT-ÉTIENNE
 AGE: 22



Norwegian midfielder Ole Selnæs has only been at Saint-Étienne for 12 months, but he has already made a big enough impact to become a crucial lynchpin in the centre of the park for manager Christophe Galtier. The 22-year-old has established himself as a starting central midfielder for *Les Verts*, but Selnæs has shown at different stages throughout the calendar year that he can perform adequately in the holding midfield role, or even as the central defender.

He arrived at the Geoffroy-Guichard in January 2016 from Norwegian champions Rosenborg BK for a fee around €2m. At the time, he was not heralded for being a “*superstar signing*” by the French media, coming from Norway with a low profile. As a result, his quietly effective performances as Saint-Étienne’s midfield metronome have largely gone unnoticed.

Generally deployed as a central midfielder, Selnæs began to forge a reputation for being a tough tackling, ball-winning midfielder. What allows Selnæs to stand out though is that he marries this defensive-minded ability with great on-the-ball technique and with a cultured eye for a killer pass.

At the time of writing, Selnæs has been played a part in more Ligue 1 games for Saint-Étienne in 2016/17 than every single one of his central midfield colleagues aside from Aston Villa loanee Jordan Veretout.

This is just one indicator of the remarkable trust that manager Galtier places in Selnæs. It is exceptionally rare for a Ligue 1 manager to adopt such an approach to a player coming from outside of Europe’s top five leagues just six months following their arrival. The extent to which he trusts the Norwegian in big games was showcased when he played him at centre back for the derby against Lyon. That indicates a fantastic belief in Selnæs as a footballer, not just as a midfielder.

Selnæs has not only impressed at club level in 2016. Following a period of captaining the Norway under 21 side, he was promoted to the first team squad in March, making his full international debut in a friendly against Estonia.

Not only that, but with the exception of the last World Cup qualifier where he was called up to the Under 21 side, Selnæs was involved in every senior international game from March until October.

The darkest moment in 2016 for Selnæs is inextricably linked with his recent demotion to the Norwegian under 21 side. FIFA have decided to ban him from playing at the top level of international football for 11 months until November 2017 after he insulted an official following a 1-0 loss to Azerbaijan. The incident highlighted a nasty streak in Selnæs’ character which might alert future suitors.

What does 2017 hold for the central midfielder? There is no doubt that his progression has been considerable and unexpected both on a purely personal level in terms of improvements, notably in the physicality department, but also by becoming a key asset to one of France’s most historic clubs.

Selnæs has found a manager in Galtier who will give him the freedom to progress in all aspects of the game and at the tender age of 22, *Les Verts* fans will continue to get excited about their Norwegian polyvalent midfielder.

MARÇAL

POSITION: DEFENDER
 CLUB: EA GUINGAMP
 AGE: 27



For Guingamp's Brazilian full-back Marçal, 2016 has been a year of struggle, perseverance and, eventually, great success. Owned by SL Benfica of Portugal, Marçal began the calendar year on loan with Turkish side Gaziantepspor, having not played for Benfica a single time since his move there in the summer of 2015.

The New Year was to bring testing times for the 27-year-old. He sat out the first game of 2016 through suspension and, upon his return, his side lost their next two consecutive games, conceding seven goals in the process. To compound his problems, he ruptured a thigh muscle during a 4-0 loss to Besiktas, an injury that would keep him out of the six league games that followed. Experiencing one of the toughest moments of his career, it seemed a long road back to success for the Brazilian.

Having played the full 90 minutes in just five of his 18 league games whilst in Turkey during the second half of last season, Marçal had not done enough to convince Benfica to integrate the left-back into their squad, so once again they began listening to loan offers. For any European club, Marçal represented a major risk. This was a player whose only real experience of European football was during the previous season in Turkey, in which he not only missed many games through injury, but also received two red cards, and his team only avoided relegation on the final day of the season. But Ligue 1 side Guingamp, fresh off of a very testing season of their own, were willing to take a gamble. A gamble that in fact, turned out to be a masterstroke.

See whilst many clubs, including Marçal's parent club Benfica, saw an injury-prone player capable of at times being rash and reckless, Guingamp saw a talented full-back with an attacking ability that would prove crucial to their game. Playing at left-back, the Brazilian's primary job is obviously to prevent the opposition from scoring, but it is really

down the other end of the field where he truly comes into his own. His ability to put dangerous crosses into the box with his left boot has been unparalleled so far this season in Ligue 1.

In particular, he has made 22 key passes in the league so far this season, putting him comfortably ahead of anybody else in the Guingamp squad, including creative players like Yannis Salibur and Marcus Coco. Perhaps even more impressively, his five assists put him ahead of every other defender across Ligue 1 in this regard, and tied in 2nd with the likes of Morgan Sanson and Loïs Diony, amongst all Ligue 1 players.

But it is not only offensively that Marçal has excelled. He has been a major part of a back line that has led Guingamp to the 4th best defensive record in the league, having conceded just 16 goals in 17 league games this season, at the time of writing. Building largely on this newfound defensive resolve, Guingamp have defied the odds to sit just outside the European places in 6th place in the Ligue 1 table.

That is not to say, though, that Marçal is without his flaws. Whilst overall he has been exceptional so far this season, an old problem reared its ugly head on match day seven against Bastia, where the Brazilian received two yellow cards in quick succession in the first half in a game that Guingamp ended up losing 1-0. If he is to continue to progress his game, he must cut out these lapses, which may end up costing his team crucial league points come May.

Overall, though, 2016 has been a breakthrough year for the 27-year-old. His attacking talent and defensive stability are helping Guingamp reach new heights this season, and if he continues his current trajectory, SL Benfica may finally integrate him into their team come the summer. 2017 promises to be a year full of excitement for the Brazilian.

SÉBASTIEN SQUILLACI

POSITION: DEFENDER
 CLUB: SC BASTIA
 AGE: 36



For individuals who are not particularly enormous fans of French football reading this publication, Sébastien Squillaci will only be known by you for his time at Arsenal, where it is safe to say he did not make many friends among the North London side's fan-base. But since his departure in 2011, he has proved to be a great addition to SC Bastia's back-line.

At the age of 36, Squillaci is the timeworn head in the SC Bastia side, and while he may not be blessed with the greatest amount of technical ability vis-à-vis some of the more modern-age ball-playing defenders, he more than makes up for it with his experience and his ability to read the game.

Squillaci's peak years came at Lyon and Sevilla, where he established himself as a highly intelligent centre back who avoided the temptation of diving in to every tackle. Rather, he would use his brain to assess a situation, reposition himself accordingly and seek to deal with the emerging problem with the utmost efficacy. Even now, that remains the case.

Of course, Squillaci will on occasion be exposed by a particularly rapid opponent, as will any aging defender, but on the whole in 2016 he has been an exceptionally positive influence on the Corsican side.

SC Bastia finished 10th last season in Ligue 1, with Squillaci playing a key role in their mid-table stability. This was a remarkable finish orchestrated by François Ciccolini.

It is easy to forget the sheer lack of resources that SC Bastia have at their disposal. They have needed to rely on a string of loan deals and youth products, making up a largely inexperienced squad. Not only did Squillaci have a fantastic run of form in the early months of 2016, the guidance he has offered to team-mates, notably some of the academy product defenders like the promising Alexander Djiku, has

undoubtedly been invaluable.

The start to the 2016/17 season has failed to impress most in Corsica, with SC Bastia currently sitting 16th, despite the fact that they have the joint fourth best defensive record in Ligue 1 (both at the time of writing), the latter of which Squillaci has certainly contributed to.

Unfortunately, disaster struck in late October for the former Arsenal man, as Squillaci picked up a nasty ACL injury against Dijon FCO. An ACL tear, arguably the most severe, common injury picked up in modern football, is potentially career-ending for Squillaci at the age of 36.

We sincerely hope he can recover, but it might be unrealistic to think that we will see him commanding his troops at the Armand-Cesari again during the 2016/17 season, at least.

Prior to the injury, Squillaci would probably have been the first to tell you that he may not have long left in the tank with regards to playing time. However, his on-pitch performances before that fateful match in October were of a high enough calibre to convince pundits that he had potentially another 18 months in him playing a key role for SC Bastia in Ligue 1. All of that is now in doubt.

In the meantime, Squillaci can take comfort in the fact that in 2016 he picked up the mantle left by François Modesto as SC Bastia's undisputed wise owl, taking the captaincy for periods of the calendar year and executing his leadership role with aplomb.

DIEGO ROLÁN

POSITION: ATTACKER

CLUB: BORDEAUX

AGE: 23

Diego Rolán placed a very respectable 31st in the GFFN 100 for 2015. Having scaled the heights in 2014/15, hitting 15 league goals for Bordeaux, he was labelled as a big hope for the 2015/16 campaign for a Girondins side that for all of their talent, could not muster a strong run of form to break into the upper echelons of the championship.

Rolán's 2016 started much in the same way he ended the previous year - in good form. Having scored in the draw with high-flying Angers, he was arguably one of the better players for a side that began the year in the midst of a seven-game unbeaten run.

Given a freer rein by then-coach Willy Sagnol, Rolán was able to really make an impact in his side's attacking forays. With Cheick Diabaté installed up front, Rolán's positioning on either wing ensured he would support the burly Diabaté with his energy and good movement.

This was none more evident than in Bordeaux's 4-0 thrashing of Rennes in late January. Rolán had a hand in all four goals - starting two moves, scoring one and assisting one for Thomas Touré. He illustrated his poacher-like instincts in slotting past Benoît Costil after the France international had spilled the ball.

He also displayed his pace and panache for intelligent movement in setting up Cheick Diabaté for the opener. All in all, it proved to be a good highlights reel for what Rolán is about as a player, and what he specifically offered to Bordeaux as a team in the second half of the 2015/16 campaign, at least initially.

Did it last? Not for long. Two heavy defeats to Rhône rivals Lyon and Saint-Étienne was followed by another stirring display in the 4-2 win away to Guingamp. Another goal and assist saw Rolán pick up the captaincy for the following three games in



Jaroslav Plasil's absence. Despite the initial struggles between player and coach, Sagnol clearly identified the Uruguayan as central to his project.

The problem with Rolán is that while he is clearly talented, good performances are becoming a rarity. With the armband, the 23-year-old failed to repay Sagnol's belief as *Les Girondins* lost heavily to relegation candidates Reims (4-1) whilst also being unable to beat Gazelec Ajaccio at home. He was benched in the 4-0 defeat to Toulouse soon after, a result which cost Sagnol his job.

Ultimately, the forward ended the campaign on just seven goals in 31 league outings. A decrease in form failed to convince English suitors, and the Uruguayan stayed on at the Matmut Atlantique throughout the summer.

However, with the addition of the talented Jocelyn Gourvennec as coach and a new strike partner in Jérémy Ménez, there was hope that the Montevideo native could drum up the form from 2014/15.

Another strong start to the campaign - two goals in his first three league games - followed by a near two-month drought as Rolán struggled to adapt in a partnership with Ménez in a two-striker format up front.

Thus, Rolán ends 2016 with still a lot to prove, having largely failed to mimic the likes of Alassane Pléa and Martin Braithwaite who have really come into their own in the last 12 months.

At 23, the Uruguayan still has time on his side, but perhaps not the patience from the Bordeaux coaching staff and board.

FOUAD CHAFIK

POSITION: DEFENDER

CLUB: DIJON FCO

AGE: 30



In some ways, the narrative of Fouad Chafik is an unfortunate one. An assured presence at right-back for newly promoted Dijon, the 30 year-old did not even sign his first professional contract until 2012, when he moved from AS Valence to FC Istres, then in Ligue 2.

Despite the Provence club's struggles during Chafik's two seasons there, including a relegation in his second campaign, suitors were never far away, as Saint-Étienne were linked with the player in the summer of 2013 in concert with Faouzi Ghoulam's move to Napoli. Nothing came of the link with *Les Verts*, though, and he eventually moved to Stade Lavallois in 2014, further burnishing his reputation there before joining Dijon on a two-year deal this summer following their promotion.

Born in Pierrelatte, in the Rhône valley, the modest player's late trajectory had seen him privilege his studies over his playing career, earning a masters' degree in sport economics and tourism. Given his play in 2016, one wonders where his career could have gone had that not been the case.

His obvious intelligence is manifest in his style of play; Chafik is a tireless worker, but not one who runs for the sake of running.

Rather, he thrives by using his acceleration, strength and positioning to be not only a threat going forward, as is expected of modern full-backs, but also a competent defender, a skill which he had to develop only recently, having been generally used as a midfielder earlier in his career.

Upon his rise to professional football, his tackling was a bit of an issue as he struggled to cope with a quicker standard of play, even becoming a liability in this regard in Ligue 2. However, after being sent off twice last season, he has yet to be booked for Dijon, and is averaging only one foul every two matches.

He is also a sublime crosser of the ball, and how he has yet to record an assist this season is more down to Dijon's style of play than his ability; the team tend to favour a level of intricacy facilitated by Frédéric Sammaritano and Loïs Diony rather than stretching play at wide angles.

Thus, Chafik's function in attack is to stretch play and create space for the midfielders and forwards, and he does this superbly. His strength and intelligence make him superb at retaining the ball; it is not uncommon to see a defensive midfielder or centre back forced to join an opposing left-back to get the ball off Chafik, leaving space for the attack.

His performances with Stade Lavallois, and now Dijon, besides creating a greater appreciation for his talents among fellow clubs, also garnered the attention of Morocco, for whom he was eligible through his parents.

Despite not making his debut until last year, he has already racked up seven appearances for the Lions of the Atlas, and will be a massive miss for Dijon during January's Africa Cup of Nations, should he make Hervé Renard's squad.

Dijon have thus far been the most impressive of the three promoted sides, and while Chafik will be grateful to the club for having given him a chance in the top flight, it would be no surprise to see him moving to a club chasing the European places come the summer.

DALBERT

POSITION: DEFENDER

CLUB: OGC NICE

AGE: 23



Over the last two years, OGC Nice have discovered that the Portuguese Primeira Liga is filled with hidden gems waiting for the opportunity to showcase their talents in one of Europe's top five leagues. Both Ricardo Pereira and Jean Seri were signed from relative obscurity in Portugal but have become key players for Nice over the course of the last 18 months.

This summer, Nice once again dipped into the Portuguese market with the signing of the Brazilian left-back Dalbert Henrique from Vitória Guimarães. When he was signed for a paltry €2m, few would have guessed that just a couple of months later he too would become the latest Portuguese import to establish himself as an essential element for Nice as they began to mount an unlucky title challenge. However, those familiar with Dalbert will not have been surprised with his excellent performances this season.

Born in Brazil in 1993, Dalbert began his football career with several youth teams in his homeland before moving to Académico de Viseu, a Portuguese second division club, in 2013.

After two seasons with Académico, his performances were noticed by Vitória Guimarães and he was promptly signed during the summer of 2015. Initially, Dalbert struggled for playing time and was not included in the first team squad for the first five games of the season. Dalbert finally made his league debut for Vitória against Sporting Braga, playing the full 90 minutes as a left-back. Dalbert was only included because of an injury to starting left-back Breno. Despite a 0-1 loss, Dalbert put in an impressive enough performance to go on to make 25 league appearances during the 2015/16 season as he established himself as first choice left-back.

Dalbert's evolution over the past year has been fascinating from a tactical perspective. The Brazilian has never been the flashiest of players and has a completely different style from other Brazilian left-backs such as Marcelo and the great Roberto Carlos. At Vitória, Dalbert was often the more conservative of the two full-backs and his one assist that

season is a testament to his more conventional role as a left-back. With this in mind, it may seem strange that Nice made the move for him, considering that Favre's 3-5-2 formation involves two able, attacking wing-backs. However, when examined more closely the move makes perfect sense. Dalbert's signing allowed Nice to move Ricardo Pereira back to his best position of right-back. Pereira is a phenomenal attacking player and moving him to his favoured position has been crucial to Nice's success. Dalbert playing on the left has offered balance to the team and ensured that Nice's defence is rarely left exposed. His inclusion as the more defensive minded wing-back has also offered protection to 17-year-old centre back revelation Malang Sarr.

The best way to describe Dalbert's playing style is ruthlessly pragmatic. The young Brazilian has no major flaws in his game and is a very well-rounded player for such a young age. Possessing impressive work-rate and pace, Dalbert is defensively sound and is extremely difficult to beat in one-on-one situations. Despite standing at just 5' 9", his determination makes him difficult to beat in the air and he has shown that he harbours the decision-making of a much older player. Dalbert has also shown improvements in his attacking play and has become a threat from left-wing back with his crossing and dribbling ability. Having said this, he sits a good 50 places behind fellow full-back Ricardo Pereira in this year's GFFN 100 classification, and for good reason. Dalbert's accuracy from crosses is not yet good enough consistently and he has a habit of panicking when receiving the ball in advanced positions, leading him to simply rush down the line when there are better options available to him through a pass, even if that might be a more difficult skill for Dalbert to pull off.

If Nice do achieve success this season, then Pereira will most likely get most of the plaudits out of the two wing-backs and rightly so. However, Pereira is liberated offensively-speaking as a result of Dalbert's tirelessness on the left. The latter full-back remains vital to any success that Nice might have in 2017.

JÉRÉMY TOULALAN

POSITION: MIDFIELDER
 CLUB: BORDEAUX
 AGE: 33



At the age of 33, Jérémy Toulalan could easily retire and decide that he has had enough, after a remarkably understated if distinguished career. But Toulalan is far from finished, and retirement might be a long way away yet for the former Lyon enforcer.

Joining Bordeaux from Monaco in the summer of 2016, the midfielder was brought in by new manager Jocelyn Gourvennec to become the elder statesman of the team. He provides another authority figure to the dressing room, a leader who has undoubtedly helped current captain Jaroslav Plasil in his role so far in the 2016/17 campaign.

Toulalan may end this year in the blue of Bordeaux, but he started it with the Principality side at the Stade Louis II, where he made 25 Ligue 1 appearances, as well as being influential in Monaco finishing in the top three, gaining qualification to the Champions' League play-offs.

Toulalan obviously left Monaco before he could help them in this year's Champions' League group stages, but his time at the club saw him tutor Monaco's promising central midfield talents.

Toulalan is undoubtedly in part responsible for the successful reconversion of Fabinho into a deeper-lying midfielder from a right-back and the explosion that Tiemoué Bakayoko has had in 2016. Fabinho and Bakayoko now form the bedrock of an AS Monaco side that has reached a new level of high performance in 2016/17, making them a dangerous force both at home and abroad.

At Bordeaux, Toulalan is generally considered as one of their top performers so far, winning the majority of his tackles and operating consistently with an elevated passing percentage. The veteran tough-tackler has had quite a storied career, picking up all of his career trophies, including two Ligue 1 titles, two Trophées des Champions and a French cup during

his spell with Lyon between 2006 and 2011, but for now Toulalan will be looking to use all of his experience to help some of the players at Bordeaux improve.

2016 has shown that whilst he may not be the most glamorous of midfielders, Toulalan is still a fantastic player to have on your books.

Toulalan's relative lack of pace has arguably made him the player he is today, as he has no choice but to think two steps ahead of his opponent, something that is imperative if you need to be able to expertly read the game. Otherwise, he would have no hope of intercepting the ball or winning a tackle.

Toulalan's footballing brain enables him to become a third centre back in a back four when Bordeaux attack, and move into defensive midfield when they lose the ball.

Bordeaux, Toulalan and his new boss Gourvennec will be hoping that the former French international can maintain his recent form, and that the club can close the gap on the Europa League places in 2017.

Thankfully, there still seems to be life left in the knowledgeable legs of Jérémy Toulalan and Bordeaux's youngsters would be wise to listen to every ounce of wisdom that the former French international wishes to impart upon them for the rest of the 2016/17 campaign.

100-76 RECAP

100	- Rémy Cabella	(Marseille)
99	- Cedric Carrasso	(Bordeaux)
98	- Julien Palmieri	(LOSC Lille)
97	- Clément Chantôme	(Rennes)
96	- Maxwell Cornet	(Olympique Lyonnais)
95	- Billy Ketkeophomphone	(Angers SCO)
94	- Ramy Bensebaini	(Rennes)
93	- Lucas Lima	(FC Nantes)
92	- Clément Lenglet	(AS Nancy Lorraine)
91	- Kevin Théophile-Catherine	(Saint-Étienne)
90	- Jérémy Sorbon	(EA Guingamp)
89	- Malang Sarr	(OGC Nice)
88	- Alban Lafont	(Toulouse FC)
87	- Julien Féret	(SM Caen)
86	- Jemerson	(AS Monaco)
85	- Romain Hamouma	(Saint-Étienne)
84	- Yannis Salibur	(EA Guingamp)
83	- Mario Balotelli	(OGC Nice)
82	- Ole Selnæs	(Saint-Étienne)
81	- Marçal	(EA Guingamp)
80	- Sébastien Squillaci	(SC Bastia)
79	- Diego Rolán	(Bordeaux)
78	- Fouad Chafik	(Dijon FCO)
77	- Dalbert	(OGC Nice)
76	- Jérémy Toulalan	(Bordeaux)

DANIEL CONGRÉ

POSITION: DEFENDER
 CLUB: MONTPELLIER HSC
 AGE: 31



In the modern game, perhaps the most sought after quality in a defender these days is versatility. With more and more Ligue 1 managers copying the current European trend of adopting a fluid approach to formations; defenders who can fit comfortably into numerous positions across the backline have become more and more important.

Versatility is perhaps one of the most sought after qualities in the European transfer market in the January window, for example. One man with such qualities, is Montpellier HSC's Daniel Congré, who can play as both a left-back and right-back, as well as a central defender.

Though Congré is of Guadeloupian descent, the defender joined the club of his birth place, Toulouse, aged 11 in the summer of 1996. Impressing many in the Toulouse youth system with his strength and interception play, Congré went on to make his professional debut for *le Tef* in 2004; a club he would spend a further eight years at, picking up over 200 appearances and four goals.

Utilised in a number of positions during his time there, Congré remained an important player for Toulouse until the summer of 2012, when the French defender joined his now current club, Montpellier HSC, after *La Paillade's* title-winning campaign.

Brought in for his ability to play in a number of positions at a high standard, the signing of Congré was seen as a real coup by many Montpellier supporters at the time. However, considering his lack of blistering pace, Congré has often struggled in the full-back role against the faster wingers in Ligue 1, and has not always performed to the best of his ability out wide for *La Paillade*.

Yet, after hitting the ripe old age of 30, it appears Congré has come into his peak as a player. Over the course of 2016, Congré has produced a number of

consistently high quality performances, in what has been a fairly inconsistent Montpellier side, and that fact cannot be ignored. What Congré might lack in pace, he makes up for in brute strength and tactical knowhow and it is arguable that, positionally, Congré is Montpellier's best defender.

With a passing accuracy of an impressive 84% and an average passing length of 20m, Congré has proven himself to be an excellent distributor from the back and this, combined with his ability to read the game, has cemented his position as a stalwart of what has become a defensive, counter attacking team.

One other factor that has helped force Congré into this year's GFFN 100 has been Montpellier's change in system. Towards the tail-end of 2016, Montpellier manager Frédéric Hantz has been utilising a 3-5-2 formation, with Congré often playing on either the right-hand side or left-hand side of the back three.

Spending much of his career as a full-back, Congré seemed a perfect fit for this position, as in a back three the wider centre-halves move out to the touchline often whilst the team moves forward with the ball.

Discovering an excellent counter-attacking style under Hantz, this system has worked wonders for Montpellier this season, and Congré's ability to switch from a more central defender to a wider position when Montpellier have and have not got the ball has played a huge part in that.

If Montpellier are to continue to slowly but surely climb the Ligue 1 table in 2017, they will need to make sure they keep hold of versatile defenders like Daniel Congré.

BENJAMIN ANDRÉ

POSITION: MIDFIELDER
 CLUB: STADE RENNAIS
 AGE: 26



After six committed years at Ajaccio, Benjamin André's footballing development in the capital of Corsica has moulded him into the player he is today: a well-rounded, versatile ball-playing midfielder who likes to keep a low profile on and off the pitch. The 26-year-old can play anywhere in the midfield, but his qualities shine through most when playing as a deep-lying midfielder or just off the striker as an attacking midfielder.

Upon his arrival at Stade Rennais in the summer of 2014, André was originally signed to play as a right midfielder but when the opportunity came to play more centrally, 'Benji' stepped up and found his home instantly at the very the heart of the midfield.

As a result, he has been instrumental to the Red and Blacks' gradual rise as a consistent top half of the table team. After finishing 9th in the 2014/15 season and 8th in 2015/16 season; André and his team-mates are currently in the mix to push further on, with a top four finish in sight after a great start to this season's campaign, with André only missing one game at the time of writing under new boss Christian Gourcuff.

It is no surprise that his defensive contributions have helped the side become tough opposition to beat, with aerial duels and tackling most certainly his core assets. In contrast, Benjamin André's disciplinary record has been poor; holding the most bookable offences for Rennes with five yellow cards this early on in the new season. This has been caused by occasional lapses of concentration as games wear on, as well as being dispossessed as a result of frailties when holding on to the ball, which has triggered André to foul the opponent.

However, 2016 marked a springboard to his forward-thinking play. While he may not be the greatest of finishers without a goal to his name in the calendar year in Ligue 1, his passing accuracy has

been rather impressive. In fact, he is the top performing player for Rennes with 1012 completed passes and holds a pass accuracy of 83% imposing 75% of those as forward passes (at time written).

Inspired by FC Barcelona midfield maestro Andrés Iniesta, it is no surprise then, that 'Benji' keeps the ball ticking. He always makes sure that his team-mates receive the ball to feet or plays the forward pass for a player to run onto, something which he executes with great precision. André has also become a reliable source from dead ball situations and is one of the main set-piece takers this year, curling devastating crosses that forwards love to pounce on. He is not far behind the current leader Paul-Georges Ntep for the most chances created in this 2016/17 season.

All in all, the number 21 has created four assists this year and dominated the midfield in Rennes' highest victory last season, thumping Marseille 5-2 at the Stade Vélodrome.

His personal highlight came in the second half when he sprayed the ball out exquisitely with a first time pass to Yoann Gourcuff on the left flank, who then drifted inside and scored a low drilled shot in the bottom corner. That moment demonstrated everything that encompasses the complete midfielder - quiet efficiency.

André's commanding presence and reliable distribution have brought a good balance to Rennes' overall formation. The ever-present André has truly been at the heartbeat of everything that comes good for the Black and Reds, in both defence and attack. There might be a few more yellow cards to come, but it is no coincidence that André has had a big part to play in Rennes' continual improvement, as they attempt to remain in the upper half of the table and push further still in 2017.

BENJAMIN MENDY

POSITION: DEFENDER
 CLUB: AS MONACO
 AGE: 22



Benjamin Mendy is one of France's best young players - a powerful, pacey left-back with a strong aptitude for a great cross. Having stepped up at Marseille for the best part of three seasons, 2016 was to see the player's next big career step. After all, not only did his talent alert Premier League sides, but Marseille were more than willing to let him go - with ex-president Vincent Labrune hailing his young star as 'bankable'. A weird form of praise, if you ask anyone.

Mendy enjoyed a raucous 2014/15 under the tutelage of Marcelo Bielsa. With the Argentine's preference for high-octane football, it was in this set-up that the former Le Havre man thrived.

A player keen to get forward on every occasion and adept at beating his man, Mendy lacked the edge of the Bielsa days under a more sobering brand of football under Michel.

Indeed, his first half of the 2015/16 season was mediocre at best with the player unable to translate Michel's demands on the field. Indeed, it was only in the final few weeks of 2016 that the young left-back labelled his former coach as not being "one of his best friends".

2016 started very poorly in all regards for a player expected to hit the heights quickly. He suffered a ligament injury in his first game of the year, away to Caen in the cup. Missing two months of action, he later relapsed in his third game back in mid-March.

In his absence, Marseille only won one game - with Javier Manquillo proving to be an able deputy, despite the club's awful Mendy-less form.

Mendy and Michel butted heads frequently throughout the early spring. The Spanish technician was less than pleased by Mendy's professionalism, hinting that his second injury was as a result of the player's lifestyle. It was a comment that took many aback.

Nevertheless, a solid end to the season, bookended by a Coupe de France runners-up medal soon brought Mendy's Marseille career to a close.

True enough to his word, Labrune actively began working on finding a buyer for the defender. Regarded as Marseille's primary bankable star after Michy Batshuayi, his sale was central to the club's financial future. Sure enough, it was Monaco that stumped up a €15m fee to take the player just down the south coast to the Principality.

So far under Monaco, Mendy's stock has grown. He has re-found his form from 2014/15 that put him amongst the best in his position in the league. The 22-year-old is very much favoured by Leonardo Jardim because of his attributes, and forms similarities with Djibril Sidibé on the other flank.

With free-scoring Monaco hitting new heights in France, Mendy's ability has also been showcased in Europe, turning out a fine performance against Tottenham in the Champions' League.

He has found fluidity in Jardim's system, already settling in amongst a group of superbly talented young players such as Bernardo Silva, Fabinho and Thomas Lemar.

He certainly has turned his 2016 around. If he manages to continue his form into 2017, a France call-up should not be far away for an individual who remains one of France's most precocious young talents.

THIAGO MOTTA

POSITION: MIDFIELDER

CLUB: PSG

AGE: 34



Thiago Motta, a PSG stalwart since 2012, has been with the club ever since the Qatari takeover at the turn of the decade. He may not be the most glorified of players, but the ever-consistent importance of the Italian in the PSG midfield cannot be ignored and indeed, deserves recognition.

The serenity that Motta possesses on the ball in a usually offensive-minded Paris midfield is a commodity that new boss Unai Emery is slowly realizing the significance of, as the Spaniard eases into the managerial role at the Ligue 1 champions.

On the ball, Motta can change the tempo of the game in an instant, allowing those in front of him to do the running and attacking work. Under former PSG boss Laurent Blanc, Motta was given the responsibility of dominating the lynchpin, deep-lying midfield role, making it his own.

The 34-year-old Brazilian born holding midfielder started his career at Juventus (no, not *that* Juventus, but Clube Atletico Juventus in Brazil) and quickly made a name for himself by joining up with Barcelona in 2001. During his time at the Spanish giants, Motta was crowned La Liga champion two years in a row and was named amongst the substitutes, as Barcelona defeated Arsenal in the Champions' League final 2006.

After establishing himself as an elite holding midfielder during his time with Inter Milan, where he won multiple Scudetto and a Champions' League, Motta's move to PSG has allowed him to further his career. His fitness levels and style of play have enabled the extension of his footballing life.

At PSG, he has also taken on the role of mentor to some of the other midfielders similar to him, as Les Parisiens' youngster Christopher Nkunku has mentioned in an interview with *Get French Football News*.

Fast-forward to the end of 2016 and PSG are still going through a transitional period as they try to adapt to the picky style of Unai Emery. Motta has kept his place in the side, after protracted extension negotiations in summer secured the Italian a new deal until 2017 when many expected him to return back to Italy. So far this season, Motta has played 21 times for PSG in all competitions at the time of writing, becoming a mainstay in Emery's midfield due to his obvious skill on the ball.

However, Thiago Motta might never have come under such a considerable quantity of criticism in any calendar year in his career than he did in 2016. One notable game where Motta was heavily blasted was the second leg of the Champions League' against Manchester City, where he played in the centre of a five-man midfield as Laurent Blanc went for an interesting 3-5-2 formation. Criticism was laid at the feet of the midfielder for his pedestrian pace leading some to say that if PSG wanted to become a powerhouse in Europe, they needed a sharper midfield.

Despite the criticism of Motta, he has fought off competition from the likes of Grzegorz Krychowiak who was brought in to be the more mobile defensive midfielder for a sizeable initial €30m fee. It is to Motta's credit that his level of performances have prevented the Pole from getting a run of games. Instead, Krychowiak has had to watch from the dugout for a large part of the season whilst Motta continues to act as the metronomic disrupter and distributor.

The Brazilian-Italian showed in 2016 that despite being 34, he has had the intelligence necessary to adapt his game to continue to duel alongside the best in Ligue 1 with Europe's elite.

KARL-JOHAN JOHANSSON

POSITION: GOALKEEPER
 CLUB: EA GUINGAMP
 AGE: 26



For Guingamp goalkeeper Karl-Johan Johansson, 2016 was the year in which he took the first big step to announcing himself on the European stage. Having been at the Brittany outfit for barely six months, Johansson's performances in goal in France married by his excellent consistency in the first half of the year at Danish club Randers have enabled him to force his way onto this list.

At Randers, Johansson managed to keep 10 clean sheets in the entirety of last season, including four in 2016 alone which helped Randers finish 6th in the Danish Super League.

His performances caught the attention of a few teams in Europe, but it was Guingamp who won the battle for his signature following the departure of another goalkeeper that they had previously procured from Denmark, Jonas Lössl.

Guingamp's scouting network has developed considerable relationships in Denmark over the years and through the signing of Johansson, it is safe to say that Antoine Kombouaré's men have been reaping the rewards from that good work.

Johansson quickly established himself between the sticks Guingamp, propelling himself into the role of the undisputed starter. At the time of writing, Johansson has played in all but one of Guingamp's 17 league encounters thus far.

He has conceded 14 goals in 16 matches and becomes the first ever EA Guingamp goalkeeper to have a matches played to goals conceded ratio of less than one since the town in Northern France returned to the French top flight in 2013.

Particularly noteworthy performances during Johansson's so far short time in France came against Nancy, Lyon and in a solid team showing in a 1-1 home draw against Bordeaux, which included a superb Johansson save from a Jérémy Ménez penalty.

After hitting the ground running with his club, Johansson will be seeking to make strides with his country in 2017. Johansson missed the cut for the Sweden squad for the 2016 European Championships, but he has been involved in a couple of squads since then, albeit without actually getting onto the pitch.

Moving back toward his club career, the type of saves that Johansson has been making indicates that one of his top attributes is his reflexes. He is clearly incredibly adept when it comes to shot-stopping.

However, as his red card against Toulouse showed, he does have a tendency to lose his cool. Maintaining a strong, unwavering mentality is going to be vital if Johansson wants to become Sweden's number one goalkeeper. Hopefully, he will learn from his incident vs. Toulouse and progress accordingly.

At the age of 26, Johansson is essentially coming up to the peak years of his career. He is reaching an exciting trajectory and it would be foolish to put any limit on the possible heights of his footballing career at present.

With the momentum that he is taking in his stride entering the New Year, Johansson will undoubtedly be a huge player for Guingamp for the rest of this season as they seek to mount an unlikely challenge for European places.

NABIL FÉKIR

POSITION: ATTACKER
 CLUB: OLYMPIQUE LYONNAIS
 AGE: 23



Touted by a number of top football analysts and journalists as the future of Olympique Lyonnais, Nabil Fékir has suffered a frustrating 2016. Despite showing glimpses of utter brilliance at times, the pint-sized forward has been struck by countless injuries and setbacks, stunting what has looked to be a very promising footballing career.

At the age of 23, Fékir still undoubtedly has much of what will certainly be a very fruitful career ahead of him and, with hindsight, will be happy to be at a club like Lyon, who have always done an excellent job of pushing their youth players into the first team, and excelling at academy management. Despite spending time on the books of five different Rhone-area clubs, Fékir joined Lyon in 2011, rising up into the first team over the course of the next few years, emerging as a versatile and fluent attacker.

This versatility has been both a help and a hindrance to Fékir, of whom arguments can still be made over where exactly it is that the Frenchman is best suited on the pitch. During his time with Lyon so far, Fékir has found himself playing as a number ten, on the flanks as a winger, and as a striking partner to Alexandre Lacazette.

However, due to Fékir's incessant injuries, it could perhaps be suggested that his "versatility" is in a way, a false acquisition, and that the fact he has played in so many positions suggested only that Fékir is struggling to push back into a strengthening Lyon side, injury after injury.

Making only nine appearances in total for Lyon last season, and having made only 12 so far in the 2016/17 campaign at the time of writing, Fékir has

faltered behind the other youth players such as Corentin Tolisso.

Nonetheless, his albeit brief appearances in a Lyon shirt this year have been impressive, as Fékir continues to show the potential resting inside of him. Creating over 24 chances in his 12 appearances for *Les Gones* this season at the time of writing, Fékir has moulded into a fine creator, and this highlights one of the young players' biggest qualities.

Despite his trouble with injuries, Fékir has been able to adapt and change his playing style to suit what Lyon need at any one time. If they need goals, Fékir can move up top and provide firepower (scoring three goals so far this season). If they need to penetrate the flanks, Fékir can move out wide and cause full-backs problems. In need of someone to start creating chances? Fékir has the precision and ability to do that consistently too.

Truly, this young Frenchman is a special young talent, with dribbling abilities that, at his best, are rivalled by nobody in France at all, despite the problems he has had to battle through in such early stages of his career.

As 2017 comes rushing around the corner, we can hope for only one thing for Fékir. A run in this Lyon side, and an injury-free year. Should he get that, there is no doubt in our minds that Nabil Fékir could end up being one of the hottest names in world football in the years to come.

MAJEED WARIS

POSITION: ATTACKER
 CLUB: FC LORIENT
 AGE: 25



Majeed Waris is certainly a man with a journeyed career, making him an interesting selection for this year's edition of the GFFN 100. The small but very fast Lorient frontman has been linked to so many foreign teams in recent times, notably attracting the interest of Premier League sides such as Stoke City and Sunderland in the summer. The Ghanaian has been an influential figure in an increasingly unpredictable Lorient side, adding goals and causing Ligue 1 defences so many problems with his pace. However, one of Waris' main issues is that you never truly know or believe whether he is settled at a club or not. Five clubs in five and a half years suggests that the latter is more often the case than the former. Although Waris has impressed almost everywhere he has been, he never seemed to be totally committed to a club for the long haul, which is a real shame given his obvious talents and skills as a footballer. At the age of 25, Majeed Waris still has much more to offer in Ligue 1 and beyond if he knuckles down.

Waris was born in the city of Tamale in the Northern region of Ghana in the year 1991. He began his football career at the Right to Dream academy in Accra, Ghana, a now famous youth centre for developing and nurturing fledgling talents in West Africa. After a successful time at the academy, Waris moved to England to Hartpury College in Gloucestershire where he stayed for a year or so, featuring for National League side Forest Green Rovers's reserve side.

In 2010, Waris moved to Sweden to play for Allsvenskan side BK Hacken. Waris enjoyed a great few years in Sweden, becoming the first player to score five goals in a single league game this century in 2012 when he netted the milestone figure against Norrköping. This match, along with other impressive performances, earned Waris the title of Sweden's player of the year. A loan move to Valenciennes was a very successful spell for the Ghanaian international, sandwiched between two difficult periods at Spartak Moscow and Trabzonspor respectively. When Lorient

took the plunge to sign Waris last year, they were obviously suitably impressed with his performances at Valenciennes, convinced that his skill-set matched the requirements that Ligue 1 has in store for attackers and were keen to add the pacey striker to their ranks.

Due to his small but wiry stature, Waris is extremely quick off the mark, a trait that can both enable him to leave his defenders chasing shadows, and also cause him to fall over his own feet all in the space of a few minutes. On his day, Waris can cause even the top sides in Ligue 1 many problems, as he is an impressive finisher: his goal rate of just under one in two matches for Lorient certainly evidences this. He has recently performed better as a left winger, as opposed to a central striker despite his obvious finishing capacity. Statistics show that Waris has an average performance rating of around 7.5 per game as a left-winger compared to around 6.5 in the central striker role. This is further proved by the fact that Waris' four Ligue 1 goals this term have come from this position. Against the top sides though, Waris struggles to do the defensive duties which are necessary for a winger in the modern era.

It will be interesting to see how Waris continues to perform at Lorient, as the club have been struggling so much this season at the bottom of Ligue 1. However, we get the impression that at this stage of his career, Waris is more suited to playing for a 'smaller' team, needing the feeling of being a key element to his side, his struggles in Russia and Turkey suggest this to be the case.

We would love to see him achieve proper consistency which is the main entity that his game lacks. However, plying your trade for a team which is odds on to be relegated come the end of the 2016/17 campaign may not be the best platform for Waris to eliminate his inconsistent performances.

EDER

POSITION: ATTACKER

CLUB: LILLE

AGE: 29

Born in Guissau, in Guinea-Bissau, Eder has come a long way to prove doubters that he can be a reliable striker at the top level.

His family left the African country for Portugal when he was three years old and, his parents not being able to afford to raise five children, Eder, as the eldest, was taken care of by a children's institution in Coimbra. There, he was given a strict catholic religion and it is also where he started playing football.

He made his debut on August 24th 2008 aged 21 (which is quite late, frankly) for local side Academica Coimbra. He did not score a lot of goals for them though (12 in 83 games) and then made a move on a free to Sporting Braga - a much bigger club. There he began hitting double figures (13 goals in 2012/13 and 10 goals in 2014/15) which turned him into a desirable commodity for overseas scouts. It was at this moment that Swansea decided to fork out the €7m fee to acquire his services.

To say that he was not given a proper chance in Wales is an understatement. Out of 13 league appearances, Eder only started two games (in which he was both substituted) and out of his 11 substitute appearances for the Swans, Eder entered the fray at or after the 80th minute on seven occasions. Eder was basically the player used to replace Bafétimbi Gomis when the current Marseille man was having a bad day or was too tired to properly hold the line up.

Swansea let Eder go on loan to Lille in January 2016 though and there he was given a proper chance. The start of the year took a turn for the worse for *Les Dogues* (11th at the winter break) with no wins in their opening four calendar year league games (including a calamitous 1-3 loss at home to Troyes), but Eder's start against Caen coincided with one of the club's best runs: 15 games, 10 wins, four draws, one defeat.

In truth, Lille were in desperate need of a striker. Hervé Renard (sacked in November 2015) bought



two forwards from Ligue 2 - Baptiste Guillaume and Seydou Guirassy - who did not make the cut which left them Gadji Tallo as their only centre-forward option. Eder stepped in and, although he did not initially score that many goals, his overall movement made other members of a 4-3-3 play scintillating one-touch football that was too much to handle for most of Ligue 1's defences. Wingers such as Amalfitano, Bauthéac, Benzia, Boufal, and Rony Lopes enjoyed great spells in the squad.

At EURO 2016, Eder made cameo appearances for Portugal but did score the all-important tournament-winning goal against France in the final. That goal proved what kind of player he is: not blessed with immeasurable natural talent but a footballer who can provide very important goals when needed by putting himself about.

The summer was also significant for Eder's future. Thankfully, his six goals were enough to convince the Lille board to buy him from Swansea for €4.5m. Back at Lille, Sofiane Boufal was sold to Southampton and replaced by Nicolas De Préville from Reims, but injuries and very poor defending prevented Lille continuing their excellent form which they had in the second half of 2015/16 into the 2016/17 campaign.

Lille's league position from August until now indicates that Antonetti's management was poor as things are improving under caretaker manager Patrick Collot as proven by their excellent win against Caen (4-2) in December, a game in which Eder unfortunately injured himself after 20 minutes (he did score the opening goal though).

Lille will be hoping that their reliable striker (six goals in 15 games this term at the time of writing, he should be aiming for double figures at a minimum for this campaign) can come back to further help wingers develop their play. It promises to be another fine second half of the season for *Les Dogues* if he does.

JEAN LOUIS LECA

POSITION: GOALKEEPER

CLUB: SC BASTIA

AGE: 31



In many ways, Jean-Louis Leca represents the essential nature of Bastia, for better or for worse. Like many of the club's other players (Gilles Cioni, Yannick Cahuzac), he has a long-time affinity for the team and the culture of Corsican football, even if he had sought greener pastures at one point.

His success in the footballing world is somewhat qualified, and what there is of it has come as a result of graft, rather than natural talent. He is a bit undersized, but has succeeded in punching above his weight, persevering despite sometimes long odds and limited means.

Born in Bastia, Leca came through the club's academy and made his debut at the age of 20, in a forgettable season that saw the club relegated. He was given more opportunities when Nicolas Penneteau, the veteran first-choice 'keeper, was sold in the summer of 2006, but ended up splitting time with Nigerian international Austin Ejide for the next two seasons before moving on to Valenciennes.

To say his time with the northern club was frustrating would be an understatement; he rarely saw the pitch, playing as the third choice behind Penneteau and the veteran Willy Grondin, and also suffered an ACL injury in the 2011/12 season.

Humbled, he returned to SC Bastia, where he resumed his status a perennial backup, first to Mickaël Landreau and then to Paris Saint-Germain loanee Alphonse Areola. Finally, he became first choice last season, and Leca decidedly impressed.

Despite playing behind a creaky defence, his confidence grew through the course of the season. He finished with 14 clean sheets in 34 appearances, allowing just 35 goals in. SC Bastia, after struggling in the season's early going, eventually retained their top flight status with a relatively comfortable fourteenth place finish, spurred on by the replacement of

Ghislain Printant by François Ciccolini.

Undersized at just 5' 10", Leca makes his mark with superb organization of his back-line and good reflex saves. His positioning and handling are generally steady as well, leading the league in saves per 90 minutes.

In attempting to compensate for his small stature, he is however often too eager to control balls in the box or rush off his line to battle an opposing attacker, and his tackling is, to be charitable, rather agricultural.

Booked four times last season, he has already equalled that total this season, to go with a red card against Lyon. The sending-off was a bit unfair, but Leca's style of play is certainly in keeping with the stereotype of the fiery Corsican, as SC Bastia are traditionally very poor in their discipline throughout the squad.

His distribution is also pitiable, completing less than half of his passes. Part of that is down to SC Bastia trying to hit opponents on the counter rather than building play from the back, but it nonetheless remains a black mark on Leca's record.

Still, though, given his propensity to pull off the odd stunning save and good confidence overall, Leca is well worth watching, if not for the purist then for sheer entertainment value.

YOUSOUF SABALY

POSITION: DEFENDER
 CLUB: BORDEAUX
 AGE: 23



After two loan spells with Evian-Thonon-Gaillard in 2013/14 and 2014/15 and also at Nantes in 2015/16, Youssouf Sabaly is now into his third consecutive loan spell at Bordeaux.

A successful defensive campaign with FC Nantes which included two goals from right-back, Sabaly created the impression that he had his sights set on returning back to the French capital - declaring that *"the aim has always been to play for PSG."* But the summer of 2016 brought with it news that Sabaly perhaps would not have wanted to hear.

Thomas Meunier's arrival at PSG ensured that Sabaly joined up with the Girondins' pre-season tour in Morbihan rather than training at the Camp des Loges in Paris.

He is in danger of not being part of Unai Emery's plans, despite PSG recently extending the defender's contract for two more years, making him now registered with the club until 2020. Clearly, he still has time to prove his worth playing week in, week out in Ligue 1 under the watchful eyes of PSG representatives, but not everybody is destined to play for the division's strongest outfit.

Nevertheless, Sabaly is a fighter and understands there are different pathways to take before reaching where he wants to be. After all, he is still young and his progress has been commendable.

Part of the U20 World Cup winning team for France in 2013 which included the likes of Paul Pogba, the defender has always had key figures in French football admiring him from a very young age. In fact, new Bordeaux manager Jocelyn Gourvennec had been keeping an eye on Youssouf Sabaly since his teenage years in the CFA league with PSG.

Speaking in September 2016, the Girondins' boss praised the young PSG product for his *"maturity in his game... it was no surprise for me, on his good start*

to the season. No doubt one of the best in the position this season. As a well-behaved young man and a good listener, I think he'll continue to progress."

To be managed by an individual with such great faith in you as both a footballer and a man will be extremely comforting for Sabaly and can only be a positive step in the right direction with regards to his football development.

Having started every game for Bordeaux this term, he has won 32 tackles, 47 interceptions and 81 clearances (at the time of writing) - an impressive set of statistics relative to his Ligue 1 colleagues. More significantly, Sabaly has also added another weapon to his style of play.

During his time with Nantes, the full-back did not bomb forward and create chances as much as he would have liked to. However, Sabaly has already achieved four assists this season and has showed more signs of his attacking play, most notably providing both assists in a 2-1 win against Lorient, surging forward with pinpoint crosses on the right flank.

As a whole, Youssouf Sabaly's final destination still remains unclear, and soon enough he will be faced with a decision that affects many fringe players under contract at PSG.

But the immediate future is bright for the defender, as he is currently holding down his place as a regular right-back under the supervision of a manager who adores him.

HILTON

POSITION: DEFENDER
 CLUB: MONTPELLIER HSC
 AGE: 39



At the ripe old age of 39, Hilton is the oldest player featured in this year's GFFN 100. However, as a cornerstone of a Montpellier squad that has slowly been improving following the appointment of Frédéric Hantz at the beginning of the calendar year, it would have been highly unfair for the Brazilian defender to be left out.

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

Hilton had a few choices but opted to join Servette in Switzerland and soon became a fixture at the back. He even managed to notch a goal against Hertha BSC in the then UEFA Cup. From there Hilton moved to France, initially on loan to SC Bastia.

Hilton's compact performances with the Corsican side earned him a permanent move to RC Lens, where he became a fan favourite, largely as a result of his passionate personality, scoring eight goals in over 120 appearances over a four-year spell. Then came a somewhat problematic move to Marseille, where Hilton (amongst other players) was the victim of an armed robbery of his house, suffering both physically and mentally from the experience.

The enormity of the trauma he had to deal with almost made him return home to Brazil, but current club Montpellier came calling in 2011 and tempted the likeable Brazilian to stay in the south of France where he signed an initial one-year deal with

MHSC.

Since moving to Montpellier, Hilton has defied his years by putting in consistently good performances on a regular basis and has stepped forward as a fantastic and emblematic leader for the club. Despite his age, Hilton still does not look out of place in a Ligue 1 back four, and after recording an impressive 63%-win rate in duels so far this season, along with collecting zero defensive errors, the *La Paillade* veteran is showing no real signs of slowly down.

Though Montpellier will have to soon start searching for potential replacements for Hilton, their current position in Ligue 1 puts them in no real rush to spend big in January. In fact, thanks to a string of excellent performances from Hilton and Daniel Congré in particular, Montpellier are outside favourites for securing a spot in Europe next season. That is despite the fact that crucial attacking element Casimir Ninga has picked up an ACL injury.

With Hilton himself stating that he would like to keep playing for as long as possible, it certainly looks like the Brazilian leader will be around for a little while longer at least, even his current deal expires at the end of the 2016/17 campaign.

When the day finally does come for Hilton to hang up his boots, we are sure that many Ligue 1 fans, of Montpellier and other clubs alike, will be sad to see him go and miss this ever-present Ligue 1 character and combative central defensive talent.

KHALID BOUTAÏB

POSITION: ATTACKER
 CLUB: STRASBOURG
 AGE: 29



Khalid Boutaïb has been an absolute superstar in Ligue 2 for Strasbourg this season, and was also a key player for Gazelec Ajaccio last campaign, despite their relegation from Ligue 1.

At the time of writing, Boutaïb has eight goals in 17 Ligue 2 matches for Strasbourg following his summer transfer move, and will be a huge part of Strasbourg's promotion push, as they sit just adrift of the play-off spot.

The Moroccan may not be the youngest at the age of 29, but his footballing instincts, specifically with regards to positioning and skill in front of goal are assets that will undoubtedly enable him to play for several more years.

The striker had been floating around multiple clubs in the lower regions of French football, and last season when he made his big break in the top division with minnows Gazelec Ajaccio, was when he was first properly introduced to a larger audience.

Despite being relegated after a spirited start to their very first season in Ligue 1, Gazelec's hit man Boutaïb was a standout player, chipping in with six Ligue 1 goals that gave his side slight hope of surviving the drop. At the end of the previous season when the inevitable was confirmed with the relegation of Gazelec, Boutaïb became a hot property, especially being a free agent, and Strasbourg pounced first for the Moroccan international, a move made by the then newly-promoted to Ligue 2 side that appears to be a shrewd one.

Khalid Boutaïb is a polyvalent forward, with the capacity required for scoring a multitude of different types of goals. For Gazelec last season, he scored a thundering header at the Stade Louis II against Monaco where he came in from behind the defender, beat him to the header and powerfully guided the ball into the far corner.

He could be described as a penalty-box predator, feeding off of the mistakes of defenders and calmly finishing past the goalkeeper. His impressive start for Strasbourg has proven that given a good amount of games and good service, Boutaïb can be deadly.

Not only has he made a good start to his career with Strasbourg, but Boutaïb made his international debut for Morocco under former Lille boss Hervé Renard on March 26th. Boutaïb made his first international steps in a qualification match for the next African Cup of Nations.

He will likely be going to the African Cup of Nations if Renard believes he can continue his Strasbourg form for his country, as his performances helped Morocco finish top of Group F in the qualification rounds.

Adding to his debut for the national side, Boutaïb also bagged his first international goal in a friendly against Canada, making 2016 a good year personally for the striker in front of goal, both for club and country, despite his relegation to the second division with Gazelec.

So going by the start he has had for Strasbourg in Ligue 2 and for Morocco in the African Cup of Nations qualifiers, all of the stars appear to be aligning for 2017 to be a huge year for the 29-year-old. He could fire his club to promotion and help his country deliver the national trophy this winter.

The will-power that this man has shown to continue to persevere when his big break never appeared to be coming in the early stages of his career is exactly the human quality he will need to achieve those two mammoth tasks.

JÉRÉMY MOREL

POSITION: DEFENDER
 CLUB: OLYMPIQUE LYONNAIS
 AGE: 32



2015/16 was a season of two halves for Olympique Lyonnais. The glaring statistic is the following: 26 points gained from the first half of the season languishing in a horribly low 9th position at the winter break; 39 points from the final period of the campaign with 2nd place gained after an emphatic 6-1 home win against Monaco in the penultimate game.

The change in management is the obvious explanation but upon taking charge of the dressing room, Bruno Génésio needed players he could trust (or the "cadres" as the French call them). One of those was Jérémie Morel who was one of the first names on Génésio's team sheet (in fairness, Morel was in part helped by the injury-ravaged season of Henri Bédimo).

It is true that Morel did not start 2015/16 as Fournier's #1 left-back choice but sometimes, injuries to the competition are more of a blessing in disguise than a tragedy. Morel was the left-back choice by process of elimination but he sometimes also partnered Mapou Yanga-Mbiwa or Bakary Koné in the central defence with varying degrees of success.

Morel was severely tested by the opposition's attack at times, especially when he lacked harmony with his centre back partner, but he also proved to be a great option as an experienced head in the heart of defence (he played there at Marseille with Nicolas N'Koulou) letting Bédimo do the pressing from left-back (when he was fit). It is what happened in late February 2016 in a 2-1 victory over PSG and it worked very well. Lyon were pressing the current champions and had Morel for security at the back. In short, Morel had varying degrees of success.

Then came the summer and Bédimo left Lyon, with Polish international Maciej Rybus brought in to provide competition and to add to Lyon's squad depth, after their direct qualification for the Champions' League. Morel was not phased though and

began the season in his natural position, left-back, welcoming his ex-team-mate from Marseille, Nicolas N'Koulou to Lyon in the meantime. Morel did not have time to relax though as Génésio quickly tried to alter system for the first time during his tenure from a back four to three at the back with Morel playing as the left-sided central defender (generally partnering Mammana and Yanga-Mbiwa). Rybus was used as the left-winger in a 3-5-2 system.

Génésio's tinkering was largely unsuccessful and Lyon returned to a more traditional system (4-4-2/4-3-3) with Morel returning to his favoured left-back spot. He is not a particularly dangerous full-back going forward. Morel was certainly not ever blessed with pace, and that has never more so been the case at his current age of 32.

However, he brings serenity to a Lyon back four that severely needs it. Génésio has given 19-year old Mouctar Diakhaby his chance to partner Yanga-Mbiwa and N'Koulou (neither have been particularly good) but Morel is a welcome plan B should injuries hit Lyon hard (and they have: N'Koulou has been out since late October and will not be fully fit until 2017).

Then you have Rafael who brings anything but calm to a defence. In fact, Morel can be described as Rafael's opposite in every way: while Rafael is more effective in going forward and providing an attacking outlet to his side, his defending is rash and clumsy; Morel is focused and hard to beat when defending but brings little offensively.

At 32, he is still one of Ligue 1's most reliable, defensive-minded left-backs.

YOUNES BELHANDA

POSITION: MIDFIELDER

CLUB: OGC NICE

AGE: 26



Given the fanfare that surrounded the arrivals of Dante and Mario Balotelli, Nice's late move for Younes Belhanda was something of an afterthought. Still just 26, Belhanda had been instrumental in Montpellier's surprising title run in 2011/12, recording 12 goals and being named the best young player in the league. He was a somewhat diminished presence the following season, and his departure to Dynamo Kiev in the summer of 2013 was not exactly greeted by any great amount of hand-wringing.

His time in the Ukraine was productive enough as he helped the club win successive league titles as well as a pair of cups, but the earlier part of last season saw him fall out of favour. Having played just 30 minutes in the Champions' League, Belhanda's frustration was palpable, and he secured an admirable loan move to Schalke as the Bundesliga side competed in the knockout rounds of the Europa League and pushed for a top four finish.

In Gelsenkirchen, Belhanda's versatility might have been his undoing. Capable of playing as a creative midfielder or on either wing, he was a regular presence for the club, but a constant flux in tactics and his own position saw his effectiveness limited.

The move to Nice, then, has done much to improve his reputation. Taking his place in a 3-5-2 just off of an orthodox centre forward, Belhanda has recorded just three assists and three goals, numbers which might make his contributions seem limited, but there is more to his game than those statistics would suggest.

Both he and Jean Michael Seri are superb at linking play with quick, incisive passing and Belhanda's wiry strength, pace and dribbling ability means the Ivorian is thus afforded much more space in which to affect the match.

This new role might come as a surprise for some, but Belhanda has clearly sublimated his inclinations towards the audacious in an attempt to aid a precociously skilled midfield. He is averaging one of the fewest shots per match totals of his career, but his willingness to work within Nice's mazy, possession-based game means that the quality of his chances has drastically improved vis-a-vis previous situations.

While he is unlikely to remain in France past the end of the season, his newly humble approach will undoubtedly put Belhanda in good stead as he seeks to move on from his Ukrainian adventure.

With a bit more discipline in his defensive work-rate, Belhanda would be a complete player, and he still has the right combination of age and class to appeal to a Champions' League level team.

Like many players in Ligue 1, he will undoubtedly be missed when Morocco compete in January's Africa Cup of Nations, but good performances there as well as keeping Nice afloat in the title race should put him in good stead as regards his future.

He must be wary of not becoming the next Hatem Ben Arfa, in trying to succeed at a club beyond his talents, but if Premier League clubs are willing to take on the likes of Henri Saivet and Wahbi Khazri, surely Belhanda will find a suitor at a higher level than Ukraine's Dynamo Kiev, with all due respect to our Ukrainian friends.

FLORIAN THAUVIN

POSITION: MIDFIELDER
 CLUB: OLYMPIQUE DE MARSEILLE
 AGE: 23



You could excuse Florian Thauvin for thinking that 2016 would be a difficult year. Having already failed to ignite at Newcastle United towards the end of 2015 following a high profile €17m move from Marseille, the 23-year-old was already being heavily criticised across England as the calendar year commenced with talk of a move away to earn him some playing time after a largely failed four-month experience in England.

Who else but to pick him than...Marseille. In effect, it was the only team that could have under FIFA rules, with Thauvin having already turned out for two sides in the 2015/16 campaign.

But OM was seen as a place where the young star could return to a kinder environment, away from the howling and jeers of the Premier League and not least Alan Shearer. Having been forcefully moved on by Vincent Labrune in 2015 for the club's financial gain, Thauvin was keen to make more of an impact in his second stint.

An impact he did make, though not necessarily a good one. His second debut for OM commenced off the bench against Montpellier and saw him earn a red card for a late challenge on Vitorino Hilton ten minutes later. He would also go on to miss the Clasique against PSG before participating in five consecutive 1-1 draws as OM - under then-boss Michel - flirted dangerously with relegation.

Things came to a head in March for both club and player. Thauvin did not initially have a great relationship with the demanding OM supporters. Having been away for half a season, he was perhaps unfortunate to be caught up amidst the anger and protests enveloping the club before the game against Rennes.

When OM went down 3-0 in the most vitriolic environment the Stade Vélodrome had seen for years, he

took it upon himself to drag his side forward. Thauvin reduced the arrears with a sumptuous curling effort. OM would go on to lose 2-5, though his effort was noted and commended. This would prove to be the turning point in his Marseille career.

The winger went on superb run late in the season, though his effort was keenly felt more in OM's Coupe de France journey. Having scored the winner in the semi-final against Sochaux, he drilled a low shot which bamboozled Salvatore Sirigu in the show-piece against PSG to equalise for OM.

He quickly confessed his love for the jersey, having also been voted the club's player of the month in April and May, finishing third in the season award. Relationships had been mended.

Throughout the summer, there had been growing calls for Thauvin to return to OM, particularly in the aftermath of Newcastle's relegation. A move to Lazio almost transpired, before OM thrashed out an 11th hour deal to bring the winger 'home'. That Thauvin was willing to take a pay cut only endeared him more to the Marseille faithful.

As such, he is currently Marseille's best player in a side shorn of much of their top talent. With four goals and three assists to his name at the time of writing, he is becoming more central to the squad's successes.

With 2017 set to promise so much for OM under new investment, Thauvin would do well to continue on his trajectory as he seeks to emulate the likes of Steve Mandanda in the eyes of OM supporters. For now, Thauvin seems to be able to do no wrong. He ends the year significantly better off from the position in which he started.

JIMMY BRIAND

POSITION: ATTACKER
 CLUB: EA GUINGAMP
 AGE: 31



When Jimmy Briand returned to Ligue 1 in the summer of 2015 at the age of 29, you could be forgiven for thinking that Guingamp had made an error. After all, this was a player who had scored just three goals in 30 league games over the course of the previous season with Hannover in Germany. He looked to have lost that yard of speed that had given him the edge in his younger years. But Guingamp saw a player of vast Ligue 1 experience, a player who would not so much be an exceptional forward but certainly an exceptional leader inside the dressing room, and gave him a chance. Over the course of the last 12 months, Briand has proved that they made the right decision.

Joining a Guingamp team with one of the weaker squads in Ligue 1, Briand knew that scoring goals and winning games would not come as easily as it did in his previous years in the league with Lyon and Rennes. In fact, during the 2015/16 season it quickly became clear that Guingamp were going to be in a relegation scrap.

Going into the winter break and the New Year, Guingamp had just lost five straight games, and were sitting firmly inside the relegation zone. It was time for the senior players in the squad to step up and steer the club to safety. Briand himself needed to up his game, having scored just three goals in the first half of the season.

One of the major turning points in Guingamp's season came on match day 23, when they visited fellow strugglers Toulouse in the definition of a six-pointer at the bottom of the table. Guingamp took an early lead, but when Toulouse equalised from the spot it appeared the visitors would not come away with the crucial three points they desired. But, with 15 minutes to go, the ball broke to Briand inside the Toulouse box, and he slotted away a low left-footed strike to give his side what would turn out to be a vital win.

Whilst the Frenchman did not score many goals over the course of the season, when he did it was at some crucial moments, an asset that is invaluable to a team near the bottom of the league.

The real masterstroke that has led to Briand's success at Guingamp has been the fact that he has undergone a position change. In his previous years in Ligue 1, Briand would operate as a winger, using his pace and power to his advantage. However, Guingamp already had some very talented wide players, and Briand seemed to be becoming less and less effective there as his age caught up to him, so first Jocelyn Gourvennec and now Antoine Kombouaré have decided to position the Frenchman as a striker.

Standing at 6 feet tall, he has enough aerial presence to trouble defenders, whilst his finishing inside the box has also improved since his time as a winger. The switch to striker has allowed Briand to lead the team from the front, and whilst his goal-scoring record does not necessarily stand out, he contributes to Guingamp's style of football in other ways, notably through his link-up play.

The ultimate confirmation of Briand's good work came in the summer of 2016, when he was made captain of the club.

Under the Frenchman's captaincy, the club many tipped for relegation at the start of the season have upset all the odds, as they stand just outside the European places near the top of the Ligue 1 table. They have had standout wins against Marseille, Lyon and PSG already, and if Guingamp continue their rich vein of form, 2017 could be a very exciting year for Jimmy Briand and his team.

DANTE

POSITION: DEFENDER

CLUB: OGC NICE

AGE: 33

At 33, many had thought that Dante's zenith was behind him. However, the healing waters around Nice are working their magic again, as they did so excellently for Hatem Ben Arfa the season before, and this Brazilian old head is marshalling and imparting his vast footballing knowledge on one of the youngest teams in Europe. The results have been nothing short of phenomenal.

For those unaware, this is not the first time that Dante has stepped foot into Ligue 1, having joined Lille from Juventude in 2004 but only playing on 12 occasions. He emerged to prominence, however, at that German club, Borussia Mönchengladbach, becoming a stalwart in a side that clawed up from relegation troubles to the European places in the Bundesliga.

In 2012, he moved to Bayern Munich for a reported fee of €4.7m, where he lifted three Bundesliga titles, two DFB Pokals, the Champions' League and the UEFA Super Cup in a successful three-year spell.

He joined Wolfsburg last summer for an undisclosed fee but his final season in Germany was less successful as *the Wolves* fell out of the European places and the Brazilian accidentally injured his team-mate Bas Dost in training.

In stepped his former boss Lucien Favre this summer, who convinced him to return to France with his exciting OGC Nice side. With a specific role as part of a back three that would include the experienced Paul Baysse and teenager Malang Sarr, Dante would be the glue to hold both of them together.

It has worked. *Les Aiglons* sit on top of Ligue 1 at the time of writing with the best defence of the division, having conceded just ten goals in 16 games. Dante has played in 13 of them, with some of the most recent fixtures requiring him and Sarr to rotate back to a traditional back four but it is a credit to both that



they have not capitulated in Baysse's absence.

As the middle of the three, Dante's role is actually less defensive than it initially seems. Seen as the main distributor from defence that sets the team's style, his 94.9% pass completion rate shows his exceptional efficiency to recycle possession and get the team into a rhythm.

Adding to that is the fact that he is making less than a tackle a game and just over an interception a game. The experienced Brazilian is not the last line of defence, he is more of the cleaner that takes the ball once it has been won back and finds the right person to give it to, with an exceptional range of passing.

Dante also added a couple of assists in the win against Toulouse, two long raking balls from the back that split TFC's defence, resulting in an eventual, strong 3-0 win.

This is an excellent indicator as to how essential Dante's presence is for Lucien Favre's team's style to be successful, that he can do a little bit of everything from such a deep position.

Although Dante might have lost a good few yards of pace, if he ever really had any, Dante was undoubtedly a great piece of business from Favre and one of the greatest French summer transfer window coups of 2016.

An experienced head, a natural leader, a man who genuinely loves football and cares about the development of OGC Nice's younger talents, Favre has in Dante a crucial element for the latter stages of the surprising Ligue 1 title race that *Les Aiglons* find themselves to be leading as we head into the winter break.

THOMAS MANGANI

POSITION: MIDFIELDER
 CLUB: ANGERS SCO
 AGE: 29



After playing a starring role in Angers excellent 2015/16 Ligue 1 campaign, Thomas Mangani has struggled to get going at times for *Les Scoistes* this season. However, after the departure of midfield counterpart Romain Saïss to Wolverhampton Wanderers in the English Championship, Mangani will need to play perhaps an even more vital role for his side.

As one of the stars for Angers SCO last season, Thomas Mangani won plaudits, especially from those at *Get French Football News*, for his diligence and technical ability in the central midfield area, becoming somewhat of a club hero since his arrival from Serie A club, Chievo.

Mangani has not always been quite so appreciated in his career. In 2013, the Monaco youth product made a permanent move to Nancy after a loan spell at the club, and his fine form in the 2013/14 season helped him to catch the attention of recruiters from Chievo. The Franco-Italian then spent a frustrating few months at the Veronese club, making just two appearances.

However in February, Mangani moved back to France, signing on loan until the end of the season with Angers. It would prove to be an inspired piece of business as Mangani would go on to play a prominent role within the club's push for promotion, making fifteen Ligue 2 appearances and scoring two goals.

Unfortunately for manager Stéphane Moulin and his men, Mangani's influence on Angers this season has not been quite so prominent or impressive. Appearing just 12 times so far at the time of writing this season, and completing 90 minutes in only four of those games, Mangani is no longer occupying the role as the heartbeat of Angers central midfield.

Despite wowing many with his incredible left-foot, Mangani's average pass distance has dropped considerably this year, averaging 19m. As someone who was renowned in the Angers side last season for spreading the play and pushing the game further into the opposition's half, Mangani has clearly struggled this year when in possession.

A lot of this could well be down to the aforementioned absence of midfield partner, Romain Saïss. A natural ball winner and tough tackler, Saïss' game allowed Mangani a lot more time on the ball last season; time being something that Mangani sees considerably less of this year.

Mangani also grew popular last season for his deadliness from a set piece, but so far has failed to score once for Angers. Perhaps this could be down to receiving less game time. However, a lot of Angers success in the 2015/16 campaign came from benefiting from the finest of margins, free-kicks included, a factor in which Mangani played a crucial part.

Despite his shortcomings this season, Mangani continues to exert his influence on the Angers midfield. As a long serving and well respected member of the Angers squad, Mangani is one of those rare players who can have an effect on a team without necessarily being on the pitch.

Though perhaps lacking the kind of pace required to battle for 90 minutes week in, week out in Ligue 1, Mangani has made a name for himself as a shrewd operator and as a clever passer, and if Angers SCO are to survive another year in Ligue 1, they will need this man more than ever.

ALEXIS BLIN

POSITION: MIDFIELDER
 CLUB: TOULOUSE FC
 AGE: 20



"You're dirty kids, you're dirty kids!" was the cry of Toulouse manager Pascal Dupraz as his charges returned triumphant to the home dressing room at the Stade Municipal. His 'dirty kids' had just beaten the previously indomitable perennial champions PSG to move into the European places in Ligue 1 during late September.

When the now cult figure of Dupraz arrived at Toulouse in March, Les Violettes were ten points adrift from safety with as many games to play. Incredibly they survived and in no small part down to a young generation of players who had come to the fore during the reign of previous boss Dominique Arribagé.

These 'dirty kids' as Dupraz playfully referred to them as, included stoic teenage centre back Issa Diop, 17-year-old Bambi-esque keeper Alban Lafont and slick midfielder Yann Bodiger, scorer of the goal that kept them up on the final day. However, within this cohort, the under-the-radar presence of Alexis Blin is arguably the greatest influence on the new look Toulouse under the inspirational Dupraz.

Blin is the type of player that goes unnoticed until his effect on the smooth running of the side is removed. Then, he is sorely missed. Blin played every minute of the league campaign this season up until an Achilles injury in late October. At this point Toulouse were unbeaten at home and challenging for a top three spot having dispensed with PSG and Monaco along the way.

However, since then, Blin has been struggling with the intermittent heel issue that has seen him drop in and out of the side, and Dupraz's men have seriously faltered, winning just two of the next nine games. Although there have been a number of contributing factors to their drop in performance level, Blin's injury has been the most glaring.

"I have a fairly specific role in the team, which is to stay behind and protect the defence. It is true that it is rare that I really project myself before the goal, although I could do more," remarked Blin recently.

The young Frenchman is modest about his role in the side but, goals aside, it is he who makes Toulouse tick.

His ability to cover a large amount of ground with little fuss in front of the back four provides valuable protection for his defence, while his calm efficient use of the ball cannot be underestimated as he effortlessly and efficiently enables the likes of Bodiger and Oscar Trejo to play off of him.

Dupraz is well aware of Blin's talents, directly linking Toulouse's slump in form to the absence of his mid-field sentinel on several occasions; while earlier in the year, singing his praises: "What a burst of energy against Bastia... He is a smart player, effective recovery, raises a little more head and can therefore take in the information before passing the ball."

Despite his fresh-faced appearance, Blin's mature and assured style give him the feel of a player ten years his senior and Dupraz is well aware that this 'dirty kid' could be pivotal if Toulouse are to have any chance in a race for European places come May, in what is turning out to be one of the most competitive races at the top of the table in recent Ligue 1 history.

MORGAN SANSON

POSITION: MIDFIELDER
 CLUB: MONTPELLIER HSC
 AGE: 22



Morgan Sanson fully deserves his place in this year's edition of the GFFN 100 after a positive year for club side Montpellier. The talented 22 year old has become much more of an influential figure for Montpellier in recent months, adding goals and assists to his game.

This, coupled with his capability of performing well in several other positions other than his original central midfield role, make him one of the first names on the team sheet for Montpellier coach Frédéric Hantz. Last year had its ups and downs for Sanson, as he was ruled out for several months with a cruciate ligament injury which hampered his progress somewhat but in 2016/17; Sanson seems fully back on track.

Sanson was born in central France in the commune of Saint-Doulchard in 1994. He began his football career at local side Gazelec Bourges in the year 2000 before moving to the town's main team Bourges 18, where his development continued until a move to a much bigger team in Le Mans (until their serious financial problems caused them to go bankrupt and lose their professional status) came about in 2009.

Sanson originally played for the "B" team at Le Mans before impressing so much that he was moved to the first team in 2012. His standout performances for the club in Ligue 2 earned the talented youngster a move to Ligue 1 outfit and recent Champions of France Montpellier in 2013 after just one season with the Le Mans first team.

Montpellier as a club have struggled somewhat since their spectacular title win back in 2012 with many great players leaving the club for the Premier League and so on. However, since his arrival Sanson has been a mainstay and the club have always been very keen to keep him in the South of France for the long run.

His style of play is somewhat typical of a well-coached technical midfielder, he is a good dribbler, decent passer and athletic, giving Sanson exceptional versatility. Statistically, Sanson has a pass completion rate of 80% so far this season at the time of writing, which is pretty impressive considering 72% of those were forward passes. The young midfielder has scored his three Ligue 1 goals this season from each of the positions that he has played in; centre midfield, right wing and left wing.

He has also produced an impressive six assists so far this campaign and interestingly, all of the assists were given when Sanson was playing in his most comfortable position of centre midfield. It is understandable why Hantz elects to play Sanson on the flanks, especially away from home against superior opposition, as he is a hard worker, disciplined and has no qualms about tracking back to help out his team in defence. However, he is intelligent to the point where he is rivalling Ryad Boudebouz as the side's main creator.

It will be interesting to see what the future holds for Morgan Sanson as he has had many admirers from at home and abroad regarding a possible transfer with teams such as Marseille, Lyon, Bournemouth and AC Milan all linked in the past 12 months.

There is no doubt that Sanson has the ability and more importantly the potential and desire to improve to becoming one of the best in Europe, but he may have to leave his Montpellier comfort zone to reach the heights which many believe that he can.

YOUNOUSSE SANKHARÉ

POSITION: MIDFIELDER
 CLUB: LOSC LILLE
 AGE: 27



Younousse Sankharé began his career at Paris Saint-Germain and spent a decade in the capital, making his Ligue 1 debut as an 18-year-old. He then had loan spells at Stade de Reims, Valenciennes FC and Dijon FCO in which his stint at PSG ended after making a permanent move to Dijon in 2012. After several transfers across France, he left Dijon in July 2013 and signed a four-year deal with EA Guingamp to find some stability as a defensive midfielder.

Unlike some footballers who are happy to remain at a big club and stay on the bench, Sankharé's motivation has always been to play matches on the pitch, no matter what club. As a result, the 27-year-old has been around the blocks in both Ligue 1 and Ligue 2, already appearing an impressive 193 times in the first division, scoring 16 times and assisting 14 goals.

Guingamp was where Sankharé played his best football and blossomed as a player as well as a person. The club which got promoted to Ligue 1 in 2013 gave him the chance and confidence to showcase his technical gifts at the highest level of French football. Sankharé's immediate impact was rewarded when Guingamp claimed their second ever historic Coupe de France trophy, beating Rennes 2-0 in 2014.

This was also the year when the former France under-21 pledged his allegiance to his parents Senegalese roots by switching to the Teranaga Lions. As he did not play for the French senior national team, FIFA rules allowed the player to change team when he requested.

Sankharé alluded to the fact that "I was born in France and grew up in the country but you can never run away from your root, it's something my parents are always proud of".

After helping the team qualify for the African Cup of Nations which begins in early 2017, the French-Senegalese has big ambitions to conquer Africa and

claim another trophy in his cabinet.

At club level, Younousse Sankharé's focus has now turned to LOSC Lille after completing his summer move from Guingamp to Lille in 2016. He spent three years in Brittany and six months with FC Valenciennes therefore his transition in the northern 'hemisphere' was smooth for the central midfielder.

Les Dogues bought the player for his athletic qualities which includes a sweet left foot, but more significantly, for his fighting spirit. Moreover, at first glance the number four may seem uniquely solid defensively, but he is also very capable of getting involved as an attacking threat, having recorded six goals last season.

He is already off the mark in the new season with two goals for Lille, and most recently scored the winner to beat Montpellier 2-1 in December. Sankharé made use of his engine to make a run inside the six-yard box, utilised his strength well to withstand the tussle and get in front of the defender, to then finish-off a trademark poacher's goal as if he was Lille's main striker. A box-to-box midfielder... no doubt about that.

Overall, it seems as though Sankharé's adventure with Lille fits the bill perfectly in terms of his own ambition and stature as a club.

He may well have finally discovered his true home which correlates to his winning mentality: "As an ambitious player, this is the perfect club... I'll do my best to improve and take LOSC as high as possible".

FAMARA DIEDHIOU

POSITION: ATTACKER
 CLUB: ANGERS SCO
 AGE: 23



Goals in Ligue 2 are hard to come by. There were just 875 strewn across the 2015/16 season, which equates to less than 2.3 per game, one of Europe's lowest ratios. The opening round this season, for example, included a half dozen of goalless draws. This widespread drought, however, was not emblematic of then Clermont striker, Famara Diedhiou. By January 25th last season, he had 20 of those 875 goals in just 21 games, outscoring the rest of his team put together and his closest league rival by two to one.

The second half of the season was however not so profitable for the Senegalese international. Diedhiou's next 18 league games produced just one goal in a 2-1 victory at Valenciennes in May, a far less impressive return and typical of the second tier.

Nevertheless, Diedhiou still finished seven goals clear at the top of the scoring charts and was voted Ligue 2's best player that season. Despite this decidedly barren run, Stéphane Moulin, manager of SCO Angers, promoted from the second tier just 12 months earlier, had seen enough to sign Diedhiou on a four-year deal for a reported €1.6m in the summer. A sizeable sum for such a financially limited club, that represented something of a gamble for *Les Scoistes*.

Manager Moulin was however not deterred by either the figure paid for the striker or the fact that his latest acquisition's form in Ligue 2 in the second half of the 2015/16 campaign severely tailed off: "The coach told me at the end of last season, he wanted me at all costs," said Diedhiou in October and the manager's faith has been swiftly repaid.

Since opening his Ligue 1 account during a 3-1 home victory over Dijon in September, the Senegalese striker has managed a strike rate of close to a goal every other game. An impressive run in a league where goals are distributed rather economically and for a team who are far from prolific. Highlights included a superb brace during a victory over SC Bastia in Corsica, a notoriously difficult place to visit, the zenith of

his top flight career to date and undisputable proof that he has very much found his Ligue 1 legs.

The intuition of Moulin vis-à-vis signing Diedhiou proved correct, as has so often been the case since in Angers' remarkable return to the top flight in an adventure which saw them as high as third in the French top flight last Christmas. Despite surprising success last term, Diedhiou has been exactly what the Angers attack needed: a focal point.

Last season, Billy Ketkeophomphone was their top scoring forward with five goals to his name, captain Cheikh N'Doye finished with nine (mostly headers) from central midfield, as Angers survived the year without a genuine striker. Now Diedhiou's strength, physicality and ability to hold up the ball have proved crucial in tight encounters when previously Moulin's side would have fallen short.

Pivotal, however, is the newcomer's ability to finish. Chances are rare in Ligue 1 and strikers who are not clinical do not survive long. Diedhiou has proven that he is an astute and accomplished marksman who can expect to accrue goals well into double figures this season, an impressive tally by Ligue 1 standards.

Diedhiou had many options earlier in life, starting out as a goalkeeper while his mother wanted him to be a lawyer: "At first, she just wanted me to concentrate on studies. But I also knew I wanted to convince her to play soccer. She helped me, she accompanied me, she protected me."

Five years after having left Senegal for France at 18 with the support of his family, Diedhiou made his full international debut this September, an ultimate repayment to his loved-ones' initial faith in him that he could become a success in football. Recently becoming a father, Diedhiou will be in no doubt that he made the right decision to move at such a young age. As now, at just 23, his future at the top level is assured.

FLORENTIN POGBA

POSITION: DEFENDER
 CLUB: SAINT-ÉTIENNE
 AGE: 26



Best known as the elder brother of Manchester United's record-setting (at least in terms of a transfer fee) Paul, Florentin Pogba has toiled in obscurity to some extent at Saint-Étienne. Like many of France's clubs, there is a great deal of tradition, but a lack of financial power has meant that *Les Verts'* ambitions are no longer titles or even the Champions' League, rather a solid top six finish and progression in the Europa League.

Injuries to Romain Hamouma and Bryan Dabo, among others, have meant that the team have struggled even more in attack than in the recent past, placing an added onus on the club's normally superb defence. Ranking third in the league in goals conceded, the club have achieved this despite having to rotate players through the Europa League, but also through a revamped defence.

Increasingly, manager Christophe Galtier has opted for a three-man defence, and this has come at the expense of Pogba. When the team play three at the back, Loïc Perrin is used centrally, with Kevin Theophile-Catherine on the right, and Pierre-Yves Polomat on the left.

It would seem at face value that Pogba could do a job at left centre back, given that he has deputised at left-back as recently as this season; his presence would seem to offer a bit more physicality and dynamism than would Polomat.

This is certainly true, but the arrival of Léo Lacroix from Swiss side FC Sion has thrown a spanner in the works for Pogba. The purchase of Lacroix was presumably meant to add depth to Saint-Étienne's squad, as Pogba, a Guinean international, was potentially going to be unavailable due to the Africa Cup of Nations.

The lanky Swiss has instead generally displaced Pogba (and Polomat) as Christophe Galtier's preferred

partner for Loïc Perrin, putting the former Sedan player in the shade.

It seems to some degree that it has always been this way for Pogba, as Moustapha Bayal Sall and Kurt Zouma have been obstacles as well in the recent past. While it is hard to argue with Saint-Étienne's defensive record, has Galtier been missing a trick?

Tall, strong, and relatively pacey for his size, Pogba is a player who is superb when he gives his all, but that sometimes translates into an over-exuberance, or at the very least, a proclivity to over-value his pace.

He is also somewhat limited as regards his range of passing and ability to run at players. Playing alongside the sublime Perrin in a back four, that passing ability isn't as important, with Galtier moving to a back three, more is needed in that regard.

Thus, while his positioning could use some work, his supposed drop in form is not that at all, but more of a lack of being a good fit. Rumours in the summer saw him linked with the likes of Sunderland and Hull, and given the success of other Ligue 1 defenders in the recent past, it may be time for Pogba to seek greener pastures.

His failure to gain the confidence of Galtier is no slight on him as a player, but at 26, he is more than talented enough to be a full-time starter, and should perhaps seek to push himself with a new challenge.

DAMIEN DA SILVA

POSITION: DEFENDER
 CLUB: SM CAEN
 AGE: 28



After an exceptional 2015 for Damien Da Silva, a move to the Premier League became a huge possibility, however, according to reports, Sunderland were snubbed by Da Silva during the January transfer window. Perhaps a relegation battle did not appeal to a player enjoying le SMC rising high in the table during the 2015/16 campaign. The decision proved to be the right call, with Caen finishing somewhat surprisingly in 7th, only two seasons after being promoted from Ligue 2, Da Silva wanted to be part of this ongoing progress.

It was a decision that went against the Frenchmen's career pattern which has seen him move between five different teams, not staying longer than two years at each club. Nevertheless, the summer of 2014 saw Caen finally bring this seemingly late bloomer into the top flight, making a €300,000 purchase to lure the defender away from Clermont in Ligue 2.

Caen were also getting ready to get a taste of Ligue 1 themselves. After promotion, the Stade Malherbe Caen board looked to Da Silva as a strong character as well as a low-cost option to sure up the defence. It was, however, more evidently to cover imminent departures of key defenders from the Normandy club that were aiming for bigger things, such as the pairing of Molla Wague and Jean-Jacques Pierre. This left a starting berth for Da Silva and he did not disappoint. In fact, despite le SMC's all out counter-attacking "you score one, we score two" style of play, Da Silva deserves a lot of credit for Caen's improvement in defence which, as a result, lifted high-flying Caen into a top half outfit for the past two seasons.

In 2016, Damien Da Silva's quality presented continual improvement, which has been clear since his arrival in Ligue 1. He is not the biggest of centre backs, but interestingly his aerial duels are one of his forte's. What is surprising however, is his rapid development in his weakest areas.

First of all - passing. Considering he was originally a

central midfielder and is often deployed in defensive midfield for cover, one would think his passing range would not be called into question. Although more often than not, Da Silva had preferred to play the long ball and off the ground passes. Interestingly, there has been a drastic change in this department. Da Silva leads the race for most completed passes at SM Caen, executing 459 with an 82% pass accuracy so far this season, at the time of writing. It is evident that the centre-half has been working on this aspect of his game.

Secondly, what makes Da Silva's 2016 even more impressive is his disciplinary record. The 2015/16 season saw Da Silva pick up four yellow cards and a red, in contrast to not a single booking in this new campaign, having already played 16 games. However, one could argue that he has not got stuck in as much as he would like to with a side now leaking in goals. Garande's decision to deploy him as a defensive midfielder of late is a gross misuse of his talents, in our opinion.

The 28-year-old coincidentally wearing the same number on his shirt, also remained one of the division's top performers in terms of tackling and anticipation throughout the calendar year. However, his significant rise in the game was not enough to catch the eye of Didier Deschamps to name Da Silva in his 23-man squad for last summer's Euro 2016. Having seen several defenders become unavailable such as Raphaël Varane and Jérémy Mathieu, Samuel Umtiti got the final call-up, despite SM Caen officially proposing Da Silva's services on Twitter to the French Football Federation (FFF).

Overall, Da Silva proves that age is no roadblock in developing every aspect of your game. He has now blossomed into an all-rounded top centre-half at the peak of his powers in a Caen side that will be the first team to keep hold of the 'late bloomer' for the longest period of time in his career at one club. Le SMC needs him on top form for the remainder of the season if they are to avoid relegation.

MAXIME GONALONS

POSITION: MIDFIELDER
 CLUB: OLYMPIQUE LYONNAIS
 AGE: 27



As shocking as this might sound to some, Maxime Gonalons is a very under-rated footballer both nationally and across Europe. One of the best deep-lying midfielders in France, the 27-year-old has shown year on year just how good a player he is.

2016 has been an up and down year for Lyon though, even if it started well enough, with the team rising again under Bruno Génésio's leadership. Gonalons continued his role at the base of midfield, often flanked by two of Corentin Tolisso, Jordan Ferri and Sergi Darder. Gonalons when fit and not facing suspension, was Lyon's midfield constant, the leader in the middle of the park and beyond.

However, the current season did not start quite as swimmingly for both club and player. Two wins were followed by two losses, the second of which saw Gonalons lose his head and get a deserved straight red card against Bordeaux for a horror tackle on Malcom that was rightfully upgraded from a yellow initially given by the referee.

He sat out the next four games but following that dismissal, the club captain has gone from strength to strength. While the club are still recovering from a slow start, Gonalons has given them the midfield stability from which they can push on in the second half of the season.

For starters, there is not a single player in Ligue 1 that averages more tackles in 90 minutes than the Lyon man. Always willing to put himself about and win the ball in front of his defence, his destructive abilities are incredibly important in front of a shaky defence.

Add to that the seventh-most interceptions, that showcase his positional sense, and the ninth-best pass completion rate with 91.4%, with 8% of those overall passes attempted being long balls and he also knows how to both recycle possession and cre-

ate attacks from deep.

The glue he adds in the middle of the park for Lyon cannot be understated. In fact, in *WhoScored's* ranking measurements, he is currently rated as the second-best player in Ligue 1 overall, which just serves to highlight how quietly good he has been and there is no surprise that there has been strong interest from the likes of Napoli in the past.

It is actually surprising to see Gonalons outside of the top fifty in this year's edition, given how well he has performed this season. Having said that, a handful of very shaky performances at the beginning of this campaign saw Gonalons become defensively more inefficient, hurting him dearly. His inability to motivate his troops as captain during a choppy start to the second half of the calendar year also suggests that the defensive midfielder must continue to improve on his leadership skills. Despite this, there is no denying the Frenchman's natural qualities on-the-ball and in terms of tackling.

In fact, there might not be a more important player to their club than the Lyon captain. When Gonalons is in form and fully focused, an important caveat to add, Lyon have a leader in the middle of the park, shielding what is often a problematic defence and allowing the young, creative midfielders around him to express themselves further up the pitch.

You could even say that he is Ligue 1's version of Michael Carrick. Unheralded by many, quietly going about his business whilst having such an intangible impact on how his team performs on a weekly basis.

Never praised enough, always making a difference. You can instantly tell when Gonalons is not on the field and in all honesty, Lyon must be thrilled to still have him within their ranks.

75-51 RECAP

75	-	Daniel Congré	(Montpellier HSC)
74	-	Benjamin André	(Stade Rennais)
73	-	Benjamin Mendy	(AS Monaco)
72	-	Thiago Motta	(PSG)
71	-	Karl-Johan Johnsson	(EA Guingamp)
70	-	Nabil Fékir	(Olympique Lyonnais)
69	-	Majeed Waris	(FC Lorient)
68	-	Eder	(Lille)
67	-	Jean Louis Leca	(SC Bastia)
66	-	Youssef Sabaly	(Bordeaux)
65	-	Hilton	(Montpellier HSC)
64	-	Khalid Boutaïb	(Strasbourg)
63	-	Jérémy Morel	(Olympique Lyonnais)
62	-	Younes Belhanda	(OGC Nice)
61	-	Florian Thauvin	(Olympique de Marseille)
60	-	Jimmy Briand	(EA Guingamp)
59	-	Dante	(OGC Nice)
58	-	Thomas Mangani	(Angers SCO)
57	-	Alexis Blin	(Toulouse FC)
56	-	Morgan Sanson	(Montpellier HSC)
55	-	Younousse Sankharé	(LOSC Lille)
54	-	Famara Diedhiou	(Angers SCO)
53	-	Florentin Pogba	(Saint-Étienne)
52	-	Damien Da Silva	(SM Caen)
51	-	Maxime Gonalons	(Olympique Lyonnais)



BRYAN DABO

^ 33

50

Club: Saint-Étienne

Position: Midfielder

Born: Marseille

Date of Birth: 18/02/1992

Age: 24

League Form in 2016

Games: 29

Total Defensive Errors: 1

Average Pass Accuracy: 77.52%

Average Duels Won: 54.59%

A man who likes a tinkle on the ivories as a talented musician, Bryan Dabo's 2016 has been very much like one of Mozart's most famous pieces, Turkish March Piano Sonata No 11. Otherwise known as one of those piano songs you would have certainly heard of if you Google it, just like this genius writer did.

It has a wonderful rhythm to it, drawing you in with moments of excitement but in the end, that excitement was all too short and you begin to wonder whether such excellence can be recreated.

His year began at Montpellier, as it had for the past nine years of his career bar a brief, and slightly bizarre, loan spell at English side Blackburn Rovers. Starting in his preferred central midfield role, Dabo excelled in a team desperate for another difference-maker in order to lessen relegation fears.

Two superbly-taken headed goals against Gazelec Ajaccio gave Dabo and his club a big boost, finishing the 2015/16 campaign with a career-best five goals as his side managed to stave off relegation. Renowned previously for his versatility, it seemed that the 24-year-old had finally found his home and established himself as one of the rising midfielders in Ligue 1.

That form earned him a summer move to Saint-Étienne, a side looking to add some more refreshing young talent to the middle of the park. After making two substitute appearances in the Europa League qualifiers, Dabo suffered an injury that would see him miss the next five games that included the start to the domestic season.

Since then, Dabo has made nine appearances with only five in the starting 11, not exactly what he had signed up for. While he has notched one assist, he has yet to score a goal and has struggled to return to the form that he showed towards the end of his time at the Stade de la Mosson.

If you were to define Dabo's strongest ability, it would be his dominance in the air. Last season, he averaged 2.2 aerial duels won per game and while that has dipped to 1.1 this season mainly due to the lack of playing time, he is certainly one of Ligue 1's most impregnable forces when using your head is required.

That was most evident in the aforementioned double against Gazelec at the start of the year, which even showcased two different kinds of headers. The first is an incredible leap that even LeBron James would be proud of before looping the ball over the goalkeeper, while the second was a thumper at the front post that was expertly directed into the top corner.

He is also defensively adroit, which would have certainly been a big positive for Christophe Galtier's scouting network when they analysed Dabo over the course of the previous season. He averaged 2.3 tackles and interceptions per game over 2016, indicating that the Frenchman does contribute defensively, even if it only usually serves him as a springboard to push on and launch an attack.

He has tried in the last few years to add more of an offensive side to his game. In 2016, he has begun to attempt more dribbles, with 1.7 per game last season and drawing 2.9 fouls per match, showing his willingness to move his team forward instead of allowing other players to take on that responsibility.

Versatility has always been a plus for Dabo as well, harbouring the ability to play in a number of positions. Dabo has played as a central defender and his favourite position in central midfield this season but has previously filled in at right-back and on the right side of midfield when required, which is a real bonus for a relatively thin Saint-Étienne squad for have had Europa League and Ligue 1 commitments to attend to, often leaving a threadbare team when the injuries have stacked up. Dabo's ability to fill in virtually anywhere has alleviated some of those concerns for Galtier in the second half of 2016.

What does worry some observers is that despite so few minutes on the field, when Dabo does play he is not having a big enough impact on the team. With his attacking sensibilities seemingly surpassing a number of his peers in midfield, Dabo is struggling to make them count in order to get consistent game time.

In a recent display against Rennes where he did start, he was frankly anonymous. Although *Les Verts* were very poor across the board other than the goalkeeper, Dabo never got himself involved in the game by showing for the ball and it almost seemed like at times he allowed the match to pass him by.

If he wants to become a fixture with his new club, he needs to add something to their squad that they cannot live without. Try and take the ball with confidence and go on a run, look to add a creative pass or two or even a few strikes from distance, just to mix things up.

Adding to their attacking play that has stuttered all too often this season would make him indispensable. In a crowd of so many defensive, hard-nosed peers, he needs to carve out his own niche in order to make his name the first that goes on the team sheet.

It was Chumbawamba that famously said I get knocked down, but I get up again, strong advice that Dabo should heed. He may not be in the best period of his career as 2016 comes to a close, but after an impeccable start to the calendar year, Dabo must stick it out, work hard and he can rise back to the player we all expect to see in a *Les Verts* shirt in 2017.

Although, if he does have any spare time over the Christmas break, a piano cover of the abovementioned Mozart work would be an instant classic among French football quarters.



LASSANA DIARRA

v 12

49

Club: Olympique de Marseille

Position: Midfielder

Born: Paris

Date of Birth: 10/03/1985

Age: 31

League Form in 2016

Games: 21

Total Defensive Errors: 2

Average Pass Accuracy: 86.43%

Average Duels Won: 52.19%

You will find a lot of players in this publication who have enjoyed a stellar 2016, or have at the very least been in the ascendancy as the months have worn on. Admittedly, the same cannot be said for Lassana Diarra. The France international will likely begin 2017 in a very different way to the previous year, and not necessarily in a good way.

Diarra's year began after several months of top-quality performances for OM. Signed initially as a cheap-yet-experienced alternative to the departing Giannelli Imbula in 2015, he confounded critics to turn his footballing career around with a series of man-of-the-match games in midfield. After all, the former Real Madrid man had missed out on a year of football and was not expected to light up the Vélodrome. But light it up he did.

The beginning of 2016 subsequently brought much promise to 'Lass'. Already meandering his way back into the France squad after six years of absence, the ultimate goal would be cementing a place in the final squad for EURO 2016. More so, if he could just maintain his great run of form – who knows? Perhaps a major European club would come knocking. Well, that is what Marseille President Vincent Labrune would have hoped, for sure.

Things did not really go to plan for Diarra in the early months of the year. He suffered a thigh injury which sidelined him for a couple of weeks. Upon his return, the effort and zeal were noticeably missing. Perhaps the steam had run out after a gruelling first half of the campaign that would likely take a toll on someone that had been out of the game for as long as Diarra.

Perhaps it was much more than that as some Marseille supporters assumed. There were rumblings that with the team in severe difficulty in the standings, Diarra had begun to take care of himself and ensure he was not injured for EURO 2016. There was the notion that he had begun to 'pick his games', as coach Michel had suggested was the norm for players at Marseille earlier on in the season.

Whatever it was, Diarra's second half form had taken a big dip. He only took to the field just 13 times from January to June, with Marseille winning only three games – all in the Coupe de France – in his absence. Without him, OM lumbered to 13th position after a late-season surge in form. He took to the field in a decent performance in the Coupe de France final, which OM lost 4-2. Some thought it would be his final game for the club. So did Lass.

The France international became embroiled in a contract row with the OM management towards the end of the season. Having signed on a four-year deal, Diarra had believed he had a gentleman's agreement with then-president Labrune to leave the club after one year. Indeed, the 31-year-old even went on RMC radio to allege that. The midfielder had calculated that his revival at OM and return to the international set-up meant that there were bigger clubs ready to take him on for the following season.

Instead, his hopes were dashed by a bombshell on 28th May. The Court of Arbitration for Sport had upheld his €10m fine payable to his previous club Lokomotiv Moscow with regards to a breach of contract allegation. Marseille insisted that this was not a matter for them. With this massive fine hanging over him, it was believed that Diarra's head would finally be turned away from Marseille as he sought a rich club to take him on to enable him to pay that fine.

And to add insult to injury (or in this case, injury to insult), his dream to represent France at a home European Championship was ended just three days later, having picked up an injury. He was subsequently replaced by Morgan Schneiderlin. 2016 had begun to take a very different turn for the beleaguered midfielder.

The summer brought incessant rumours regarding Diarra's next move. He had been linked with clubs in Qatar and China, as well as Galatasaray. However, he grossly overestimated his ability to interest some of Europe's stellar names who did not come knocking for him as previously expected. Meanwhile, OM insisted that he serve out his contract, or find a club who were willing to meet their valuation for him.

With Frank McCourt's arrival in the late summer, it was reported that the American businessman could financially make an effort to ensure the midfielder's stay. Meanwhile, he was named unanimously by the playing staff to succeed Steve Mandanda as club captain. Despite the issues that plagued him for several months, no one could deny his experience and effort as central to Marseille's season aims.

He started the new season in strong fashion, but once more his momentum was scuppered by back trouble. In his absence, Bafétimbi Gomis took the armband. With new coach Rudi Garcia's arrival in the middle of the autumn, the former Roma technician decided the imbroglio over Diarra's future was too much, having opted to hand the captaincy to Gomis full-time.

Therefore, Diarra's year pretty much encapsulates him at the moment. Full of talent and hope, but with several question marks hanging over him. Here is to a clearer 2017 for a player who still has what it takes to succeed at the top.



VINCENT ENYEAMA

V 31

48

Club: LOSC Lille

Position: Goalkeeper

Born: Akwa Ibom

Date of Birth: 29/08/1982

Age: 34

League Form in 2016

Games: 38

Goals Conceded: 40

Total Clean Sheets: 14

Average Saves Per Goal: 2.29

In assessing Vincent Enyeama's career, one might have wondered if his best years have been wasted at Lille. He first made an impression on European football in 2010, when he shut out Schalke and Benfica in the group stages of the Champions' League. His Hapoel Tel Aviv team failed to pip the Portuguese side to third place and the Europa League, undone by a last-minute Alexandre Lacazette equaliser against Lyon, but his reputation was made. Lille brought in the Nigerian to eventually replace Mickaël Landreau that summer, and he spent that first season as the reserve 'keeper before spending 2012/13 back in Israel, on loan with Maccabi Tel Aviv. The club won the league in style, with the best defence and Enyeama recording eleven clean sheets despite missing seven matches due to the Africa Cup of Nations.

Landreau moved on to Bastia that summer, and Enyeama was made first choice under new manager René Girard, coming close to setting a Ligue 1 record by keeping a clean sheet in eleven straight matches. Only the imperious form of Monaco and Paris Saint-Germain kept Lille from qualifying directly to the Champions' League, the club eventually finishing third.

The following season, a strong start was undone by an eight-match winless run, which saw the club slip from the European places to a mid-table finish as Lille were simultaneously eliminated from a tough Europa League group. Limited tactically and lacking a reliable attacking outlet, Lille played a dour 4-3-3, overly reliant on a plodding midfield and the centre back pairing of Marko Baša and Simon Kjaer.

The sales of Kjaer, Idrissa Gueye and the underrated Nolan Roux did little to improve things in 2015, despite the arrival of Hervé Renard. The club flirted with relegation through the autumn, unable to find any consistency in attack. The mercurial Sofiane Boufal was a real talent, but unreliable, and Frédéric Antonetti's success in hauling the club back up the table was based on an improved defence that saw Enyeama keep clean sheets in seven of the team's last ten matches, eventually finishing fifth.

Shorn of Boufal, Djibril Sidibé and promising youngsters Benjamin Pavard and Sehou Guirassy, the club stumbled at the beginning of the current season, suffering an embarrassing loss to Qabala in the Europa League play-offs. Antonetti's dismissal has precipitated an improvement in form, with the club now playing a dynamic 4-2-3-1, but it looks as if Enyeama's Champions' League forays will be limited to his time with Hapoel given the form of the current top four.

Signed with Lille through 2019, at 34, Enyeama's future is undoubtedly with *Les Dogues*, an admirable tenure decidedly undone by the club's financial situation. The expenses associated with the use of the Stade Pierre-Mauroy have forced player sales at every turn, limiting the team's ambitions and making Enyeama one of a particular breed of goalkeeper, along with the likes of Stéphane Ruffier and (until recently) Steve Mandanda who might have regretted not taking an opportunity to move abroad whilst in the prime of their playing careers. Reports on the heels of a stellar World Cup in 2014 had seen him linked with the likes of Liverpool and Manchester United, but it looks unlikely that anything will change, barring an injury crisis.

Undersized at just 5' 11", Enyeama has made his reputation by doing the most within a limited physical profile. He has outstanding communication, effectively marshalling a constantly changing (and often slow-footed) defence superbly, an attribute that he maintained during his time with Nigeria as well. He maintains a consistent focus, rarely being caught off his line or surprised by an opponent's counter-attack.

His distribution is sometimes lacking, although some of this may be a product of Lille's compactness than his own kicking ability. Despite his slight stature, he commands the area fearlessly and superbly with a strong build, even if he can be a bit guilty of punching rather than catching at times as a product of his height. His handling is a lacking little at times, though, as he has, on occasion, parried the ball into the path of opposing attackers.

His positioning is generally consistent, and his smallish frame allows him to go to ground quickly, but his best attribute is surely his reflexes. Combining a powerful leap with strong wrists, Enyeama does not let his lack of height detract from his ability to effectively cover the frame of the goal; even when he does not make a save, his instincts are generally good, beaten only by the best-placed of shots.

There has admittedly been some deterioration in this regard as he ages, but Enyeama is still one of the world's best at pulling off the spectacular. His retirement from the Nigerian national team at just 33 was seen as a disappointment for fans of the Super Eagles, but it was more down to a fall-out with management than any lack of form; Ligue 1 observers will be happy to see him continue what has already been an impressive spell in France's top flight.



JOÃO MOUTINHO

V 35

47

Club: AS Monaco

Position: Midfielder

Born: Portimão

Date of Birth: 08/09/1986

Age: 30

League Form in 2016

Games: 26

Chances Created: 32

Goals: 2

Average Pass Accuracy: 83%

What an incredible year for Monaco midfielder João Moutinho. The central midfielder enjoyed one of his finest career moments in the summer, as his Portugal side managed to defeat France to win EURO 2016, the first ever-international trophy in their nation's history. On a personal level, it was a good 2016 for Moutinho, who played 37 times across four different competitions for Leonardo Jardim's AS Monaco side, being directly involved in returning Monaco back into the Champions' League after a season away in the Europe's second-tier competition, the Europa League.

Monaco's quick elimination from the latter, aforementioned competition in the 2015/16 season meant that Moutinho had limited high-profile games during which he could attempt to stake his claim for a spot in Portugal's EURO 2016 squad. The midfielder knew that he had to perform out of his skin to impress, or risk losing out on the tournament.

During last season after the turn of the year, Moutinho only played in one loss, a 3-0 away defeat at the hands of Angers, albeit because he missed a handful of games due to injury, which at one point looked like it could cost him his place at EURO 2016. Regardless, when Moutinho was not on the pitch for Monaco, the sizeable hole that he left was both noticeable and painful for the Principality side to bear. Out of their four losses in 2016 last season, the Portuguese midfielder was absent for three of them. That speaks volumes as to how important he can be for Monaco, especially with his tendency to change the pace of the game from the middle of the park to suit his side.

One performance that sticks out in mind from 2016 for Monaco was against Lorient back in January, where Moutinho grabbed a goal from a free-kick and set up the first goal of the game for Thomas Lemar after half-time. The performances that he was chipping in with allowed Monaco to unlock situations against hyper-defensive minded opposition, keeping their foot on the gas to maintain momentum in their chase for Champions' League football.

At the very beginning of 2016/17, Moutinho was a lynchpin in the midfield during Monaco's pair of Champions' League qualification encounters, playing in both legs against Villarreal. Moutinho did not play for the full 90 minutes in either game, with manager Jardim weary about putting the player's fitness at risk, especially after Portugal's demanding yet ultimately successful EURO 2016 journey.

In the Champions' League, Monaco have been extremely impressive, defeating Tottenham Hotspur both at Wembley and at the Stade Louis II, where the French side were incredible to watch. Moutinho has been used in all but one of the games in the Champions' League so far, missing out on a home win against CSKA Moscow due to injury, being used in more of an attacking position against Spurs and Bayer Leverkusen, which in both cases worked to good effect.

For Monaco to have someone with the talent and experience of Moutinho is a valuable asset, especially if they wish to progress further in the Champions' League this season and push for domestic honours in Ligue 1 and the Coupe de France.

Speaking of domestic matters, the 30-year-old has played a far less important role there during what has been an incredible 2016/17 campaign. Monaco are well in contention for top spot with Nice and Paris Saint-Germain going into the winter break. However, Moutinho is no longer a starting player in the league for Jardim, with the latter radically altering his tactics in the second half of the calendar year, opting for an offensive 4-4-2, with Fabinho and Tiemoué Bakayoko operating as a pair of central midfield enforcers.

With only one goal and two assists to Moutinho's name, it would be acceptable to demand more from him in these departments if he was not a bit-part player. However, with the lack of minutes available to him paralleled with the fact that goal-scoring has hardly been his strong point over the years, only managing seven goals in 105 Ligue 1 games, these returns are no surprise.

After all, the 30-year-old missed four games during October and November due to injury, during which time Monaco won three and drew one, scoring 16 goals in the process. On a personal level, Moutinho would be right to worry about how brilliant Monaco have been when he has not been involved, even if he did grab an assist in their 7-0 demolition on Metz.

Of course, Moutinho will continue to be an important figure in the Monaco squad due to his experience and his undoubted talent on the ball as well as his killer eye for a key pass, but his influence on the side's performances will be less direct in 2017, limited to training sessions and through advising some of Monaco's fine young talents off the pitch rather than by making decisive contributions on it.

As we look back on 2016, Moutinho must take comfort in a history-making string of performances that he put together for his country in summer. He made an appearance in all but one game at the tournament, and even set up the tournament winner deep into extra time for Eder.

When Fernando Santos subbed on Moutinho in the second half for Adrien Silva, Moutinho had his country's potential glory in his hands. Lesser players would have crumbled at the sheer psychological challenge that such a scenario poses. Not Moutinho.

Playing for a side that is truly challenging for the Ligue 1 title, as well as progressing into the knockout stages of the Champions' League, alongside the extraordinary EURO 2016 victory making the last 12 months a rather incredible year for the 30-year-old.



GUILLAUME GILLET



46

Club: FC Nantes

Position: Midfielder

Born: Liège

Date of Birth: 09/03/1984

Age: 32

League Form in 2016

Games: 37

Total Defensive Errors: 1

Average Pass Accuracy: 84.49%

Average Duels Won: 50.95%

In most leagues, averaging more than a goal a game across a calendar month would usually put you in line to win the player of the month award. In France, where goals are scarce and prolific strikers rarer still, seven goals in six games should make it close to a certainty. In early 2016, Zlatan Ibrahimovic's February read as such, during what turned out to be a record-breaking season for the Swede, but it was Nantes' new Belgian signing Guillaume Gillet who trumped Zlatan and took the award.

Such accolades are by no means uncommon for Gillet, having been voted Anderlecht player of the month for December in 2015 before leaving to join Michel Der Zakarian's FC Nantes outfit the following month. In the first month of 2016 therefore, Guillaume Gillet was perhaps the most in-form player in France. He was no stranger to Ligue 1, having had an impressive spell at SC Bastia on loan from the perennial Belgian champions in 2014/15. The impetus that his arrival gave to Nantes aided in inspiring a superb run of form which saw *Les Canaris* avoid defeat for 11 games at the start of 2016, winning seven of those fixtures as part of a 16-match unbeaten spell, spanning from mid-November 2015 to the start of March.

With Guillaume Gillet a serious catalyst, Der Zakarian's side went to within one point of a Champions' League spot as February drew to a close. Gillet leadership qualities were an instant hit and appeared to serve as the glue that finally cajoled what was an already talented group into the kind of performances that one of France's most passionate fan bases and their somewhat toxic president Waldemar Kita had so been craving. However, an extra-time cup exit to Ligue 2 outfit Sochaux and a 4-1 thrashing at the hands of local rivals Rennes in the derby abruptly halted Nantes' forward moment and instigated a run as poor as the previous unbeaten stretch had been impressive. Nevertheless, despite just two more wins and a hugely disappointing eventual 14th place finish, which played a sizeable role in the non-renewal of manager Michel der Zakarian's contract at the end of the season, Gillet's form remained excellent and his talismanic presence at the club was quickly established.

Many of Gillet's 20 or so Belgian caps have seen him deployed at right-back, whereas he has operated almost exclusively as a defensive midfielder in his one year long Nantes career. His national team's desire to position him on the right-hand side of the defence is unsurprising, owing to a mixture of the general lack of top quality full-backs at Belgium's disposal and Gillet's experiences at SC Bastia and Anderlecht in the right-back role. It is however in the holding midfield role where Gillet really shines. His physical, commanding presence and assuredness in possession provide Nantes with a secure central base from which all of their attacks can be kick-started.

This was evident in the first half of the calendar year where Gillet facilitated what was previously in the 2015/16 campaign a talented midfield of American international Alejandro Bedoya, Brazilian trickster Adryan and the cunning Frenchman Adrien Thomasson to play off and around him, affording them the luxury of the knowledge that their back four was formidably protected.

Gillet swiftly became the team's kingpin as his experience became invaluable, dragging his supporting cast along by the collar and enabling more creative colleagues to express themselves. Despite his obvious physicality, it is Gillet's calming influence that continues to be his most valuable attribute as a leader on and off the pitch, repeatedly assessing and analysing his own performances.

As early as his second Nantes appearance, he explained: *"There were good things and worse things. It is up to me to analyze my performances to see what has been and what has not been and improve all this in the next games."*

Despite his drive to improve all areas of his game, Gillet is not a box-to-box midfielder. The Belgian can count just a small handful of goals to his name and zero Ligue 1 assists in his 35 plus league outings. He was never blessed with the ability to be a complete midfielder, especially in an attacking sense, and this has partly been Nantes' undoing. As the slow trickle of goals from the likes of the lumbering Kolbeinn Sigthorsson, the inconsistent Emiliano Sala and the wayward Yacine Bammou halted completely in the second half of the 2015/16 campaign, so did *Les Canaris'* wins.

Gillet's presence, however, remains undimmed and although he has been unable to affect games as consistently to the extent he did last spring, he continues to be the club's premier performer. *"Nobody knew me when I arrived in Bastia but I had a good season and I made a small place in Ligue 1."* said a modest Gillet recently.

However, with his eye catching performances at the Beaujoire in 2016 he has carved out a far bigger place in Ligue 1 than he cares to admit and with the club struggling at the bottom of the league over the new year, fans of Nantes will be hoping that the newly installed Sergio Conceição can rectify their situation or their stoic Belgian talisman may not remain in Eastern France to aid in the rebuilding process for too much longer.



MAXWELL

v 15

45

Club: PSG

Position: Defender

Born: Cachoeiro det Itapemirim

Date of Birth: 27/08/1981

Age: 35

League Form in 2016

Games: 23

Goals Conceded: 10

Total Chances Created: 23

Average Duels Won: 53.78%

Brazilian left-back Maxwell has arguably had one of the most decorated careers in the history of the game called football. If 2016 was anything to go by, it does not appear as if he has any intention of stopping from attempting to add to his vast array of honours any time soon.

When Layvin Kurzawa was brought into PSG at the start of the 2015/16 season, many expected Maxwell to be eased out of the first team to make way for the younger star. However, the Brazilian had other plans and as Maxwell has a history of doing, he managed to retain his place and remain the starting left-back whilst also acting as a mentor for the young Kurzawa.

Towards the tail end of the 2015/16 season, Maxwell was still seen as the first choice left back under Laurent Blanc. Although on occasion, Maxwell alternated with Kurzawa, the fact of the matter was that Blanc trusted the Brazilian on the bigger stage and in the games of greatest importance. Maxwell played all but one game in the Champions' League, including once in an advanced, quasi-left midfield role in that fateful second leg against Manchester City in the quarter final that ended so disastrously for the Ligue 1 champions.

When Blanc was removed from his post in the summer, many people expected Maxwell to follow his best friend Zlatan Ibrahimovic out of the Parc des Princes. However, the left-back signed a one-year extension to remain in the French capital, much to the delight of the Parisian faithful.

The Brazilian's talent has often been overlooked during his time at PSG, with megastars like Zlatan Ibrahimovic and Thiago Silva taking the majority of the media spotlight. However, Maxwell's stability, reliability and ability would be an asset to any team in Europe to this day. That is well considered, high praise too. For an individual that has been playing in Europe since 2001, Maxwell has adapted well to a variety of football climates, proved by his winning of a domestic trophy in every country that he has played in.

Despite his age, the 35-year old is a suitable alternative for the fast, less measured and attack-minded Kurzawa. Maxwell should be used when a particular game situation needs a cool, experienced head, perhaps in the dying embers of the 2017 Ligue 1 title run in, with the League 1 table at the close of 2016 making dim viewing for PSG fans.

Unai Emery has however made a concerted effort to ease him out of first team proceedings early into his reign, at least in Ligue 1 where Maxwell did not feature until the 6-0 defeat of Caen, when he grabbed two assists and showed that he could still perform at a high level.

Emery was aware of Maxwell's European pedigree and drafted him in for the first two games against Arsenal at the Parc des Princes and away to Ludogorets, with positive results eventually coming in both fixtures. Emery would be wise to deploy Maxwell in PSG's upcoming pair of matches with Barcelona, because of his proven identity as a big game player. There is a trend around Europe in the Champions' League this season that affords experience over potential in this particular competition.

At Juventus, Patrice Evra is still performing in Europe's premier competition as Alex Sandro settles into the surroundings, with this season likely to prove to be the latter's breakthrough. The relationship between Maxwell and Kurzawa is very similar, and the latter's access to one of the most learned left-backs in the world will prove to be extremely beneficial for the French international, if he is not foolish enough to waste the opportunity.

As for what the future holds, only Maxwell and his super-agent Mino Raiola can answer that question. With his current contract set to expire at the end of the 2016/17 season, he is potentially most likely to return home to Brazil, unless Unai Emery decides to keep him on as his second left-back for the 2017/18 campaign.

Whatever unfolds, the Brazilian has done an enormous amount for the club, and as he looks to end 2016 with a flourish, if 2017 is the year where the Parc des Princes waves goodbye to one of its most consistent servants, he deserves an enormous send-off. He embodies the Qatari revolution and the shrewd initial transfer policy that was orchestrated by Leonardo (a policy that has never been anywhere as successful since the latter's departure).

2016 has been kind to Maxwell, with the Brazilian working hard to retain his place in the side earlier in the year, which has transferred over to the 2016/17 season somewhat, but arguably only because of a string of injury problems suffered by Kurzawa.

As previous examples such as Patrice Evra and Dani Alves have shown, an experienced head and timeless talent can keep you at the height of European football long past your expected sell-by date. Maxwell does not get the credit he deserves, and PSG must think very carefully before casting him aside in the summer without ceremony. The man has had an excellent 2016, mirroring the astounding career he has forged for himself.



DANIJEL SUBAŠIĆ

V 35

44

Club: AS Monaco

Position: Goalkeeper

Born: Zadar

Date of Birth: 27/10/1984

Age: 32

League Form in 2016

Games: 37

Goals Conceded: 41

Total Clean Sheets: 15

Average Saves Per Goal: 2

With Monaco's superb start to the season, many pundits have rightfully praised players such as Fabinho and Thomas Lemar. However, there is one player who has remained hugely underappreciated. That man is Monaco's goalkeeper: Danijel Subašić.

Born in Zadar, Yugoslavia (now part of Croatia), Subašić began his career with NK Zadar. After Zadar's relegation to the Croatian second division, Subašić became their starting goalkeeper at the age of just 21 years old. Subašić spent five years at Zadar, making 82 appearances in all competitions. One of his greatest achievements at Zadar was being starting goalkeeper when they gained promotion to the first division of Croatian football in 2007.

After spending one season with Zadar in the top division, Subašić joined Croatian football giant Hajduk Split on loan in the summer of 2008. Subašić was immediately made a starter and was so impressive that Hajduk Split made the deal permanent just five months later. Subašić spent three seasons with Hajduk Split and during this time won the Croatian Football Cup. Subašić made 126 appearances for Hajduk Split in total, including 14 in the Europa League. During his time at Hajduk Split, Subašić was praised for being one of the best goalkeepers in Croatia. However, despite Subašić's popularity and recognition within Croatia he was overlooked outside of the country, and at the age of 28 time was running out for Subašić to make impact outside of Croatia.

Subašić joined French Ligue 2 side AS Monaco for a fee of €1m in the winter of 2012. During his first season with the French club, the Croatian made 17 appearances. The following season, Subašić was the undisputed starting goalkeeper under Claudio Ranieri as Monaco won Ligue 2 and gained promotion to Ligue 1. He played 35 times in the league, conceding just 27 goals and keeping 14 clean sheets.

Following the signing of superstars such as James Rodriguez and Radamel Falcao in preparation for the 2013/14 Ligue 1 season, there were those who wondered if Monaco would need to invest in a new goalkeeper. And when Argentina goalkeeper Sergio Romero was signed on loan, many assumed that Subašić's time as a starter was finished. However, surprisingly it was Romero who was benched in favour of Subašić, with the latter seemingly able to raise his level of play almost effortlessly following the introduction of competition in the form of Argentinian. Monaco finished as runners up in their first Ligue 1 season after promotion, with Subašić only conceding 29 goals in 35 league games. The following season, Romero's loan deal expired and Dutch goalkeeper Maarten Stekelenburg was brought in on loan from London outfit Fulham as his replacement. Once again Subašić refused to be usurped as number one, with Stekelenburg only going on to make one appearance in Ligue 1.

The 2015/16 season proved to be the most challenging of Subašić's Monaco career. Monaco were not as defensively sound as in previous seasons and Subašić's form suffered as a result. In 36 Ligue 1 appearances, Subašić conceded 50 goals. The signing of promising young goalkeeper Paul Nardi during the summer of 2015 once again gave the impression that perhaps Subašić's starting berth had come to an end.

However, in a display of great mental strength, Subašić rebounded in 2016 with several great performances which forced Nardi to go out on loan for the 2016/17 season to Rennes in search of increased playing time.

The summer of 2016 was an enormous one for Subašić as he played for Croatia's national team during EURO 2016. Subašić had made his international debut in 2009 but had only become starting goalkeeper after the 2014 World Cup. During Croatia's group stage game against Spain with the score level at 1-1, Subašić saved a Sergio Ramos penalty. Croatia would go to win the game 2-1 making Subašić's save absolutely crucial. Subašić has carried his summer form into Monaco's 2016/17 campaign, consistently playing well for the title challengers.

Throughout his career, Subašić has made a name for himself by being a solid if unspectacular shot-stopper. The Croatian who stands at 6' 3" does not have world class reflexes in the vein of Hugo Lloris or David De Gea. Instead, Subašić relies on superior positioning, closing down the angles earlier so that he is not in a position where he is forced to attempt an acrobatic save. As a result of this, Subašić has gained a reputation as a big game player, with his performance against Arsenal in the second leg of the Champions' League Round of 16 in 2014 being an excellent example of the Croatian elevating his game when necessary. Subašić has gone from strength to strength since joining the Principality side, despite the identity of his number two altering every season, typically an unsettling experience for a less impressive #1 to deal with. Subašić is also certainly a mentally strong player. After several poor performances during the second half of the 2015/16 campaign, Subašić was criticised by the French media. However, he responded by improving his form and re-establishing himself as one of the best goalkeepers in Ligue 1 as the calendar year comes to a close.

In essence, Subašić has remained relevant throughout his career by continuing to improve and to adapt to whatever challenge he faces, whether that is fluctuating competition for places at AS Monaco, being invited onto the international stage in his first major tournament with Croatia at EURO 2016, or the double-trouble involved in title challenging and the Champions' League knockout experience that Subašić will face in 2017. We are happy to bet on the Croatian performing excellently in both of those endeavours. The bounce-back ability that Subašić showed in 2016, when his performances in the earlier months came under the greatest criticism that he has ever faced during his time in France, to finishing the year with a flurry, is testament to why he will continue to succeed.



NICOLAS DE PRÉVILLE

^ 20

43

Club: LOSC Lille

Position: Attacker

Born: Chambray-lès-Tours

Date of Birth: 08/01/1991

Age: 25

League Form in 2016

Games: 29

Chances Created: 68

Goals: 5

Average Duels Won: 48.24%

If you are perusing this publication for one of the more meteoric rises in French football last season, then stop looking and start reading. Always seen as a promising enough talent with considerable potential, Nicolas de Préville had never taken off in the way that some had hoped he would.

In 2016, everything changed.

The Stade de Reims forward had always been steady in his net-finding form, his 2013/14 season saw him score five goals which was followed by an indifferent and injury-hit 2014/15 campaign, where he scored three goals and had minimum impact on his side's fortunes.

Entering his mid-twenties and not setting the world alight, many assumed he would trickle into obscurity like a number of young talents had in the past. Many believed that he had missed his window but boy did he prove any doubters wrong.

Despite playing in a poor Reims team, De Préville was their leading light last season and at times, he seemed like their only hope of survival. Six goals, nine assists and a real driving force from wherever he was told to play along the front line, the Champagne club would not have held on until the final day of the season had it not been for the 25-year-old's contribution.

He earned a move to a bigger club within Ligue 1 as LOSC Lille eventually pounced, albeit with a strange caveat. Oostende actually bought the player for €4.5m, whose president is a minority shareholder in Lille, but loaned him to the French side with a 2017 purchase option.

However, it has not quite been as smooth sailing as De Préville would have hoped. In and out of the line-up under former manager Frédéric Antonetti, he has struggled to rediscover the form that propelled him into the limelight at Reims and with Lille lacking a spark, his resurgence would be a huge lift.

An unfortunate injury to Eder has given him the chance to impress before a new boss is chosen and De Préville is taking it with both hands. He was the author of two goals and a super performance against Bordeaux as he terrorised their defence for 90 minutes, looking much more like the player we know and love. A super strike against Montpellier in early December adds weight to the idea that another flurry of good De Préville form is imminent in 2017.

De Préville is a hard-working, ever-moving forward who can play either in the wide areas or up front, although the latter requires players in close proximity to support him. When the ball is at his feet, he will drive at defenders in an attempt to put them on skates. Although he is not blessed with blistering pace, he does have the skills and burst to get past any defender that takes him lightly.

That is the beautiful balance he can bring, either getting into space by breezing past lazy blockers or allowing himself a yard of room to punish those that do not close him down enough. He has a good eye for a pass, highlighted by his assist total last year and always plays with his head up, looking to bring his team-mates into play.

Not only that, he is excellent from dead ball plays. Four of his nine assists came from either free-kicks or corners, with his delivery regularly pinpoint and he can be such a danger when allowed a set piece in and around the opponent's penalty box.

The thing that really attracts fans to him is that he will just not stop working. For 90 minutes, De Préville seemingly gives you everything he can and especially while at Reims, those are exactly the kind of players you need on your team.

There are holes in his game, he could bulk up a little although he usually does a good job of getting his body in the way of stronger players. He is also a jack of all trades, master of none which could contribute as to why he has not fully broken into the Lille team and has been tried in a number of different roles without a true home.

How far he goes from here really depends on him and how he adapts to his new team. There is no doubt that he could be an important player for a side desperate for both a creative and a goal-scoring outlet, especially as he could fill both holes.

Should he settle into the Lille starting eleven, with a definitive position in the squad, then he could take off again. With new owners potentially on the way, 2017 could be just as important as the year just gone in terms of his career projections.

But refocusing on his 2016, it really could not have gone much better for the Frenchman. He worked hard for everything he got, tried his best to keep Reims up before rightfully getting a move to a better team with the potential for him to continue the upward projection of his career.

As he turns 26 in just a few days, now is the time for De Préville to continue to grow as a footballer and hit his stride. Should he keep working hard, hone his game to an art form and help lift those around him like he did at Reims, then he might just force even more doubters to eat their words.



BENOÎT COSTIL

^ 28

42

Club: Rennes

Position: Goalkeeper

Born: Caen

Date of Birth: 03/07/1987

Age: 29

League Form in 2016

Games: 38

Goals Conceded: 56

Total Clean Sheets: 8

Average Saves Per Goal: 1.67

Benôit Costil has been one of the top French goalkeepers in 2016, with his form with Rennes over the course of the year increasing his popularity and stock in European football.

At the start of the calendar year, Costil was in top form as he and Rennes took Ligue 1 by storm, reaching as high as fourth during last season's spectacular second half of the campaign under the orders of Rolland Courbis. They were defeating much of the league, led by a certain youngster who goes by the name of Ousmane Dembélé.

However, a slump towards the end of the season where they lost five out of their last six fixtures with Costil conceding 15 in those games meant that Rennes finished the season with a whimper despite their earlier heroics.

On a personal level, it was a good start to 2016 for Costil who had previously suffered a debilitating cruciate ligament injury earlier on in the 2015/16 season. He had managed to recover fully from the injury and reproduce the high level performances that the Rennes faithful have become accustomed to over the years.

His full recovery is undoubtedly a great source of satisfaction, not least for the goalkeeper himself, with many players failing to ever recapture their top form following an ACL problem. Despite the fact that Costil and Rennes only managed to keep two clean sheets during the first half of 2016, he certainly put in some performances that saved his side from dropping vital points.

Regardless of what certain statistics may say, Costil's season earned him a place as the third choice goalkeeper in Didier Deschamps' France squad for EURO 2016. This was a testament to how the national team boss feels about Costil and the season he was coming off of the back of.

He was certainly not going to see much playing time in the actual tournament as the third choice goalkeeper, with Steve Mandanda coming off of an equally important season and captain Hugo Lloris being in inspired form for Tottenham Hotspur in the Premier League. However, it is the experience that counts and to be able to say that you were part of a France squad that came within fingertips of glory on home soil is an enormous achievement.

The 29-year-old may not have made an appearance at EURO 2016, but it was not long until he made his first international appearance as he played the full 90 minutes against the Ivory Coast on November 16th, which would have been an extremely proud moment for the goalkeeper.

As for the current 2016/17 season, Rennes have been floating in and around the European places, with a lot of credit going towards Costil, who has already kept more clean sheets in the beginning of this season than he did in the whole of the last campaign!

It may sound like a cliché, but as the clean sheets stats suggest, the tail end of 2016 has been a glorious one for the Frenchman, as he continues to age. A lot more goes into being a goalkeeper than meets the eye, with shot-stopping being the one notable skill that always gets mentioned, but Costil is more of a full package than that. His high concentration levels are one of the pluses of Costil's game, he is always switched on, alert to any danger and ready to deal with any mess that his defence fail to clean up.

For the rest of the 2016/17 season, the goal is for Costil and Rennes to get as far up the table as possible. They are in the running for a place in the Europa League, and if Costil can keep up his good form between the sticks then Rennes will have a good backbone to mount a push.

2016 has been a great year for Costil, picking up his first cap for the French national team and being a part of the squad at EURO 2016 that nearly went all the way but could only finish runners up. At club level, Rennes and Costil have built themselves a solid foundation, with Costil continuing to marshal the defenders in front of him.

So, what does 2017 hold for the 29-year-old? More of the same, he hopes, including more starts for the national team and some European football with Rennes would top off a fantastic time with the Ligue 1 side for the goalkeeper. We say that because Costil's contract with Rennes expires at the end of this season, and he appears to be set on leaving for free.

This year has been a good indicator as to what happens when you put faith in Costil he will deliver. The headlines last season may have been all about the young Dembélé, but Costil and company have proved this season that a good team ethic and high team spirit can take you far, especially with a top goalkeeper watching your back! With Costil's current contract situation, the second tier of Europe's finest should be on alert.



MOUSTAPHA DIALLO



41

Club: EA Guingamp

Position: Midfielder

Born: Dakar

Date of Birth: 14/05/1986

Age: 30

League Form in 2016

Games: 26

Total Defensive Errors: 0

Average Pass Accuracy: 77.50%

Average Duels Won: 48%

Moustapha Diallo, despite being, along with Thibault Giresse, one of Guingamp's longest-serving players, has been a somewhat underrated presence for the Breton club. At the age of 23 and already then a full Senegalese international, his arrival came at a time when survival in Ligue 2 was the club's primary objective, and in sticking with the club following their drop into the National for the following season, he did much to endear himself to the club's fans.

Born in Senegal, Diallo played his earliest years at ASC Diaraf, working hard to balance his schooling and sporting development. He made the leap to European football at age 19, having been spotted by FC Bruges.

His time in Belgium was far from fruitful, though, and he was soon on the move to Racing de Ferrol, a minor Spanish club who had just been promoted to the second tier. Dismayed, he returned to Dakar, humbled but hungry and determined to repay the generosity shown to him by his mother. His performances there saw him win the Senegalese cup in both of his two seasons, and he even earned a call-up to the national team, although he has not featured again since 2009.

When a second opportunity to play in Europe arose, he grasped the chance, making the move to Brittany. Guingamp, defending Coupe de France winners, were relegated from Ligue 2 by a single point that season, but it mattered little to the big Senegalese.

Seeking solidity after his initial foray into European football had been a busted flush, upon relegation, Diallo told *Ouest-France* there was never a question of leaving.

"When we were relegated, I called the president pretty much the next day. I told him that I had offers, but that I wanted to stay. I also told him that I wanted to come back up. We had the chance with the coach that came in when players like Giresse and (Lionel) Mathis stayed."

He continued to feature in the amateur ranks, and with Giresse leading the way, the club were, as Diallo had wished, soon back in the realm of professional football.

Recent seasons have seen Guingamp win the Coupe de France and advance to the knockout stages of the Europa League, but the focus has been on the flashier likes of Claudio Beauvue. Indeed, even with the club currently riding high under the guidance of Antoine Kombouaré, more focus has been on a cadre of young players and resurgent veteran Jimmy Briand than the imposing midfielder.

Even though Diallo has failed to attract any significant notice aside from diehard fans of French football, his consistency and importance to the club must not be understated. Standing 6' 4", the temptation is to compare Diallo to the likes of Cheikh N'Doye, but unlike his countryman, there is more to Diallo's game than bullet headers or being a set-piece threat.

Composed on the ball and able to link play with short passes or long, he has evolved over the course of his career from being merely a physical specimen to a rather cultured midfielder. His passing has consistently improved, although no one would ever confuse him for Xabi Alonso. So, too, have his positional instincts, particularly since the arrival of Kombouaré.

The former Paris Saint-Germain manager has an estimable reputation for developing young talent, but his treatment of veterans such as Diallo, Jonathan Martins Pereira and new arrivals Étienne Didot and Lucas Deaux sees a manager who can not only balance a fairly deep squad but also get more out of elder statesmen of the group. Even though Guingamp have employed both a 4-2-3-1 and a 4-3-3, both represent radical changes from the emphasis on wing play that was seen under Jocelyn Gourvennec's 4-4-2/4-4-1-1. Kombouaré has done well to position both Diallo and Deaux as complete midfielders. Both have looked more accomplished getting forward, with Diallo having scored twice, his best for a season being three when Guingamp were in Ligue 2. This freedom to be involved in the attack whilst still protecting the defence has been somewhat forced by the departure of Younousse Sankharé, who had scored six goals from midfield last season. Diallo, despite not being a given to this sort of play, has taken to his new role with aplomb.

The rougher edges of his game are still there, however, and are probably not going anywhere soon. He was booked a remarkable twelve times in just 1900 minutes last season, and has already accumulated five bookings and a dismissal this campaign. To have a bit of bite and energy in one's play is not necessarily a make-or-break for a defensive midfielder, (see Thiago Motta and Marco Verratti) but between his disciplinary record and a somewhat spotty injury history, Diallo could be operating at a much higher level were he to reign himself in a bit.

Diallo admitted as much in the same interview, name-checking another defensive midfielder noted for his crunching tackles.

"When I was young, they called me the Vieira of Senegal. He was well-renowned for his tackling, the same for me. But I would never really want to be confused with (another) player."

This self-belief has been key in establishing Diallo as one of Ligue 1's best-kept secrets. At 30, it is foolish to expect much in the way of improvement, but Kombouaré has changed that, and if there is yet another, his ranking could creep higher next year.



VINCENT KOZIELLO



40

Club: OGC Nice

Position: Midfielder

Born: Grasse

Date of Birth: 28/10/1995

Age: 21

League Form in 2016

Games: 30

Chances Created: 24

Goals: 2

Average Pass Accuracy: 91.13%

Born in Grasse, a middle-sized town situated some 40 kilometres west of Nice, young Vincent Koziello is one of the many to watch in this up and coming Nice side.

Nice did not come and pick him up in Grasse though. Koziello first started playing football at Stade Olympique Roquetan aged six. He stayed there for five years before being picked up by AS Cannes, a widely respected youth academy in France. This was already a promising move for the 11-year old.

The big break of course arose when Nice came knocking on Cannes' door for Koziello. After seven years at Cannes, Koziello became a youth player at Nice. He played his first professional game in the League Cup against on October 29th 2014, replacing then captain Didier Digard in the 24th minute. His first league game came two days later at home to Lyon in another substitute appearance. Koziello came on after 72 minutes, replacing Grégoire Puel with both sides contesting a 1-1 draw. Unfortunately, things did not go too well for young Vincent on his league debut as Alexandre Lacazette bagged a brace that wins the game for Lyon 3-1.

His first start came a month later, in late December, during a trip to Lens. Again his presence on the pitch coincided with the opposition scoring (one Wylan Cyprien goal, who happens to be playing alongside Koziello currently) and he was promptly subbed at half-time by Digard. Koziello was learning what top-level football was all about the hard way.

The rest of the 2014/15 season was basically all about cameo appearances against Monaco, Lyon and Lens (the corresponding fixtures) but he did play his first full 90 minutes at Toulouse on the last day of the season (a 3-2 win). Koziello's trademark trait is one of a hungry player, but hunger comes at a price. His desire to win the ball back forces him to commit a lot of fouls which earned him three bookings in seven games.

His performances did not go unnoticed though and Nice offered him a professional contract in the summer of 2015. The 2015/16 season saw Koziello become an ever-present in a Nice side propelled by the fact that Hatem Ben Arfa was finally able to play for them.

With Ben Arfa playing behind Alassane Pléa and Valère Germain, Nice had an attacking edge to their game. In this 4-4-2 diamond system, you need three very fit players to make the runs for cover in midfield. This was where Koziello did a startling job on the right side of midfield alongside Jean-Michel Seri and Nampalys Mendy. Those three formed one of the most cohesive and disciplined midfield trios of 2015/16.

Koziello was manager Claude Puel's fourth most used player from the start (behind his two colleagues in midfield and Germain), but his light frame saw him very often substituted (17 times out of 32 starts). At 1.68m, he is not as big and physical as Seri and Mendy. He makes up for that with an unbelievable energy and hunger to get the ball and doing well to get it forward: he scored three goals (including at Saint-Étienne in late September, an emphatic 4-1 win) in the 2015/16 campaign. However, Koziello ended the season with nine bookings, his clumsiness in terms of challenges continued from the previous season (although he did not once get sent off).

The learning process did not stop here for Koziello. In the summer, Nampalys Mendy was sold to Leicester and Wylan Cyprien was acquired to replace him. You would think that Lucien Favre, appointed new Nice manager after Puel's departure for Southampton, would keep the same structure as last season (Nice did finish 4th after all) but unfortunately, things turned a little sour for Vincent.

If Puel favoured Koziello over other youngster Rémi Walter, Favre seems to be going the other way. At the start of the season, Favre first gave Bodmer the Nampalys Mendy role in the centre of midfield with Koziello and Seri keeping last season's slots. However, as the season progresses, Cyprien is showing all his talent (check out his free-kick in the top of the table encounter at PSG) and Favre has been leaving Koziello on the bench and Walter on the pitch. Slowly but surely, Seri has been moved to the right side of midfield, Walter on the left and Cyprien in the middle with Koziello watching from the substitutes bench. Walter has a bigger frame than Koziello (probably not as big as Seri and Cyprien), but also has just as high a work-rate. An undeniable advantage when you are competing in Ligue 1's physical midfield battles on a weekly basis.

Koziello is currently experiencing a tough time at Nice (just six starts from 17 games at the time of writing) but in doing so is learning about the realities of top-level football. Performing exceptionally well for a full season does not mean that the club is not going to try and bring in someone better. Showing that just getting to the top is not enough, Koziello now has to work very hard to get his spot back.

And if he fails to do so, a lot of clubs would be happy (and lucky) to have him.



CHRISTOPHER JULLIEN



39

Club: Toulouse FC

Position: Defender

Born: Lagny-sur-Marne

Date of Birth: 22/03/1993

Age: 23

League Form in 2016

Games: 32

Goals Conceded: 30

Total Defensive Errors: 0

Average Duels Won: 61%

Toulouse's Christopher Jullien is a superb example of a player who, despite his talent, has fallen through the cracks. Standing an imposing 6' 5", the 23-year old from the Parisian suburbs is the same age as Raphaël Varane, Samuel Umtiti and just a year older than Kurt Zouma and Aymeric Laporte, with Presnel Kimpembe just a year younger.

The quintet composes arguably the world's most impressive array of young centre backs, and Jullien found it exceptionally hard to make an impact with France's youth squads, despite impressing as a regular at Auxerre, where he had moved at age twelve. An unused substitute during the 2013 U-20 World Cup that saw several of France's youngsters (Paul Pogba, Zouma, Umtiti) improve their reputations, that summer had seen Jullien make the leap to German side Freiburg.

Moving to Germany has become more *de rigueur* for young France-based players in the recent past, as the likes of Raphaël Guerreiro, Ousmane Dembélé, Benjamin Pavard and Jean-Philippe Gbamin this summer alone made, but at the time Jullien was sold, it was seen as a surprise.

Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang and Anthony Modeste also moved to German clubs that summer, but Jullien and Nancy defender Salif Sané were the only younger players who made the leap. To say his time in Germany was a disappointment would be an understatement; despite being a regular for the B team, he made just a solitary appearance in two years with the Black Forest club, and was loaned to an ambitious Dijon side last season.

Wasting no time in making an impact back in France, a motivated Jullien was named the player of the month in Ligue 2 in September 2015, a rarity for a defender. Alongside the experienced Cedric Varrault, Jullien was a regular, missing three matches through the accumulation of yellow cards but otherwise being an ever-present as the team won automatic promotion with the division's third-best defence.

Named in the Ligue 2 team of the season, Jullien's performances in the second division did not go unnoticed by the top flight, especially as he had scored nine goals. As a player who displayed a high level of poise and promised a threat from set pieces, Toulouse were quick to snap him up for €2.8m. He has handled the move up a division in fine form, already contributing two goals from set pieces and forming an imposing partnership alongside Issa Diop.

Big, strong and blessed with decent pace for his size, Jullien has struggled to position himself as the type of cultured centre back that has become increasingly sought after in the modern game, but that does not mean he is without merit.

Besides the aforementioned set piece threat and its attendant aerial ability (he initially projected as a striker before being converted to a centre back during a spell at Clairefontaine), Jullien also has decent recovery pace and a good knack for positioning.

He is often able to break forward from defence and break up play by feeding one of Toulouse's central midfielders, Yann Bodiger or Alexis Blin, with a short pass, but his long passing is poor; it is difficult to see Jullien being as effective behind a three-man midfield.

His record of nine bookings in Ligue 2 last season suggests his tackling needs refinement, but he has actually averaged just a shade under 1.5 fouls per match this season (and only one booking) with Toulouse, a figure that, while well below the best in Ligue 1, (think Loïc Perrin and Thiago Silva) is still far from reckless. Along with Mouctar Diakhaby and Ellyes Shkiri, he is generally of a breed of young centre backs/defensive midfielders who combine their height and pace well, but are still often guilty of a youthful mistake, as evidenced by the events of a recent loss at Rennes.

Diop and Jullien form one of Ligue 1's more callow defensive partnerships, but they and even younger goalkeeper Alban Lafont have allowed just over a goal per match, keeping the team close to the European places in a series of fine performances. Even though Diop was a regular last season, he is still just 19, and it was a big leap for Jullien to become the senior member of a defensive partnership given his lack of first-team experience, and that leap is still, to be fair, in progress.

With Diop injured of late, Jullien has been needed to provide experience, but a moment of rashness was his undoing in a fixture against Rennes, lashing out at Pedro Henrique and earning a three match ban for kicking the Brazilian winger in the midriff. He has missed the last three league matches, and while Toulouse did manage to win two of them, this vindictiveness is unbecoming of a class defender.

Jullien certainly has the physical tools to challenge the likes of Varane and Umtiti at the senior level, but his indiscipline is an issue that needs addressing if he is to do so. For the time being, though, Toulouse's investment looks a wise one; the club are ambitious enough to allow Jullien to operate at a high level and potentially even play European football without being overly pressurized.

That little was made nationally of Jullien's foul on Henrique underscores this point; with the right amount of patience Toulouse may eventually have found a bargain, but the youngster will have to prove his point on the pitch.



MARQUINHOS

^ 23

38

Club: PSG

Position: Defender

Born: São Paulo

Date of Birth: 14/05/1994

Age: 22

League Form in 2016

Games: 30

Goals Conceded: 19

Total Defensive Errors: 2

Average Duels Won: 48.63%

Marquinhos arrived at Paris Saint-Germain from AS Roma in the summer of 2013 as a raw, promising 19-year-old with a huge €31m price-tag on his head. With only one season in Europe behind him there was a huge weight of expectation on such young shoulders bearing in mind that PSG's ambitious project was beginning to take serious shape domestically and in Europe.

Marquinhos has had to be patient to become a first-choice centre back at PSG alongside captain Thiago Silva, after playing a secondary role to the likes of compatriots Alex and more recently David Luiz. The ex-Roma man was only sporadically called upon to start games under Laurent Blanc as *le president* preferred to use the Brazilian as a late change usually when a game was already won.

However, when called upon, Marquinhos rarely let his team down with some accomplished displays, even when deployed as a make-shift right back to cover the now departed Gregory van der Weil.

Following the arrival of manager Unai Emery to PSG this summer, the Brazil international centre back is now flourishing, but this would not have come as a surprise to anybody at the club. During the 2015/16 campaign there were calls from sections of the PSG support for Blanc to part with his centre back partnership of Thiago Silva and David Luiz in favour of Marquinhos after several below-par displays from the now Chelsea player.

Unai Emery's arrival has been a key component at a critical time in the development and future of Marquinhos at PSG.

With reported murmurs of discontent at his bit-part role at the Parc des Princes and links to Barcelona and Manchester United circulating, PSG were at risk of losing one of their prized assets this summer before Emery put his faith in Brazilian.

As the 2016/17 season began it was still unclear as to who Emery would favour in the heart of the defence. Marquinhos was selected to play in the Olympics in his homeland resulting in him missing PSG's first three league games, but after more indifferent performances from David Luiz followed by a shock deadline-day move back to Chelsea, Marquinhos' role under Emery was beginning to elucidate.

Upon his return from the Olympics, Marquinhos hit the ground running with some mature and disciplined displays in the Champions' League and in Ligue 1.

The former Corinthians man boasts a wealth of high-quality attributes to his game including his strength and the timing of his challenges. His positional play is impressive for such a relatively inexperienced central defender and on the occasion that Marquinhos marks out a situation incorrectly, his exceptional athleticism usually offers him a get out of jail free card. Standing at 6 feet tall, Marquinhos is relatively strong in the air and is willing to put his body on line for his team. However, he has been occasionally guilty of lapses in concentration at key moments – a flaw he must eradicate if he is to become Europe's best. He will have no better person to learn from in this regard than Mr Consistent, captain and defensive partner Thiago Silva over the next 12 months as he establishes himself as a first choice starter.

Despite Marquinhos' tender age, he boasts an impressive CV including a Copa Libertadores, three Ligue 1 titles, two Coupe de France wins, three Coupe de la Ligue successes and two Trophée des Champions titles and there is no doubt that the Brazilian will be hungry for further success in Paris.

Although there were times where Marquinhos was reportedly unhappy, there was never a sense that the 22-year-old ever really wanted to leave the club this summer. Marquinhos has settled well in the French capital, learned the language quickly and plays a large role in the fun-loving atmosphere that many of PSG's South American players bring to the club. Off the pitch, he got engaged to his Brazilian singer girlfriend in 2015 at the Eiffel Tower and regularly expresses his love for the City on social media.

Marquinhos has become a big personality in the dressing room, a larger than life character with an infectious smile and a wonderful attitude to the game. He has a close friendship with team-mate Lucas Moura and the pair are inseparable when the cameras are rolling at the PSG training ground at Camp des Loges.

Having now cemented his place in the starting XI, the next step is clear, Marquinhos must now make himself indispensable to the club much like Thiago Silva. Marquinhos is the future of the club and possibly a club captain in the making. He must endeavour to develop into a senior figure in the dressing room and on the pitch; an organiser, a leader and a cover for the exceptional but aging Silva.

With academy graduate Presnel Kimpembe currently the only like-for-like competition for Marquinhos, it is imperative that the Brazilian does not become complacent with the chance that he has now been given. Kimpembe has seen pockets of playing time so far this season and has showed that he has a bright future ahead. Moreover, Unai Emery has made it clear that he has no problem in making high profile changes after leaving out the likes of Blaise Matuidi and Hatem Ben Arfa as well as replacing the likes of Marco Verratti when he sees anybody underperforming.

There is no doubt that PSG have a wonderful talent on their hands with Marquinhos and after a frustrating three years in the capital in terms of playing time, the centre back's development now has no limits. As he moves into 2017, Marquinhos should firmly establish himself for club and country and cement himself as one of world football's most promising defenders.



ALASSANE PLÉA



37

Club: OGC Nice

Position: Attacker

Born: Lille

Date of Birth: 10/03/1993

Age: 23

League Form in 2016

Games: 31

Chances Created: 20

Goals: 14

Average Duels Won: 41.58%

One of the biggest surprises of the 2016/17 season so far has been Nice's superb form under Lucien Favre. Even more surprising is that Alassane Pléa, not the continentally-renowned Mario Balotelli, is leading Nice's goal-scoring charts at the time of writing with 9 goals in Ligue 1. Pléa's surprising emergence as a reliable goal-scorer would have been almost impossible to predict last season when he played second fiddle to more talented players such as Hatem Ben Arfa and Valère Germain.

Pléa was recruited by the Lyon youth system in 2009 where he worked alongside players such as Samuel Umtiti and Anthony Martial. Playing as a winger, Pléa was a prolific goalscorer for the Lyon youth team. Pléa made his professional debut for Lyon three years later, coming on as a substitute in the last minute against Lorient on October 7th, 2012. Pléa would go on to make two more appearances that season both of which came in the Europa League. Pléa continued to make sporadic appearances for Lyon's first team during the 2013/14 season but ultimately failed to shine through enough to convince Rémi Garde that he could be of use for Lyon.

At this point, he was 21 and joined OGC Nice in the summer of 2014 for a meagre €500,000, a price that Lyon will now surely regret. It was at Nice where Pléa finally made his breakthrough under the guidance of Claude Puel. Playing in Nice's 4-2-3-1 formation, Puel saw Pléa's potential as a striker and moulded him into a player capable of leading the line with talents such as Carlos Eduardo playing in the number ten role behind him.

Despite Nice having an average season, finishing 11th, Pléa showed glimpses of his potential, scoring three goals and offering seven assists in 33 appearances. With the departure of Carlos Eduardo in the summer of 2015, Puel recognized that Nice were in desperate need of moulding together a new goal-getting force, and so Monaco veteran Valère Germain was signed on loan, along with the now football-famous free transfer of the mercurial Hatem Ben Arfa.

With the addition of these talents, the stage seemed set for Pléa to finally deliver on the potential that had convinced Lyon sign him as a sixteen-year-old. The season began promisingly for Pléa with two goals in his first six Ligue 1 games, but it was then cruelly cut short thanks to injury problems. He was not able to return to Nice's starting lineup until February.

Pléa was forced to watch from the sidelines as Ben Arfa and Germain dazzled Ligue 1 propelling Nice towards European qualification. When Pléa did return, he disappointed. The Frenchman scored just four goals in his final thirteen appearances of the season with half of those goals coming against Guingamp on the final day.

The summer of 2016 brought many changes to Nice as manager Claude Puel left for greener pastures alongside Hatem Ben Arfa and Nampalys Mendy, while Valère Germain returned to Monaco. This exodus of attacking talent presented Pléa with an incredible opportunity, but pundits questioned his ability to lead the line. He only scored once in the opening five games, seemingly validating those concerns.

With the arrival of Mario Balotelli, it seemed like Pléa would once again be forced to play second fiddle to a more established striker. However, Balotelli has struggled with injuries this season and in the final two months of the calendar year, Pléa has made the central striker role his own. He has outperformed the Italian in terms of goal-scoring, but also with all-round team play, notably off the ball work. During these matches, Pléa has shown a huge improvement over the inconsistency of previous seasons. Playing upfront in Lucien Favre's 3-5-2 or 4-3-3 system, Pléa appears more clinical and has seemingly relished his new leadership role as Nice's main goal-scoring threat. With Balotelli returning to injury at the end of 2016, the Swiss tactician is facing an unenviable conundrum for the remainder of the season.

Pléa began his career exclusively as a winger, owing to his searing pace and dribbling ability. It was at Nice, however, that Claude Puel recognised his potential as a striker and moulded Pléa into the player he is becoming today. Despite still occasionally playing as a winger when Mario Balotelli is positioned up top, Pléa is much more impactful centrally. Pléa's pace and movement enable him to make lethal runs in behind the opposition defence – the source of a great number of Pléa's goals. Because of this, Pléa is a perfect weapon for a counter-attacking team. His recently increased penchant for performing diagonal runs between the full-back and central defender will make him even more lethal in 2017. In addition, Pléa is increasingly comfortable with the ball at his feet, willing to drop into midfield to link with team-mates. The latter skill, in particular, has been honed in on immensely under Lucien Favre. Pléa's main weaknesses lie aerially and in terms of physicality. Standing at a modest 5' 11", Pléa is susceptible to being pushed off the ball or beaten in the air. These are easy weaknesses to resolve in the coming months, but they are nevertheless blemishes he will want to iron out before a move to the Premier League.

Overall it is clear that Pléa is benefiting from having trust placed in him by Favre. It will not be long before he joins talents such as Martial and Umtiti in leaving France for a new challenge, despite the exorbitant €40m release clause that hangs over his head.



ADRIEN RABIOT

^ 31

36

Club: PSG

Position: Midfielder

Born: Saint-Maurice

Date of Birth: 03/04/1995

Age: 21

League Form in 2016

Games: 22

Total Defensive Errors: 1

Average Pass Accuracy: 91%

Average Duels Won: 54%

In Paris Saint-Germain's era of Qatari ownership, the idea of player development has been all but an afterthought. Despite their obvious abilities, the likes of Mamadou Sakho and Lucas Digne were sent packing, the club preferring instead to bring in players who were closer to being the finished article.

This win-now mentality has often been lamented vis-à-vis its effect on a squad that can sometimes be lacking in depth. However, this season has seen a bit more from the club, giving some hope for the future. Alphonse Areola's long journey seems to have finally come to an end after three successive seasons on loan. Although the young 'keeper has had some miscues, he has generally been convincing.

So, too for Presnel Kimpembe, who has failed to unseat one of Thiago Silva or Marquinhos to be a regular at centre back, but showed enough in his early season performances to have earned a first call-up to the national team. The two are both young for their position, and will doubtless continue to improve, but the real reward for patience at the Parc des Princes this season has gone to Adrien Rabiot.

It is hard to believe that this is already the 21 year-old's fifth professional season. After a rather itinerant youth career, including a spell at Manchester City, Rabiot signed with Paris Saint-Germain in 2010. He made his first team debut in 2012/13, a precocious start for the then 17-year old, and much was expected of him after further distinguishing himself during a loan spell at Toulouse. That summer only served to burnish his reputation as he was named to the U-19 European Championship Team of the Tournament.

The following season, though was a bit of a wash; things had looked up for the youngster, as David Beckham's retirement and Clément Chantôme's loan to Toulouse looked to free up more playing time for him, but he played just 1200 minutes in the league. What had been a consistent run in the first eleven in mid-autumn was frustrated by the arrival of Yohan Cabaye and some minor injury issues.

He recovered to become a key player in the back half of 2014/15, though. Injuries to Cabaye and Thiago Motta, as well as the sale of Chantôme meant that his versatility was essential as the team negotiated an unprecedented domestic treble, capped by a run of nine consecutive wins to pip Lyon to the league.

All was not well, behind the scenes, however, as Rabiot's agent, his mother, agitated for an improved contract, which he eventually received. His performances continued to improve down the back of last season, scoring crucial goals against Chelsea and Manchester City in the Champions' League and shaking off the ill-deserved reputation of being a bit of a firebrand that he had earned after being sent off against Lille in both the season's first match and in the Coupe de la Ligue final.

Tall and lanky with a wiry strength, Rabiot's biggest asset is his versatility, being able to play in any of the midfield positions in a 4-3-3, or as a more orthodox central midfielder in a 4-2-3-1. His ball control, passing and dribbling abilities allow him to fulfill the same role as Thiago Motta alongside Blaise Matuidi and Marco Verratti, even if his vision is not quite to the same level as the former Barcelona player's.

His eye for goal is impressive for his position, an added bonus given PSG's midfield usually offers little in this regard. His positioning is still a work in progress, as is his tackling, but he is also a superb header of the ball. What is lacking about his play often comes with maturity, experience and fostering a relationship with one's team-mates; what is strong is innate in a player, all of which portends great things for the future.

His recognition at the national level has begun to arrive as well. After earning a place among the reserves ahead of Euro 2016, he received his first call-up to the senior side in November, capitalizing on his fine form for both PSG and the U-21s. A recent hamstring injury saw his 2016 come to an end prematurely, but there is certainly more to come from Rabiot. His versatility and intelligence make him an ideal fit for the national side, and with the likes of Blaise Matuidi beginning to show signs of aging, Marco Verratti as prone to a booking as ever, and Thiago Motta on his way out come June, Rabiot has every chance to go from a lightly regarded utility player to perhaps the most important component of Paris Saint-Germain's midfield.

His absence has already been keenly felt; in the eight matches since his injury at the time of writing, PSG have dropped points four times, after winning 10 of 13 with him in the side. This is no coincidence, as his flexibility and consistency allowed Verratti to be eased back into the side after a long injury layoff, and to play Blaise Matuidi in a more advanced role, adding defensive stability without sacrificing attacking potency. Should this upward trajectory continue, there is every chance that it is the name of Rabiot, and not Paul Pogba that will be lauded as the key to France's midfield come the next World Cup.



KAMIL GROSICKI



35

Club: Rennes

Position: Attacker

Born: Szczecin

Date of Birth: 08/06/1988

Age: 28

League Form in 2016

Games: 29

Chances Created: 35

Goals: 8

Average Duels Won: 35%

Players who have raw talent and a good mentality are hard to come by. Most footballers blessed with those characteristics usually get to the very top without any major problems. This is certainly not the case of Polish international Kamil Grosicki who is a great dribbler, has a good shot and possesses a generally fine technique but all of this was soured by indiscipline, a gambling problem and a history of showing up at training both late and drunk.

Born in Szczecin, north-west Poland, Grosicki made his professional debut on May 6th 2006 for local side Pogon Szczecin. At the end of the 2006/07 campaign, Pogon finished bottom of the league and were relegated from the top division but Grosicki's performances did not go unnoticed and he was acquired by Legia Warsaw (one of, if not the biggest club in Poland) in 2007.

However, this was where his addiction to gambling became apparent; his subsequent subpar performances on the pitch were a direct consequence of it. Grosicki took matters into his own hands and publicly admitted to his addiction. He spent the final months of 2007 in a detox clinic in Hawaii.

His gambling problems might have been behind him from then, but his troublesome attitude remained a serious burden. During a loan spell at Swiss side FC Sion, he showed up late to training and then did not attend the French classes paid for by the club in order to acclimatise himself to his new surroundings.

To add insult to injury, he had two car accidents even though he did not own a driver's licence at the time in Switzerland. Grosicki eventually agreed to sign a document (written in French) that stipulated that due to his discipline issues, the club would not be liable to covering his wages up until the end of his loan spell.

Grosicki returned to Legia, but never played for them again. He truly became a respected player whilst playing at Jagielonia Balystok where he scored 15 goals in 70 games (despite showing up to training drunk on one occasion).

His performances were such that he then received his first big move abroad to Sivasspor, Turkey. His time there was a successful one and he would probably still be playing there but for a restriction on foreign players from the Turkish league. That and the start of a series of injuries motivated him to look for a club in the 2014 January transfer window.

Rennes were busy in this particular window as Grosicki started his Ligue 1 career alongside two other high-profile players: Paul-Georges Ntep and Ola Toivonen. Grosicki played his first Ligue 1 game in a 2-0 win over Lyon, replacing Ntep on the hour mark. The rest of the season was pretty bland for Rennes with very few wins coming in the last run of games; they lingered in mid-table mediocrity without ever being in real danger of getting relegated.

The following season (2014/15) was soured by injuries for Grosicki. He did not start in Rennes' opening game of the season at Lyon (a 0-2 loss) and he was forced off the following week after 34 minutes as Ntep and Toivonen bagged a brace each in the club's emphatic 6-2 win over Evian. Rennes continued their great start to the season with a win at Caen (1-0) but Grosicki did not seem to be participating as much as he would have liked, niggling injuries were holding him back.

The big blow came in November. He was substituted in the Brittany derby against Lorient on the hour mark after suffering an elbow injury which kept him out well into 2015. He played again at Lille in mid-March and was restricted for the rest of the season to cameo substitute appearances and just three starts. Ntep was the flavour of the season, Grosicki went along unnoticed. Alarmingly at that point, Grosicki was yet to score a goal after 18 months in French football!

Grosicki started the season from the bench in 2015/16 but, in Rennes' second league game, he finally got his Ligue 1 tally off the mark after coming on as a substitute at home to Montpellier: an 85th minute strike which earned his side a 1-0 win. However, Grosicki did not get the manager's approval to start games. The determined Grosicki did not give up and became accustomed to the life of a super-sub, becoming increasingly decisive off of the bench.

Grosicki took that tag into the 2016/17 season, but before that he was Poland's surprise package at EURO 2016, with three goals and two assists. He lit up France in the summer to such an extent that only some last-minute agent trouble prevented Grosicki from making a move to Premier League club Burnley on deadline day. Highlights have so far in the 2016/17 campaign included Grosicki's first brace at Nantes, his latest goal was a wonder-flick scored against Saint-Étienne.

Grosicki looks to have shaken his bad boy habits and is relied upon by his manager as a player that can provide the glimpse of brilliance his side badly needs when chasing a game. His goals generally are not tap-ins and tired defences struggle to keep him off the scoresheet. An all-round character.



ÁNGEL DI MARÍA

v2

34

Club: PSG

Position: Midfielder

Born: Rosario

Date of Birth: 14/02/1988

Age: 28

League Form in 2016

Games: 30

Chances Created: 95

Goals: 5

Average Duels Won: 52.50%

Let the armchair critics emerge, Paris Saint-Germain's highly rated and highly paid Ángel Di María is not among GFFN's top ten players for the year 2016. This is not an oversight or an error, but a carefully considered ranking. At the peak of his powers, is Di María one of the best in Ligue 1, his abilities approaching world-class? Undoubtedly, but his performances this year have been resolutely underwhelming; there may even be some suggestion at this point that he remains a starter only by default, his high salary prioritising his inclusion even as Lucas Moura has proven himself a far more effective presence.

This may seem unnecessarily harsh, and admittedly, Di María has still shown moments of class this year, but they have unfortunately been against weaker opposition. Like his former Manchester United team-mate, Wayne Rooney, the Argentine has become a bit of a flat track bully. This season, he has started with a decent total of seven assists in all competitions. One against an overmatched Lyon in the Trophée des Champions, two against Metz, and one each against Ludogorets, Bordeaux, Lille, and Rennes. Against Monaco, against Toulouse, against Nice, against Arsenal? Not a goal, not an assist, although he did miss the second match against the Gunners due to a hamstring injury.

Contrast this to last season, when he recorded goals and assists in both legs against Chelsea, in all four Coupe de Ligue matches, against Lyon in the league, and was the kind of lung-busting presence who had been the real catalyst in Real Madrid's Champions' League title in 2014. This is not to suggest that Di María is back to the affected performance of his time at Manchester United, but that he seems to be lacking the right sort of motivation.

Perhaps he feels that the chance to make an impact in the Champions' League went begging with the departure of Zlatan Ibrahimovic (and the subsequent failure on the part of the club to adequately replace the big Swede). Or maybe he is experiencing frustration over being played out of position, although his recent move to the right side of PSG's 4-3-3 has done little to improve his performances, only to limit the effectiveness of Lucas Moura, the rare player who has blossomed under Unai Emery.

The issue with Di María is partly down to how he fulfills a need; Moura is a sublime presence on the ball, but is much more direct than the Argentine. Moura's movement, acceleration and willingness to shoot have been massively important as PSG have just about kept pace in the title race.

Edinson Cavani's well-documented struggles in front of goal have continued, and Moura's scoring touch has been vital in making up the difference, although he has yet to score since being moved to the left wing. Obviously, the switch is down to Emery, and not the players, but this is an unfortunate example of Di María's reputation affording him perhaps out-sized privilege.

Goals? Not scoring enough, the pedants say, that's what you want to ring up for? Seems a bit unfair, no? A winger's job is not necessarily to score, even in a 4-3-3. This is true, but there are other issues with Di María's play as well.

As previously mentioned, while he is a monster with the ball at his feet with his combination of pace, dribbling ability and deceptive strength, what made him integral to Real Madrid during his time with Los Blancos was his work ethic. Perhaps the lower standard of play in Ligue 1 has something to do with this, as his 18 assists in his first year in France surely would give most the idea that the league could be dealt with at a walking pace.

There may be something to that, as there have also been notable discrepancies in the play of Ibrahimovic and Cavani against the better sides in Ligue 1 and Europe, but truly world class players maintain their focus and professionalism no matter the opponent. Di María may be able to "turn it on" against a Metz or a Caen, but for the matches for which he is most needed, where he is required to put in a shift defensively, providing protection for the full-backs as they stretch play, he has not been worth the fee paid for him by the capital club.

Some might argue that this is down to the way Emery uses Di María, but the overall improvement in defensive play under the Spanish technician is manifest in other players. Moura's ability to track back and affect a match defensively has greatly benefitted from the Spaniard's presence on the touchline.

To conclude, while this piece may seem a bit harsh, the reality is it should come across that way. For all of Di María's obvious talents, (it would be remiss not to mention his sumptuous set-piece delivery) 2016 has seen a marked downturn in his perceived effort, in his first touch, and in his goal-scoring.

For a player of his ability, to miss the top five in this ranking is unthinkable, to say nothing of the top ten. Given his place in the team, he will have every opportunity to rectify his situation come the new year, but as 2016 comes to a close, for the Argentine, it should be regarded as a missed opportunity, or even a step backwards, rather than progress in an already stellar career.



MARTIN BRAITHWAITE

^ 42

33

Club: Toulouse FC

Position: Attacker

Born: Esbjerg

Date of Birth: 05/06/1991

Age: 25

League Form in 2016

Games: 34

Chances Created: 24

Goals: 12

Average Duels Won: 45.59%

Upon his appointment as Toulouse manager, with the Southern club floundering, adrift in their seemingly futile flight to stay up, one of Pascal Dupraz's first changes was not to alter the tactical approach or to overhaul training sessions, but to appoint Danish forward Martin Braithwaite as his captain. The role had previously belonged to French full-back turned midfielder Jean-Daniel Akpa-Akpro, but the inspirational Dupraz had swiftly pinpointed the frizzy haired Dane as his on-field lieutenant and leader.

Despite the deficit in points edging into double figures upon the former Evian manager's arrival with just 10 matches to play, Toulouse, remarkably, rescued their Ligue 1 status on the final day with a dramatic win over Angers. Dupraz's re-design of the club's attitude and ethos was absolute, making a number of crucial decisions that contributed to *Les Violet's* miraculous survival. However, the appointment of Braithwaite as captain was one such move that has perhaps gone underappreciated.

"Martin did not change his way of being," the experienced midfielder Étienne Didot told *20 Minutes* in March. *"He always spoke little, although he is not very expressive. He must remain quiet and he does it very well."*

Despite Dupraz's own brand of volatile charisma, typified by the fire in his eyes as he delivered that now famous, emotional caught-on-camera team-talk that inspired the win over Angers in May, he has a slightly different ethos in mind when it comes to his players on the pitch. He wants them to fight and to be bold but also to espouse a calm confidence. Although his manager was coy when asked why he made Braithwaite captain, the reasons are clear. Toulouse's number nine embodies these attributes to the letter.

Braithwaite is a dogged and intense forward, tirelessly pressing defenders into errors, chasing lost causes with the composure to capitalise on the chances he receives or makes for himself. With Dupraz's confidence and support, Braithwaite's form accelerated alongside premier goal-getter Wissam Ben Yedder. The Dane added four goals (including the equaliser in the final day comeback) to the latter's eight strikes, forming a formidable attacking partnership over those crucial final 10 games. Braithwaite's fearlessness as captain was (and still is) a clear example for the rest of a fledgling squad to follow, even showing the wherewithal to take skying a first half penalty in his stride during the pivotal win at Angers to put in a stirring display and lead *Les Violet's* to safety.

Although he enjoyed an excellent start to life under Dupraz, it is during the new season where the 25-year-old has really come into his own. With the talismanic Ben Yedder finally sold to Sevilla and the more experienced Ligue 1 heads of Didot, centre backs Jean Kana-Biyik and Marcel Tisserand, and winger Adrien Regattin following him through the exit door, (not to mention long-term injuries to stalwarts Akpa-Akpro and Tongo Doumbia) Braithwaite and Dupraz were left with a depleted and overtly youthful group of players that looked likely to struggle for goals.

Despite his tireless, intense style Braithwaite has often failed to provide a consistent goal threat. Although admittedly he has invariably been utilised on the left across his career, he carries the less than stellar record of just 19 goals in 97 games for his boyhood Danish club side Esbjerg and just 14 in his first 72 outings for TFC, following a €2m Euro move to France in 2013, a ratio of less than one goal in five. However, much as many players do in their early to mid 20s, Braithwaite rapidly matured as a footballer and his tally of 13 goals in Toulouse's survival season in 2015/16 under Dominique Arribagé and Dupraz was by far his most prolific.

As the Toulouse squad returned to training this July, it was clear that, despite the exciting additions of Sweden internationals Ola Toivonen and Jimmy Durmaz, the majority of the goalscoring responsibility would fall to Braithwaite as Ben Yedder's natural successor. The Dane has not disappointed. Currently average a goal every other game, Braithwaite is neck and neck with the likes of Mario Balotelli and Ryad Boudebouz towards the top end of the Ligue 1 scoring charts in 2016/17.

Along with teenage defender Issa Diop, Braithwaite is now Toulouse's prize asset and links with Premier League clubs are a regular occurrence, at still only 25, he has the chance at forging an excellent career in European football.

Despite the prospect of offers from across the continent, Braithwaite is keen to remain on the banks of the Garrone for now, telling *Omnisport* this season: *"I want to stay in Toulouse one more year because we have something really nice going on. This is a big city and it's a nice city in France and we have so much unfulfilled potential..."*

In an industry where money does far more talking than the words coming out of a player's mouth in an interview however, Dupraz may struggle to hold on to him for much longer.

"Starting this Sunday, I will donate €1000 to charity for every goal I score this season. Let's rally around a good cause," was Braithwaite's tweet in August, a noble gesture from an exciting and developing talent that goes a long way to outlining his character and style of leadership. Whether or not he stays into 2018, the Toulouse faithful and Dupraz will be hoping that Braithwaite's pockets are more than a little lighter come May.



RACHID GHEZZAL



32

Club: Olympique Lyonnais

Position: Attacker

Born: Décines-Charpieu

Date of Birth: 09/05/1992

Age: 24

League Form in 2016

Games: 33

Chances Created: 60

Goals: 9

Average Duels Won: 42.91%

The match sticks in the memory sharply for any Lyon fan: Sunday, March 15th, 2015, Matchday 29: Olympique de Marseille 0-0 Olympique Lyonnais. In first place at the start of play that weekend, Lyon traveled to the Vélodrome to take on Marcelo Bielsa's Marseille. Les Phocéens had started the season strongly, but had faded of late, allowing Lyon to climb to the top of the table.

Paris Saint-Germain lurked, but Lyon were enjoying breakout seasons from Nabil Fékir and Alexandre Lacazette, and the title, while not a certainty, still seemed a realistic goal. It was a far cry from a season which had started with being unceremoniously dumped out of the Europa League and losing three of their first four league matches.

Yoann Gourcuff, as has been his wont since leaving Bordeaux, was injured, and rather than deploy Fékir as a playmaker, manager Hubert Fournier used Rachid Ghezzal behind the strike partnership. The result was an unmitigated disaster; Ghezzal had only nineteen touches, completed just a third of his passes, and was removed before half-time for Clinton N'Jie.

A month away from his 23rd birthday, Ghezzal had made his debut in the 2012/13 season, and along with Clément Grenier, Lacazette and Gueida Fofana, was supposed to herald a newly dynamic generation of talent at the club. Instead, an entire season (2013/14) had been lost to injury, and even though it was mid-March, Ghezzal was making just his fifth league start of the 2014/15 campaign. He would play only eight more minutes that year, spread over two appearances, and his once-promising career looked over before it began.

It was not an uncommon sight at Lyon; despite the club's vaunted academy, the occasional bust was bound to happen. For every Lacazette or Fékir, there was also a Mehdi Zeffane or a Yannis Tafer, and Ghezzal seemed to be drifting into the latter group, already surpassed by the younger Fékir as a creative fulcrum.

Never a favourite of Fournier, nor a natural fit for his diamond 4-4-2, Ghezzal appeared in a handful of matches at the beginning of last season, but his first start only came after the former Reims boss had been replaced by Bruno Génésio.

Génésio changed the team's tactical approach, playing a 4-3-3, and Ghezzal, badly out of favour, was the immediate beneficiary, recording seven goals and six assists as Lyon roared up the table to snatch second place and automatic qualification for the Champions' League. Lacazette's goal record garnered much of the attention, but Ghezzal's development was not lost on all observers, as he also became a regular call-up for Algeria at this point, no mean feat for a squad that boasted the likes of Riyad Mahrez, Sofiane Feghouli and Yacine Brahimi.

Despite being crucial to Lyon's resurgence last season, the current campaign has proved a bit more difficult. As the club have struggled for form, Génésio has tried a variety of formations, attempting to balance long-term injuries to the likes of Fékir and Mathieu Valbuena with establishing an attacking rhythm. As such, Ghezzal has played on the right of a 4-4-2 double pivot, in a 4-3-3 and even, briefly, behind Fékir in a 3-5-2.

The constant flux of systems and positions has done neither player or team much good, and a hamstring injury in October, coming just after scoring a magnificent goal in a derby match was an additional setback. Génésio has more firmly adopted the 4-3-3 again of late, though, and Ghezzal and Valbuena have wreaked havoc, even if the goals have not exactly been forthcoming. There have been calls for Nabil Fékir to replace Ghezzal in Génésio's preferred eleven, as he does provide more of a natural goal threat, but thus far the manager has resisted, aided by Fékir's stuttering return from a long injury layoff and lack of suitability in a 4-3-3.

Like Valbuena, Ghezzal plays in this system as an inverted winger, cutting inside onto his left foot to either link play with through balls, or to cross to the opposite post. The pace of Maxwel Cornet, a more orthodox winger, provided great balance last season, and there have been some iffy moments as Ghezzal and Valbuena negotiate space.

The two do seem to be approaching more of a rapport of late, though, and Ghezzal's close control and dribbling abilities make him a good counterpoint to Valbuena. Lyon may lack the goalscoring impetus of Fékir with this personnel, but with two inverted wingers, the team have been able to control possession in most matches and increase the number of chances available to them via set pieces.

Out of contract at season's end, rumours are abound over Ghezzal's future, especially as club president Jean-Michel Aulas has trotted out his habitual hardball tactics. Everton, West Ham and West Bromwich Albion have all been linked, and it is easy to see the attraction to the lanky Algerian holds to Premier League sides.

His ability on the ball, pace and improving defensive work ethic speak of a highly skilled individual whose talents can dazzle but can sometimes seem incomplete or lacking focus. There is, too, the above-mentioned caveat that Ghezzal is not a natural fit in every tactical system, but given consistency and the right situation, last season should not be viewed as a fluke, particularly if he can continue to make strides with his country come next month's Africa Cup of Nations.

Once all but forgotten, his story of redemption is an impressive one and speaks volumes of his character. If Ghezzal is not long for Lyon, fans of the club will do well now to remember the incandescent presence of this year, rather than the ill-used afterthought of two seasons ago.



VALÈRE GERMAIN

^ 38

31

Club: AS Monaco

Position: Attacker

Born: Marseille

Date of Birth: 17/04/1990

Age: 26

League Form in 2016

Games: 37

Chances Created: 37

Goals: 12

Average Duels Won: 43.51%

When Valère Germain arrived at OGC Nice on loan during the summer of 2015 from arch-rivals AS Monaco, few would have predicted the impact he would have on *Les Aiglons'* season. In fact, had the Principality side known themselves the effect that Germain would have on their seaside neighbours's form, they would never have let him go.

The French striker, who has spent his whole career at Monaco, had always been seen as a player who lacked the ruthlessness to become one of France's best. After several prolific seasons with Monaco in Ligue 2, Germain had struggled to replicate the same form in France's premier division. Admittedly, the arrival of high profile stars such as Radamel Falcao and James Rodriguez had done nothing to help Germain's chances of making an impact. With Germain already struggling for playing time, his relationship with coach Leonardo Jardim turned sour. The dispute started when Jardim left Germain out of the squad to face Arsenal in the 1st leg of the Champions' League quarter-finals. By the summer of 2015, Germain was actively searching for a move away.

After Carlos Eduardo's loan at Nice expired, Nice were in desperate need of attacking reinforcements. Germain was signed on a season-long loan deal, with Hatem Ben Arfa joining in parallel on a free transfer. Claude Puel, the Nice manager at the time, has long favoured an attacking, possession oriented style of play, notably a philosophy that he is currently attempting to implement at Southampton. With the signings of Ben Arfa and Germain, Puel finally had the players to fulfill the goal that he originally set out to achieve when he joined Nice in 2012. Rather than putting an emphasis on physicality Puel wanted his forwards to be quick technical players, capable of keeping possession for extended periods of time.

In Germain, Puel had a forward whose work-rate and movement fitted his system perfectly, while Ben Arfa provided the necessary flair and trickery. The first test of this new duo was ironically against Germain's parent club Monaco. It took just seven minutes for Germain to show Monaco what they were to miss out on during the 2015/16 campaign as he swept home a cross to give Nice a 1-0 lead. Nice would go to lose 1-2 after having a man sent off. However, the signs were positive for Germain and Nice. During the next match against Troyes, Germain once again managed to have an impact as he gave an assist for Alassane Plèa's goal. The biggest reason for Germain's good form seemed to be a confidence, instilled by a loving squad and coaching staff that believed in his abilities, as well as the fact that he was receiving regular playing time. Germain and Ben Arfa's partnership continued to blossom as the season went on. Playing in Nice's standard 4-3-1-2, the pair complimented each other excellently. Ben Arfa benefited hugely from Germain's grunt work and unselfish playing style, as the creativity and flair of the former Newcastle man often diverted opposition defenders' attention from Germain, giving him more space to operate. The players' enormous influence is shown by the fact that they were directly involved in 43 out of Nice's 58 league goals. Germain personally contributed 14 goals and provided six assists as Nice grabbed a European football spot, whilst playing arguably the best football in France.

His performances for Nice did not go unnoticed by Monaco who realised that if Germain could reincarnate his Nice form, then he could propel the principality side to title race contention in 2016/17. Germain's unselfish play would also prove to be of huge benefit to Radamel Falcao, whose confidence was at an all-time low after two miserable years in England. After clearing the air with manager Leonardo Jardim, Germain has become an indisputably essential ingredient of Monaco's play. At the time of writing, Germain has five goals and three assists in 16 appearances. These statistics might not jump off the page, especially as Monaco have quite simply been in phenomenal attacking form with 53 goals in 17 games. However, Germain has formed a deadly partnership with Falcao who has scored 10 goals in 11 Ligue 1 games. Germain has also played a key role in Monaco's Champions' League campaign as the Ligue 1 side qualified top of their group. Germain scored twice in the qualifying round against Fenerbahce as Monaco came back after losing the first leg 2-1 and also contributed a goal and a assist during the group stage.

Germain's main strength has always been his intelligence on the field. Not blessed with pace or physicality and standing at just 5' 9", Germain almost seems more suited to playing as a midfielder. Throughout his career, Germain has compensated for these weaknesses by becoming technically excellent. Germain's rebirth at Nice can mainly be attributed to his improved decision-making. Already possessing great work-rate and technical ability, Germain's improvements resulted in him becoming a more dangerous player inside the box. Germain has become a perfect team player, comfortable with dropping into midfield to receive the ball and link with team-mates. This has made him the perfect partner for players like Falcao and Ben Arfa who struggle with the defensive side of the game and prefer to focus solely on goal-scoring.

Another positive side of Germain's game is his professionalism. Germain has been praised for taking care of himself outside of football by living a healthy lifestyle. This attribute will begin to shine through later in Germain's career when fitness begins to become an issue.

Every club needs players like Germain. Players who put in essential work to give flashier team-mates the opportunity to display their talents. If Monaco's young superstars succeed in lifting the Ligue 1 title at the end of the season, it will be because Germain gave them a platform to succeed.



LUCAS MOURA

v 11

30

Club: PSG

Position: Attacker

Born: São Paulo

Date of Birth: 13/08/1993

Age: 24

League Form in 2016

Games: 34

Chances Created: 58

Goals: 10

Average Duels Won: 52.03%

"I got a lot of criticism because I do not score enough, so I am looking to find the net more often, to be more effective and more decisive for the team."

As the quote above clearly shows, Lucas Moura harbours one of the essential qualities of a world-class player. He is a perfectionist. He believes that a player can always improve upon himself. Nobody will ever attain perfection in football: instead, it is about attempting to get as close to 100% as possible.

From getting hit with a flagpole by a Bastia supporter in the build up to a corner, to assisting captain Thiago Silva's opener in a symbolic Brazilian goal, in commemoration of the Chapecoense plane crash; 2016 has been an unpredictable year for most but also a momentous breakthrough year for Lucas Moura that has seen the 24-year-old being right in the thick of things on the pitch.

His three years in the capital in summation since arriving from São Paulo suggest that he has been more effective as an impact player coming off the bench. When given the chance to start, Lucas struggled to consistently perform to a level that met the standards of previous Paris Saint-Germain head coach Laurent Blanc, so much so that he publicly called out on the Brazilian's slow progress. Despite only playing the full 90 minutes in 10 league games last season, the winger insisted he was happy at PSG and pledged to fight for playing time in the upcoming campaign.

The arrival of Unai Emery as the new boss in summer 2016 and new recruits in the same position, such as Hatem Ben Arfa and Jérémy, as well as the already established Ángel Di María and Javier Pastore, suggested a potential marginalisation of Lucas Moura.

In total contrast, the Brazilian international became one of Unai Emery's most used players. He has enjoyed life under the former Sevilla coach, featuring in every game so far this season at the time of writing, holding a 100% record which was unheard of since his debut in 2013.

After almost four years in Paris, the Brazilian is finally settled, speaks the language and is a popular member of the Parisian squad. Some of these traits place Lucas ahead of new arrivals. The departure of Zlatan Ibrahimovic meant that Edinson Cavani switched into the middle of the front three and created an opening for the speedy winger to earn himself a regular spot on the right flank; with Di María completing a dangerous South American attacking trio.

When called upon in the starting XI, Lucas Moura has been heavily criticised by the media, fans and previous managers for his inconsistency to have a major influence on the game. But his positive impact is becoming more and more apparent as the year wears on. Firstly, his return of goals has been much higher.

The attacking winger at the time of writing already has five goals in Ligue 1 (nine in all competitions) the best start he has had in a PSG jersey, and looks set to finally go into double figures in 2017.

One reason touted for this growth has been his eagerness to shoot more often, boasting the highest shot accuracy for PSG. The Brazilian has scored one goal in every four attempts, in contrast to previously needing at least six attempts to find the back of the net.

Moreover, the abundance of confidence oozing into Lucas's play could also be down to him finally having an injury free season. More significantly however, Emery's slight tweak of attacking system has enabled Lucas to touch the ball an average 10 times more in each match. He is also producing less dribbles, but is playing more intricate passes which allows him to be an integral team player, rather than solely relying on producing individual moments of fleeting brilliance which was seen too rarely during Lucas's early years with PSG. Adapting his game to the team's style suggests a growing of maturity on the part of the Brazilian forward.

Even if Lucas Moura made a bold claim last summer, pointing out that in time, he still wants to be recognised as the world's finest footballer, one would quickly forget that he still has time on his hands at the tender age of 24 to achieve his goal. After all, the PSG number seven remains a special talent, a talent that has been unlocked by his belief in his own ability and the faith shown in him by the new boss.

PSG may not be at their strongest, but the pacey winger is on course for his best campaign yet in France and 2017 could see Lucas move into another level as he approaches the peak of his powers. The €45m price tag is slowly being repaid.



TIEMOUÉ BAKAYOKO



29

Club: AS Monaco

Position: Midfielder

Born: Paris

Date of Birth: 17/08/1994

Age: 22

League Form in 2016

Games: 31

Total Defensive Errors: 2

Average Pass Accuracy: 87%

Average Duels Won: 54.58%

Timing is everything and some players are blessed with the luck and knack for perfecting that art. They might have had their issues, people have doubted them but just when your mind forgets about them, they pounce from out of the shadows and prove you wrong.

That's the story of Tiemoué Bakayoko, a player many thought had probably wasted his chance of progressing to the next level by joining AS Monaco in the first place. However, a stellar 2016 that only improved month after month gave French football pundits not only renewed optimism that he can fulfil his potential, but that he could actually be better than anyone could have anticipated.

Since Bakayoko's move from Rennes, it has been a rocky road for the 22-year-old. In his first season, he struggled to break through into the starting 11 before a hamstring injury cut his season short.

Starting afresh the next year, he still struggled to receive playing time as he tried to regain fitness. A malleolar injury saw him miss another month of action that meant he would have to wait until 2016 to get his chance.

Finally, after almost a year and a half of injury problems that stop-started his Monaco career, Bakayoko was fit. He closed out the 2015/16 season with 15 appearances, scoring once as he began to adapt to playing regularly again and finding his role within the side.

After Jérémy Toulalan's departure in the summer of 2016, the door was definitively opened for the enormous Frenchman to make a central midfield starting spot his own. The enormity of the task in front of Bakayoko must not be understated. He was asked to immediately fill in for one of the most experienced defensive midfielders in Europe, not to simply fulfil Toulalan's role, but to better the now Bordeaux man's performances as Monaco sought to earn an automatic Champions' League place for the 2017/18 campaign.

In the second half of 2016 and the start of this campaign, Bakayoko has been a *tour de force* in the middle of the park for *Les Rouges et Blancs*. He is operating in a two-man partnership with Fabinho that is fast-becoming one of the most astonishingly consistent midfield duo's in European football.

Bakayoko is more of the destroyer, willing to bustle around to break up play wherever he can before distributing the ball to some of the more creative players at pace. Averaging around three tackles and interceptions per game in all competitions, he is adept at denying the opponents space in between the lines and cutting them off before they have a chance to break into the final third.

Added to that is the fact that he is a great distributor, highlighted by his 89.1% pass completion percentage. He does his best to recycle possession once he has won the ball, using it wisely and allowing Monaco to not only keep pressure off of their defence but to push them further up field.

Bakayoko is also a physically imposing player, even if he stands at just over 6 feet tall, he looks like a man-mountain and he uses that to his advantage. His obvious lack of confidence in terms of dribbling is something to look at for 2017, because should he use that frame to burst forward and put panic into his opponents more often, he will become a far greater offensive threat.

There is also the slight issue of the fact that he is prone to getting a little carried away with his physicality, which can get him into trouble. The prime example of this came with his silly sending off in the 4-0 loss against Nice, where he charged into the back of Valentin Eysseric with no attempt to play the ball, which shows he still has to learn to control himself when his team can ill-afford losing him, especially against top quality opposition like *Les Aiglons*.

That could also be something he eventually adds to the French national team as well. Having already played at every youth level and with other competition in his position either aging, out of form or simply off the radar, he has a legitimate chance to stake his claim for a place on the plane come the 2018 World Cup, should *Les Bleus* qualify.

With the growing importance of N'Golo Kante as the famed "*Makélélé*" of the side, an issue would arise in the event that the Chelsea man suffers an injury, suspension or loss of form. Without the existence of another player in the setup that allows Paul Pogba to operate with more attacking freedom, Bakayoko could be the ideal foil to fill that void should that bridge need to be crossed.

After such a meteoric rise in the second half of 2016, it is not difficult to see why the likes of Manchester United are linked with the young midfielder. The impact he has had in such a short space of time, especially after bouncing back so successfully following a few seasons interrupted by injury, is simply astounding and Bakayoko has quickly become a key player for the Principality club.

It should strike fear into the rest of Europe to think that Bakayoko is not yet close to the peak of his powers, in our opinion. Should he continue to grow his game, both in terms of consistency and palette, notably working on having more confidence in joining attacks and using even more of his frame to bully his opponents, he could become a real force in world football.

Monaco is the best place for him to be to hone his skills, a quick move in the summer of 2017 à la Anthony Martial is not the answer. It would put Bakayoko's entire career trajectory and potential in jeopardy.



WYLAN CYPRIEN



28

Club: OGC Nice

Position: Midfielder

Born: Les Abymes

Date of Birth: 28/01/1995

Age: 21

League Form in 2016*

Games: 18

Total Defensive Errors: 1

Average Pass Accuracy: 90%

Average Duels Won: 64%

They say that the mark of a top player is his ability to perform in the big games. If this is true, then Wylan Cyprien will have passed the test with flying colours after his performance for OGC Nice against fellow title challengers and French powerhouse Paris Saint-Germain. Cyprien scored a phenomenal free-kick to open the scoring for Nice. However, it was not just his free-kick that was impressive. Quite simply, Cyprien ran the midfield, no easy feat considering he was up against Marco Verratti, Grzegorz Krychowiak and Thiago Motta. Motta and Krychowiak are both seasoned professionals, while Verratti is arguably the best midfielder in Ligue 1 and has been linked with every top club in the world. Cyprien outshone all three of them and won the midfield battle for his side, with some nifty help from Jean Seri, admittedly.

At the age of 21, Cyprien is already a star in the making and is rightfully being heralded as the next big thing to come out of France. When he was initially signed from RC Lens, it was thought that he would be a replacement for Nampalys Mendy, previously Nice's defensive midfield general and captain. Mendy had been a formidable midfield presence in his own right, but Cyprien was seen as being an astute replacement. However, it soon became clear that Cyprien lacked the discipline to play in the midfield holding role and that his talents would be wasted in such a defensive position.

Lucien Favre initially opted for a 4-3-3 formation, with Cyprien playing as a right winger. The intention was that Cyprien would be able to use his work-rate and versatility to help Nice gain a midfield advantage. However, three games into the Ligue 1 season it was clear that the 4-3-3 and playing Cyprien as a winger was not working. The turning point was the signing of Dante. Dante's arrival allowed Lucien Favre to switch Nice to a 3-5-2 formation with Cyprien playing centrally. The first test of this new formation came in a game against Olympique de Marseille. The match will always be remembered for Mario Balotelli's brace on his debut. However, Cyprien arguably put in an even better performance and would end up scoring the winning goal in a 3-2 win. Cyprien's work at the heart of midfield showed a maturity and composure not usually seen in such young players.

Cyprien's professional career began with Lens in 2012. The French youth international established himself as a starter during Lens's promotion to Ligue 1 and subsequent relegation in 2015. The 2015/16 season began slowly for Cyprien, but upon entry into 2016, it became clear that it was going to be by far the most successful year of Cyprien's career. He finished the season with seven goals in 34 appearances, even captaining the Ligue 2 outfit in the final two games, perhaps his appointment for this role was an attempt to convince him to stay. Once again playing as a central midfielder in a 4-3-3, Cyprien began to take on a more attacking role in the team in 2016. Cyprien's transformation from simple workhorse to one of Lens's main attacking options can be mainly attributed to the efforts of Lens manager Antoine Kombouaré, a coach well-known for his development of young players. Unfortunately for Cyprien, Lens failed to gain promotion from Ligue 2. It seemed that for Cyprien to fully exercise his potential, he would be forced to leave the club to play at a higher level.

Over the past two years, Ligue 2 has become a favourite hunting ground for OGC Nice who have realised that it is a league contains an immense amount of young talent, available relatively cheaply. Cyprien is a case in point, having signed for around €5m. Operating largely exclusively in the centre of midfield for Nice so far, Cyprien has quite simply become one of the best players in Ligue 1. At the time of writing, Cyprien has made 17 appearances, scored five goals and given two assists in the French top flight for *Les Aiglons*.

If there is one area that Cyprien has most improved in over the course of the calendar year, it has certainly been with regards to his attacking play. From a young age, Cyprien possessed exceptional work-rate and stamina. Because of this, he was typecast as an engine in midfield whose main job was to help press and win back the ball for his side. However, Cyprien has not rested on his laurels. He has become a valuable goal threat from midfield using his energy and pace to make late runs into the box. Cyprien has also hugely improved his passing and has become much more intelligent with his use of the ball.

One of Cyprien's main strengths is his composure when in possession, like the entirety of the Nice team in fact. The Frenchman is extremely comfortable with the ball at his feet and has shown a maturity rarely seen in players so young. Cyprien has already played in many different midfield roles throughout his young career, however he is best used as a box-to-box midfielder. Here, he can use his stamina and ability on the ball to affect both the defensive and attacking aspects of play. If Cyprien has one major weakness, it is that he sometimes displays a lack of defensive discipline when the opposition are in possession. However, Cyprien has come on enormously in such a short period of time under Lucien Favre, that this particular weakness is unlikely to even exist this time next year.

There are not many players who will ever display the type of skill that Cyprien can, let alone at such a young age. Should he can continue to improve, he will almost certainly develop into the next great player to come out of France's seemingly never-ending conveyor belt of young talent.



SERGE AURIER

^9

27

Club: PSG

Position: Defender

Born: Ouragahio

Date of Birth: 24/12/1992

Age: 24

League Form in 2016

Games: 19

Goals Conceded: 17

Total Chances Created: 16

Average Duels Won: 53.42%

Anyone with even a rudimentary knowledge of French football will know Serge Aurier as an undoubted star in the top-flight. A powerful, skilful right-back blessed with fantastic pace and an almost-unrivalled crossing ability, 2016 was expected to promise much for the Ivorian international who had begun the year midway through his first season as a PSG player proper – having had his loan move from Toulouse made permanent.

However, world football will remember Aurier's 2016 perhaps more for his exploits off the field, than on it.

Let's begin chronologically however. With Gregory van der Wiel's star waning at the Parc des Princes, Aurier began the year firmly in the ascendancy. Having weaved in and out of the squad, the 23-year-old firmly cemented his place in the starting 11 at the turn of the year as a result of a number of starring performances, not least the immense 5-1 win over Lyon. For the first six weeks of the year, Aurier featured in every minute of every game as PSG chained together an impressive run of results. The right-back had also picked up an assist in the win over Saint-Étienne, before finally being rested for the home tie against struggling Lille on 13th February as PSG laboured to an uninspiring 0-0 draw.

No-one can quite fathom what passed between the night of the 13th and 14th. Aurier – alongside a friend of his – set up a seemingly innocuous Periscope broadcast to his Twitter followers late on Saturday night, something not necessarily out of the blue for today's social-media savvy footballers. Armed with a shisha pipe, blazing music and a flurry of questions and comments posted on the app for the player to answer, the young right-back dutifully obliged.

An astonishing attack on team-mates and coach Laurent Blanc followed. He labelled the technician a '*fiotte*', regarded as a homophobic slur. He criticised rival Van der Wiel as well as other members of the dressing room. But his most scathing words were left for Blanc, who he accused as a puppet to Zlatan Ibrahimovic (in less polite terms of course). The sheer nonchalance of the player who continued to answer questions freely on social media without thinking once of the consequences. And they came – fast.

Within the hour, Twitter was ablaze with Aurier's comments. Journalist Pierre Ménès tried to defend the player, making excuses that the video was perhaps falsified. It was not. All this occurred on the eve of a very important Champions' League clash against Chelsea. PSG released a statement condemning the player's actions. Nasser Al-Khelaifi, the club's president, suspended the player until further notice.

And just like that, Aurier's momentum had ground to a halt. PSG demoted him to the club's reserves squad while working out their next step. Would he be sacked or sold on? Eventually, and only after the player's grovelling apology on the club's in-house television channel did Aurier return to the side in April for a crucial Champions' League tie against Manchester City.

Shorn of top-tier action for more than six weeks, it was evident that his form had dipped considerably. In his absence, PSG had already sown up the league title at a canter with a thumping 9-0 win away to relegated Troyes. His only mission was to let the football do the talking. Surprisingly, Blanc was unafraid to bring Aurier straight back to the fold after the suspension elapsed. He featured prominently mainly in the cups, as PSG beat Lille in the Coupe de la Ligue show-down, before helping his side to the final of the Coupe de France, having participated in the 1-0 win over Lorient.

In the league however, Marquinhos was increasingly preferred to at right-back, with Aurier featuring in only two of the seven games following his return to the first-team squad. Nevertheless, he was still chosen to start the Coupe de France final against Marseille, putting in a decent showing as les Parisiens sealed a quadruple in their 4-2 triumph. At last, Aurier could put a challenging season behind him.

Not for long however. A week after that final triumph, the Ivorian found himself in custody following an incident outside of a nightclub on the Champs-Élysées. The Periscope scandal still fresh in the memory, this was another blow to the player's fragile relationship with a PSG hierarchy keen to protect their image. With the player bailed until September, PSG could do nothing more than protest his innocence until proven guilty.

Perhaps it was this hanging cloud that forced Aurier to redouble his efforts in pre-season training. The player started the 2016/17 campaign in strong form, picking up three assists in five games – as well as impressing in the Champions' League against Arsenal. Under Unai Emery, he transformed himself into a formidable attacking threat on the wing.

Though trouble is never far away with Aurier. The nightclub incident returned in late September when the right-back was sentenced to two months' in prison, which he subsequently appealed. That incident also ensured he would miss the return leg against Arsenal, having been denied entry into the United Kingdom – something which had incensed his employers.

All in all, Aurier is an undoubted talent destined for the top. On the field he has grown as a player with continued experience and exposure against the very best opponents. But this year has largely been a write-off for Aurier the man, the role model. This has to change in 2017, for his sake and Paris Saint-Germain's, before it is too late for all involved.



PAUL BAYSSE



26

Club: OGC Nice

Position: Defender

Born: Bordeaux

Date of Birth: 18/05/1988

Age: 28

League Form in 2016

Games: 26

Goals Conceded: 20

Total Defensive Errors: 1

Average Duels Won: 59.96%

Generally speaking, every great team has had a great captain. He is the embodiment of the team, the leader in victory or defeat. For OGC Nice, this player is Paul Baysse. The Frenchman has had a career whereby he has fought tooth and nail for everything he has achieved. Whilst players such as Mario Balotelli and Wylan Cyprien may receive plaudits for Nice's recent success, Paul Baysse is at the very heart and soul of the team.

Baysse's career began with French football giant Bordeaux as a 19-year-old. Unfortunately, Baysse failed to make any appearances for *Les Girondins* and was sent on loan to CS Sedan in Ligue 2. After spending one campaign with the second division outfit, it became clear that Baysse had no future with Bordeaux and, without a bevy of options, he chose to join Sedan permanently. Baysse went on to make 88 appearances for the recently bankrupted side, his first taste of regular first-team football at professional level.

In 2010, the then 22-year-old Baysse was given an opportunity in the top flight with Brest. Baysse bought into the rather rugged mentality of the side and became a key element for the northwestern outfit over the course of the three seasons that followed as they battled relegation before a cruciate ligament injury midway through the 2012/13 campaign ruled him out for the rest of the season. This was incidentally Brest's last Ligue 1 campaign, finishing bottom of the table as they undoubtedly, sorely missed Baysse during the business end of the season.

Having recovered from injury, Baysse opted to leave Brest, knowing that at the age of 25 he needed to be in the Ligue 1 conversation. Saint-Étienne saw Baysse as a perfect squad signing to provide depth at both centre back and right-back for the grueling campaign ahead.

However, in a huge blow for both Baysse and Saint-Étienne, the defender suffered another cruciate ligament injury whilst playing in a friendly for *Les Verts* and was ruled out for at least another six months. The Frenchman went on to miss the entirety of the 2013/14 season. Although Baysse recovered in time for the following campaign, Loïc Perrin and Moustapha Sall were already established starters and Baysse was given neither the time nor the chance to put together a sustained run of games to prove that he deserved to be starting ahead of them.

After two car-crash seasons at Saint-Étienne, OGC Nice picked Baysse up initially on loan in an attempt to plug a leaky defence. Nice's attack during the summer of 2015 improved significantly through the signings of Valère Germain and Hatem Ben Arfa, however, their defence was still a major weakness. The arrival of Baysse can only be described as a stroke of genius. He added experience and poise to a backline that had often been its own worst enemy. The statistics make the argument better than words can. During the 2014/15 season, without Baysse, Nice conceded an average of 1.39 goals per game.

During the 2015/16 campaign, with Baysse, they conceded an average of 1.08 goals per game. Baysse quickly developed a partnership with fellow new defender Maxime Le Marchand, and while this entirely new personnel took time to gel, they were a massive improvement on the calamitous Romain Genevois and Kévin Gomis from the previous campaign. Baysse's assured style of play and die-hard attitude quickly installed him as a fan favourite on the Riviera. Under Claude Puel, one of Baysse's more underrated qualities became increasingly important. Nice played an attractive brand of possession-based football which required centre backs to be comfortable with the ball at their feet. Baysse's frame is not naturally compatible with that of an ideal ball-playing centre back, but he has become surprisingly successful in developing a wide and accurate passing range. Nice immediately exercised their option to purchase Baysse permanently when the season closed for an incredibly handy €500k.

Baysse began 2016/17 by being appointed club captain, a strong sign from new manager Lucien Favre who arrived with new ideas and a new formation. Favre intended to play a 3-5-2 with Baysse, Sarr and new signing Dante occupying the back three slots. As a result, Baysse's role shifted considerably. With Brazilian veteran Dante playing in between Sarr and Baysse, much of the onus of marshalling the defence and the rest of team was alleviated from the latter's shoulders, allowing him to focus on his own game. The shift has provided excellent results. Nice conceded just five goals in their opening nine games. However, during a 2-0 win against Olympique Lyonnais in October, Baysse suffered an injury which ended his 2016. It is no coincidence that Nice's defence has looked decidedly shakier and makeshift without their captain.

Baysse is quite a well-rounded defender, combining his strong aerial ability and good reading of the game to great effect. Baysse is one of the best emergency defenders in the league and is perfectly comfortable with being bunkered... in his own box should the need arise, excelling in the final 15 minutes of a match when OGC Nice might see their box besieged by a particularly tricky opponent. Although initially clumsy on the ball, Baysse has significantly improved this side of his game under Claude Puel and Lucien Favre.

Paul Baysse will likely never play at a higher level than with OGC Nice. However, this does not diminish his importance for the Côte D'Azur side. He is quite simply "*Le Capitaine*".

50-26 RECAP

50	-	Bryan Dabo	(Saint-Étienne)
49	-	Lassana Diarra	(Olympique de Marseille)
48	-	Vincent Enyeama	(LOSC Lille)
47	-	João Moutinho	(AS Monaco)
46	-	Guillaume Gillet	(FC Nantes)
45	-	Maxwell	(PSG)
44	-	Danijel Subašić	(AS Monaco)
43	-	Nicolas De Préville	(LOSC Lille)
42	-	Benoît Costil	(Rennes)
41	-	Moustapha Diallo	(EA Guingamp)
40	-	Vincent Koziello	(OGC Nice)
39	-	Christopher Jullien	(Toulouse FC)
38	-	Marquinhos	(PSG)
37	-	Alassane Pléa	(OGC Nice)
36	-	Adrien Rabiot	(PSG)
35	-	Kamil Grosicki	(Rennes)
34	-	Ángel Di María	(PSG)
33	-	Martin Braithwaite	(Toulouse FC)
32	-	Rachid Ghezzal	(Olympique Lyonnais)
31	-	Valère Germain	(AS Monaco)
30	-	Lucas Moura	(PSG)
29	-	Tiemoué Bakayoko	(AS Monaco)
28	-	Wylan Cyprien	(OGC Nice)
27	-	Serge Aurier	(PSG)
26	-	Paul Baysse	(OGC Nice)



SÉBASTIEN CORCHIA



25

Club: LOSC Lille

Position: Defender

Born: Noisy-le-Sec

Date of Birth: 01/11/1990

Age: 26

League Form in 2016

Games: 36

Goals Conceded: 38

Total Chances Created: 18

Average Duels Won: 53.53%

It would be under the harsh whistles of Lens' Bollaert-Delelis stadium, with 20 minutes left to play of France's second match of the November international break against Ivory Coast, that Sébastien Corchia would come on for former team-mate Djibril Sidibé to finally make his senior international debut.

While you would be hard pressed to find a worse place for a Lille player to make their first steps in a blue shirt, the Franco-Italian right-back - who at one point even sounded out the *Azzurri* team in an attempt to find international football - nevertheless spoke of this match as a '*turbo boost*' to his ambitions for his career. This call-up was the result of a succession of several seasons of consistent performances for Lille which Didier Deschamps could no longer ignore, and it seems that he will be a more integral part of the national team in the future.

Nevertheless, it is clear that Corchia, who has played for France at every youth level - would have much preferred to make his France debut four months' prior, 200km south in St Denis for the opening match of EURO 2016. His omission from Didier Deschamps 23-man list was made all the more scathing by the - deserved - inclusion of his club competition at full-back in Sidibé, despite the both of them proving crucial in Lille's resurgence under Frédéric Antonetti - who replaced Hervé Renard, sacked in November - to finish 5th at the end of the season. His performances even garnered the praise of Thiago Silva, who suggested in April that he should be the player who PSG should acquire to replace Gregory van der Wiel - who already had one foot out of the door by then - or controversy magnet Serge Aurier.

There is an argument, nevertheless, that Corchia's breakthrough into the limelight is long overdue. Now being 26, he is well beyond the age at which he can be considered a youth prospect, and should be establishing himself by now. Having come through the youth academy at Le Mans, he was playing a full Ligue 1 season by the age of 19 before spending three years at Sochaux between 2011 and 2014, a spell which would have been shorter had his transfer to Lille not been hampered by a DNCG decision - although it would eventually go through six months later.

He has flown under the radar over the last few seasons despite being a reliable performer for his club side - in part due to his unremarkable and uncontroversial image - but has only recently been considered as a viable replacement in the national team in a position which has not seen a player take it and make it his own on a long-term basis.

While primarily a right-back, Corchia's attacking potency and marked pace has allowed him to almost seamlessly transition into playing on the wing or in midfield several times over the course of his career so far. Though last year's return of just two goals and two assists was below par, he has usually been noted for his crossing abilities over the years as well proficient defensive showings.

His versatility, though, had proved a problem early on in his Lille career as he was often slotted into the position which benefited the team more, something which would prevent him from properly establishing himself at the right-back position, particularly under René Girard. Since finding form, however, he has imposed himself as a crucial member of the team, often being a key contributor to attacking play and offering an impressive tackling success rate - although this side of his game is less often discussed.

Despite Corchia's sudden upturn in career development - a year of steady performances to go with his international debut - Lille's start to the 2016/17 season has been anything but consistent. So far they have wallowed near the bottom of the table for the majority of the first half of the season, although this poor form has been alleviated recently with three-game winning streak. One of the catalysts for this resurgence has ironically been Frédéric Antonetti's departure - his own arrival a year before having sparked Lille's storming run in the back end of last season.

Overall, it seems that Corchia has finally made the step up to a long-awaited international level of play, and as his performances with *Les Dogues* continue to catch the eye there is a sense that, in spite of Lille's stubborn grip on him while their other top players were leaving the club, he may leave in the summer amid interest from the likes of Paris Saint-Germain and Sevilla, although Gérard Lopez's imminent acquisition of the club may give them the financial means to keep him.

This is also dependent on whether Lille can continue to recover from their abysmal start to the season and break this apparent cycle of mediocrity as they continue trying to replicate the dizzying heights of the 2011/12 league and cup double. With the aging Bacary Sagna and Christophe Jallet being phased out by Didier Deschamps, Corchia may find it less of a struggle to rack up the international caps, even though Sidibé remains ahead of him in the pecking order.



CHEIKH N'DOYE

^ 62

24

Club: Angers SCO

Position: Midfielder

Born: Rufisque

Date of Birth: 29/03/1986

Age: 30

League Form in 2016

Games: 21

Total Defensive Errors: 2

Average Pass Accuracy: 86.43%

Average Duels Won: 52.19%

Seemingly a trend in modern day world football, many of Ligue 1's biggest clubs once again found themselves chopping and changing players over the summer. With Paris Saint-Germain waving goodbye to talismanic striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic, as well as considerable changes at two of France's biggest clubs, Olympique de Marseille and Olympique Lyonnais, it would have seemed that change was the flavour of the summer. However, despite the transfer bedlam, one club who have done extremely well to keep hold of their key players is Stéphane Moulin's Angers SCO.

Famed last year for their ability to make shrewd and cost-effective signings, eyes were on Angers this summer for different reasons, as it was expected that bigger, richer clubs would swoop in and cherry pick the best of Angers' exceptional side, who achieved an extremely impressive ninth place finish.

Despite their success however, Angers have lost only one significant name from their 2015/16 squad, with Romain Saïss leaving for Wolverhampton Wanderers in the Sky Bet Championship. Though the central midfielder's departure is certainly a loss for Angers SCO, fans in the Pays de la Loire will have been delighted to see the club keep hold of their main asset, Cheikh N'Doye.

Before his arrival at Angers, N'Doye was a largely unknown quantity outside of French football despite scoring twenty-one Ligue 2 goals between 2013 and 2015 for Créteil. The Senegalese midfielder's impact for Angers last season was unprecedented, ending the campaign as Angers' top scorer with nine goals in 35 league appearances, as well as winning over 53% of his duels in midfield.

A tough-tackling midfielder with an eye for goal; Cheikh N'Doye has become the Yaya Touré of Ligue 1, and his fearlessness in the face of even the biggest opponents has been one of the many highlights of watching Angers SCO over the last year.

N'Doye's start to the 2016/17 season has not been quite so full of impact, but still, the thirty-year-old midfielder continues to impress. Scoring two goals at the time of writing this season, and winning over 56% of his average duels, the Senegalese is showing no signs of slowing down, despite his side's rather faltering form.

The arrival of Angers new attacking players, such as Karl Toko Ekambi and Famara Diedhiou, has seen the attacking duties that N'Doye held last season shift somewhat, and perhaps this has contributed to his drop in goals. However, despite this, N'Doye continues to shine as a beacon of leadership and strength in this Angers side.

Among his many qualities, it is N'Doye's ability to score with his head that has caught the attention of fans and pundits alike in 2016 in Ligue 1. An extremely strong presence in the air, the Senegalese midfielder poses even the strongest defences in Ligue 1 serious problems with his aerial prowess, making him almost like an extra centre-forward at times, when Angers are taking set-pieces.

This talent has a dual-effect though, as N'Doye can also double up as a central defender, adding extra bulk to Angers SCO's defensive set plays. Despite his age, N'Doye's energy in midfield is also admirable. The deep-lying midfielder acts as the real engine room for Angers SCO, often moving the ball from defence to attack, as well as being a strong and confident tackler and he does well to break down opposition moves.

However, he is by no means the finished article and N'Doye himself probably knows that there are areas of his game which must improve if he is to continue to stand out as Angers SCO's key man. N'Doye's playing style is often robust and, at times, clumsy.

Repeatedly, the Senegalese midfielder is found picking up one too many bookings or giving away the occasional needless foul. He commits to the challenge fully, without hesitation, and this can often land him in trouble. However, picking up only one yellow card and one red so far this season, N'Doye could certainly be said to be improving this area of his game. The old adage of maturing with age, if you will.

Occasionally too fast to challenge, and giving away the odd needless foul and loose pass, Cheikh N'Doye is by no means the perfect midfielder. However, his fight and commitment to the Angers cause, as well as his constant running, tackling and aerial threat, make him one of the most exciting midfielders in Ligue 1 to watch.

Moulin and company will do well to keep hold of him for much longer if he continues to stand out in such a way for his side.



ROMAIN THOMAS

^ 54

23

Club: Angers SCO

Position: Defender

Born: Landerneau

Date of Birth: 12/06/1988

Age: 28

League Form in 2016

Games: 33

Goals Conceded: 42

Total Defensive Errors: 3

Average Duels Won: 52.72%

After playing a major role in Angers excellent 2015/16 Ligue 1 campaign, Romain Thomas has again stood out as one of the key players for *Les Scoistes* this season. However, recreating the outstanding achievements of their 2015/16 season was never going to be easy, and this year, Angers SCO have struggled to find that magic formula which guided them to a ninth place finish. And now, with English clubs' eyes fixed firmly on the French defender, Angers might be facing a battle to keep hold of their defensive sentinel in 2017.

A huge part of Stéphane Moulin's sides success last season was the team's ability to reorganise themselves in the face of danger. As one of the most defensively disciplined sides in Ligue 1, Angers frustrated many of the big teams, conceding just 38 goals in total over the course of the season.

As the heart of the centre of defence, Romain Thomas was a major part of Angers defensive success, cementing himself not only as a fan favourite, but as a reliable and level-headed defender capable of matching up to some of Ligue 1's best attacking talent.

Thomas has been a longstanding fans' favourite at the Stade Jean-Bouin since his move to the club from National side USJA Carquefou in 2013. Last season, the giant Breton developed an integral central defensive partnership with summer signing Ismael Traoré at the heart of the Angers back four, with both players developing well-earned, positive reputations as a result of their reliability when playing. However, this season Thomas has had to withstand a change of tactic.

Aware of his team's fragility, Moulin has changed his style from last season, employing a 5-3-2 system on many occasions. In 2015/16, Angers SCO stuck to their signature 4-3-3 formation fairly rigidly, and some might claim that this change of style has had a major impact in causing Angers' downturn in form this season. Though that may be up for debate, one thing that has certainly changed is Thomas' role in the team.

Last season, the Breton had a fairly simple role; to stick rigidly to his defensive position in the centre, and distribute the ball when and where possible. Thomas executed the role outstandingly, earning him the attribute of the most completed passes in the Angers side last season, completing 559 with an 86% passing accuracy. However, as part of Moulin's new and not-so improved 5-3-2, Thomas has been forced to play more conservatively, often forced out into a quasi-right-back role; a position the Breton does not look entirely comfortable in.

Thomas' stock has hardly fallen though, with many remembering what an integral part he played in the Angers side that won so many plaudits last season. The twenty-eight-year-old was also an inspirational part of the club's successful promotion campaign in 2014/15 in Ligue 2, in which he played an impressive thirty-five times. The twenty-eight-year-old played an impressive seventy Ligue 2 matches in just two seasons between 2013 and 2015.

The product of the Stade Brestois 29 youth system's playing style can be fairly described as 'steady'. He often does not take risks and his ability to maintain his composure at the back is one of his main positive attributes. He likes to keep things simple and he does not tend to dive into tackles unless it is necessary and his passing is usually 'practical' and pragmatic, as he prefers to play short passes as opposed to riskier long-range attempts.

At 1.93m, he is a logical aerial presence in the box and he mostly does well to deal with balls played into the danger zone, typically clearing trouble with success. Despite his height, Thomas has struggled impose himself in the opposition box as much this season, so far scoring no goals in his 15 appearances for Moulin's side.

By no means is Romain Thomas a perfect player. At times there are clear limitations to his game that could prevent him from ever becoming a top class centre back. He is not the quickest player and he often relies on his excellent ability to read and anticipate the game in order to stay one step ahead of pacey strikers.

With clubs from England now reportedly monitoring Thomas, Angers could face a battle in 2017 to keep hold of him. At 28, the Breton might see the upcoming transfer window as the right time to make a bold step in his career and make the move to another country to make more of a name for himself.

Whether he stays or goes though, Romain Thomas will always be loved by the Angers faithful, and forever remembered for the outstanding part he played in this successful period of the club's history.



ISSA DIOP



22

Club: Toulouse FC

Position: Defender

Born: Toulouse

Date of Birth: 09/01/1997

Age: 19

League Form in 2016

Games: 29

Goals Conceded: 32

Total Defensive Errors: 0

Average Duels Won: 51.67%

The date is November 28th 2015. A youth product is surprisingly included in Toulouse's starting eleven by then coach Dominique Arribagé. The Toulouse coach is feeling the pressure from the board as Toulouse haven't won since the opening day of the season (against Saint-Etienne, 2-1) and are yet to keep a clean sheet. They host 3rd-placed Nice who had just beaten Lyon 3-0 and Marseille 1-0 - back-to-back. One of those matches where you feel the game doesn't need to take place (on paper).

Arribagé opts for a 4-3-3 with young Issa Diop partnering Marcel Tisserand in the centre back positions. Surely Arribagé has gone mad! Lining up two rookies against the likes of Ben Arfa, one of the league's most technically gifted players, and Germain - a very much in-form striker! Toulouse did not read the script though: they open the scoreline via a Martin Braithwaite penalty on the half-hour mark and put the game beyond doubt thanks to a Wissam Ben Yedder (now making the fans of Sevilla FC smile) strike on the hour mark. The youngsters have just kept Ben Arfa and company at bay...

Diop to his credit did not take anything for granted from that point onward, knowing that he was going to have to fight for his place. For that, he needed to keep up his excellent reading of the game and to add a bit of physical presence in the opposition's penalty area. He achieved that a week later at Troyes in early December by scoring his first career goal from a set-piece: Diop only had to wait 100-odd minutes of top flight football to score his first goal! Toulouse beat Troyes 3-0 (which is less of an achievement than it sounds given that they are statistically the worst side in recent Ligue 1 history).

The team to bring Diop's dreams crashing back down to earth were Lorient. Tisserand was once again paired with Diop at Troyes but got sent off for two bookable offences and so missed the fixture against the Brittany outfit. Diop's partner at centre back was Kana-Biyik and Toulouse lost the game 2-3.

Maybe the defeat seriously dampened Diop's spirits more than it should have, as Diop got himself sent off the following game at Nantes for a cynical and meaningless foul in second half stoppage time. 2015 ended on a positive note with a 1-1 draw against Lille. Toulouse were however second bottom to Troyes as 2016 began, but Diop had gotten his foot in the door. Competition was fierce to start games for a club that was on the brink of relegation (again!). Diop knew that a decent start to 2016 could help him cement a side in senior side in the long-term.

The new year did start well for Diop. Toulouse won at Reims 3-1 (a side they would eventually relegate thanks to an epic last-gasp 3-2 win at Angers on the final day) and were resilient in defending against PSG, losing the game by the solitary goal (scored by Zlatan of course). After that, Diop followed the squad's general dip in form, performing to the detriment of the club's performances (he was again sent off against Nantes in stoppage time).

Toulouse continued to lose away (0-4 at Monaco, 0-2 at Montpellier) and to draw at home. It was not until February 28th that Arribagé quit after a 1-2 defeat at home to Rennes (Rennes scoring 2 goals in second half stoppage-time). The club was 10 points from safety with 10 games to go. Surely only a magician could help Toulouse out of this rut...

In came Pascal Dupraz though and the magic did take place. During those last 10 games, Toulouse only conceded eight goals (not bad for a struggling side), in nine of those 10 games, the same centre back pairing started: Issa Diop and Marcel Tisserand. The foundation of a good side usually starts from the back. The emergence of youth academy product Alban Lafont in goal did help of course but the cohesion and harmony formed between the two young defenders to conserve the crucial leads created by Ben Yedder and Braithwaite was exceptionally necessary for survival.

Marcel Tisserand was merely on loan at Toulouse however and they did not have the financial muscle to buy him (Ingolstadt bought him from Monaco for €5m). Tisserand had to be replaced. Dupraz needed a decent centre back for less than €3m - a hard find. Dupraz came up with the goods though signing Christopher Jullien from newly-promoted Bundesliga club Freiburg for €2.5m. Jullien had just spent the previous season on loan at Dijon and impressed many with his calmness on the ball.

At 26, Jullien is four years Diop's senior but the 19-year old has already learned so much in his first half season at Toulouse: he beat one of the best sides in the country in his first career game, scored his first goal in his first away match, got himself sent off twice due to inexperience and, more importantly, has gone through the ups and downs of a relegation battle (a very much "back from the dead" one as well). Both defenders have things to learn from and teach each other.

After 17 games, Diop has missed four matches due to injury but has been partnered with Jullien at every occasion. He scored against local rivals Bordeaux in an emphatic 4-1 win and has yet to be sent off in the 2016/17 campaign. The progress made by Diop in 2016 is immense and he is certainly one of the most exciting up-and-coming players that Ligue 1 has to offer.



EDINSON CAVANI

^ 20

21

Club: PSG

Position: Attacker

Born: Salto

Date of Birth: 14/02/1987

Age: 29

League Form in 2016

Games: 32

Chances Created: 18

Goals: 26

Average Duels Won: 28%

For a man who has been replicating Zlatan Ibrahimovic's scoring rate at PSG, it might appear rather harsh that for Edinson Cavani the jury is still out on whether he has been an adequate replacement for the Swede as the focal point of the Parisians' attack. For too long shafted to the side lines – both on and off the pitch – by the flagship acquisition of PSG's Qatari era, the Uruguayan finally had the centre stage to himself to capitalise on and finally establish himself, as the team's marksman in Ibrahimovic left the club and Laurent Blanc was given his marching orders, replaced by the Basque Unai Emery. All of the mishaps of the last three years – unimpressive spells on the wing, the erratic finishing and the disappearing act in the Champions' League – would be forgotten, what we were about to see take centre stage was the Edinson Cavani that PSG had paid €60m for, the Napoli striker who had built a reputation around himself for his ruthless finishing and tireless work-rate.

And, on paper, shouldn't his 21 goals in 21 appearances this season be enough to suggest that we have found the real Cavani once again? Unfortunately, in reality Cavani has suffered from the same problems that have been inextricably linked to PSG throughout the last five years, anchoring them down and stopping them from *'dreaming bigger'*. For instance, a lack of decisiveness in Europe, notably in the first Champions' League group stage match this season against Arsenal which saw him fill up a season's montage worth of agonising misses; as well as an inability to capitalise on the creative engine that runs behind him – who could equally be held to account for the poor quality of their service this year. Not even a European specialist like Emery could mask those faults, and if anything the team has regressed – particularly in the league, which would have been expected under the manager who led Sevilla to a 7th place finish in La Liga last season.

Edinson Cavani's seemingly absurdly high rate of missed chances is made all the more infuriating for fans and coaches alike by his extraordinary ability to time his runs to perfection and find space in the most watertight defences, making it inevitable that he would at least poke one past the goalkeeper eventually. Michael Owen, always the astute observer, once commented – as a former striker himself – that *'any young footballer should watch Cavani's movement. Just close your eyes when he finishes'*. For the former Ballon d'Or winner (no, really), it is clear that Cavani lacks the composure in front of goal of a world-class striker, but he makes the type of run that is the hallmark of a lethal finisher, simply missing the final ingredient. This is the difference between a Cavani and a Ronaldo: both make the same types of runs into the box, but for Ronaldo, finishing off the opportunity is a mere formality. For Cavani, it is more of a lottery. Having scored only one goal in his first three games of the season, there were doubts over his credentials as the heir to the striker's position, which he would quickly quash with a four goal haul against Caen. Nevertheless, non-performances against the likes of Montpellier and Toulouse, who in the past few seasons had been relatively easy pickings for Laurent Blanc's and Zlatan Ibrahimovic's PSG, have recast those doubts over Edinson Cavani.

However, it does seem like, after a string of missed chances, you usually find Cavani atoning for his errors soon enough by scoring a goal or two – hence his exceptional rate of 16 league goals in 15 games. In that regard, it would be harsh to say that he has had a poor year. A successful domestic campaign last season, winning the treble for the second year in a row and notching his best tally yet in a PSG shirt in the league – which he looks well on course to shatter this term – was unfortunately overshadowed by the club's shortcomings in Europe, an Achilles heel often used by critics to undermine Paris' unrivalled dominance in the league that season. This season, Cavani's scoring feats have even taken him above Safet Susic in PSG's all-time top scorers list to go 3rd. It is evident that in Cavani, the Parisians have themselves a more traditional striker than Ibrahimović, whose imposing presence, incredible acrobatics and technique set him apart from his counterparts, and as a result the team must play to his strengths. This is something with which they have not always been successful in doing, despite a part of the blame lying on the striker's shoulders for his constant wasting of chances. There is a case to be made, however, that given that he has spent the last three years alternating between the wing and deputising for Ibrahimović, his lack of finishing prowess may be down to the fact that he has only just regained the position of the team's main striker.

A facet of Cavani's game which is often overlooked is his tireless work rate, contributing to both his teams' defensive and attacking play – he will often be found covering at left-back before bombing forward once the counter is on or breaking away with the ball himself. This attribute makes him a vital part of any team, regardless of his possibly wayward finishing up front, and is crucial for PSG or Uruguay when they employ any form of pressing game in matches where he features.

Overall, it would be petty and harsh to say that Cavani has regressed in 2016, or that he is not a world class striker. Finishing last season's title winning campaign with 19 goals in 24 appearances and looking this season to equal Zlatan Ibrahimovic's rate of scoring for PSG, most stats seem to point to a seamless handing over of striking duties at the Parc des Princes. But, just as Zlatan had been criticised of doing, Cavani has failed to make his mark on major games this season and as the team's supposed talismanic figure. It is fine to fill your boots against the likes of Caen, but there also needs to be convincing performances in Europe or against title rivals.



LAYVIN KURZAWA

^ 8

20

Club: PSG

Position: Defender

Born: Fréjus

Date of Birth: 04/09/1992

Age: 24

League Form in 2016

Games: 17

Goals Conceded: 14

Total Chances Created: 14

Average Duels Won: 46.59%

2016 has been a slow burner for Layvin Kurzawa and a year where he has had to bide his time and take his opportunities when presented to him.

Signed from Ligue 1 rivals AS Monaco in August 2015 for a reported €23m, the pacey left-back played a secondary role to Brazilian veteran Maxwell under former boss Laurent Blanc making 25 appearances in all competitions in his first season in the capital.

Maxwell had previously fought off competition from a below-par Lucas Digne for the starting left-back berth, but it was clear that the signing of Kurzawa would produce more of a threat to the aging Brazilian.

Whilst performances were generally good, Kurzawa's development was not progressing at the rate that it could and should have been had he been given a run of two, three or four continuous starts.

The dismissal of Laurent Blanc and arrival of Spaniard Unai Emery as PSG manager this summer has been the catalyst that Kurzawa needed to push on and make himself first choice.

The ex-Monaco man was given the nod and could hardly have started the 2016/17 season better as he was the goal-scorer and stand out performer in PSG's opening day win at Bastia in August. This followed another excellent performance the previous week in PSG's 4-1 Trophée des Champions thrashing of Lyon where he also found the net on that occasion.

In week two of Ligue 1, the 24-year-old once again showed his attacking intent, scoring a close-range header as PSG dispatched newly-promoted Metz 3-0. Bizarrely, since joining PSG just over a year ago, Kurzawa has found the net five times, more than midfielder Marco Verratti (signed in 2012) who has four in his entire PSG career.

Whilst his goals have caught the eye this term, Kurzawa has also shown a maturity in his game as well as a real intent to cement himself as a main-stayer in Emery's new look side.

From an attacking sense, Kurzawa has regularly offered another outlet for an already very attacking team. His link up play down the left flank with Blaise Matuidi and Ángel Di María has provided the champions with success in the final third.

From a defensive standpoint, the French international has improved upon his positioning and now showcases controlled aggression in his challenges, especially when charging back to disrupt an opponent's counter-attack from a more advanced position. Helped by having the outstanding Thiago Silva by his side, there is little doubt that Kurzawa can go on to become one of European football's top full-backs.

There are some similarities in Kurzawa with a young Ashley Cole, in terms of his intensity, energy, and powerful attacking runs. If the Frenchman can go on to have a career standing in the game like Cole, then PSG will have a huge asset on their hands.

Kurzawa's move to PSG has been a positive one overall. He is starting to show improvement in his position and playing alongside some of the world's top players has been a key reason for this. He is playing big games in the biggest competitions and already has a Ligue 1 title, Coupe de France and Coupe de la Ligue under his belt, even if Emery has generally preferred to pick Maxwell ahead of the French international in the Champions' League.

Sadly for the French left-back, he has been plagued with a groin injury towards the end of 2016 and he may need surgery to eradicate the issue. Whilst this has let Maxwell back into the starting XI at the expense of Kurzawa, the ex-Monaco man will be confident of claiming his place back when fully fit.

In summary 2016 has been a positive year for Kurzawa where he has been able to break his way into the PSG starting XI and show some of the huge potential that was unearthed during his time in the Principality. Although he would have been disappointed to have missed out on France's EURO 2016 squad he will know that he will have a great opportunity to establish himself as the future number one left-back for Les Bleus if he can fend off the challenge of Barcelona's Lucas Digne. With Digne likely to play a bit-part role in Catalunya behind Jordi Alba, Kurzawa will need to be receiving regular game time for PSG if Didier Deschamps is likely to favour him.

PSG need a fit, strong Kurzawa as they make their assault on domestic and European success and look to make up points in an intriguing title race. Maxwell can fill in especially in Ligue 1, but has shown signs that he is slowing down most notably in an attacking sense. Kurzawa can give PSG the impetus needed to push this youthful new-look side into the latter stages of the Champions' League, but the left-back must show increased serenity in training and an even more measured judgement and character on the field in order for Unai Emery to trust him fully in 2017.



THOMAS LEMAR

^ 29

19

Club: AS Monaco

Position: Midfielder

Born: Baie-Mahault

Date of Birth: 12/11/1995

Age: 21

League Form in 2016

Games: 31

Chances Created: 43

Goals: 8

Average Duels Won: 54.94%

Thinking back on Thomas Lemar's earliest days as a professional at Caen, his incredible rise almost seems beyond belief. At that point (2014), the diminutive winger was a luxury for Patrice Garande's ferocious counter-attacking side. Superb at drawing fouls and delivering free-kicks, Lemar represented something intriguing, but hardly seemed at the level of "sure things" such as Allan Saint-Maximin, Adama Traoré or Rony Lopes, a trio of attacking players who joined him in signing for AS Monaco in the summer of 2015. Fast forward just over a year, then, and Lemar is a full-fledged French international, banging in the goals for one of Europe's form teams, continuing an upward trajectory is far from approaching its limits.

Just recently 21, Lemar was important to an U-20 France side that won the Toulon Tournament that summer, but was hardly making waves as doubts surrounded his stature and physical presence. He had recorded four assists for Caen, an impressive figure for a teenager, but after a bright start to his time at Monaco (three goals and an assist in his first five matches before missing a few weeks six weeks with an ankle injury), the beginning of 2016 was indifferent.

The club struggled to find an attacking rhythm, and a handful of transfer missteps (Vagner Love, Stephan El Shaarawy, Ivan Cavaleiro) looked to have the potential to embarrass the club. Elimination from the Europa League and losing second place to a resurgent Lyon added to a palpable sense of frustration. Lemar himself was often benched in favour of Helder Costa, and contributed just two goals in the season's last half.

This season, things have been quite a bit different, to say the least. Manager Leonardo Jardim has supplanted what was essentially a 4-2-3-1 with a 4-4-2. His thought process surely had more to do with rotation and keeping a deep squad happy than it did improving the performances of Lemar specifically. However, it is hard to imagine the manager being disappointed with Lemar having notched eight goals this season, including against Tottenham both home and away in the Champions' League. Jardim had never used a two-striker system at Monaco before, and with both Lemar and Bernardo Silva given to cutting inside to run at opposing defences, there were questions as to whether there would be enough space for the two attackers. However, with Valère Germain eagerly putting in a shift to stretch play from the striker's position, things have gone swimmingly.

Lemar excels at free-kicks, but he is also a surprisingly versatile attacker. He is more adept at stretching play and delivering crosses, but with left-back Benjamin Mendy's play improving week by week, he has often taken on a more central role, and his improved shooting has been the catalyst for his uptick in goals. His directness has been a boon to Monaco tactically, as he and Silva have switched roles to some degree, with the Portuguese becoming less of a goal-scorer and more of a creative presence, as evidenced by his strong recent showing against Bordeaux, a match that not only saw Monaco win comfortably but also saw left-back Diego Contento removed at the interval. That said, when Monaco have gone more defensively, with Djibril Sidibé at left back and Andrea Raggi on the right, Lemar is happy to let his powerful France team-mate cut inside, using his physicality to worry defenders while Lemar whips in crosses.

With both wide players so plastic in their approach, and Fabinho and Tiemoué Bakayoko becoming increasingly comfortable in joining the attack from midfield, it is no wonder that Monaco have developed one of the most frightening attacks in Europe, comfortably winning a difficult Champions' League group while remaining well-positioned in Ligue 1.

There will be, of course, some naysayers as regards Lemar's true potential, given his size, but comparisons to Andres Iniesta, while flattering, are instructive. Like the Spaniard, Lemar's ability to keep the ball and read a situation holistically is remarkable. If he shoots, if he passes, if he dribbles, it all comes within the framework of a keen understanding of a team's tactical initiative.

Too, despite his small size, he has worked hard to improve his strength and positioning, making sure to not leave his full-back exposed. For a 4-4-2 to work, the wide midfielders must be willing to put in a shift, and Lemar has been no stranger to hard work, despite lacking any great deal of pace. His tackling and interception rates are vastly improved, and not only because of the shift in tactics. He has also covered more ground, his improved energy and stamina providing strong validation of his ambition and attitude.

Lemar's recent France call-up was no accident, either. He had consistently impressed with the U-21 side, and with Anthony Martial struggling for playing time at Manchester United, Lemar was given his chance in a friendly against the Ivory Coast, and despite only getting a cameo, he is well-poised to continue his development with the senior squad, especially with Dimitri Payet approaching 30.

Recent rumours have linked Lemar with the likes of Manchester City and Atletico Madrid, two clubs run by managers who know a thing or two about footballing intelligence. Rumours are meant to generate clicks or sell papers, but given how rapidly Lemar has improved in 2016, it would hardly be far-fetched to see him make that kind of leap in the near future, even if Monaco continue to impress in the present.



RYAD BOUDEBOUZ



18

Club: Montpellier HSC

Position: Midfielder

Born: Colmar

Date of Birth: 19/02/1990

Age: 26

League Form in 2016

Games: 35

Chances Created: 103

Goals: 8

Average Duels Won: 48.09%

You would be hard-pressed to find a more improved player than Ryad Boudebouz over the course of the last couple of seasons. The Algerian has been plying his trade in Ligue 1 for what seems like forever, making over 300 appearances over the course of over nine years, but it has only really been since last season that he has elevated his game to such a level that he must be considered one of the league's top talents.

Still at the relatively young age of 26, and with so much aforementioned experience to hand, Boudebouz combines youthful energy and speed with a veteran's know-how and guile to cause defenders all sorts of problems from his attacking midfield role.

The 2015/16 season was truly a breakout campaign for Ryad Boudebouz. In the summer of 2015, the Algerian had moved from SC Bastia to Montpellier for a transfer fee of around €1.7m. Now in arguably a better squad than any Boudebouz has played in over the course of his career, he is really able to display his talents. Playing in an attacking midfield role, the Algerian was tasked with being the creative spark in a team looking to once again near the dizzying heights of the Ligue 1 title obtained in the 2011/12 season.

As it to be expected after a change of clubs, Boudebouz took a while to settle in to a new system with new team-mates. In the first 13 games of the Ligue 1 season, the Algerian had only one goal and no assists to show for his efforts. However, the signs of what was to come were there. In those games, despite not recording any assists, he had created a staggering 37 chances for his team-mates. As a comparison, that is more than then-OGC Nice player Hatem Ben Arfa managed for the whole season.

As was bound to happen, creating chances for opponents would soon turn into assists. Boudebouz recorded four assists in his next five games, and finished the 2015/16 season on 12 assists, behind only Ángel Di María and Zlatan Ibrahimovic across all of Ligue 1. In fact, whilst Boudebouz was behind these players in terms of assists, he far surpassed everyone in the league in terms of chances created. Over the whole campaign, he made 108 key passes, with Di María a distant second with 79. It is clear that, whilst his strikers were perhaps not so good at putting the chances away, Boudebouz was more creative than anybody else in Ligue 1.

It was during that 2015/16 season that the true indication of Boudebouz's improvement was to arrive. The Montpellier man once again became a regular in the Algerian international team, a feat he had not achieved since his earlier years in Ligue 1 back in 2013. He played in all four qualification games for the African Cup of Nations, finishing with three assists and a goal as Algeria went undefeated in that sequence of matches. It was as good an indication as any that Boudebouz's stellar season had not gone unnoticed.

Coming off the back of that breakthrough campaign, during the current 2016/17 season the Algerian must have been looking to emulate what he did in the previous year. Instead, he did what probably even he himself did not expect: he got even better. See whilst he was a supreme creator in the previous season, he had only scored two goals over all 38 Ligue 1 games.

He entered the new season with a thirst to improve on that strike-rate, and he has done just that. After just 16 Ligue 1 games so far this season at the time of writing, he has already scored 7 goals, more than any other midfielder across the whole league. Not only that, but his goals seem to come against quality opposition; he scored a brace against Monaco, as well as important goals against both Nice and PSG, meaning he has scored against each of the current top three teams in Ligue 1.

That is not to say, though, that the foundation he built his game on in the previous campaign has disappeared. He remains top of Ligue 1 in terms of key passes with 45, once again beating Ángel Di María (41) into second place. Whilst he currently only has two assists, if his chance creation rate continues that number will rise very quickly, much like it did last season. As things stand, it is pretty likely that Boudebouz will end up both the highest-scoring and the most creative midfielder in Ligue 1 this season, which would be a stunning achievement.

So what makes Boudebouz so effective? Standing at 5 foot 9 with a wiry frame, he is very similar in terms of stature to fellow Algerian and namesake Riyad Mahrez of Leicester City. Whilst not one of the quickest players, he has enough speed to trouble the typically slow defenders or defensive midfielders tasked with trying to stop him.

The primary weapon in his arsenal, though, is his technical ability. He has wonderful ball-control on his preferred left foot, and a passing ability that comes from natural talent and the years he has spent plying his trade in Ligue 1. Having this season combined all of that with a newfound scoring touch, it is difficult to see a weakness in the Algerian's game. If he continues on his current trajectory, it is not an exaggeration to say that he could soon be regarded as one of Europe's top midfield talents.



RONNY RODELIN



17

Club: SM Caen

Position: Attacker

Born: Saint-Denis, Réunion

Date of Birth: 18/11/1989

Age: 27

League Form in 2016

Games: 34

Chances Created: 38

Goals: 10

Average Duels Won: 64.68%

Born in Guadeloupe, Ronny Rodelin arrived in France at the age of ten, and began his footballing career in earnest, signing on with Occitan club Rodez, who were then playing in the National. He struggled at times with the physicality of the lower division, but managed to make his first-team debut at the age of eighteen.

His performances soon caught the eye of Nantes, one of France's better clubs in terms of developing talent, but he struggled to make an impact with the Breton club.

There was, however, the feeling that his lack of success was somewhat circumstantial, as Nantes' development director, Matthieu Bideau, recently recalled to *So Foot*, "He joined the professionals quickly, but things stalled for various reasons: injuries, lack of stability (Nantes were the quintessential yo-yo club at the time), and maybe a bit of relenting on his part. The whole club was aware of having a great player in the squad, but this was (also) a player who couldn't fully express himself." After spending a fruitless loan spell at Troyes, where he showed a bit more, he made the move north to Lille in 2011.

Despite appearing over 100 times for *Les Dogues*, Rodelin struggled to fit in, as most of these appearances were from the substitutes' bench. The team generally opted for a 4-3-3, with Dimitri Payet, Nolan Roux and Salomon Kalou preferred. There were more opportunities after the sale of Payet, but by then, the dour style of René Girard had taken hold, replacing the effervescent play of the club under Rudi Garcia.

Girard had no appreciation for Rodelin's talents, and with the likes of loanee Rony Lopes and Divock Origi holding much more promise, Rodelin was eventually deemed surplus to requirements and spent the second half of the 2014/15 season on loan at Lille's sister club, Royal Mouscron.

Used as an attacking midfielder in a 4-2-3-1, Rodelin recorded two goals and three assists to give the club an unexpected push for top spot in their group in the Europa League playoffs. Having impressed on loan, Rodelin was eager to return to Lille and fulfill his promise, having spent four seasons at the club without making much of an impression. In Belgium, he had finally been used in the creative role which he so desperately sought after, and felt ready to make his mark in Lille.

His loan odyssey continued, though, as Caen came calling, with Rodelin signing on loan last season, before agreeing to a three-year deal this summer. Rodelin's lanky frame initially seemed an odd fit for Caen's aggressive counter-attacking style but Garande's management brought the best out of the player. Whereas in the past, he had too often functioned as a target for long balls, being expected to win the ball in the air and let his fellow attackers do the work, at Caen, his not inconsiderable talents were put to better use.

Playing wide on the right of a 4-1-4-1, Rodelin scored ten goals in the league, eclipsing the sum of his total with Lille. In 2015/16, Caen were never in the relegation battle that they had suffered through the season prior, and Rodelin showed his hunger to play in a style that fit his talents more aptly.

Despite his size, he had never really been comfortable being a mere aerial threat at Lille, and at Caen, his dribbling, pace and finishing were allowed to shine, as was his confidence in shooting from distance. Only four of his ten goals were scored with his head, and eight were from open play; it was easy to see why his manager at Troyes, Patrick Rémy, had dubbed him "*l'Esthète*."

This season has seen Caen switch things up a bit, as Garande adapts to life without Andy Delort by playing three at the back. Admittedly, the sight of a 6' 4" wing-back is somewhat bemusing, but the use of Rodelin on either flank has given Caen added flexibility, as he has proved equally as effective cutting inside from the left as playing a more orthodox wide role on the right.

He can also play as a more traditional number nine, and has done well to support new man Ivan Santini when asked, consistently winning headers for the smaller Croatian when the two are partnered in the aforementioned 3-5-2.

Given that Santini is far from an accomplished dribbler, the Croatian has been more than appreciative of having a creative presence in close proximity, Rodelin providing a bulwark for the often onerous work of a lone centre forward.

While there is still much to improve in Rodelin's play, particularly in terms of his defensive contributions, the sight of seeing a player of his size link play on the ground or deliver a feathered cross with confidence is something to behold.

Caen's status in Ligue 1 is far from guaranteed, but if the club do go down, given what Rodelin has shown this year, it would be a surprise if he followed suit. His sublime talent and tactical versatility have been allowed to shine at the Stade Michel d'Ornano, and it looks as if the gangling teenager has finally fulfilled the promise he had once shown at Nantes.



HATEM BEN ARFA

^ 22

16

Club: PSG

Position: Attacker

Born: Clamart

Date of Birth: 07/03/1987

Age: 29

League Form in 2016

Games: 30

Chances Created: 29

Goals: 10

Average Duels Won: 56.20%

A comeback story to beat almost any comeback story, Hatem Ben Arfa's 2016 was like no other. After waiting almost eight months from his contract being cancelled by Newcastle United in January 2015 to playing his first game for OGC Nice in August 2015, it must have been the greatest relief for "HBA" to just get back to playing football.

Les Aiglons kept their faith in him, even after the initial deal made in January was terminated due to him being ineligible to play after appearing for two other clubs in that season having been on loan at Hull City. Before Nice, the fact was that Ben Arfa had fallen out with someone at almost every club he had even been at, and despite his on-pitch ability to shine like a star, the hype around the player would be diminished by talk of his sometimes-abrasive nature.

OGC Nice ignored the stereotypes and gave him a chance anyway. My word, did the 29-year-old ever repay them for giving him the love and attention he needed. The club went on to have a great 2015/16 season, combining experience from the likes of Ben Arfa and loanees Paul Baysse and Valère Germain with the exciting youth products that were ready to blossom such as Vincent Koziello and Alassane Plèa. Nice's real star was Ben Arfa, who relished in his role both as their main creative force and an on-the-field leader to inspire the youngsters around him. 17 goals and six assists speak for themselves, he was a total driving force for a side no-one expected to challenge for Europe. They did so until the bitter end, even occupying the final Champions' League place for a few seconds on the final day of the Ligue 1 campaign. At times, Ben Arfa looked unstoppable. He generally scored in spurts, but a run of three games stands out particularly, where he grabbed five goals and his side scored 14 in total. He looked like the world-beater that everyone expected him to become when he exploded onto the scene with Olympique Lyonnais 12 years ago.

That spectacular form caught the eyes of clubs across Europe, with Ben Arfa keen to move on and reach the pinnacle of the game once again. His destination of choice was to remain in France with the champions Paris Saint-Germain, signing a two-year deal. It started perfectly, he was instrumental in their destruction of Lyon in the Trophée des Champions including scoring his first goal for the club. That earned him his first start in the Ligue 1 opener against SC Bastia but in a night where he and the team struggled as an attacking force, it has been downhill from there.

Overall, he has played 12 league games for the capital club at the time of writing, but has made just four starts and has registered just one assist. Out of favour, he has struggled to receive game time until the last few weeks and especially against Angers, he showed that he still has the quality required at a club looking to not only win the league but to succeed in Europe as well.

A walking highlight reel when he steps on to the football field, if you do not know who HBA is by now, you really need to re-evaluate what football you are spending your time watching. Occasionally pouty, occasionally a wizard but regularly a problem for any defence, Ben Arfa is an absolute nightmare for any defence in the world when he is on his game.

That was the Hatem Ben Arfa of Nice, terrorising defences with his distinctive dribbling skills and ability to drift past players as if they were cones on a training pitch. Sometimes he can appear to wander into spaces uninterrupted, as if players are reluctant to dive in or simply incapable of stopping him, and that is where he can cause havoc: after the initial acceleration.

A perfect example of this is his goal against Saint-Étienne last season. A poor *Les Verts* midfielder dares to challenge him as he runs in behind the midfield, he then spins out of one tackle to avoid a second with consummate ease before embarrassing a third defender for even contemplating putting a foot in.

There is a stroke of luck about how he beats the fourth defender, with the ball bustling around his legs but the Frenchman can be afforded that luxury after the superb work beforehand. Bearing down on goal, against one of the best goalkeepers in Europe in Stéphane Ruffier, Ben Arfa slides the ball into the bottom left-hand corner as simply as a postman delivering the mail.

It is a wonderful goal, similar to those many will remember from his days in England with Newcastle United, where for a time he was also an unstoppable machine. Ben Arfa really is one of the best players to watch in football, poetry in motion and the healing waters of Nice really rejuvenated his powers.

Only time will tell if the move to PSG was really worth it for the mercurial Frenchman. After seemingly finding a home in the south of France after so many years of searching for a place he could settle, it may sting him to see them succeed even further without him whilst he is still trying to break through in a side that are struggling for consistency.

However, given the same choice again, any one of us would have chosen his path with a chance of glory. The hope is that a run of games and a chance to establish himself in Paris will eventually mean there can finally be the ultimate happy ending to his fairy-tale return to his homeland.



YOAN CARDINALE



15

Club: OGC Nice

Position: Goalkeeper

Born: La Ciotat

Date of Birth: 27/03/1994

Age: 22

League Form in 2016

Games: 38

Goals Conceded: 31

Total Clean Sheets: 15

Average Saves Per Goal: 3.56

Goalkeeper is a selfish position that demands confidence and character. Some goalkeepers get a spot given to them on a plate due to the club not wanting to spend money on a big-name custodian; others need to fight for their spot and make it theirs. 22-year-old goalkeeping sensation Yoan Cardinale very much falls under the second category.

Cardinale's first chance of playing for Nice's first team could have come much earlier than his debut in 2015, on November 3rd 2013. Nice were hosting Bordeaux at the Stade du Ray when David Ospina (now plying his trade on Arsenal's bench) limped off injured early in the 2nd half. Surely time for Cardinale's big break? Unfortunately, Yoan had a knee problem and the chance fell to Anthony Mandréa, 16 years of age, who soon conceded a Ludovic Obraniak goal which meant that Nice lost the match 1-2.

Cardinale of course was distraught not to have received the opportunity to show the Nice faithful what he could do. Competition was extremely stiff behind Ospina; Cardinale had to contend with Mouez Hassen, who played five times in 2013/14, and the experienced Simon Pouplin. In the summer of 2014, Ospina was sold to Arsenal for €4m but this time, the club did not look to overseas talent (Ospina was bought from Colombian side Nacional in 2008 for €2m) to buy a quality goalkeeper; they believed in the local talent at their disposal.

Hassen was given the reins in 2014/15 and Cardinale was forced to play with the reserves. Cardinale did not lose hope despite not starting a single minute that particular season. However, 2015/16 was supposed to go the same way: Hassen the undisputed number one with Simon Pouplin the elder statesman charged with advising the upcoming goalkeepers around him (Hassen and Cardinale).

Except that 2015/16 did not go as expected: Simon Pouplin started the opening game against Monaco only to be replaced by Hassen after 37 minutes. Nice lost the game 1-2 but Pouplin's injury was a serious one. In fact, he has never played another game for Nice. Hassen was suddenly the undisputed number 1 with the older, but still young Yoan Cardinale his understudy. This also meant that Cardinale was no longer the reserve goalie, but he was now making first team trips to Ligue 1 games.

Hassen was then injured in late September. This time Cardinale's knee was not causing him trouble and he was able to start his first game for Nice: a 4-1 win against Rennes. His performances were so good that he was voted Nice's player of October by the fans. Despite his newly-acquired fan favourite status, Cardinale returned to the bench in November, with Hassen resuming between the sticks until a sending off at Toulouse after half an hour. Cardinale received a second chance to stay on the pitch and this time he did not let it go. Puel was fed up with the precocious and much touted Hassen making blunder after blunder.

Which brings us to a great 2016 for Cardinale. He remained Nice's primary custodian during the second half of the 2015/16 season and has also played every single minute of every game in Nice's league campaign this season. Not only did Cardinale acquire a spot in the starting line-up, he now has European experience: Nice finished 4th in 2015/16 which meant access to the Europa League group stages. A happy calendar year for both player and club.

Nice have followed the blueprint that every Ligue 1 club attempts to emulate: money is sparse, so offering youth products a chance is the financially prudent strategy. Examples such as Jordan Amavi, Vincent Koziello and Neal Maupay prove that the Nice academy is currently doing a fantastic job and that they have not rested on their laurels since nurturing France's number one, Hugo Lloris.

Is Cardinale the next Hugo Lloris? He certainly does not look like him. Cardinale is not very tall for a Ligue 1 player (1,81m) and is quite a large man (84 kg which borders on overweight for a professional sportsman). His reflexes are however very much comparable to the Tottenham goalkeeper and he is very commanding of his penalty area.

Another difference with Lloris: Cardinale does not appear nor does he attempt to be shy. During his first game against Paris Saint-Germain, he had no problem telling Zlatan Ibrahimovic what he thought of the Swede's tantrums. Cardinale does play for Nice, a club notorious for preventing the press from accessing their players, so we will never know exactly what he said to the big Swede.

For those reasons, finding a quote of Cardinale's is quite a big ask. What we do know is that Cardinale seems to be aware that he cannot rest on his laurels: *"I am not the number one, I am simply the goalkeeper who gets to play at the end of each week."*

This is not something that the Frenchman should worry about. Statistically, only Hugo Lloris has trumped Yoan Cardinale in 2016 when one stacks him against France's best in this position. He might not look like a star from the outset, but Cardinale is the unlikely hero who is playing an integral part of keeping OGC Nice's fairytale title challenge alive. Truly, one of Europe's most underrated talents.



BERNARDO SILVA

v 9

14

Club: AS Monaco

Position: Midfielder

Born: Lisbon

Date of Birth: 10/08/1994

Age: 22

League Form in 2016

Games: 32

Chances Created: 48

Goals: 6

Average Duels Won: 45%

Bernardo Silva is undeniably one of the most talented players in France right now. However, his 2016 story, much like AS Monaco's, has been very much a tale of two halves.

Now 2016 may not have been that impressive for Bernardo Silva when you look at his goals scored column: seven in the league (four in the 2nd half of 2015/16, three this season so far (17 games at the time of writing)). His assist statistics are nothing to write home about either – five so far this season – but make no mistake; Silva is an integral part of Jardim's new-look Monaco. The Monaco that scored 53 goals in 18 Ligue 1 games this season (which is almost as many as Nice and PSG combined (63)!).

Just like in the first half of 2015/16, the opening six months for Bernardo Silva were blighted by a negative style on the part of Leonardo Jardim. Monaco did not start that campaign well but their unyielding defending translated into them picking up points more or less every week. They also profited from a weak Lyon side who were unable to put wins together. Six games without defeat at the end of 2015 meant that the Principality side finished that calendar year in 2nd. 2016 started in very much the same vein. Defeats were rare (just one between the start of the year and April) but since nobody else was as consistent – bar PSG of course – 2nd spot was Monaco's almost until the end. Jardim moved Bernardo Silva across all the three positions of a 4-2-3-1. Sometimes, he would appear on the right playing in front of Fabinho (when the latter was playing as a right-back, despite him now feeling right at home in a central midfield position). Occasionally, Silva would start on the left playing in front of Fabio Coentrão or he would act as a second striker playing behind Carrillo (an ineffective move) or Vagner Love (Brazilian knew where the goal was but his relationship with Silva didn't blossom).

In 2015/16, Bernardo Silva played in a number of positions without developing an actual understanding with his full-back when he was playing on the wings (be it Fabinho or Fabio Coentrão) or with whichever striker he was playing with. Playing second striker in a 4-2-3-1 is a tough ask for any player and very few come out of it with relative success. It is a position where the player needs to constantly veer sideways or drop deep in order to find space between the lines or between the players. This was just not happening for Bernardo Silva, who is at his best when he is driving towards opponents.

Then Jardim did some shopping. In came Djibril Sidibé from Lille, Benjamin Mendy from Marseille, Falcao came back from an unsuccessful loan spell at Chelsea (no one was quite sure whether he was going to play or not) and Valère Germain also returned from a very successful loan spell at Nice (7th in the goal-scoring charts in 2015/16 with 14 goals). You could have been forgiven for thinking that Silva was going to form a formidable duo behind Germain.

However, Silva is in perfect harmony with the new right-back, Djibril Sidibé. Unlike Raggi (who is slow) and Fabinho (who is much less pacey), Silva thrives with Sidibé behind him. The ex-Lille man gives him the width he needs which allows him to drop deep or inside, playing centrally without having the opposition's defensive midfielders on his back immediately.

Of course, Monaco's Europe-beating line-up did not come to fruition on the opening day of the season against Guingamp. Jardim persevered with Bernardo Silva as a second striker but he made a tactical switch against PSG in late August in order to counter the champions' power down the wing: what looked like a 4-4-1-1 was more of a 5-4-1 with Sidibé marking Kurzawa and Silva doing the same on Serge Aurier.

There, Jardim definitively saw not only that Bernardo Silva was better used on the wing than in the second striker position but he also realised that his tracking-back qualities had massively improved. It showed as well; Monaco won the game 3-1 and deservedly so.

Jardim now has a distinct plan that Bernardo Silva is very important to: Monaco currently operate in an attacking 4-4-2 with much impetus given to the full-backs, Sidibé and Mendy. Fabinho (Silva's former partner down the right-wing last season) and Tiémoué Bakayoko play deeper, offering the work-rate in terms of winning the ball back, as the front four form a lethal attack, alongside the overlapping full-backs.

Back-up to Silva has manifested itself in the form of Nabil Dirar and Gabriel Boschilla this season. Very effective players in their own right, but neither harbour the ability that the Portuguese has to bring colleagues into the game. Jardim is aware that Silva's diminutive stature needs to be protected from Ligue 1's rough challenges over 90 minutes. The stats back this up: of the 17 games Bernardo Silva has played, at the time of writing, in Ligue 1 this season, he started 15 and was subbed off 11 times and never for a defensive substitute to hold on to a result (Monaco are generally out of sight by the time he is subbed) but by players with the same profile as his (Dirar, Boschilla, Carrillo).

It is unclear whether Silva's excellent 2016 is due to Jardim's brilliant reinforcements in the summer, but we are at least certain that the boy is much more lethal playing on the wing than in a second striker role behind the centre-forward. With that in mind, and Silva's explosive talent, Monaco could even score 100 goals this season, barring injury to key players.



STÉPHANE RUFFIER

^ 27

13

Club: Saint-Étienne

Position: Goalkeeper

Born: Bayonne

Date of Birth: 27/09/1986

Age: 30

League Form in 2016

Games: 36

Goals Conceded: 29

Total Clean Sheets: 16

Average Saves Per Goal: 3.44

Unheralded might be the best word to use when you start talking about Stéphane Ruffier. Only an occasional French international, yet to make an appearance in the Champions' League and with only the French League Cup in 2013 to his name, the 30-year-old has always been the bridesmaid yet never quite the bride.

However, there is no doubt of how important Ruffier is to Saint-Étienne, and if you asked the *Les Verts* fans, they would have absolutely no one else between the sticks for them. 16 clean sheets last season and seven so far during the 2016/17 campaign, you will be hard pressed to find someone better in goal who is currently plying his trade in Ligue 1.

In fact, one could make the argument that he has won Saint-Étienne points on his own this season. In a number of games where his side have been down to ten men or have simply sat on a 1-0 lead, he has been there to cover what is already a solid defence and keep *Les Verts* in match-winning positions.

That is not to say 2016 has come without an occasional blemish. A silly red card in the Europa League was wholly unnecessary and irresponsible, even though his side did hold on to draw in an important qualifier. However, he has worn the responsibility of that one and since then, he has been nothing short of excellent.

The 30-year-old should also be a regular in the French squad but to his credit, he is fed up of being the third-choice stopper, having had discussions with national team boss Didier Deschamps to that effect. Even with Steve Mandanda injured, Ruffier's refusal to join up with the national team simply for the sake of sitting on the bench has ensured that he still sits behind the ever-present Hugo Lloris and youngster Alphonse Areola. Ruffier's decision to demand more from Deschamps has brought the former to being excluded entirely. Regardless of your opinion on that, the *Les Verts* goalkeeper has every right to claim he deserves a shot at the number one spot, especially on the back of his 2016 form.

For starters, Ruffier is a world-class shot-stopper. Whether it be a thunderbolt in the top corner or a snap-shot from close range, he has the perfect combination of athleticism and reflexes to pull off the kinds of saves which on the outset appear impossible, yet the *Les Verts* stopper makes them on a nightly basis.

Added to that is the sheer amount of saves he has had to produce in this campaign alone. He averages 3.7 saves per game in 2016/17 and has put on some really stellar single performances, with eight stops against Guingamp earning his side a 1-0 win and a shut out of Marseille in a tough 0-0 draw with seven more.

As a last line of your defence, you could not wish for any better. The team is boosted by the fact they have such a reliable man between the sticks who can rescue them points every weekend, which is especially important with their impotency at the other end of the field.

He is great at closing the space down and making himself big, which is a nightmare for attackers in one-on-one situations. Most strikers would love to freeze the keeper or buckle to the ground but Ruffier does neither, standing his ground until the forward makes up his mind. He has progressed in this area and this particular improvement is perhaps the most significant sign of the great goalkeeper that Ruffier has become.

The command that he orchestrates of his box is also a sight to behold, having yet to fail at a claim attempt this season. He averages 41% punches on his claim attempts, which might be a little heavy to some tastes but he does deliver a strong fist that regularly clears his area, which is the most important thing.

His pass percentage could be better, sitting at 64.4% but when one considers that almost 30% of his attempts are long balls, that statistic is much less surprising. Saint-Étienne have been trying to build more from the back but without a creative influence in the centre and the wing-backs not giving him an extra option, Ruffier has had to kick it long more often than he should.

The real plus point over 2016 was the lack of individual mistakes that Ruffier has made. In recent past, on the odd occasion, his mind would go wandering which would lead to either an erroneous short pass or an overcomplication to a simple save that led to a goal, but these sorts of calamities are almost entirely a thing of the past. Cutting out those silly errors that previously kept him away from reaching the highest level just serves to highlight all of his fantastic attributes we have known him to have for years and years.

Ruffier is undoubtedly improving with age, much like a fine wine from the Rhône area where he currently plies his trade. He is making better decisions, has become less erratic, is stringing together more consistent performances and much like an aged malt whiskey, he gives you that little extra punch.

It is quite reasonable to suggest that there is not a better goalkeeper in Ligue 1 than the Saint-Étienne stopper as 2016 comes to a close.



ANTHONY LOPES

V6

12

Club: Olympique Lyonnais

Position: Goalkeeper

Born: Givors

Date of Birth: 01/10/1990

Age: 26

League Form in 2016

Games: 37

Goals Conceded: 39

Total Clean Sheets: 12

Average Saves Per Goal: 1.82

For whatever reason, Lyon's Anthony Lopes never seems to be mentioned in the same breath as the top goalkeepers in Europe. That is a reality that we find to be incomprehensible, because throughout the calendar year of 2016, Lopes has largely been in sublime form for Les Gones.

The start of the year was hardly ideal for Lyon, with former manager Hubert Fournier being replaced by one of the club's former players in Bruno Génésio. Although the move actually ended up spurring Les Gones on for the rest of the campaign, enabling them to secure Champions' League qualification for the 2016/17 season, it created a hectic and anxious environment around the club as they opened their brand new stadium, the Parc OL, in January.

At the turn of the year, Lyon were floating precariously around the Europa League positions, and went into their first fixture under Génésio in 9th place. Their ability to dispatch of lowly Troyes with relative ease in their first league match in their new stadium served as a sign of things to come. This win marked the start of the Lyon revival, and Anthony Lopes' form slowly started to look up after a dreadful run personally at the end of 2015.

The Portugal goalkeeper went on to keep four clean sheets for the remainder of the season. On the outset, that does not appear to present itself as the form of a top goalkeeper. However, external factors, such as the ever-wobbling performances of Mapou Yanga-Mbiwa, must be attributed with the blame for a lack of clean sheets, rather than Lopes. Lyon managed to finish 2nd in Ligue 1, conceding 43 goals all campaign.

The strong finish to the Ligue 1 season was enough for Lopes to make it into the Portugal squad for EURO 2016, which proved to be a dream of a tournament for Fernando Santos' men. Whilst he never made it onto the pitch seeing as well-established number one Rui Patrício was on fire, Lopes received some silverware nevertheless, only his second professional trophy and medal, and, arguably more importantly, gained invaluable experience at the highest level of European football.

The EURO 2016 adventure served as a springboard for Lopes who went into the 2016/17 season full of confidence. With Lyon being in the Champions' League, Lopes had the opportunity to play at the highest level, instead of merely being part of a squad that was playing at the highest level as was the case with Portugal in the summer.

As we entered the 2016/17 season, there was a considerable amount of expectation on Lyon to do well on all fronts. It was time for a young squad full of individuals touted to possess enormous potential to turn that into proven quality and results. Especially with capital club PSG changing manager and system and facing a period of transition. Additionally, they had a Champions' League group that was tough yet doable, facing Juventus, Sevilla and Dinamo Zagreb. However, they have ultimately disappointed yet again, falling short of qualification for the knockout stages by three points, even if they took it to the final game against Sevilla.

Anthony Lopes himself impressed during the group stage despite the early elimination, keeping clean sheets home and away against Zagreb and in the final game against Sevilla. However, Lyon's best defensive performance came in Turin where Lopes's communicative skills were an enormous help for Les Gones in gaining a point. His ability to command the defence was what restricted Juventus to just two shots on target all game.

Moving onto domestic matters, and the second half of 2016 has been bizarre for Génésio's men and Lopes. The season began with a bang: two wins, five goals scored and none conceded for Lopes between the sticks. It was the perfect start, but it seemed to get worse almost immediately as a 4-2 away defeat to Dijon started a run of three games without a win which saw them fall as far as 9th in the table. The pressure on Génésio started to grow, but Lopes and his colleagues showed great mental strength as they notably powered past Montpellier and AS Monaco and remain in the hunt for a European place.

Arguably Lopes' greatest asset is his willpower, alongside his close-range shot stopping. His determination and ability to concentrate has a habit of getting Lyon out of tricky patches and is something that does not translate in the statistics. In Lyon's crucial final Champions' League group game, Lopes made a string of saves in the face of lightening Sevilla counter attacks that kept Les Gones' dream of advancing to the next round alive.

Lopes is never "the man" when it comes to a Lyon win, because he is usually keeping the other team at bay and that typically goes unrecognized. The year, as a whole, has been a good one for Lopes, who achieved national glory in the summer, finished runner up in Ligue 1 last season with Lyon and performed admirably in the Champions' League, despite falling into the Europa League for the rest of the 2016/17 season.

In 2017, it is important for Lopes to maintain his fine form so that he might establish himself as Portugal's number one.



RICARDO PEREIRA

^ 62

11

Club: OGC Nice

Position: Defender

Born: Lisbon

Date of Birth: 06/10/1993

Age: 23

League Form in 2016

Games: 29

Goals Conceded: 25

Total Chances Created: 27

Average Duels Won: 53.97%

It was a brilliant cross. Delivered right onto the head of the striker and whipped in with enough pace so that the goalkeeper could not come out and collect the ball. The striker was left with a virtually empty net and nodded home with ease.

The goal was scored by Mario Balotelli on his debut for OGC Nice against Olympique de Marseille and the cross was delivered by Ricardo Pereira. Understandably, it was Balotelli who received most of the limelight across France's headlines the next day. However, those who chose to look past Balotelli's superb debut for the club would have focused on Pereira.

Born in Lisbon, in 1993, Pereira began his football career at local club CF Benfica at the age of eight. Pereira spent three years with his hometown outfit before joining the youth system of Portuguese giant Sporting Clube de Portugal. Pereira was not perceived as good enough by the Lisbon based club's youth academy to make him a priority of theirs, and he was shipped off in 2010. The versatile wide-man then moved to another Portuguese club, Naval, where he spent a single season in their youth set-up, before finally settling down at Portuguese club Vitoria Guimaraes, where he achieved his ambition of becoming part of an elite class of individuals to become professional. Pereira, who at that time was playing as a right winger, was influential in Vitoria winning the Taca de Portugal. FC Porto noticed Pereira's performances and signed him at the end of the 2012/13 season. During the next two campaigns, Pereira alternated between Porto's first and second teams, making 34 appearances for Porto's premier outfit and 18 for the reserves. It was during this time that Pereira was converted to a full-back although he continued to play on the wings on occasion. Versatility has been a hallmark of his so far short, yet considerably successful career.

At the end of the 2014/15 season, Porto entered into a dispute with French club OGC Nice. To prevent Nice from taking the matter up with FIFA, Porto agreed to give the French club Pereira on a two-year loan deal. With the benefit of hindsight this now looks like one of the most fortunate transfers in history. Pereira has been nothing short of superb since joining Nice. When he was initially signed, then manager Claude Puel was still unsure of what formation he wanted to play. Puel eventually settled on a 4-3-1-2 with Pereira playing as a left-back. The season was revelatory for Nice with several youngsters undergoing a breakout campaign, such as Pereira and Vincent Koziello, as more experienced players such as Hatem Ben Arfa and Valère Germain were reborn under the former Lyon boss. Taking advantage of the fact that Pereira had been a winger, Puel instructed him to press high up the field and use his pace and dribbling ability to devastating effect. Pereira finished the season with zero goals and four assists, a wholly inaccurate representation of Pereira's quality and importance for Nice throughout the season.

The signing of Dalbert during the summer of 2016 would prove to be a game changer for Pereira. With new manager Lucien Favre preferring a 3-5-2 formation, Dalbert's signing allowed Pereira to move to his favoured right side, in the shape of a right wing-back. This role is perfectly suited to Pereira's qualities and the Portuguese wing-back has undoubtedly been one of the best players in Ligue 1 so far this season. Once again, his one goal and three assists fail to fully tell the story. Pereira has been absolutely vital to both Nice's attacking and defensive play. Going forward, Pereira and Dalbert are often the only players providing width within Favre's set-up, making it imperative that they properly support the attack. As the season has progressed it has become clear that Pereira is the better attacking player of the two wing-backs. The two Portuguese-speaking speedsters have developed an understanding which helps maintain Nice's balance. When Pereira bombs forward, Dalbert will drop slightly deeper, almost as a left-back. This allows right centre back Paul Baysse to slide over and cover the space Pereira has left behind. When *Les Aiglons* lose possession, Pereira drops into the right-back position giving Nice five at the back and making it very difficult to break them down.

Pereira is one of the most entertaining players in Ligue 1 and is blessed with great pace and has good stamina. Because of the latter quality, he is able to execute both his attacking and defensive duties effectively, making him the ideal wing-back for Favre's system.

Owing to his upbringing as an attacking player, a right-winger, Pereira's attacking qualities are exceptionally well developed for a 23-year-old right-back. He possesses superb dribbling ability and is also a wonderful crosser of the ball, as his assist for Balotelli showed. Pereira is also a deceptively strong player who has a knack of positioning his body in order to wriggle the ball away from tight spaces. Admittedly, Pereira is still susceptible to being caught out of position, as a result of his late conversion into a full-back, but he is rapidly improving this side of his game. Pereira has been so impressive during 2016, that he has been mentioned as a potential starter for the Portuguese national team.

After being described as Ligue 1's breakout star last season, this label is no longer accurate. Pereira is simply a star: one of the best players in Ligue 1 and a key driving force behind Nice's title challenge.

Porto fans will be looking forward to the sight of Pereira playing at the Estadio do Dragao again. However, if Pereira's impressive performances continue, then there is no guarantee that Porto will be able to hold on to his services come the summer window.



KAMIL GLIK



10

Club: AS Monaco

Position: Defender

Born: Jastrzębie-Zdrój

Date of Birth: 03/02/1988

Age: 28

League Form in 2016

Games: 36

Goals Conceded: 50

Total Defensive Errors: 0

Average Duels Won: 48%

Monaco needed to find a hero in the summer transfer window. An individual with the leadership qualities that the recently departed Ricardo Carvalho showcased during his time with the Principality side, a man who could orchestrate the entire defensive mechanism at the club.

My word, did they achieve just that.

It might have gone under the radar at the time but the signing of Torino captain Kamil Glik might go down as the best piece of business any club did this summer, not just in France, perhaps even in Europe. Looking for a marshal, someone to guide a young team ready to blossom into a powerhouse from the team's very spine, *Les Rouges et Blanc* could not have found much better than the Polish dynamo.

That iron grit started at home for Glik, where a tough upbringing showed the best in him as he wrestled to help his alcoholic father. He would step in when he became aggressive with his brother and mother. Glik offered him help through advice to seek rehab but he was unable to sway him as he eventually died following a heart attack.

His heart does still lie at home, where he spends Christmas and parts of the off-season. He also built a pitch for the local community and it is that grounded nature that shines through in the way he plays the game.

Glik puts it best himself, as he stated in an interview: *"It is very difficult to move an old tree even if it is to a better place."*

Those words rang true during his first venture abroad with the Real Madrid academy. He represented the C side but things never went much further than that with *Los Blancos*, with Glik returning to his homeland to play for Piast Gliwice in a transfer window that also involved rejecting an offer for Legia Warsaw.

He blossomed back with his home comforts and even though Piast Gliwice were relegated, he earned a move to Serie A side Palermo. Glik would again struggle to find first-team football with *the Rossonero* but found some game time on loan with Bari.

Another loan to Torino proved more fruitful, as the then-Serie B side began to mould him into the footballer they needed. *Il Toro* returned to the top flight with Glik in tow, growing back into the once proud football club that did its best to not simply sit under the shadow of their more famous Turin brothers Juventus.

Slowly but surely, his talent received recognition. He was voted into *Gazzetta dello Sport's* Team of the Year for 2014/15 and that form also saw strong interest from the likes of Manchester United, who instead opted for his team-mate Matteo Darmian.

The biggest honour bestowed upon him by *the Granata* was the promotion to captain of the club, the first non-Italian to take that mantle in over 50 years. A player who wears his heart on his sleeve with a club eager to show incredible love for his exploits, it surely was a no brainer and a very proud moment for a man that rose from the ashes alongside the club.

Glik is also seasoned international, with over 50 caps for his nation. He really showed his quality with his country during EURO 2016. Poland had one of the strongest defences in the competition, keeping everyone out during the group stages before allowing Switzerland and Portugal to notch just one each in the knockout rounds.

Glik's contribution at EURO 2016 was not solely limited to the defensive side of football, as he stepped up to take a penalty in both of the shootouts that his nation was involved in. He scored on both occasions, showing both his courage to put his name forward and his coolness under pressure that comes with a spot kick that can mean victory or defeat.

It must have been a proud moment for Glik, being a part of a Polish side to go the furthest they had ever been in a European Championships. In fact, it was their best tournament appearance since a third-place finish at Spain 1982 and the excellent form that Glik showed in marshalling that stout defence earned him rightful praise.

With his Poland commitments over, Monaco pounced. A reported €11m deal was completed just four days after Portugal beat Poland on penalties and before anyone else could even have a sniff, Leonardo Jardim got his man.

Even in parting, Torino repaid Glik with the class that he had shown them. In a statement, the club said: *"It has been five wonderful years, intense, full of emotions and mutual satisfaction. President Cairo and the whole Torino FC salute Glik with great affection, wishing him the best that his career can offer."*

A touching tribute, which just shows how much of an impact he had at the club. However, Glik was ready for a new challenge.

Joining a team that decided to completely reshuffle their defence from the season before, the 28-year-old was seen as the lynchpin amongst three younger pieces. Djibril Sidibé was brought in from Lille with Fabinho moving into midfield, Benjamin Mendy joined to play left-back and Jemerson moved up from the bench.

There were some sticky points with the defence having some shaky moments in the Champions' League. Jemerson in particular did not click well with Glik, often caught out of position with the Pole covering him and even with reinforcements, things looked a little bleak to start off with.

Jardim persisted with that line-up and with that consistency came a certain familiarity on the field, which slowly began to turn out successful results. A solid base in front of them helped, but Glik began to help cover Jemerson's weaknesses and even vice-versa, the Brazilian is a better footballer and has the pace to cover when needed.

However, it has only been since November that this defence has hit overdrive. With just two goals conceded in all competitions with that centre back pairing in that specific month, the two are starting to resemble more of what one would typically expect from a Jardim defence, they type that we had seen during the 2015/16 campaign.

That solid back-line has led to some eye-popping results. The domination they are experiencing is translating into big wins, all of their last six wins in Ligue 1 have been by three goals or more without conceding.

So at least part of the thanks can go to the former Torino man, who has really brought a professionalism to the defence and those around him have copied his example.

For starters, Glik has the most important quality for any top centre back, positional awareness. Rarely does he find himself in the wrong spot or at the wrong angle to make a stop, highlighted by the 0.7 tackles per game he has had to make. He is usually in the right place to deny his opponent the ball or force others to look for different options.

While not quick, he is no a slouch but it is that consciousness of where he is on the pitch in relation to his opponent that makes him so impressive. He is not one of these younger defenders that relies on their quickness to cover mistakes or their ability with the ball to get out a trouble as his off-the-ball efforts make sure he is in that situation as infrequently as possible.

That is also not to say he is bad with his feet. His 86.2% pass success shows that he rarely gives possession away, when combined with the fact that 10% of his passes are long balls, that is a very high success rate for his short game, crucial for any modern defender.

But then in comes that old traditional defender in him that is not afraid to hoof the ball out of harm's way when needed. Averaging 7.7 clearances per game in all competitions, rising to over 10 in the Champions' League, he knows when it is best to just get the pressure off of the defence so they can regroup and recover.

He is very strong in the air, aided by both his tall 6' 2" frame and his ability to leap strongly off the ground. You know you will be in a physical battle for every cross or long ball with him, a tenacious attacker of the ball who strikes it off his forehead with a real authority.

Which also comes into play in the opponent's box as well. He is a danger at any set piece with his heading but surprisingly enough, that is not where the majority of goals have come from.

In fact, three of his four goals have been with his feet. The goal against Saint-Étienne shows the quality of the runs he makes at set-pieces, only it was a little too low to nudge it in with his head, and the finish against Angers was a controlled volley into the ground.

His best goal was saved for the Champions' League draw against Bayer Leverkusen, hitting a sweet volley into the top corner in the final minute of the game. These key contributions, with three goals leading directly to points, just adds to what he already does on the defensive side of things so well.

An added bonus to a player that already seemingly gives so much, it is hard not to fall in love with the way Glik likes to play football. Hard-nosed, passionate and with a real drive to do the best for his team, his attitude has been incredibly infectious to a team on one heck of a roll.

The fact that Glik is so high on this list just five months into his Ligue 1 adventure speaks volumes about the significant impact he has had on the club. He is a leader that brings the best out of those around him, he immediately commanded respect through his performances and now, it is almost like he had been with the club for decades.

This was a match made in heaven. Almost like lovers at first sight, it is like Glik and Monaco were meant for each other, with both becoming stronger in each other's presence. A man in the form of his life with a club on the edge of becoming something special, there is no better place for him to be and the club would not know what to do without him.

It might sound a little cheesy, a little farfetched, but that is really how good he has been. From *Il Terribile Polacco* to *Le Terrible Polonais*, Glik is the immovable object that allows Monaco's unstoppable attack to flourish so wonderfully.



LOÏC PERRIN

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9

Club: Saint-Étienne

Position: Defender

Born: Saint-Étienne

Date of Birth: 07/08/1985

Age: 31

League Form in 2016

Games: 22

Goals Conceded: 15

Total Defensive Errors: 0

Average Duels Won: 64.27%

The world of football reveres the men that stay with one club for their entire professional career. Treated almost like deities, they become part of the furniture at whichever club they commit to so wholeheartedly and the fans, club representatives and staff become implanted into their hearts.

There have been some greats over the years. Ryan Giggs at Manchester United, Francesco Totti at Roma and a man who should join that list when he calls it a day, Loïc Perrin at Saint-Étienne. The silver-haired statesman has been ever-present for *Les Verts* for just over 13 years and much like those listed above, he has yet to show any signs of slowing down in his 30's.

The end of the 2015/16 season was a superb showing from the 31-year-old and his team-mates, as Saint-Étienne recorded six straight clean sheets in games from the 19th of March versus Montpellier until the 30th of April against Toulouse. However, that good work was scuppered in the final two weeks of the season as they suffered two losses, dumping them from automatic Europa League qualification in 4th to two qualifying rounds for the same competition in 6th.

A disappointing end that also saw Saint-Étienne conspicuously far away from being the best defence in Ligue 1, something not usually associated with Christophe Galtier's traditionally stubborn side. They conceded 37 goals all season, which is a respectable enough total but compared to PSG's exceptional 19 and Lille's tidy 27 and combined with Saint-Étienne's paltry goals tally of 42, it was not enough.

With questions of how far this team could go, Galtier made some cost-effective reinforcements, notably the loan signings of Jordan Veretout and Henri Saivet from England. Alongside the club constants like, they aimed to be stronger next year. So far, they have been, at least defensively-speaking, with seven clean sheets and 14 conceded from 17 games at the time of writing. They are at least certainly on course to have a stronger goals conceded total from a defensive point of view than last season.

On the other hand, that is not to say that their status in the league has improved, if at all. They are still scrapping for a Europa League spot, a comfortable 11 points off a Champions' League spot and seemingly not progressing at all offensively, despite the fact that the likes of Oussama Tannane and Alexander Söderlund have had more than enough time to acclimatise to Ligue 1 by now.

Even with all that going off, Perrin has been an ever-present, ever-reliable source of confidence for this team. Some games have been scrappy, with a backs against the wall mentality employed by *Les Verts*, in typically ugly displays where the defence has stood firm, aided considerably by the fine performances by goalkeeper Stéphane Ruffier, notably in the final two months of the calendar year.

The average Saint-Étienne fixture during the 2016/17 campaign thus far has been a tight affair because of the lack of goals scored in their games this season. Saint-Étienne have only been involved in four games all season in all competitions that have had more than three goals scored in total, which might sound like a football purist's nightmare but, defensively, is a testament to the club captain and how he keeps himself and his back-line organised.

That warrior-like spirit also comes into play when you look at the defeats that have happened this season. Only two of their five defeats have been by more than a one-goal deficit. In both of those matches, goals have been scored by the opposition in the dying embers of the match, with Rennes producing an unstoppable wonder-goal seemingly out of nothing by Kamil Grosicki, of which even Perrin was helpless to stop, despite being just a few centimetres away from the Polish international.

The team have also impressed more in Europe this season, approaching the Europa League as an opportunity to progress rather than as a hindrance to their league campaign. After two tough qualifiers against AEK Athens and Beitar Jerusalem, they managed to reach the knockout stages after topping a group containing recent conquerors of Lille, Azerbaijani side Qabala, German side Mainz and Champions' League regulars Anderlecht without losing a single game.

Their reward is a trip to Old Trafford to take on Manchester United, a just recompense and a challenge that an elder statesman like Perrin will be relishing. Finally, Perrin has an opportunity to play on the big stage. Do not expect anything less than some stellar performances from a man that a European giant should have taken a chance on long ago.

Arsenal have been linked with him as recently as 2015 but alas, as Perrin turns 32 in January, it looks as if that ship could have sailed. In the meantime, whilst he may have fought tooth and nail to get Saint-Étienne to Europe's highest level rather than moving to a club that was already there, but with *Les Verts* stagnating, Perrin might never reach the pinnacle of the game.

Which is a shame and it also hits home on an international level. When you see the calibre of players that other big footballing nations call-up in the central defensive area, it is almost unfathomable that Perrin has never had a senior French cap.

Simply put, if Perrin would have been of almost any other nationality, he would have quite a few international appearances to his name. Caught in one period where he went a little unheralded to another where so many superb youngsters are now playing in his position and you start to see why he may have just missed the boat.

Almost a man caught out of time, his last chance might have been a late call-up for the European Championships in the summer. With so many little injuries and a lack of experience heading into a tournament on home soil, the cool head of Perrin would not have been as polarising a choice than someone like Adil Rami, who simply got the call because he has been on the international stage before.

It might be that little blemish on the windscreen of his footballing career that may chew at him for some time. At this point, it will seem like a hollow token gesture to give him a shot rather than a genuine reward for how much he has given to the French game but at least, *Les Verts'* heartbeat will continue to thrive at his real home at the Stade Geoffroy-Guichard.

Perrin excels in the areas you want any great defender to excel in. A strong header of the ball, a sound sense of positioning on the field and excellent timing with his tackles when mistakes from the other two areas are made.

In the air, he has always been a tough opponent to beat or to stop in the opposing box. While not the tallest of players, standing in at just over six foot, the Frenchman has an excellent leap off the ground and timing to his run to rise above opposition, using his physicality to impose his will upon them.

His positioning has also never come into question. When you watch Perrin play, he is constantly looking around him to be two steps ahead of the opponent, knowing where he needs to be and where others are around him, including any danger from the opposition so that he can be in the right place to snuff it out.

When there is a need for him to intervene, he is there to put a roadblock in the way. Averaging 2.6 tackles per game over the past season and a half, he is able to cover over the mistakes that he himself or others make with his superb timing. His average of 0.3 fouls per game this season is absolutely outstanding.

Add to that his impressive passing skills: he has an 88.5% success rate with just under 10% of his overall passes being long balls. He recycles possession well, keeping the pressure off the defence by playing out from the back, but he can also pick out a quick counter-attack when needed.

However, the key weakness to his game is his speed, which has never been great but is slowly getting worse. If he does make a mistake in rushing out to make a challenge, he can be too often caught out by anyone with half a yard of pace who can get in behind the position Perrin has vacated.

That also becomes an issue when facing more slender, nimble forwards who are not looking for a physical game. When Perrin is facing burly opposition, this is not such a problem as these type of forwards do not have the technical skill to beat him compared to those at the top of the league like an Alexandre Lacazette. Perrin struggles to lay a hand on the faster, nimbler attackers and they are becoming more and more in fashion during this Ligue 1 campaign.

One of the ways that Christophe Galtier has attempted to cover these cracks this season is to play a three-man defence with Perrin, Florentin Pogba and Kevin Theophile-Catherine. With the captain as the middle of those three, he has receded almost into a sweeper role, allowing him to analyse the game from further back and that also means he is caught out less regularly.

Galtier's tactical tinkering has not eliminated the problem entirely though, as evidenced in the game against Guingamp a few weeks ago. With that three-man defence brings two wing-backs, with Kévin Malcuit a particular culprit in not doing enough on the defensive side of things to cover his tracks after going forward.

With the gaps in behind, Perrin had to cover the right-back's slot on occasion, leaving him out of position and somewhat stranded between covering the wing and marking centrally. Also, with the defence being outnumbered on occasion, Perrin has resorted to attempting to eliminate the initial pass higher up the field, but that has caught Saint-Étienne out a few times and against stronger opposition, they would have been severely punished.

While he has also filled in at defensive midfield in the past, his ability to go from sideline-to-sideline during a game has diminished enough for him not to be considered in that role again. Saint-Étienne also have more than enough cover in that area and in all honesty, it would be a crime to take him away from the position he really excels better than most in Europe, at centre back.

Even as Perrin enters the final third of his career, he has shown no signs of stopping. As he adapts to what his manager wants from him in a multitude of different formations, the ever-present Frenchman has never deviated dramatically in form and has been the foundation for his club's success over the past few years.

Les Verts without Perrin are almost as difficult to imagine as fish without chips. It never seems quite right, neither is it as strong without its partner and with such a winning combination, why would you ever deviate?

Simply put, he is a staple of one of France's most famous clubs and while that may not quite get him worldwide recognition, that should not bother him in the slightest. He is the lifeblood of Saint-Étienne, a man of the people and someone that Saint-Étienne can rely on for many more seasons to come.



ALEXANDRE LACAZETTE

^10

8

Club: Olympique Lyonnais

Position: Attacker

Born: Olympique Lyonnais

Date of Birth: 28/05/1991

Age: 25

League Form in 2016

Games: 34

Chances Created: 45

Goals: 26

Average Duels Won: 47.88%

West Ham, Arsenal, Paris Saint-Germain, the list of suitors has been endless, but Alexandre Lacazette has remained a Lyon player. Club president Jean-Michel Aulas has never been hesitant to sell players if he thinks he can get the right price for them, and he has extracted some eye-watering sums from some of Europe's biggest clubs. Karim Benzema, Michael Essien and Samuel Umtiti have been some of the biggest names to depart in the last decade, but Aulas has remained firm on Lacazette, even going so far as to give him what is supposedly the most lucrative contract in the club's history.

Given the emphasis on sustainability as regards player turnover fostered by the club, Lacazette stands as a clear exception, but he has consistently repaid the faith showed in him, scoring 26 goals in 2016 at the time of writing. His recent form has seen him scoring more from the spot than from open play, but there is more to his game than being a predatory presence or making his mark from the graft of others.

Born in Lyon to parents of Guadeloupian heritage, Lacazette has been with the club since the age of 12. He was initially projected to be a winger, and his pace and energy had seen him used on both flanks for the club's youth teams and through France's various underage national teams. He scored three goals, including the winner in the final in the 2010 European Under-19 Championships, but his real coming-out party was the following summer in Colombia. France struggled to a fourth-place finish, but Lacazette finished as the tournament's leading scorer, securing his reputation as a capable finisher.

Despite this, his development with Lyon was slow to come. He had already made his debut for the first team at the back end of the 2009/10 season, but the presence of senior players ahead of him relegated him to the wing. Lisandro Lopez, Jimmy Briand and Bafétimbi Gomis are far from a murderer's row of forwards, but they were all at or near their peaks at the time. Briand and Gomis were earning the odd call-up for France and Lopez was named Ligue 1's player of the year that season, so there was no shame in that. Still, though, Lacazette might have expected more than the 153 minutes he earned in 2010/11, scoring just a single goal and failing to make a start in the league.

The following season saw Lyon struggle badly in the league, missing out on the Champions' League places for the first time in over a decade, but Lacazette was starting to demonstrate his promise and his versatility. Played on both wings and (rarely) as a striker, he managed ten goals across all competitions, including a screamer at home to APOEL Nicosia in the Champions' League Round of 16, a more than impressive total that cemented his status, at 21, as one to watch.

In 2012/13, a tactical change from new manager Rémi Garde saw Lyon play an orthodox 4-4-2, but Lacazette was rarely privileged to start up top. Lopez and Gomis made a natural centre forward pairing in terms of their physical attributes, but at least Lacazette was afforded a consistency as regards his position, with Michel Bastos on the left and he on the right.

Faced now with being a creative influence, Lacazette performed admirably, recording nine assists in the league as Lyon captured third place. The return to the Champions' League was hard-fought, but much of the focus with regards to Lyon's young players was on Gueida Fofana and Clément Grenier, contemporaries of Lacazette's who had less decorated youth careers, but seemed set on making a bigger impact on the club at the senior level.

Much was expected of Lyon the following season, but the club failed to meet expectations, crashing out of the Champions' League and despite an impressive run in the Europa League, being generally viewed as a disappointment. It was here, though, that Lacazette finally began to grasp the opportunities offered to him.

With the club in dire straits financially, Lopez and his onerous salary were moved on prior to the play-off against Real Sociedad, and Lacazette was given the chance to partner Gomis, with Grenier and Briand pulling the strings. Lacazette responded by scoring 22 goals in all competitions.

His pace and ability to link play worked well with the slower Gomis, whose gifts in terms of hold-up play were likewise allowed to shine, but few could have predicted the 2014/15 season, for either the player or the club.

Gomis, seeking perhaps a final chance for a big payday at 29, moved to Swansea City in the summer, and Lyon were forced to once again re-work themselves tactically, under yet another new manager, Hubert Fournier, who had gained a reputation for succeeding with limited means by earning promotion and consolidation with Reims.

Although young players had not been a big part of Fournier's success with the Champagne club, his willingness to trust not only Lacazette but also Jordan Ferri, Corentin Tolisso, Nabil Fékir and Clinton N'Jie made Lyon one of Europe's most unlikely success stories. The season had started with an ignominious elimination from the Europa League at the hands of Romanian side Astra Giurgiu, but blossomed into a surprising challenge to the Parisian hegemony. Lyon ultimately fell short of winning the title, but laid down a serious marker as to the potential of faith in youth in a cash-poor league. Although Fékir was viewed by some as a more serious prospect long-term, Lacazette's 27 goals led the league, no mean feat with Zlatan Ibrahimovic in the running, and he also won player of the year honours, leading to him being linked with the aforementioned clubs, as well as Barcelona.

Last year saw Lacazette struggle in the early going, as he failed to get off the mark in the league until late September, leading to a monumental discord with Aulas, who went public with the player's salary demands. Given the magnetic charm that the chairman holds, this and his stuttering form made him an object of the fans' frustration as the club were mired in mid-table domestically and finished bottom of a mediocre Champions' League group. He told *L'Equipe* in an interview, *"It hurts, I think that's the right word. When you're a young guy at the club, from the city, who's never behaved badly towards anyone, to be treated like that... yes, it's hurtful."*

In displaying an unusually vulnerable side with these remarks, Lacazette positioned himself as someone who bled for his club and was being treated unfairly. Indeed, to point to the striker as being the issue on the back of such success would have been unfair; Fékir's creativity had been integral to Lyon's achievements the previous season, and his early-season ACL injury forced Lyon into a series of failed tactical solutions. The club had recruited positively that summer, bringing in the Guingamp striker Claudio Beauvue, Mathieu Valbuena and promising young Spaniard Sergi Darder, with N'Jie departing. The inventiveness of Fékir, coupled with the willingness of N'Jie to use his searing pace to stretch defenders made Lacazette the beneficiary of a system tailor-made to his style. Valbuena is a superb creative player, but has never been best-used as a number 10, while Beauvue's arrogance and poor work ethic meant that space in opponents' penalty boxes was at a premium, leading to a paucity of coherent attacking play.

Fournier was replaced by the assistant Bruno Génésio, who switched to a 4-3-3 and brought in promising but untested youngsters Maxwel Cornet and Rachid Ghezzal, who, were seen as fit to play on the flanks. With support from the mid-field, Lacazette was once again back to his best, leading Lyon on a charge up the table. They eventually finished second, passing Monaco with a 6-1 victory powered by a Lacazette hat-trick. Growing pains now mitigated, Lacazette was once again linked with a move abroad, as the Premier League's new television contract provided an even longer list of potential suitors, even as he surprisingly failed to be picked for France's squad at the summer's European Championships.

This season has seen a further tactical flux, as Génésio has sought to balance injuries to Fékir and Lacazette himself. The goals are still there, though, as Lacazette has recorded 11 in 12 matches at the time of writing, and rumours continue to swirl surrounding his departure, with a move in the summer now appearing more likely. That has been the case for some time now, though, and as long as Lacazette remains in Ligue 1, he should be appreciated as a remarkable model of perseverance and consistency.

France has a somewhat recent tradition of strikers who started their career on the wing, with Thierry Henry having set the standard in this regard. Anthony Martial and Kylian Mbappé-Lottin are among the next to take this mantle and it would not be unfair to argue that the two younger players draw a good deal of their inspiration from the style of Lacazette. Whereas Henry stood 6' 2" and mixed pace and power with just a dash of physicality, Lacazette and his younger compatriots rely more on their instincts and work-rate.

While his pace, ball control and ability to finish with either foot are undoubtedly Lacazette's strongest suits, he is also strong in other areas. When Lyon have needed to press an opponent that likes to dominate the ball, hoping for an error from nervous centre backs, he has been at the forefront of that. He works tirelessly and uses his deceptive upper body strength to limit opponents playing the ball out of the back; he has been, with some good justification, labelled as the kind of player who would appeal to Jürgen Klopp in this regard.

He achieves this not only through his pace, but also through intelligent positioning; the same mind that seeks to spring an offside trap is also adept at anticipating short passes from a 'keeper under pressure. He is also unafraid to drop deep to receive the ball, running through the centre to invite the likes of Ghezzal and Cornet to link play with him inside. It is no coincidence that the pair recorded career-best goal totals last year, Lacazette's runs dragging centre backs out of position to allow the wide players space. This aspect of his play shows a player possessed of a remarkable intelligence who has consistently adapted his play to fit different tactical systems, something which is no small feat and should not be overlooked by "bigger" clubs scouting him.

Despite having played as a lone centre forward in the recent past, it would be unwise to think that Lacazette has lost his versatility, either. Were he to move to a bigger club, the idea that he could sublimate his ego and happily play on the wing is not a fanciful one; he has made no secret of his disappointment with the club's recent Champions' League performances, and he could easily play the role of a Pedro or Alexis Sanchez at a club like Barcelona, offering convincing cover for a number of players.

His injury history is perhaps the only black mark on his career; issues with his back have been recurring, and a missed month in 2014/15 was seen by some as the difference between Lyon winning the title and not. He missed a handful of matches last season and this as well; while not quite on the level of a Daniel Sturridge, the difference between a player who plays thirty matches in the league or one who displays exemplary fitness could be significant if, as recent rumours suggest, his transfer clause as swelled to a figure around €60m. Aulas has been firm in getting his price, but even in an inflated market, he will have a hard time finding a suitor for that figure. He may move for a fee less than that this summer, but in the meantime, we would do well to take pleasure in observing one of the world's most complete centre forwards in action.



DJIBRIL SIDIBÉ

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7

Club: AS Monaco

Position: Defender

Born: Troyes

Date of Birth: 29/07/1992

Age: 24

League Form in 2016

Games: 34

Goals Conceded: 32

Total Chances Created: 34

Average Duels Won: 51.53%

During the summer of 2016, Djibril Sidibé had a decision to make. Arsenal, coached by legendary French manager Arsène Wenger, were interested in buying him from Lille. The Premier League had long been a dream destination for Sidibé. It seemed like the perfect move for the French full-back. However, there was a problem, Arsenal already had Hector Bellerin, Mathieu Debuchy and Carl Jenkinson on the books. All three of these players are right-backs, a position in which Sidibé saw his long-term future in. Arsenal wanted Sidibé to play mainly as a back-up to players such as Hector Bellerin and Nacho Monreal, providing cover in both full-back positions. Signing for Arsenal would almost certainly have seen Sidibé's playing time decrease as he would be playing second fiddle to more established players.

Too often in football, specifically with regards to Premier League clubs shopping in France, young players make the wrong choices for their career when moving clubs, and their development stagnates. In a rare move, Sidibé broke this unfortunate trend and rejected Arsenal's offer. With the benefit of hindsight, Sidibé's choice seems an obvious one. However, it must be remembered that Sidibé was playing for a team that had barely qualified for the Europa League. Playing for a team containing the talents of Mesut Özil and Alexis Sanchez in the Champions' League would have been an almost irresistible lure to North London. But Sidibé, showing maturity beyond his years, chose to look at the big picture and stay in France.

Despite being one of Lille's most consistent players, Sidibé had remained relatively under-appreciated both inside and outside of France. While players such as Anthony Martial and Layvin Kurzawa had commanded huge fees, Sidibé remained overlooked. However, Sidibé had quietly been one of Ligue 1's best players over the course of the 2015/16 campaign, with his performances being rewarded with a place on the standby list for France's EURO 2016 squad.

Frenchman Sidibé was born on July 29th 1992, in Troyes. At the age of eight he joined the ESTAC Troyes youth academy, and would go on to be a part of the Troyes youth system until 2010, before making the proud transition into professional football with ESTAC. His first league campaign saw him play just six times, all in the form of starts, as Troyes battled to shake off the tag of a mediocre mid-table Ligue 2 outfit. Sidibé firmly established himself in the first team as Troyes's first choice right-back during the following campaign in 2011/12, making 34 appearances as the club earned promotion to the French top tier.

Lille were impressed with Sidibé's ability to balance his attacking and defensive duties effectively, especially considering his tender age and they picked him up in the summer of 2012. This cleared the way for Mathieu Debuchy to leave Les Dogues for Newcastle United. However, Lille rejected Newcastle's bid and Debuchy ended up staying with Lille until January of 2013. In the meantime, Sidibé was seen as an understudy to Debuchy who he could replace when the now Arsenal right-back eventually left. During this six-month period, Sidibé benefitted greatly from his apprenticeship under French international Debuchy, whose sense of positioning was something that Sidibé is said to have greatly admired. Sidibé certainly had large shoes to fill. Debuchy had been a key player in Lille's title winning side and had already gained multiple caps for the French national team. Sidibé was only nineteen and had only ever played in the second division of French football.

Sidibé struggled to adapt to Ligue 1 in his first season and as a result, his playing time suffered. Sidibé only made 14 appearances in Ligue 1. Even after Debuchy left the club, Lille manager Rudi Garcia usually opted for the more experienced Franck Béria. The next season was more of the same for Sidibé as he only made 20 Ligue 1 appearances with new coach René Girard also preferring Béria. Sidibé did however display his versatility and made several appearances playing as a left-back, competing with Pape Souaré for that specific slot, which was vacant as a result of Lucas Digne's departure to PSG.

The 2014/15 season can be classified as the campaign where Sidibé finally broke through at Lille and became a key player for the club. The season began with Lille's purchase of promising right-back Sébastien Corchia from Sochaux. During the first half of 2014/15, Sidibé battled with Corchia for the right-back role as Pape Souaré started at left-back. However, Souaré's departure to the Africa Cup of Nations and subsequent transfer to Crystal Palace during the January transfer window left Lille with a conundrum in the left-back position. Sidibé once again displayed his willingness to be versatile, accepted to be drafted in and immediately established himself as a starter in that position. It seemed that after seasons of turmoil at the full-back positions Lille had finally found their answer in Corchia and Sidibé. Sidibé grew in confidence on the other flank and went on to finish the season with two goals and two assists in 25 Ligue 1 appearances.

The beginning of the 2015/16 season was nothing short of a disaster for Lille. New coach Herve Renard was sacked after collecting just 13 points from the opening 13 matches of the league season. During this period, Sidibé was once again moved to a new position as Renard experimented and moved the Frenchman further forward as a left or right midfielder in a 3-5-2/3-4-3 system. Despite some positive performances, it was clear that Sidibé's best position was at full-back. He looked uncomfortable as the sole creative wide-man on either side. After Renard's sacking, Frédéric Antonetti was installed as manager with one of his first acts being to return Sidibé back to his pre-established position of left-back, as Lille

looked to return to a more direct style of play. These two switches brought about the beginning of an extraordinary run of form as 2016 began. Lille lost just three times in the second half of the 2015/16 campaign and would go on a magical 10 match unbeaten run. A huge part of this success was the benefit of finally having a settled back four. Sidibé grew in stature with each game and developed an incredibly productive partnership with talented winger Sofiane Boufal. Perhaps the high point of the entire season came in the 4-1 demolition of Monaco. After goals from Morgan Amalfitano, Eder and Mounir Obbadi had given Lille the lead, Sidibé stormed down the left wing and raced onto a through ball, finishing calmly to cap off a famous win. Sidibé improved hugely throughout the second half of the season benefiting from finally regularly playing in the same position. Sidibé played 37 league games during the season and was not substituted once. Boufal often played as a left winger and preferred to cut inside leaving a lot of space to overlap. This gave Sidibé the freedom to press high up the left wing and contribute to the attack. The success of this partnership is evidenced by the fact that Boufal and Sidibé contributed 15 goals and 7 assists to Lille's league campaign. Sidibé also had a stellar run in the Coupe de Ligue as Lille reached the final of the competition against PSG. During that match, as Lille were losing 1-0, they won a free-kick in an exciting position. Sidibé did not hesitate to step up, lifting the ball over the wall and into the bottom corner, leaving Salvatore Sirigu with no chance. Lille would go on to lose 2-1, but Sidibé was praised for his performance.

After such an impressive season, coupled with being named on the standby list for France's EURO 2016 squad, it seemed only a matter of time before Sidibé moved to a bigger club.

Leonardo Jardim, the coach of AS Monaco, wanted to move quickly in the summer transfer window to find a replacement for the then starting right-back Fabinho, who was attracting interest from all corners of the continent. Monaco saw an opportunity to pounce for Sidibé, convincing the player to reject Arsenal for regular playing time with one of Ligue 1's finest outfits. Signing Sidibé would allow Jardim to compensate for Fabinho's departure, except that the Brazilian never left and has since moved into the defensive midfield, which is possibly turning out to be one of the greatest positional conversions in recent Ligue 1 history. For Sidibé the move made sense as well, at Arsenal he would have been merely backup, at Monaco he was almost a guaranteed starter. In addition, the Principality side had qualified for the Champions' League and are renowned in Europe for developing young players into the next big thing, making the decision an easy one for Sidibé.

Much has been made of Monaco's wonderful start to the season and the players responsible for it. Players such as Bernardo Silva and Thomas Lemar have received plaudits for their performances while Fabinho has been a revelation playing as a defensive midfielder. Sidibé has also been superb in his own right. Benefiting from Monaco's free-flowing attacking style, Sidibé has become an automatic starter for Monaco as they continue to dazzle Ligue 1. His performances have been so impressive that he has been touted as France's likely starting right-back for the 2018 World Cup. Indeed, Sidibé's chances look good considering that Bacary Sagna, Christophe Jallet and Mathieu Debuchy are all over the age of thirty. Sidibé's only real rival for the starting spot in *Les Bleus*'s backline at right-back is his former team-mate Sébastien Corchia. However, Sidibé has the benefit of playing in the Champions' League over the course of this campaign and Didier Deschamps has shown an early preference for the Monaco man. Despite being used as a left-back on a handful of occasions for Monaco, Sidibé has made it clear that he prefers playing as a right-back. It appears that Leonardo Jardim feels the same way, with Sidibé playing almost exclusively as a right-back for the second quarter of the season.

Like many modern full-backs Sidibé is a better attacker than he is a defender. Possessing lightning pace and good dribbling ability, Sidibé has improved his decision-making skills over the past year and has shown better judgement concerning when to press forward and when to stay back. As a young defender, Sidibé often struggled with his discipline, regularly being caught out of position and committing sloppy fouls. Sidibé's improvement over the past year is shown when comparing the 2014/15 season to the 2016/17 season in this regard. He averaged 0.24 yellow cards per game during the 2014/15 season while during the 2016/17 campaign, Sidibé has averaged 0.07 yellow cards per game, a huge reduction.

Defensively, Sidibé is a competent if not spectacular player with his main weakness being a propensity to get caught high up the field. Physically, Sidibé is quite strong on the ball and is difficult to dispossess, however, he does tend to hold onto the ball a little longer than he needs to. This flaw has been slowly ironed out by Leonardo Jardim during the course of this season. Sidibé stands at 6' 0" which is fairly tall for a full-back but serves as a big advantage in the aerial battle, especially against Ligue 1's more frail wingers. Sidibé has won 65 percent of his aerial duels in Ligue 1 compared to fellow full-backs Serge Aurier and Layvin Kurzawa who sit on a 60 percent and 55 percent win rate respectively.

The role of the full-back has changed dramatically over the past few decades. Once seen purely as a defender, full-backs are now expected to contribute and be part of the attack. Sidibé is the definition of this transformation, and throughout the last year has shown his potential to become one of the best full-backs in the game. His position on this list is fully deserved and we can only wait and see whether Sidibé will continue his steady and patient rise to the top of French football.



BLAISE MATUIDI

v2

6

Club: PSG

Position: Midfielder

Born: Toulouse

Date of Birth: 09/04/1987

Age: 29

League Form in 2016

Games: 31

Total Defensive Errors: 0

Average Pass Accuracy: 90.45%

Average Duels Won: 44.35%

One of the game's most admired midfielders; Blaise Matuidi has been at the forefront of both PSG's success in 2016 and France's road to the final of the European Championships, held on home soil. It has been an incredible year for the tireless midfielder; a year full of amazing highs and disappointing lows, but a period of 12 months that will undoubtedly go down as some of the most memorable of his career.

Let us go back to where this calendar year all began, with Matuidi playing a huge part on the left-hand side of Laurent Blanc's midfield trio at PSG, as they cruised on top of Ligue 1, utterly obliterating domestic opposition on a weekly basis. Going into the first week of 2016, *Les Parisiens* were already 20 points clear of nearest challengers Monaco. As we all know, PSG were totally dominant and the word-class trio of Matuidi, Motta and Verratti orchestrated proceedings, stopping any attacks, breaking up play, starting attacks and helping out the three forwards of Edinson Cavani, Ángel Di María and of course Zlatan Ibrahimovic.

The front three would often get the plaudits and the praise for their goals, but the fact of the matter is without Matuidi and his energy, the PSG's attacking troika simply would not have had as many goal-scoring opportunities. Matuidi's ability to cover the field has led many to suggest that the former Saint-Étienne man might be battery-powered. His tireless closing down of the opposition allows other players in the starting eleven to focus exclusively on their own role with possession, rather than have to worry about what position to take up when *Les Parisiens* do not have the ball.

One of the greatest examples of Matuidi at his finest offensively, in terms linking the play, came in a 5-1 home win against Angers. The game will be remembered for Ángel Di María's fantastic double, but it was Matuidi who managed to grab three assists for himself, showing how creative and destructive to the opposition he can be in the final third.

For his first assist to Ibrahimovic, Matuidi's intense pressing game forced Angers into a mistake, and all he had to do was slip Zlatan in via a through ball for the Swede to tap home. The second came from a fantastic team move which included Matuidi clipping the ball to the back post for Gregory Van der Wiel to strike emphatically past Mathieu Michel. The third was another perfectly-weighted pass from Matuidi that threaded through a hapless Angers defence, that left the ball on a plate for Di María.

Arguably, this was Matuidi's strongest performance of the year, alongside a game in April against Caen, where Matuidi captained the champions in a rout in every sense of the word, bagging a goal and assist for himself in the process of PSG demolishing the away side 6-0.

The common theme when discussing the Frenchman's performances over the course of this calendar year is the sheer dominance involved in Matuidi's play, yet combined with an elegance and poise that makes him one of the top central midfielders in Europe.

The 29-year-old may be known for having an outstanding engine and some of the toughest legs in the game, but what often goes unnoticed is how much of a threat he is to the opposition goal. Having been played a handful of fixtures in 2016 as a left-winger, Matuidi has arguably never posed more of a threat in and around the opposition box as a result of his direct running than ever before in his career.

The first half of 2016 was, from a domestic standpoint, amazing for Matuidi as he helped PSG win the domestic quadruple once again under expert Ligue 1 boss Laurent Blanc.

However, the ambitious Qatari owners have long been bored of what they say as token success in France. They almost exclusively only care about the Champions' League and Blanc lost his job for failing to deliver in Europe's top competition.

PSG were knocked-out by Manchester City in the quarter-finals, in a tie that many in France expected *Les Parisiens* to emerge victorious from, having been barred from further progress in recent campaigns only by FC Barcelona. Matuidi missed the second leg at the Etihad due to picking up a yellow card at the Parc des Princes, forcing him out of the vital away leg. Without him and David Luiz, PSG did not look the same ruthlessly consistent force that they had been across all competitions over the course of the 2015/16 campaign. Laurent Blanc panicked, introduced a bizarre 3-5-2 formation that players had no experience with playing and they seriously missed Matuidi's energy and strength in the middle as they fell to a 1-0 loss.

Putting the Champions' League disappointment behind him, Matuidi and a few of his compatriots prepared themselves for one of the biggest tournaments of their lives, EURO 2016. With the tournament being played on home soil, expectations were high for Matuidi and the rest of the French national team. This was especially the case when we reached the summer because of a raft of baggage that was associated with the France side in the lead up to the tournament, specifically the Karim Benzema - Mathieu Valbuena sextape blackmail affair.

However, after months of anticipation, Matuidi did not exactly have the best start, at least according to the infamous *L'Équipe* player rating system. In the first game against Romania, Matuidi was disappointing owing to an inability to break through a sturdy opposition defence. However, it was during the second game against Albania where he suffered the majority of his critics, receiving a weak score of 4/10 and causing him to be dropped for the final group game against Switzerland.

What can be said in Matuidi's defence was that during EURO 2016 he and Chelsea midfielder N'Golo Kanté were asked to sit back and let Paul Pogba flow forward to try to give the now Manchester United midfielder the necessary space to make decisive attacking contributions. It frankly did not work.

Matuidi is predominately played as a left-sided central midfielder, which was incidentally also Pogba's position at Juventus. In a midfield three, the two could not play in the same position, so Matuidi was forced to compromise.

With Pogba being favoured as the left sided midfielder and Kanté in the holding midfield position, Matuidi was shifted out to the right, which was an utter disaster for the PSG man who looked completely lost at sea, less confident with his touches of the ball. It was not until Didier Deschamps switched from his trusted 4-3-3 formation to a 4-2-3-1, introducing Moussa Sissoko on the right hand side to compliment Matuidi who remained in the right-sided central midfield role. This was first tried out against Iceland in a 5-2 victory, with Matuidi assisting the opener for Olivier Giroud.

It was a mixed EURO 2016 for Matuidi. He did not perform to the best of his ability but a very strong case can be made to suggest that this was down to him being played out of position by Didier Deschamps. It was not until that quarter-final fixture against Iceland that Matuidi appeared more assured, but Deschamps must be taken to task for misusing the PSG man.

As we all know, *Les Bleus* reached the final after defeating Germany, but fell to the now infamous late Eder strike, which came as a hammer blow to the whole nation. It was a heartbreaking moment, with Matuidi the most visibly emotionally affected player following the full-time whistle.

For Matuidi, post-EURO 2016 brought with it a summer of uncertainty. When your agent is the infamous Mino Raiola, every transfer window has the propensity to throw up some surprises. It appeared that following the sacking of Laurent Blanc and the appointment of Unai Emery as PSG's new coach that Matuidi would be on his way out of the club, with Manchester United and Juventus having been linked with the player. However, fresh off of the back of winning the Europa League, Spanish tactician Emery made a last-ditch plea to Matuidi in the final hours of the summer window to reject a move to the Serie A champions and stay. The Frenchman obliged.

The 2016/17 season has been quite disastrous for Matuidi and PSG, as teething problems under the new regime have put the champions in the unusual position of having to make up ground in the Ligue 1 title race in the second half of the campaign. An early loss to AS Monaco in August, 3-1, brought with it an extremely disappointing performance from PSG that set the tone for the first six months of Emery's reign.

29-year-old Matuidi himself has played in all but one Ligue 1 fixture at the time of writing in the 2016/17 campaign, but has responded poorly to Emery's apparent hesitancy to fully impose his philosophy on the capital side, leaving many players confused, both by the coach's methods and his tactics, having wavered between a 4-3-3 and 4-2-3-1. Matuidi's brightest moments during this period have come in a pair of Champions' League ties with Arsenal. In both games, Matuidi was deployed as a left-winger, which seemed strange on paper, but in practice it was a perfect scheme to prevent Hector Bellerin from making dangerous attacking runs.

Matuidi's energy and defensive mindset made him the best choice on that left flank ahead of Lucas Moura or Jesé, who both would have prioritised attack ahead of defence. Netting against Basel and Ludogorets, Matuidi's best performances of late have come in Europe's premier competition. The concern over his Ligue 1 form is evident, but he is not the only one to suffer from a huge drop in form.

With reports suggesting that Matuidi is on the verge of signing a new contract, his season must improve, and quickly, if Raiola is going to be able to seal his client the perfect pre-retirement contract. Unai Emery has shown in recent weeks that he is prepared to play Grzegorz Krychowiak in the central defensive midfield position alongside veteran Thiago Motta, which signals that Matuidi may have a long road back to the starting XI after the showing against Montpellier, which has been described as disgraceful and embarrassing by some fans.

The midfielder must take his aggressive run-making into the box that he has shown on European outings and grab some goals, as he has still yet to open his account in Ligue 1 for the season.

This makes 2017 an enormous year for the midfielder, who has experienced every emotion across the 12 months of 2016, ranging from ecstasy to despondency, from disappointment to elation. The first half of the year saw Matuidi play some of his best football in a Paris shirt, whilst EURO 2016 saw him as part of a team that nearly brought glory home to a country who were desperately hoping for some light and glory at the end of what had been a harrowing year for various reasons.

Emery's short reign has been a traumatic experience for Matuidi, on and off the pitch, as he adapts to a number of changes, positional or otherwise. One thing you can count on with Matuidi is that he is a fighter. He has not become one of the best central midfielders in Europe by simply giving up when the going gets tough. He rises to the occasion. The gloriously talented Frenchman must show that he has plenty of fight left in him in 2017.



CORENTIN TOLISSO

^15

5

Club: Olympique Lyonnais

Position: Midfielder

Born: Tarare

Date of Birth: 03/08/1994

Age: 22

League Form in 2016

Games: 31

Chances Created: 44

Goals: 8

Average Pass Accuracy: 83.45%

The subject of several recent transfer battles between Lyon and Napoli, Corentin Tolisso has slowly but surely become one of the most complete young central midfielders in Europe. The academy product has seen his path to *Les Bleus* blocked by the likes of Blaise Matuidi and N'Golo Kanté, but offers a much more cultured and nuanced approach to his play than either of those two, his versatility and skill the product of being asked to handle a variety of roles and responsibilities than either of his compatriots. A hard worker but not to the point of it being his sole asset, when Lyon rejected a reported €37m offer from the Italian runners-up this season, some were surprised. However, for close observers of French football, Lyon's rejection of the offer was a given, especially in light of club chairman Jean-Michel Aulas' habitually tight-fisted approach to player movement.

Born in the small town of Tarare, not far from Lyon, Tolisso signed on with the then-French champions in 2007, just as the club were ending their remarkable run of seven consecutive titles. He was slow to move into the first team, even as he had initially come through as a right-back, a position of need as Anthony Réveillère aged out of the side.

Unable to unseat the stopgap likes of Mouhamadou Dabo and Miguel Lopes during his first season with Lyon's first team, he struggled for playing time, being used in a variety of positions but failing to make any significant impact. Internationally, he scarcely featured for the U-19s and U-20 international sides, and with the likes of Nabil Fékir, Clinton N'Jie and Samuel Umtiti being hugely impressive at similar ages, he was hardly looked to as being a key part of the club's future.

That all changed with the appointment of Hubert Fournier in the summer of 2014. Rémi Garde had done well to advance the careers of several young players, but Tolisso was decidedly not one of them, being used more as a stopgap than with an eye towards development. Fournier's time at Reims was not a particularly impressive one for youth products; aside from Nicolas de Préville and Aïssa Mandi, he had decidedly relied upon veteran players as he consolidated the club's status in the top flight, playing a scrappy brand of football as he sought to cope with limited financial means. Lyon were, at the time, in a similar state, unable to sign players, and Fournier was meant to keep the club within touching distance of the top three as their new stadium moved toward completion.

What transpired instead was something revelatory, and Tolisso's blossoming was perhaps the biggest surprise of all. Fournier set up the team in a diamond 4-4-2, and brought to the team an exciting and dynamic counter-attacking style of play that showed a level of attractiveness that would have hardly been expected in light of long-term injuries to Gueïda Fofana and Clément Grenier.

Maxime Gonalons played at the base of midfield, with Nabil Fékir at the tip, the diminutive yet robust midfielder deservedly winning young player of the year, and Alexandre Lacazette leading the league in scoring. While Fékir and Lacazette garnered the headlines for their play up top, the real work was being done by Tolisso and fellow academy product Jordan Ferri in central midfield.

After suffering an embarrassing loss to Romanian side Astra Giurgiu in the Europa League playoffs, Lyon had hardly started the season like a house on fire, losing to promoted Lens and Metz in successive weeks. With Monaco at home and a trip to Paris Saint-Germain looming, things looked dire indeed for *Les Gones*, but instead Lyon went on a remarkable run through the winter break, rising to first place in January. While a tilt at the title was eventually undone, an injury to Lacazette frustrating the team in attack, Lyon had laid down a serious marker as regards placing faith in youth, with Tolisso at the forefront as he featured in every league match.

Just 20 at the beginning of the season, Tolisso combined exceptionally well with Ferri, Fékir and Gonalons to offer the perfect balance in midfield. Whereas Ferri offered a combative presence who relied more on energy to dictate play, Fékir played directly, using his strength and dribbling ability to draw defenders and Gonalons used his physicality, tackling ability and range of passing to protect the defence, Tolisso had all of those attributes, and used his versatility to affect a match in a variety of different situations.

If Lyon needed to keep possession to kill off a match against a desperate opponent, he could use his intelligence of movement and passing range to keep the ball. If the attack was stuttering, he got forward and offered goals. If an aggressive pressing style was needed against an opponent who sought to dictate play through possession and long passes, he would work with the forwards to limit that, Paris Saint-Germain in particular being party to that as they failed to beat Lyon that season.

His play in this new role had not gone unnoticed by the French national team, and he soon became a regular for *Les Espoirs*, forming a dynamic and powerful midfield trio in Pierre Mankowski's 4-3-3. With Tiemoué Bakayoko sitting deepest, Tolisso and Rabiot played with an almost frightening composure and intelligence, and despite failing to qualify for this summer's European Championships, the way that the two repeatedly combined in a qualifier against Iceland in September was impressive indeed. In a match that finished 2-0 to the hosts, Tolisso, wearing the captain's armband, notched a double, with Rabiot providing the assist on each goal in a display that magnificently showcased his versatility.

For the first goal, Iceland have a throw, Issa Diop heads clear and France move quickly to break, Rabiot leading the charge upfield. Tolisso, accelerating the whole way, runs onto the PSG man's through ball, takes a perfectly weighted touch with his right foot and delicately chips the 'keeper, who has been left stranded by his touch.

Tolisso barely breaks stride for the entire run, and while not blessed with lightning pace, his fitness and ability to accelerate over long distances allow him to seemingly play in several positions at once. For the second goal, Rabiot receives the ball some thirty yards from goal and lofts the ball in, Tolisso springing the offside trap and looping a perfectly cushioned header into the net to all but seal a much-needed result.

In these two plays, Tolisso demonstrates not only his versatility, but his ability to play with a mindset more inclined towards attack. Linking play on the break is probably Tolisso's best attribute; his passing is rarely spectacular, but his ability to complete passes at a high rate while moving quickly allows his teams to not only be dangerous on the counter but also to avoid being caught out themselves. Likewise his sense of anticipation, as his timing to latch onto Rabiot's ball had to be perfect to spring the offside trap.

The quality of the header itself should not be ignored, either. Just a shade under six foot, Tolisso's combination of positioning, anticipation and leaping ability make him an exceptional header of the ball, netting a vital equaliser against Juventus in the Champions' League earlier this year.

Tolisso also can display a good eye for a long pass, although with Gonalons and, more recently, Sergi Darder alongside him, this ability is called upon less often. He is also adroit at breaking up play and starting a counter-attack; while Lyon have evolved tactically away from playing on the counter this season, this skill still lurks and could potentially make him a very valuable asset for a bigger club who embraces that style (Atletico Madrid?).

He is also, despite his slight frame, unafraid of a tackle, and the same acuity that he has displayed in his positional sense translates well in this regard; he is yet to be sent off in Ligue 1 and played all of 2014/15 with only a single booking, his stamina allowing him to retain this sharpness throughout a match.

As a coda to Tolisso's abilities, it would be remiss to not mention his positional versatility. Playing as the deepest of a mid-field three was a bit of a failed experiment during a period when Gonalons was deployed as a makeshift centre back, but he has done very well in a double pivot, wide in a 3-5-2 and, most intriguingly, playing as a second striker in a 3-5-1-1.

Here, he can be an exceptionally mobile target man, using his intelligence and heading ability to allow Lyon to play on the counter. His link-up play and movement are also given then chance to shine here as well. His best position in the long-term is probably as a central midfielder, but this versatility will surely do much to make more attractive to bigger clubs.

Despite these accomplishments, it would be remiss not to balance these considerable assets against the areas in which Tolisso still needs improvement. He is happy with the level of play at Lyon, telling the club's website, *"I'm very attached to the club and I don't feel like leaving now. I still have big things to do with OL, with a good season ahead,"* but for him to take that next step, which is surely in the offing, he needs to burnish a few things about his game.

Given his ability to shoot, he should look for his own shot more often; truly great players need to have a bit of, if not selfishness, confidence about them. Tolisso can lack that at times for his club, who are reliant on Lacazette and others in attack, but he has shown for the U-21s that his desire is there, he need only harness it.

This lack of selfishness belies a need to develop mentally, an issue that is not uncommon for a young player, but needs to be addressed for Tolisso to take the proverbial next step. His dressing-room dust-up with Lindsay Rose was the source of consternation as the club struggled early last season.

Rose has been moved on now, and Tolisso seems to be continuing an upward trend as regards his maturity, but the incident and an issue between Claudio Beauvue and some of the club's academy products reveal a player who must learn when to sublimate his personal issues for the good of the team. If he can reign this in, he has a superb chance to make the next step to be a regular for France, particularly with Moussa Sissoko in poor form for Tottenham.

Although Tolisso is eligible for Togo through his parents, his talent is simply too undeniable for him not to make an impact with the country of his birth. The role of Paul Pogba will certainly be a stumbling block in this regard, but seeing the trio of Bakayoko, Tolisso and Rabiot together is hard to ignore.

While Tolisso is not as capable of the spectacular as the Manchester United man, his consistency, versatility, discipline and willingness to work for the team may eventually make him a better bet for *Les Bleus*. This may seem nigh on heretical to say given the fee paid for Pogba this summer; while Tolisso seems happy to succeed with Lyon, the club were right to refuse Napoli's offer, as he seems destined for far bigger things.



MARCO VERRATTI

v1

4

Club: PSG

Position: Midfielder

Born: Pescara

Date of Birth: 05/11/1992

Age: 24

League Form in 2016

Games: 19

Total Defensive Errors: 0

Average Pass Accuracy: 89.58%

Average Duels Won: 59.89%

"I love Verratti. I like his vision of the game. He never loses the ball..."

The phrase 'I love Verratti' is, justifiably, a common one. The little Italian's style, grace and guile has been one of the main attractions of French football since his arrival from Pescara in 2012. But for the master of Verratti's number 6 role, Barcelona hero, Xavi, to adorn him with such testimony equates to the highest of praise for a talent that cannot be understated.

PSG's midfield fulcrum effortlessly glides across the pristine pitch at the Parc de Princes, ghosting past his opponents and directing play with the panache of a conductor in charge of his orchestra. Joy in football is largely derived from style, skill and flair and the way in which Verratti realizes the vision Xavi spoke of is heavily routed in all three. At his best, Verratti's natural verve is one of the most compelling sights in world football.

However, Verratti's attraction both for the capital club's faithful and the neutral observer comes not just from his undoubted ability but the persona he exudes both on the pitch and away from it too. The wide eyed youthfulness, almost naivety, with which Verratti plies his most finessed of trades makes him further enthralling still and somewhat unusual within the upper reaches of the European game, more readily characterised by cynical, egotistical personalities.

Perhaps just as important to his success as his supreme technical ability and spectrum of passing is the fact that Verratti is the most grounded and level headed of young professionals, retaining a degree of honesty and openness as a player and a man.

Having moved to Paris at an early age with his long-term partner and having been so quickly and passionately accepted by the PSG supporters, Gufetto (a nickname meaning 'Little Owl' given to him by girlfriend Laura Zazzara and adopted by his club's adoring fans) is at home in the French capital. Paris is where he started to make his first waves on the European scene and is where he began to raise his family, a fact which is often overlooked by potential suitors but one crucial to the Italian, a true family man. *"I made a choice of life, that of founding a family."* Verratti explained to *One Yard* last year. *"Even though at 23 I can seem young, I grew faster thanks to football. I love spending time with my family."*

A strong sense of family may be a key part of Verratti's attachment to Paris but this feeling is also prevalent in a footballing sense, although perpetuated in reverse. Being a young and precociously talented player with little top level experience upon his signing, a keen interest in Verratti's development was taken, not just by the staff but by the long time professionals within the squad who took him under their collective wing. *"Right away, everyone took me like the son, the boy of this team,"* Verratti told *AFP* in 2015, adding *"And every day that passes I feel better here, with the confidence of my teammates, the staff. I am still young and for a youngster confidence is the most important. When you work with the kind of players there are in Paris, if you're a little smart you always get better."* A year earlier saying in a *PSG TV* interview that *"at their contact, I gained in maturity. Becoming a father also allowed me to become more mature. I have more responsibilities now."*

These responsibilities have aided the Italian's development both as a man and as a player. The maturing of his playing style and the way in which he has conducted himself on the pitch over the last few years has been an overt and engaging process.

When his Paris career was in its infancy, Verratti's tendency to let his youthful exuberance get the better of him became almost a running gag amongst watchers of PSG, with Verratti (much like another master of his role, Paul Scholes) flying into tackles, sometimes a little recklessly, earning bookings with almost comic regularity. The arrival of former *Les Bleus* centre back (and, little known to many, Montpellier's all-time top scorer) Laurent Blanc began to erode this frustratingly loose area of his game. Verratti himself admitted to *Téléfoot* in 2014 that *"it is perhaps a defect but I always want to recover the ball, even when it is not possible. I'm young and I'm sure I have to correct that."*

But even here, Verratti's carefree attitude and boyish grin shine through, a laughably blatant attempt to halt a SC Bastia counter attack last year too was a notable instance when his cheekiness bubbled to the surface. A sense of fun that goes hand in hand with that boyishness is always evident in Verratti's play, although he can occasionally let the clear competitive streak he also possesses take over.

Verratti has joked about PSG's president Nasser Al Khelaifi warning him about talking to referees but he insists that: *"I love to have fun too. We do a fantastic job,"* Verratti told *Le Parisien* in 2015, *"there are so many people who are less lucky than us."* Furthermore, PSG's Little Owl maintains that, despite the maturity he is slowly garnering from his elders such as Blanc, Thiago Motta and previously Ezequiel Lavezzi, a close friend of the Italian's before leaving for China (perhaps explaining, in part, his recurring cheeky side), remaining true to his own philosophy is equally crucial to his success and development.

"If I change my way of playing, I will no longer be myself," explained Verratti in another AFP interview. "That's how I play, since I'm a child, and I want it to stay like this for as long as possible. It's my style, it will never change. At first it was true that I felt that [Laurent Blanc] was suffering when he saw me play like that. But now [he] lets me play as I always did. It's up to me to know when I have to do it and when it should not."

Although Verratti's undoubted ability and footballing grace have both been plain for some time, undergoing notable development and progression, he has hit something of a bump or two in the last year which has destabilised his form and seemingly his conviction. An unusual pubic bone injury troubled him repeatedly throughout 2016 with the issue requiring extensive rest in order for him to recover fully, a luxury Blanc and PSG rarely had.

Repeated attempts to either ease him back or push him to play in bigger games often backfired and resulted in relapses or further setbacks. Verratti's early insistence that an operation would not be needed perhaps also proved to be a misstep. When he and PSG's medical team were eventually left with little choice, the surgery resulted in his absence from EURO 2016, an obvious source of disappointment for the proud Italian.

Under Unai Emery, Verratti's fitness has been managed with a degree more care and nuance, allowing him to fully recover from the problem over the summer and in the early weeks of 2016 to return to the side week after week. Unfortunately, however, his form has taken a little longer to recover.

Although his performances have often still oozed the smoothness of his best work during this new campaign, that work has been done a little more in the background than before. PSG's struggles under Emery and the realisation on the part of Ligue 1 sides in particular that the Ligue 1 champions can be pressed and hurried into errors has also contributed to a downturn in the number 6's influence with faithful wise man Motta, regularly used as a passing wall by Verratti deep in midfield, also entering the latter stages of his career and a period of decline.

A slight switch in style and set up under the Spanish coach has also gone some way to heightening an aura of uneasiness on the Italian's part. The classic Blanc triumvirate of Verratti, Motta and Blaise Matuidi has been broken up by Emery, with varying results and arguably to the detriment of Verratti's ability to affect the game. Although this may be a necessity, at least in some instances, if Paris are going to have more impact on the European stage, the balance of what was the strongest area of the side, the central midfield, has been disrupted.

The security of Motta behind and the support of Matuidi alongside clearly allowed Verratti to express himself in the more possession-heavy approach of French coach Blanc, but the admittedly somewhat glacial move to 4-2-3-1 over the autumn with the additions of Hatem Ben Arfa and Gregory Krychowiak as well as Emery's more direct style, have left Gufetto exposed more than he would like. As a result, Xavi's affirmation that *"he never gives the ball away"* is not the truism it once was.

Nevertheless Verratti's confidence in his ability and desire to play his own game remain unrelenting: *"Soccer, for me it is the most beautiful thing that exists,"* he told *Téléfoot*. *"When you do it with passion, you cannot hurt it. I can miss a pass, a control, a shot but the urge will always be there. The day I no longer have this flame, I will stop playing."*

Meanwhile, the man himself clearly sees his place in the side as just that; just one member of the team. Again, perhaps unusually for a genuinely world-class player, individual acclaim is not something that interests Verratti, as he humbly admitted to *Le Parisien*: *"There are a lot of players much stronger than me. I prefer to win trophies with my team, because it allows me to party with them. With the Ballon D'or you party on your own..."*

At little more than 24, PSG's Little Owl has most of his best years ahead of him and although a playful naivety remains evident in his performances, the fact that he both has learnt a great deal and still has a clear capacity to develop further still, despite his supreme class, is a thrilling prospect.

Nevertheless, Verratti remains level-headed as ever and focused on what lies ahead. *"It's up to every single guy to understand that arriving in a great team is a starting point and not the finish line,"* Verratti explained to AFP. *"I always try to learn from my team-mates by listening to their advice. It was up to me to develop my playing skills. When you're part of a big club, if you're smart, you get better. There's always something to learn."*

Unbelievably, despite the heights already reached, potential remains the watchword for Gufetto and should he be able to fully realise that potential, a certain individual award may come his way, whether he seeks it or not.



JEAN SERI

^ 20

3

Club: OGC Nice

Position: Midfielder

Born: Grand-Béréby

Date of Birth: 19/07/1991

Age: 25

League Form in 2016

Games: 35

Chances Created: 63

Goals: 4

Average Pass Accuracy: 88.91%

The identity of the current assists leader in Europe's top five leagues will likely come as a bit of a surprise. Lionel Messi, Mesut Özil and Kevin de Bruyne have all had fine starts to the 2016/17 season, but it is Nice and Ivory Coast's Jean Seri who tops the charts with eight. Given that Nice have an efficient, if not especially prolific attack, and that Younes Belhanda and not the Ivorian is the de facto creative midfielder, makes it even more impressive. Unpacking Seri's style and his rapid rise from unheralded prospect at Porto to one of Ligue 1's best midfielders will be instructive, as his improvement and that of his club are no coincidence.

Seri was one of several players to arrive at the Cote d'Azur club last season; Valère Germain from Monaco on loan contributed goals, Ricardo Pereira was quietly one of the league's best right-backs, and Hatem Ben Arfa stole the show with his electric presence at the tip of a midfield diamond, earning a recall to the France squad. Even Seri's partners in midfield, Vincent Koziello and Nampalys Mendy garnered more notice, with the latter moving to Leicester City and the former coming from seemingly nowhere to star for the U-21s as well as his club.

Those who ignored Seri will have done so at their own detriment, as the diminutive midfielder could be set for even bigger things. Born in the western coastal city of Grand-Béréby, Seri moved through two clubs in Abidjan, playing first at Africa Sports before making his professional debut with ASEC Mimosas.

Having produced the likes of Yaya Touré, Gervinho and Didier Zokora, the club has been the source of much of the finest talent to arrive in Europe from the country in the recent past. However, when Seri made his move to Europe, he was already 21, not exactly old, but nor was he along the lines of an Adama Traoré, a teenaged prodigy.

His first season in Portugal was spent with Porto's B team, who play in Portugal's second division. The standard of play was certainly a step up for the youngster, and he struggled with his positioning and tackling, earning seven bookings and two dismissals in eighteen starts.

22 and without a clear chance at the first team, Seri was only too happy to move on to Paços de Ferreira. The tiny club in the north of Portugal has never been one of Portugal's traditional powers, but the last decade or so has seen them become a participant in European competition with some regularity, including a third place finish the season prior to Seri's arrival.

At Paços, Seri became a regular, and his dynamic play as part of a double pivot in a 4-4-2 allowed the club to improve their position; after scraping survival through the relegation playoffs in 2013/14, the following season saw the club finish an impressive eighth.

Seri led the team in minutes played by some margin, and notched four assists, but as Paços' style at the time was a traditional, wing-based system, his responsibilities fell more along the lines of controlling possession and breaking up opposing attacks. He was linked with the likes of Olympiakos and Sporting Club de Portugal, but Nice's emphasis on young players proved more alluring.

The best was yet to come, then, and Les Aiglons, as part of an ambitious program, brought in Seri, Pereira and Wallyson Mallman from the Portuguese league. The latter two were on loan, but Seri, even at just €1m, represented a sizeable investment for a player who was already 24 and was yet to distinguish himself at the highest level. Didier Digard was set to move on, though, and Nice were desperate for a player who could provide the right blend of aggression and intelligence in midfield.

Seri had done enough in a league of a reasonably high standard to warrant taking a flyer on him. Despite not being the youngest, he still seemed to be improving, as his discipline and pass completion rates continued to show season-to-season growth.

Eighteen months later, it is hard to imagine that Nice have any regrets over their purchase. Seri played in all but one of Nice's matches that first season, starting 34 of them. Again, while his team-mates took the plaudits, Seri quietly went about his business, recording a number of passes that was exceeded only by team-mate Mendy and a handful of Paris Saint-Germain players.

Given the capital club's style, that was only to be expected, but Seri's metronomic reliability made Nice able to control play almost equally well. The club ranked second in completed passes last year, and third in possession. It was not exactly peak Barcelona, but there were some truly magnificent results, including a stretch in late September that saw the club score fourteen goals in three matches, including four past a then in-form Saint-Étienne.

Part of the reason Seri was so unheralded, unlike other midfield maestros such as Xavi or Marco Verratti, is that while his passing was reliable and consistent, he rarely caught the eye with long balls over the top or raking passes to the flank.

With Koziello being the more attack-minded of the two central midfielders, Seri's job was to link play with the attacking trio, being the conduit between Mendy and forward line, whilst also breaking up play himself on occasion.

This season, in new manager Lucien Favre's 3-5-2, more of Seri's natural gifts have been revealed, as he often plays as the most advanced of the midfield three, leaving the likes of Wylan Cyprien or Rémi Walter to play more defensively. Having been initially seen as an N'Golo Kanté type during his time in Portugal, to see this transformation has been both impressive and surprising.

L'Equipe recently compared the player to Marvin Martin at his best, and the on-loan Dijon man shares a similar eye for a pass, having set the Ligue 1 record for assists in 2010/11, although Seri may have something to say about that before the end of the current season, particularly if Mario Balotelli can find the form and fitness he had shown in the campaign's early stages.

Even at 25, Seri continues to progress, as his pass completion statistics continue to ameliorate, even though Nice have slightly changed style as they seek to integrate the big-name arrivals of Mario Balotelli and Younes Belhanda while balancing the development of players like Walter, Koziello and Cyprien.

As imperious as he has been, though, there is still room for improvement in his game. His small stature means he can struggle against more physically imposing midfielders (think Adrien Rabiot); but the model of Verratti should be a good one in this case, as the similarly small Italian has no problem with laying in a crunching challenge when the need arises, despite his obvious other gifts.

Seri should not see to tackle for the sake of tackling, but it is surprising to see him yet to be booked this season. Some might point to that as a benchmark for improved discipline, but he is attempting and completing tackles at a clip less than last year, although some of that may be down to what is asked of him.

His close control could also use some improvement; as skillful as Seri is at linking play through his passing, he can also be guilty of being over-ambitious with the ball at his feet, putting undue amounts of pressure on those behind him. With Nice playing a three-man defence this season, that is less of an issue, but should be a consideration for bigger clubs keeping an eye on the Ivorian.

As far as his attacking style goes, one might expect a few more goals from Seri, although with two already in 2016/17, he has a good chance of exceeding the three he had notched all of last season. Nice have generally played a 3-5-2 this season, and that has required a more fluid role from Seri, he, Wylan Cyprien and Koziello have all had to play with a bit more flexibility.

Still, though, Seri has grown into this new role well enough, and should have no reason not to take a bit more initiative. Indeed, in a recent interview with the club's website, Seri spoke about how he saw his role in the team, after recording a pair of assists against Nantes. *"I'm not saying that what I've done is enough, it has to continue. I am trying to put my team-mates in the best positions. My goal is to have my strikers at 20-25 goals. I want them to be satisfied, that's my job. I'm here to make my team-mates shine."*

The future, then, remains bright. Despite failing to progress from their Europa League group, if Nice can retain a top three place in Ligue 1 via their tilt at the title, the Champions' League potentially beckons next season, a platform which will give Seri a chance to further his credentials.

His place with an Ivory Coast side that lacks the stars of the recent past but has performed well as a team may allow him to help his country defend their Africa Cup of Nations title in a tournament that lacks a clear favourite and is without heavyweights Nigeria. There is already interest from abroad, but the hierarchy at Nice should hold firm at taking a shot at the Champions' League with a full squad.

Seri has already mentioned his potential for bigger things, especially given the inevitable links to Barcelona given his style, and he easily referenced the sale of Anthony Martial to Manchester United as a move that would be a ready parallel one of his own. Moreover, he spoke in the same interview with Nice's website about playing with a hunger to succeed, using his own humble origins as a template for his younger team-mates.

"It is always necessary to have hunger, to keep the desire to do well, that's the secret to success. I tell them often that nothing is yet won, in life as in football. They must keep their feet on the ground and their head on their shoulders; we've made a magnificent start to the season but there is all to play for."

There is every chance that this may be the last time Seri is profiled for this publication, but given that there is a rumoured release clause of €40m in his contract, if he does leave, seeking to fulfill that aforementioned hunger, it will doubtless leave the club well-positioned to cope with his departure.



FABINHO

^ 31

2

Club: AS Monaco

Position: Midfielder

Born: Campinas

Date of Birth: 23/10/1993

Age: 23

League Form in 2016

Games: 35

Total Defensive Errors: 0

Average Pass Accuracy: 82.57%

Average Duels Won: 48.83%

Why does anyone watch football? If we knew what was going to happen 90 minutes before the match reached its outcome, would we still watch it? If we know that our team was going to finish 12th in the league come the season's end before the campaign even started, would we still watch it? If we knew how the career of every player was going to pan out before they even signed a professional contract, would we care so much?

One player that has surprised everyone in the last 12 months, and continues to give us reasons to love football for its unpredictability, is AS Monaco's Fabinho. Although the Brazilian might not make the headlines because he does not stuff the statistic sheets like the world-class attackers who win coveted awards and golden balls at the end of every year. However, what the Brazilian does do is bring his consistent quality from making the fundamentals looks so incredibly easy.

The 23-year-old started with Fluminense in Brazil but left to join Portuguese side Rio Ave without making an appearance for the club. He was then sent out on loan to Real Madrid Castilla, playing an entire season with the *Los Blancos* B side and even came on as a late substitute for the senior side in La Liga, creating an assist for Ángel Di María in a 6-2 victory.

In the summer of 2013, he began his career with Monaco on an initial two-year loan deal. His first season was a quiet one but in the 2014/15 campaign, he established himself as a regular within the squad at right-back.

He played a total of 53 games in all competitions and was a brilliant part of a defence that conceded just 26 goals in Ligue 1. That back-four also showed their might in Europe, allowing just one goal in during the group stages before Arsenal could only notch one against them at the Emirates Stadium and Juventus managed just the one strike over both legs.

Even then, he showed an ability to play in midfield when called upon. His 2015/16 season saw him take another subtle step up, creating more chances than ever before from forward positions and attempting to add more individual technical skills to his game.

Switching the ball across the field, using his pace to drive to the by-line and even trying to be a little more selfish on occasion showed what he could do in that position. However, Leonardo Jardim had much bigger plans in store for the Brazilian than anyone could have anticipated.

With the team gearing up for the 2016/17 season, the signings of Djibril Sidibé and Benjamin Mendy stood out from Monaco's choices. While the former had played left-back at Lille to accommodate Sébastien Corchia, he was naturally a right-back and with Mendy coming in as well, it was unlikely that one would sit out on a regular basis.

What came next shocked a few when it was initially announced, Fabinho was moved to the midfield. One of the best right-backs in France, sought after by the likes of Manchester United and no doubt monitored by others throughout Europe, why would Jardim move him out of his best position?

That is because he knew something that everyone else did not.

To say the start of the season has been good for Monaco would be a pretty big understatement. The team managed to get through two tricky qualification ties against Fenerbahce and Villarreal before the campaign even started to make the Champions' League group stages.

They sit second in Ligue 1 having lost just twice, once to table-topping Nice, and have scored more goals than anyone else in the top five leagues in Europe. Monaco also qualified top of their competitive European group with two wins against Tottenham Hotspur and are still in the Coupe de la Ligue and the Coupe de France at the time of writing.

That has at least been in part because of Fabinho's terrific and seamless transition into a central midfielder. There have not been those moments where you think that he is still adjusting or that he is not quite on his game, he has taken to the new position as if he has played there for his entire career.

If you do not quite believe it, then check the statistics. He is the third best rated player on *WhoScored* at the moment, only below Lyon's Maxime Gonalons and Nice's Ricardo Pereira, two excellent players in their own right.

The form that he has shown should also translate into regular international call-ups sooner rather than later. He looked like the heir apparent to Dani Alves last summer but the Copa America passed him by without management even thinking of giving him the chance to shine.

In fact, it is a real shock that he is yet to have been called up by current boss Tite. To see the likes Fagner, Paulinho, Renato Augusto and Lucas Lima in front of him is not disappointing, it is almost outright insulting.

He should be a fixture within a team desperate for a real workhorse ready to do the dirty work that makes everyone else shine. Until then, Monaco will continue to reap the benefits of him being fully fit under their guidance without the distraction and extra miles on his clock put on by international football.

Fabinho is best described as a footballing chameleon. Having started as a right-back, he has morphed into a central midfielder seamlessly and has the ability to play as a centre back if needed without any dip in his play.

The first thing about the Brazilian that stands out when watching him is his natural ability to defend and his sense of danger in the final third. When you watch him without the ball, he is always analysing where he is on the pitch in relation to both the person in possession and what options he has available to him.

For example, if Sidibé has drifted a little far forward, he will drop in at right-back to cover until he can get back himself. That even translates when Sidibé is in position, if he feels that the danger is coming behind him or it is best to stay centrally to support if needed, Fabinho always seems to pick the best option for his team.

That also translates to his defensive work overall, with 3.9 tackles and 1.9 registered per game. Fabinho works hard to win the ball back all over the pitch when required, he does not tend to overexert himself in situations that may leave his team short at the back or when it is unlikely that he will regain possession.

Comparing that to where he was last season at right-back, some questioned his desire to defend. He would often be a great outlet on the right wing with a good cross and while he had the pace to get back, he sometimes did not have the urgency required.

To say that has been negated this season is an understatement. In fact, there is probably not a player in Monaco's team more reliable concerning what the team is doing defensively and sticking to the important task handed to him by his manager.

He has also formed a terrific partnership with Tiemoué Bakayoko, with the two complementing each other nicely. They both attempt to do a similar job, break up play and distribute, with Bakayoko more of the destroyer and Fabinho the hustler.

The synchronicity that they have shown this season in tandem has been nothing short of incredible. Monaco are not the same without them, neither work quite as well without the other and both combined have created the best young midfield in Europe.

Mix in that basis with a strong passing game, where he averages an 86.1% pass completion rate. He also averages a key pass a game, one which has led to an assist this season, which shows that he can create from a deeper position if the opportunity arises.

It is an area where he can and should grow a little more in terms of being more creative from a central area. There is no doubt in his crossing ability, his four assists last season displayed that in spades, but saying he can do a little more to help the best attack in Europe score more goals should be a frightening enough statement in itself.

He has great strength when in possession of the ball, with the ability to bounce off of tacklers and hold off would-be pursuers with relative ease. It is very rare to see him lose possession, there usually is not much wasted movement either from the Brazilian and it is a real testament to his growth as a footballer that he has started to keep things simple.

Fabinho also likes the occasional penalty and unsurprisingly enough, he has the best recent record out of anyone in Europe's top five divisions, with 12 penalties attempted and 12 penalties scored. He always strides up with great composure, like it is just another kick of the football but his efforts are always placed with great pace and accuracy to give the goalkeepers no chance.

To round off his exceptional skill-set, Fabinho is unyielding in the air and shows a fantastic aptitude for learning. Maybe a rocket from long range is missing from this Swiss Army knife that is the range of Fabinho's abilities, although he has attempted a few, but in such an efficient player, the increased temptation to shoot might do more harm than good.

Other than David Alaba, there is not a man in world football with the diverse range of skills combined with the versatility that this young man possesses. Fabinho has learned so much in his time with the Principality club, in a number of different positions on the field but he has yet to do anything less than astound.

What is scary is that he is only getting better each week, learning from his mistakes and adapting his game to suit whatever his team needs.

It would be naïve to say that French football will enjoy Fabinho's delights for much longer. He is a sensational footballer that would add something to any club in European football, he is that exceptionally good.

In fact, if the Manchester City manager is reading, then listen closely Pep Guardiola. You need someone who could emulate what that young Austrian did for you at Bayern Munich and can fill the hole you need at right-back while being adept with the ball or playing more centrally when needed.

This is your man. Fabinho is that man. It will not hit you the first time you watch him play. Or maybe not even the first few times. But trust us, this kid is the real deal.



THIAGO SILVA

1

Club: PSG

Position: Defender

Born: Rio de Janeiro

Date of Birth: 22/09/1984

Age: 32

League Form in 2016

Games: 24

Goals Conceded: 17

Total Defensive Errors: 1

Average Duels Won: 63.75%

Thiago Silva has been a polarising character during his time at Paris Saint-Germain. He was seen as the figure of fun at the hands of Joey Barton via Twitter in his first season and was strongly associated with the Brazil team that flamed out of the 2014 World Cup in spectacular fashion (Silva was the captain, although he was suspended for the loss to Germany). He is rumoured to have a decisive say in the club's transfer dealings, as well as who is part of the first eleven on a week-to-week basis, reportedly stubbornly refusing to speak French on the pitch. These issues would have come as no surprise to those who have followed Silva's career. He has always made a point of doing things his way, his will and determination the key ingredient for his success.

Undersized for a centre back at just six feet tall, Silva's progression to become one of the world's best in his position began in Rio de Janeiro, where he was spotted by scouts for Fluminense at the age of 14. Still a defensive midfielder, Silva opted to join Barcelona EC in 2000, initially becoming a professional at just 16. He impressed in Brazil's third division, and was even scouted by Roma, but eventually returned to Fluminense before moving to RS Futebol permanently. He moved then to Juventude, where he was converted to a centre back by legendary manager Ivo Wortmann, his performances being key in dramatically improving the club's fortunes.

By this point, Europe was beckoning, as it does for so many Brazilian players, and Silva took the well-traveled route to Porto. Despite solid performances for the reserves, he failed to make a first-team appearance, and when Wortmann was appointed manager at Spartak Moscow, Silva followed him. In Russia, Silva also failed to make an impact with the first team, but not through his form. He was diagnosed with a serious case of tuberculosis and spent six months in hospital. Many questioned whether or not Silva would ever be able to play football professionally again, but Wortmann once again showed faith in the player, bringing him along when he was appointed manager of Fluminense.

In his three seasons with the club, Silva emerged as the best central defender in the country, leading the team to a Copa Libertadores final and earning his first call-up to the national team, although he remained uncapped until 2008. His performances had once again caught the attention of European clubs, only this time on a much bigger scale. Inter Milan and Chelsea were among the clubs who sought the player nicknamed "O Monstro," but the chance to be the successor to the legendary Paolo Maldini proved to be persuasive in Silva joining AC Milan.

Playing alongside Alessandro Nesta, Silva struggled with injuries at times, but when fit, he only continued to improve his reputation, earning plaudits of the highest order from the Italian press and his distinguished team-mates alike. His second season with the Rossoneri, 2010/11 saw him named as the best defender in Serie A, as well as being named in UEFA's 2011 team of the year. By this point, though, many of Silva's team-mates, players like Gennaro Gattuso, Clarence Seedorf and Pippo Inzaghi had finally started to show their advancing ages and the club's declining performances in the league and Champions' League necessitated player sales.

Silva, despite his injury history, was still just 27 in the summer of 2012, and after protracted negotiations, he agreed to join newly moneyed Paris Saint-Germain. The capital club's initial tilt at the title had resulted in a still-admirable second place finish at the hands of unlikely champions Montpellier, but more was required, and a player who had come to be regarded as the world's best centre back in some quarters was brought in for a fee of €42m, a sum that was a record for the position at the time. There was initially some frustration surrounding his arrival, as the team's hierarchy admitted he had arrived at the club only half-fit.

Silva quickly shook that off, though, and has been an indomitable force in the time since, leading the club to four league championships, including domestic trebles in each of the last two seasons. It has not always been smooth sailing for the player, though. Various injury woes have meant that the thirty matches played last season represented his best total with the club, although fitness is yet to be a concern this season. There was also the ongoing power struggles behind the scenes, which seem to have finally dissipated, although who knows for how long given the club's struggles (by their standards) this season.

Zlatan Ibrahimovic and Silva had formed a powerful axis, a bond dating to their days together at Milan, and there was also some suggestion that the two had an undue influence on the club's transfer strategy and even the starting eleven at times. Silva's preference for speaking Portuguese on the pitch saw the talented likes of Christophe Jallet and Mamadou Sakho pushed out, with aging players like Maxwell and Alex arriving in their stead.

The latter pair performed admirably, with Maxwell even earning his first call-ups to the national side, but the pair's ages meant they had no resale value. This issue is admittedly less pressing due to the revised Financial Fair Play arrangements in place, but it is really only this season that Silva has not exerted himself on the first eleven, with David Luiz's sale to Chelsea finally giving the promising but underused Marquinhos his chance alongside his compatriot after three seasons of waiting his turn.

The two have formed a fairly strong partnership to date, but are still working out some of the kinks as regards communication. A fine example cropped up in a title challenge six-pointer in December against OGC Nice, as both tried to tackle Alassane Pléa at the same time, leaving the striker the simplest of tasks to tap home his club's second goal of the evening. It is a bit frustrating to see this happen; both players are more mobile than the average centre back, and Silva, while generally decent with positioning, has failed in small ways to adapt his style of play to his age. There were seeds of this last year alongside David Luiz, a similarly mobile centre back, but as Luiz was prone to the odd foray forward with the ball at his feet, Silva was often left to cover the former Benfica player's runs.

With Marquinhos, the youngster is a more orthodox centre back, despite having taken the odd turn in defensive midfield or at *right-back*. Silva must better learn to negotiate this, using his leadership and communication skills to better foster their relationship as his pace diminishes and the youngster continues his development.

It is not enough, then to lead by example; Silva must be clear with his younger defensive partners (the similarly promising Presnel Kimpembé is Marquinhos' deputy) about his expectations, both in specific in-match situations and in their roles in general. With all of the on-pitch abilities that Silva shows, the mental strength to acknowledge this new role and a slight decline in his recovery will become increasingly important, especially as talks over a renewed contract are underway.

However, Silva has not attained the ranking he has in this publication by being a poor player, rather the opposite is true. As the recent match against Nice demonstrated, too, that he is more than a defender, as he had several good chances from corners. While he failed to connect against Les Aiglons, his technical abilities heading the ball are unparalleled, as Chelsea fans can attest.

To watch Silva at a set piece is to see a master in action. Despite standing just six feet tall, his remarkable awareness of the movement of those around, his timing and his positioning has allowed him to become a feared presence, especially against "better" teams.

If PSG advance against Barcelona, for example, there is a good likelihood that a headed goal courtesy of Silva will have aided the final margin, as the Catalan club are superb from open play but lack the necessary height and physicality to deal with the Brazilian.

There is also his long-range passing, which has made Paris Saint-Germain so effective. His training as a ball-playing defensive midfielder comes in handy here, allowing him to spray passes upfield with aplomb. Currently ranked third in Ligue 1 in both completed passes and pass completion percentage, his accuracy and vision means that in order to succeed against the French champions, teams are forced to pick their poison.

They can apply pressure to the centre backs, leaving a gap between their forwards and midfielders, forcing PSG to funnel play through the fullbacks. Given that Serge Aurier and Layvin Kurzawa are two of the world's best at getting forward from defence, that option is rarely chosen, and Silva's ability to quickly turn a tackle or a forward's stray pass into a dangerous counter-attack is impressive indeed.

It is also a skill which he had encouraged Marquinhos to develop as well; David Luiz is also a sublime long-range passer, some of PSG's early woes have been down to a lack of options in releasing pressure at the back. Silva's example has been helpful to his young partner, but there is still work to be done in this regard.

To conclude, the most impressive thing about Silva is his tackling. While he does wear his heart on his sleeve on the pitch, that fire and passion rarely manifest themselves in a way that has disciplinary consequences.

He has been booked just once this season, following on with the trend that he has established since moving to France of averaging a booking every ten matches or so, on par with the very best at his position the world over.

Creatively funneling his passion on the pitch, Silva can often be seen remonstrating with the officials as captain, but his years of experience have allowed him to toe a line without stepping over it. He has also shaken off some of the reputation he (deservedly) had as being a bit of a bad seed in the dressing room, recently assuming his role as captain in a more positive way, particularly in the way he has embraced Aurier, Kurzawa and even Kimpembé. This evolution and recognition of their abilities has admittedly been a long time coming.

However, it also reveals much about a player who recognizes that his time at his peak is coming to its end and with it, the opportunity for success that he so dearly craves.

20 TO WATCH IN 2017

A selection of some of French football's most exciting emerging talents that we tip to have a breakthrough year in 2017.

YOUSSEF AÏT BENNASSER (20) | CLUB: AS NANCY-LORRAINE

Already a Moroccan international at 20, Aït Bennasser spent 2016 at club level entirely with Nancy, proving to be instrumental in their promotion to Ligue 1 at the heart of their midfield. Although AS Monaco (famed for uncovering exceptional talent) snapped him up in summer, he was immediately sent back on loan to Nancy in order to continue to progress where regular playing time was available to him. Blessed with exceptional close control and immaculate attention to detail in the passing department, but with a large frame and the physical strength to boot, Aït Bennasser's polyvalence smacks of a less refined Adrien Rabiot, but arguably with a greater engine than the PSG man. With Fabinho and Tiemoué Bakayoko undoubtedly going to be the subject of intense Premier League interest in summer, Monaco are in the position to immediately replace internally with Aït Bennasser - that is how impressive he is.



LUDOVIC BLAS (18) | CLUB: EA GUINGAMP

A diamond that might take some polishing, Ludovic Blas was one of a number of individuals who impressed during France's EURO U19 win in summer. With frightening pace and technical dexterity, Blas has received playing time in Ligue 1 in 2016 as a right-winger and as an advanced midfielder. Blas's dynamism has allowed him to establish himself as a livewire and an excellent trick card for manager Antoine Kombouaré, with the potential to develop into a top player in either of the two aforementioned positions. His decision to commit his future to Guingamp this summer by signing a new deal until 2020 shows that the teenager has surrounded himself with a good entourage, prioritising the quality of his development over immediate financial gain.



GABRIEL BOSCHILLA (20) | CLUB: AS MONACO

This precocious Brazilian attacking midfielder impressed manager Leonardo Jardim to such an extent during the 2016 pre-season that the Portuguese tactician was forced into a change of heart. Jardim had initially wanted to loan Boschilla out, but upon witnessing a host of bright training sessions from the player in July, he decided that he could be of use to the Monaco set-up in the 2016/17 campaign. The highlight reels will show that Boschilla possesses exceptional accuracy from direct free-kicks, netting against Marseille and Nantes recently in this fashion. A willing worker in terms of run-making, Boschilla is heralded as the eventual replacement for diminutive Portuguese attacker Bernardo Silva. If Boschilla can produce a better final pass in 2017 and show greater unpredictability in attack, then the sky is truly the limit.



MARCUS COCO (20) | CLUB: EA GUINGAMP

A vociferously direct runner, Marcus Coco has quietly established himself as a key attacking element in a marvellously underrated EA Guingamp side, led by Antoine Kombouaré. Capable of playing on either wing, the rather uncommon, yet spectacular blend of much-improved composure in front of goal and boundless energy has enabled Coco to make a decisive difference against Ligue 1 giants Lyon and Monaco within the last six months. Under the combined tutelage at Guingamp of veteran Jimmy Briand and youth-nurturing expert Kombouaré, Coco's surroundings are conducive to increased personal success for the remainder of the 2016/17 campaign.



ADAMA DIAKHABY (20) | CLUB: STADE RENNAIS

Timing your run as a centre-forward is one of the most delicate skills to perfect, just ask Bafétimbi Gomis. A young man who has shown an excellent mastery of this complex feature of a centre-forward's game is Adama Diakhaby. Brilliant awareness of where the opposition back four is allowed him to score two goals in Ligue 1 in 2016/17 against Montpellier and Guingamp respectively. Limited to substitute appearances exclusively by manager Christian Gourcuff in the league at the close of 2016, this speedy youngster has shown in just a couple of hundred minutes of professional football that he has the composure required to become a top Ligue 1 player. With Rennes' striker situation continuing to pose Gourcuff problems in that his side is struggling for a consistent stream of goals, 2017 surely has some exciting opportunities in store for Diakhaby.



MOUCTAR DIAKHABY (20)

CLUB: OLYMPIQUE LYONNAIS



Another promising Diakhaby has taken advantage of an injury crisis at the back for Lyon in the back-end of 2016 in order to establish himself as a potentially indispensable element at centre back for manager Bruno Génésio. An enormous aerial ability and, for a man of his size, exceptional recovery pace are the immediate attributes that stand out when one ponders about Mouctar Diakhaby's signature strengths. The Frenchman possesses a serenity on the ball that is quite simply uncharacteristic of an otherwise chaotic Lyon defensive unit. Under the guidance of Jérémy Morel, positioned directly by Diakhaby's side at left-back, the recently-turned professional has blossomed in several ways on a variety of stages. A respectable performance against Juventus in the Champions' League group stage reflected on Diakhaby as a player who both relishes and remains calm during the big occasions.

JORIS GNAGNON (19)

CLUB: STADE RENNAIS



Famed for the enormous amount of time that he spends assessing the youth academies of a club before taking a new position, Christian Gourcuff's diligence in this regard appears to be paying off. Introduced to first team proceedings in late October, the colossally physical Joris Gnagnon has enjoyed a totally unexpected spell as one of the club's starting central defenders. Profiting from an injury suffered by Mexer, this talented teenager combines gross athleticism with a considered approach to passing play that allows Rennes to begin the construction of attacking moves from the very heart of the defence. Gnagnon is in the process of leaving an indelible mark on the French football scene, with the Ivory Coast national team already monitoring his situation.

AMINE HARIT (19)

CLUB: FC NANTES



Plying his trade for an outfit with a generally lifeless attack, Amine Harit has become FC Nantes' forward-thinking heartbeat in 2016. Victorious with France at EURO U19, Harit's calendar year has gone from strength-to-strength, as he has been viewed as an undisputable starter by both of *Les Canaris'* two managers, Sergio Conceição and René Girard, over the last six months. Harit has been likened to Disney character Bambi on occasion by French football pundits, owing to the combination of his dangerous dribbling skills and a tendency to offer an egregious first touch. Harit's brilliance lies in his exceptional footballing brain and incisive passing, the latter being executed most devastatingly in between the opposition's midfield and defensive banks. His offensive versatility is another positive, having performed acceptably at left-wing in the final games of 2016, despite being more at home in the number 10 role.

GAUTHIER HEIN (20)

CLUB: FC METZ



Pocket-sized attacking midfielder Gauthier Hein made the headlines in early December when he scored a fantastic solo strike against Lyon. Dashing down the wing before unleashing the effort goal-ward, Hein thought he could lay claim to the sort of first Ligue 1 goal that many can only dream about. Unfortunately for the Frenchman, the match was later called off after Metz fans injured Lyon goalkeeper Anthony Lopes by throwing a firecracker in his direction, meaning that Hein's effort will likely go down as one of the best ghost goals of all time. Hein's low centre of gravity allows him to turn opposition defenders with ease and is coupled with a sharp change of pace, which facilitates an ability to cut inside from both wings to create goal-scoring opportunities. A product of Metz's youth academy, Hein has been slowly introduced into the French top flight by manager Philippe Hinschberger in 2016. The 20-year-old will be hoping to make the difference in 2017, as Metz face a battle for their Ligue 1 lives.

YANN KARAMOH (18)

CLUB: SM CAEN



This SM Caen youth product is undoubtedly one of the lesser known talents on this list, even if he became the youngest player to both score and assist in a single game for the Normandy outfit over the last ten seasons in early December. Blessed with the ability to play on either wing, what earmarks Karamoh at such an early age is his incisive and intelligent run-making, both on and off of the ball. He has a knack for putting himself in advantageous positions of space, either through beating the full-back with pace and skill or by receiving the ball with virtually no opposition players in his vicinity after making a disguised off-the-ball run. This has given him the time to deliver crosses for centre forward Ivan Santini, a man with which Karamoh has developed an excellent relationship over a short period of time, or to cut inside for a shot. In 2017, Karamoh will need to work on his composure in front of goal in order to make the latter skill all the deadlier in a fierce fight against relegation for Caen.

MAXIME LOPEZ (19)

CLUB: OLYMPIQUE DE MARSEILLE



Often heralded by our readers as “it” when it comes to French football prospects rated by video game “Football Manager”, Olympique de Marseille’s attacking midfielder Maxime Lopez is finally beginning to burst onto the Ligue 1 scene. The pint-sized number 10 has reignited a stale-looking Marseille attack that spent the majority of 2016 lacking a cutting edge and a source of constant attacking inspiration. This baby-faced assassinator of Ligue 1 defences has the necessary talent to have featured in this year’s main list, and would have done so had he been less shielded by the club’s former manager Franck Passi. The French coach did not believe that it was prudent to expose the youngster to a starting spot too soon, fearing for the player’s confidence when faced by a primarily hostile Marseille fan-base during what has been a globally disappointing calendar year for France’s most supported club. New boss Rudi Garcia does not share Passi’s sentiments however, making use of Lopez’s technical mastery and rapid interchanges regularly in a 4-2-3-1. It is not unrealistic to expect Lopez to finish the campaign with close to double-figures for assists.

VINCENT MARCEL (19)

CLUB: OGC NICE



Guadeloupe-born Vincent Marcel has seen relatively little professional football, but he is giving OGC Nice fans yet more cause for excitement in what has been an incredible year for the club; one that will see them sit top of the Ligue 1 table when this publication is released. A central midfielder by trade, Marcel has laboured over the course of 2016 to match his scintillating attacking endeavours with the work-rate required to succeed in a Lucien Favre formation that demands the midfield to press exceptionally hard when they are without possession. Although Marcel is unlikely to make a breakthrough in the first half of 2017, with so many Nice players performing so brilliantly in all positions, when a host of clubs come knocking in summer to inevitably attempt to lure them away from the Côte D’Azur, there will be opportunities for Marcel to establish himself in the first team.

KYLIAN MBAPPÉ (18)

CLUB: AS MONACO



Dubbed the next Thierry Henry, high-flying Kylian Mbappé enjoyed his first taste of Ligue 1 action with AS Monaco at the age of 17. He eventually signed a professional contract with the Principality side in March, despite intense interest in his services from the Premier League, the latter of which boiled over in the summer when Mbappé was the subject of a €40m bid from Manchester City. Mbappé has played largely alongside another striker in Jardim’s 4-4-2 formation, but typically likes to drag wide onto the left wing to pick up the ball in what is a very fluid attacking quartet in the Portuguese tactician’s system. At 18, Mbappé is frighteningly complete, with a refined crossing ability and the necessary intelligence vis-à-vis making runs into space to match his rapid dribbling style. Apart from having issues with the physicality of some of Ligue 1’s most rugged defenders, Mbappé otherwise appears destined to add to the frightening attacking arsenal that the French national team already has at its disposal.

STEVE MOUNIÉ (22)

CLUB: MONTPELLIER HSC



After a productive loan spell with Ligue 2 side Nîmes over the course of the 2015/16 campaign, Steve Mounié established himself at the end of the calendar year as Montpellier’s first choice forward. Admittedly, he profited from an injury to a man that featured on this list last year, Casimir Ninga, in order to be given that starting spot by manager Frédéric Hantz. However, Mounié has grabbed the opportunity with both hands and his quite sumptuous blend of pace and physical strength has enabled him to become one of Ligue 1’s most unpredictable strikers in just under four months of French top flight football. The combination of hold-up play and quick feet that Mounié can provide is reminiscent of a more mobile version of former Montpellier man Olivier Giroud, but with arguably a more natural predatory instinct in front of goal than the Arsenal forward.

CLÉMENT MICHELIN (19)

CLUB: TOULOUSE FC



Currently, the weakest position in terms of talent for the French national team is undoubtedly at right-back. For the last three seasons, Didier Deschamps has uncomfortably shuffled from Bacary Sagna to Mathieu Debuchy to Christophe Jallet, without any of them putting in stand-out performances. Toulouse teenager Clément Michelin gave Deschamps and his nation hope that the future might be brighter in that very position this summer by stringing together some excellent cameos as France were victorious at EURO U19. Very much the archetypal “modern” full-back, Michelin’s crossing and all-round attacking play is at times salivating to watch. Having been thrown into Ligue 1 action by boss Pascal Dupraz for the 2016/17 season, Michelin has learned some very difficult lessons in the defensive department, with his over-exuberance in attack leading to holes in the Toulouse defence that have been exploited by the opposition. Time will soon tell whether or not Michelin will sink or swim in this starting role or whether Dupraz brought him into the fray too early.

ADAM OUNAS (20)

|| CLUB: BORDEAUX



With reflection, Adam Ounas might admit that 2016 was a year in which too much success and attention came too quickly for him. Having featured on this list last year, Manchester United and company's consistent visits to the Stade Matmut Atlantique to watch Algerian international Ounas appear to have at least in part gone to the player's head. His runs are less cutthroat, his passes less side-splitting and his intensity oftentimes missing when compared to the pocket-rocket winger who burst so innocently onto the scene in 2015. In Ounas' defence, he has not been abetted by new Bordeaux manager Jocelyn Gourvennec, who has repeatedly played him away from his favoured position of right-wing. He retains the raw dribbling and shooting qualities to become a special player. That is, if he can obtain a run of games in his favoured position and keep his temper in check.

NICOLAS PEPÉ (21)

|| CLUB: ANGERS SCO



An Ivorian international at just 21, Nicolas Pepé is fast gaining a reputation as one of the most accomplished young strikers of the ball in Ligue 1. His approach to almost entirely, exclusively use the inside of his foot when faced with a goal-scoring opportunity emanates from his time at Poitiers, and has become the trademark of his play in the French top flight. This unique style has allowed Pepé to specialise both early and quickly concerning this particular aspect of his game, making him very potent in front of goal. With an indefatigable work ethic and a zippy running style, this centre-forward is on the radar of some of Europe's top outfits, namely Juventus, if the latest round of French press reports are to be believed. As a left-footer with an excellent attitude, there is no cap to be placed on Pepé's potential at the time of writing.

VALENTIN RONGIER (22)

|| CLUB: FC NANTES



At 22, central midfielder Valentin Rongier has the vast majority of his career ahead of him, but his tenacity on the pitch and at the training ground are akin to a footballer who is playing his final match over and over again. This quality makes Rongier likeable and is also favourable to long-term success. Despite a raft of injuries over the last 18 months, including an ACL ligament problem in October 2015, Rongier boasts a skill-set that could aid him in becoming a leading box-to-box midfielder, with his passion for creating attacks married by his enthusiasm with regards to making interceptions. A misunderstanding with new manager Sergio Conceição led to some heated words between the pair in Nantes' final match of the calendar year, but Rongier has generally displayed a superb temperament. Under the wing of a coach who rewards hard-work before natural talent, we back Rongier to blossom spectacularly in 2017, bar any injury concerns.

ALLAN SAINT-MAXIMIN (19) || CLUB: SC BASTIA



Often a little over-eager to impress leading to selfish decision-making, 2016 has been a year in which obviously gifted winger Allan Saint-Maximin has been forced to become much more mature. Two consecutive loan spells, one with Hannover in 2015/16 and now with SC Bastia this campaign, might lead one to forget that Saint-Maximin is actually the property of AS Monaco. A feisty character both on and off the pitch, the French teenager's personal characteristics are an embodiment of the Corsican mentality where he is currently playing his football. His dribbling ability is so impressive, undoubtedly the best out of any of the players on this list in this regard, that, on his day, he is genuinely untouchable. He can also be delighted with the progress that he has made in taming his fiery right-foot when shooting, hitting the target at an increased rate compared to his time at Saint-Étienne. Happy under François Ciccolini and enjoying the greatest responsibility in attack in his career, Saint-Maximin has the potential to single-handedly put SC Bastia in the conversation for a Ligue 1 mid-table spot in 2017.

VINCENT THILL (16)

|| CLUB: FC METZ



No matter how small your country might be in terms of population size, having seven caps with a senior national team to your name at the age of 16 takes some doing. FC Metz's Luxembourgian central midfielder Vincent Thill is the author of that very astounding achievement. Thill made history for both club and country in 2016, becoming the first player born in the new millennium to score an international goal when he struck at the death against Nigeria in May. In September, he made his first senior appearance for *Les Grenats* in a league match against Bordeaux, making him the first player born in the 2000s to appear in any of Europe's top five leagues. Thill is quite simply an electric talent, with exceptional pace both with the ball at his feet and when he attempts to press the opposition. Metz are quite rightly protecting him, waiting for the physical side of Thill's game to come somewhat closer to matching his disgustingly impressive technical skill. With Bayern Munich courting Thill heavily, it is a question of when and not if the Luxembourg international makes waves in European football.

THE GET FRENCH FOOTBALL NEWS 100 TEAM 2016

Adam White

Christian Nourry

Eric Devin

François Ali

Josh Mart

Kevin Galvin

Lee Davey

Louis Pullen-Freilich

Lucas Mirani

Mohammed Ali

Nathan Staples

Nodar Barbakadze

Peter Robert Bowler

Philip Bargiel

Raphael Jucobin

Tom Scholes

*Wylan Cyprien's statistics apply only to the second half of the calendar year.

Note: All statistics powered by Opta, WhoScored and Squawka. All profiles were written in December 2016.

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