

2021/2022



Ligue 1
Preview Guide

INTRODUCTION

After a historically close title race that saw four teams in the running Ligue 1 is back with no small amount of fanfare following a busy summer. Of those four sides, while Lille and Lyon have been relatively quiet as they try to consolidate under new managers, Monaco and Paris Saint-Germain have been eager participants in the mercato, buying well in a way that addresses the two sides' needs. Nice and Rennes have also done some canny business in the offseason, to say nothing of Marseille's flood of arrivals, but the discussions about prospective title favorites in France have to start and end with the capital side.

Even as rumors swirl around the potential departure of Kylian Mbappé, it's hard to argue that Paris Saint-Germain haven't done their utmost to convince their young star to stay. At least, that is, if one judges by their transfer activity. The arrivals of Sergio Ramos, Gianluigi Donnarumma, Georginio Wijnaldum, and Achraf Hakimi have bolstered Mauricio Pochettino's side in key areas whilst also adding another layer of dynamism. If he can keep his squad happy and balanced, this team looks as potent as any in Europe,

Elsewhere, Monaco are probably best-equipped to challenge, even as they will have to contend with playing European football. The arrivals of Myron Boadu, Alexander Nübel and Ismail Jakobs look to be upgrades, and so long as Niko Kovac's exciting, front-foot football remains in place and so do all of its key elements. With more time for Kovac to improve the squad's fitness, and for its young players to further develop, the Principality side look certain of a place on the podium.

Their chief rival, then, just might be Marseille -- the club have brought in a raft of talented young players to support Jorge Sampaoli. Matteo Guendouzi and William Saliba are the most promising, and in retaining Arkadiusz Milik, the team have a clinical finisher to get on the end of attacks. There are still questions lingering over the ability of aging players like Dimitri Payet and Steve Mandanda to balance a season in which l'OM will feature in the Europa League, but on the whole, France's best-supported club should push Monaco hard for a Champions League place.

Elsewhere, Lyon just fell short of the top three with a gutting loss to Nice and now the two find themselves set to battle for Europe under new management. Les Gones largely stood pat this summer, but may be a more potent force going forward following the installation of Peter Bosz in the dugout, even if comes at the cost of some degree of solidity. Nice, by turn, have been quite active in the mercato, bringing in a cadre of promising youngsters and new manager Christophe Galtier. He will have to get a diverse group of players off to a fast start, but it would be unwise to bet against him given his achievements of the last few seasons.

As to his former club, *Les Dogues* are likely set to battle Rennes for a Europa League place. The northern side will do so with Jocelyn Gourvennec taking charge of a largely unchanged side, Further departures could ding what is a shallow side's hopes of returning to the Champions League, but Lille remain a team to watch. The Breton side, meanwhile, were busy in the transfer market, adding Loïc Badé and Kamaldeen Sulemana to complement the ever-improving Jérémy Doku. Elsewhere in the league, more than a half-dozen other sides will have new managers, with Michel Der Zakarian and Olivier Dall'Oglio having swapped places at Montpellier and Brest. Bordeaux (Vladimir Petkovic), Reims, Angers, Strasbourg (Julien Stéphan) all have changed things as well, which could make for some surprising results in the season's early going.

All told, though, the level of play in France should continue to increase, as it has quietly been doing for several seasons. More and more sides are investing in meaningful ways and that, combined with France being an unparalleled source of young talent, has seen the league's reputation deservedly increase of late. Even without a title race, then, Ligue 1 will this season remain compelling viewing, with a panoply of big personalities and absurdly talented players from which the neutral can choose.

--**Eric Devin, Chief Features Writer**

*player ages and squads correct as of 6 August



Form Guide

Season	Division	Position	Points
2020/2021	Ligue 1	13th	44
2019/2020	Ligue 1	10th	39
2018/2019	Ligue 1	13th	46
2017/2018	Ligue 1	14th	41
2016/2017	Ligue 1	12th	46

Likely XI



Angers SCO

Key Man: Sofiane Boufal

Boufal's return to Angers last season was much-anticipated but it was also cursed by injury, as the former Southampton man made just 14 appearances for Le SCO.

Having been a key element to the team's promotion before decamping for Lille in mid-season in 2014/15, the Moroccan's return to his academy club was less than successful. However, there remains every hope that a player who is still just 27 can be a force in Ligue 1 again.

For his part, new manager Gérard Bat-icle looks set to give his star man a fine platform from which to play, lining his side up in a 4-3-1-2/3-4-1-2 affording the ex-Saints man a free role behind a partnership of Stéphane Bahoken and youngster Mohamed Ali-Cho.

His remit will be both goals and working as a creative focus. Even if he is several seasons removed from his best, the hope here is that a more tailored system and full fitness can see that form return, keeping the team afloat.

SIGNING TO WATCH: BATISTA MENDY

Mendy would seem to occupy this slot almost by default. Like so many teams in Ligue 1, Angers lack the resources to spend in the transfer market, even through they saw the signing of Rayan Aït Nouri made permanent by Wolves. Mendy, a defensive midfielder brought in to nominally replace Ibrahim Amadou upon his loan from Sevilla ending, arrives from Nantes on a free. While he may lack the battling profile of previous midfield generals Romain Saïss and Cheikh Ndoeye, he could yet be a revelation despite his career having gone off the rails somewhat following a string of caps for France's youth teams. Tall, lanky, elegant on the ball and possessing a fine eye for a pass, Mendy won't have the guile of, say, a Thomas Mangani, but his energy and positive style of play could be a surprising boon to the club's survival hopes.

SQUAD ANALYSIS

Angers are functionally the same side as last year, save Loïs Diony, Amadou and Lassana Coulibaly, but another year older. The greying likes of Romain Thomas, Mangani, Ismaël Traoré, Vincent Manceau and Pierrick Capelle have always been able to defy the odds during their spell in the top flight. The feeling now, though, is that without Moulin, who had been the longest serving manager across Europe's top five leagues, no longer on the touchline, there are more questions than answers. The attack is full of intriguing, if inconsistent players. Sada Thioub looked brilliant upon being promoted with Nîmes but struggled to exude the same verve last season with Angers; Mathias Pereira Lage and Jimmy Cabot have impressed in Ligue 2 but the jury is still out on whether or not the two wide-men have the tools necessary to succeed at the top level. If the team's younger players (Cho and Mendy especially) can take the next step, a mid-table tilt is possible but, as it stands, Angers will likely be happy to just reach 40 points.

STRENGTHS

The team's experience can't be understated — this is a squad that has never finished lower than 14th since being promoted and the club's continuity has been a massive factor in that, even as many of their signings have failed to impress. Thomas and Traoré make for a bruising centre back partnership. While Stéphane Bahoken can be frustrating at times, his combination of pace and power make him an ideal foil for Cho and Boufal - although more goals would be appreciated. Paul Bernardoni had a challenging season last year, but showed enough to remind fans why he became the club's record signing.

WEAKNESSES

Age, depth, a lack of experience on the touchline — where to start with this team? For so long a model for stability, even as a succession of key attackers (Famara Diedhiou, Karl Toko Ekambi, Nicolas Pepé) departed, Angers may have, with the departure of Moulin, finally met their match. That's not to denigrate Baticle or the quality of those older players, as Montpellier showed last season, age in defence need not be a byword for a lack of success.

VERDICT

Angers were able to skate by on the back of Moulin's drive and the veteran nous of a cadre of players who had joined the club on their promotion, but with that group now aging and the team lacking a consistent goal threat, this may be a difficult season for any new manager. That Baticle, despite his time at Lyon, enters this job without any experience as a head coach is further cause for trepidation. Angers fans will have to hope that this vastly experienced group can use its wiliness to stay up, something that should be possible, if only down to the lack of competition.

PREDICTED FINISH: 16th

SQUAD LIST

NAME	POSITION	NATIONALITY	AGE	AT CLUB SINCE	FORMER CLUB
Paul Bernardoni	GK	French	24	2020/2021	G. de Bordeaux
Danjiel Petkovic	GK	Montenegrin	28	2019/2020	FC Lorient
Anthony Mandréa	GK	French	24	2017/2018	-
Souleyman Doumbia	LB	Ivorian	24	2020/2021	Stade Rennais
Enzo Ebosse	LB	French	22	2020/2021	Le Mans
Romain Thomas	CB	French	33	2013/2014	Carquefou
Mateo Pavlovic	CB	Croatian	31	2016/2017	Werder Bremen
Ismaël Traoré	CB	Ivorian	34	2015/2016	Stade Brestois
Abdoulaye Bamba	RB/LB	Ivorian	30	2016/2017	Dijon FCO
Vincent Manceau	RB	French	32	2008/2009	-
Batista Mendy	DM	French	21	2021/2022	FC Nantes
Zinedine Ould Khaled	DM	French	21	2019/2020	-
Angelo Fulgini	CM	French	24	2017/2018	Valenciennes
Antonin Bobichon	CM/AM	French	25	2019/2020	Nîmes Olympique
Thomas Mangani	CM	French	34	2015/2016	Chievo
Azzedine Ounahi	CM	Moroccan	21	2021/2022	US Avranches
Mathias Pereira Lage	LW	Portuguese	24	2019/2020	Clermont Foot
Pierrick Capelle	LW/CM	French	34	2015/2016	Clermont Foot
Sofiane Boufal	LW/AM	Moroccan	27	2020/2021	Southampton
Casimir Ninga	LW/ST	Chadian	28	2019/2020	SM Caen
Mohamed Ali-Cho	RW/ST	French	17	2020/2021	-
Sada Thioub	RW	Senegalese	26	2019/2020	Nîmes Olympique
Jimmy Cabot	RW	French	27	2020/2021	FC Lorient
Farid El Melali	RW/AM	Algerian	24	2018/2019	Paradou AC
Kevin Bemanga	RW	French	23	2020/2021	Paris FC
Stéphane Bahoken	ST	Cameroonian	29	2018/2019	RC Strasbourg
Rachid Alioui	ST	Moroccan	29	2019/2020	Nîmes Olympique
Gérard Baticle	Manager	French	51	2021/2022	Olympique Lyon
Saïd Chabane	President	French	56	2011/2012	-



Girondins de Bordeaux

Key Man: Yacine Adli

Form Guide

Season	Division	Position	Points
2020/2021	Ligue 1	12th	45
2019/2020	Ligue 1	12th	37
2018/2019	Ligue 1	14th	41
2017/2018	Ligue 1	6th	55
2016/2017	Ligue 1	6th	59

Likely XI



The floppy-haired Adli has been teased as the next big thing since joining Bordeaux from Paris Saint-Germain in January 2019, but the presence of players like Hatem Ben Arfa and Nicolas De Préville, often coupled with a lack of patience from management, meant that his chances were limited.

If not in terms of playing time, then at least in terms of the length of his leash. While nominally a creative player, Adli was more often played in a box-to-box role following a season-ending injury to Otávio, and as such his attacking contributions were somewhat muted, despite leading the team in assists with five.

Deadly from set pieces and unafraid to take on a shot from range, Adli could finally prosper given the team's need for creativity and the return of players like Nigerian winger Samuel Kalu and striker Josh Maja after a season's loan at Fulham. That's not to say, of course, that Adli was wholly miscast in a deeper role — his defensive numbers were sound as well and few would have looked at last season's ignominy and pointed the blame at a player who is still just 21.

SIGNING TO WATCH: GIDEON MENSAH

With Loris Benito perhaps on the way out, another casualty of the team's need to tighten things up financially, Mensah's arrival, on a loan from Red Bull Salzburg looks canny indeed. Playing on loan at Vitoria SC in Portugal last season, he showed himself to be a player full of energy, pace and inventiveness. A Ghanaian international with a handful of caps, he's also spent time in Belgium on loan, having come to European football via the Austrian Bundesliga. More of a livewire than Benito or the now-departed Maxime Poudjé, Mensah is also more defensively sound, showing a tremendous workrate even if he's not the most cultured in terms of his passing. That sort of leather-lunged running was key to the play of the full-backs for Petković's Swiss side this summer, and he and one of Enock Kwateng or loan returnee Raoul Bellanova should be the ideal up-and-down-the-flank wing-back pair.

SQUAD ANALYSIS

Given that Petković has only had one match in which to experiment, it is hard to get a handle on how the club might play. Had Jean-Louis Gasset stayed, a 3-4-3 would have been used, but in their final friendly against Troyes the team lined up in a 4-2-3-1. Petković had played with a three-man defence with Switzerland, but with Paul Baysse unlikely to feature until the new year, he may favour a system which places fewer demands on its centre-backs. Having used a 4-1-4-1 at his previous club appointment, Lazio, he is certainly no stranger to playing four at the back, and he may opt to play that way until Baysse is again fit. While rumours continue to swirl around departures for Ui-Jo Hwang and Toma Basic, the club's two most valuable assets, given their financial situation, most of the club's departures to date have been spare parts or ill-fitted to the club's need to rejuvenate, making for a leaner and younger squad.

STRENGTHS

Benoît Costil remains a dependable and assured presence in goal, and Laurent Koscielny continues to defy his age in defence. Alongside the captain, Baysse and Mexer are capable options, while Togo international Loïc Bessile looks promising as well. With Otávio fit again and the likes of Adli, Mehdi Zerkane and Tom Lacoux all intriguing prospects, the midfield is perhaps more promising than a casual observer would think, albeit callow. Petković could yet fall into this category as well, given how well he had Switzerland playing this summer, but the jury remains out on his ability as a manager at club level, something which could yet be a hindrance in what looks to be a season as every bit as challenging as the last.

WEAKNESSES

Again, Petković's name may make him seem like a canny, even impressive signing given what he accomplished this summer, but his record at club level has been mixed. His spell at Lazio is the only time he has worked in a top five league prior to this, not a ringing endorsement of a manager, who at 57, is closer to the end of his career than the beginning. Goals could also be an issue for this team — Hwang may leave for financial reasons and Josh Maja (lack of quality) and Jimmy Briand (age) may not be up to the task either..

VERDICT

Petković may not be the managerial version of the player who parlayed a fine international tournament into a big move, but he should at least offer a more enterprising style of play than his predecessor. Gasset was admittedly hindered by injuries, but his waffling between the team's young talent and more experienced players ultimately cost the club in terms of both the squad's development and the results on the pitch, underscored by an ugly late season run. If Petković can avoid this and apply some tactical consistency, the team should be at least easier on the eye, if not the heart.

PREDICTED FINISH: 12th

SQUAD LIST

NAME	POSITION	NATIONALITY	AGE	AT CLUB SINCE	FORMER CLUB
Benoît Costil	GK	French	34	2017/2018	Stade Rennais
Gaëtan Poussin	GK	French	22	2017/2018	-
Tidiane Malbec	GK	French	19	2021/2022	-
Loris Benito	LB	Swiss	29	2019/2020	Young Boys
Gideon Mensah	LB	Ghanaian	23	2021/2022	RB Salzburg
Ricardo Mangas	LB	Portuguese	23	2021/2022	Boavista
Laurent Koscielny	CB	French	35	2019/2020	Arsenal
Mexer	CB	Mozambican	32	2019/2020	Stade Rennais
Paul Baysse	CB	French	33	2017/2018	Malaga
Alexandre Lauray	CB	French	24	2020/2021	-
Loïc Bessile	CB	Togolese	22	2020/2021	-
Enock Kwateng	RB	French	24	2019/2020	FC Nantes
Raoul Bellanova	RB	Italian	21	2018/2019	AC Milan
Otávio	DM	Brazilian	27	2017/2018	A. Paranaense
Toma Basic	CM	Croatian	24	2018/2019	Hadjuk Split
Rubén Pardo	CM	Spanish	28	2019/2020	Real Sociedad
Tom Lacoux	CM	French	19	2020/2021	-
Issouf Sissokho	CM	Malian	19	2021/2022	Derby Académie
Yacine Adli	CM/AM	French	21	2018/2019	Paris SG
Samuel Kalu	LW/RW	Nigerian	23	2018/2019	KAA Gent
Rémi Oudin	RW/ST	French	24	2019/2020	Stade de Reims
Mehdi Zerkane	RW/CM	Algerian	22	2020/2021	-
Amadou Traoré	RW	French	19	2020/2021	-
Josh Maja	ST	Nigerian	22	2018/2019	Sunderland
Ui-Jo Hwang	ST/RW	South Korean	28	2019/2020	Gamba Osaka
Jimmy Briand	ST	French	26	2018/2019	EA Guingamp
Sékou Mara	ST	French	19	2020/2021	-
Dilane Bakwa	ST	French	18	2021/2022	-
Vladimir Petkovic	Manager	Swiss	57	2021/2022	Switzerland
Gérard López	President	Luxembourgish	49	2021/2022	Lille



Stade Brestois 29

Key Man: Romain Faivre

Form Guide

Season	Division	Position	Points
2020/2021	Ligue 1	17th	41
2019/2020	Ligue 1	14th	34
2018/2019	Ligue 2	2nd	74
2017/2018	Ligue 2	5th	65
2016/2017	Ligue 2	5th	65

Likely XI



Forwards Irvin Cardona and Steve Mounié scored more goals, and left-back Romain Perraud got the big money move across the channel, but it was the versatile, energetic attacking midfielder Faivre who looks to be key to the Breton side's hopes of staying up.

Used on both flanks as well as as a second striker by the now-departed Olivier Dall'Oglio, the former Monaco academy product was key in building play for Brest — in a team which sought to play on the front foot as often as possible, their lack of a central creative outlet often hindered their ability to do so.

Now, under Michel Der Zakarian, his talent, often wasted on the flanks, looks to be the focus of the team's tactics. The former Montpellier boss appears ready to deploy Faivre in a free role, behind a partnership of Cardona and Mounié. It's an approach similar to what he used at his previous club, and if Cardona and Mounié are a step below the likes of Andy Delort and Gaëtan Laborde, Faivre is a sight better than Florent Mollet. This would allow the team to remain as potent in attack as they have been in previous seasons

SIGNING TO WATCH: MARCO BIZOT

Bizot, a former Ajax youth product who at 30 years of age had taken a winding road to success with AZ Alkmaar, has arrived for a fee of 5M Euro. That may seem a high price for a player with little resale value but after Bizot, who kept clean sheets in a mind-boggling 18 of 24 matches in 2019/20, became available, the club made a decisive move for a player who may prove to be an upgrade on Gautier Larssonneur, the team's once-promising young goalkeeper having badly lost his way last season. A full Dutch international after being capped in November, Bizot's goals conceded average does not appear to be too impressive, but one would do well to remember the often inflated attacking statistics that characterise the Eredivisie. In a league dominated by the hegemony of the "big three" of PSV Eindhoven, Ajax, and Feyenoord, AZ finished no worse than fourth in Bizot's four seasons between the posts, further evidence of his solidity.

SQUAD ANALYSIS

Brest slipped badly in the second half of last season. What had been a delicate balance between attacking football and a clever defence was often compromised by Larssonneur's loss of form and injuries to defenders Christophe Hérelle and Denys Bain, both of whom have shown themselves to be capable options in the top flight. In midfield, the team were able to weather the departure of Ibrahima Diallo as well as a season-ending injury to Paul Lasne. Lyon loanee Jean Lucas brought some needed midfield presence, but his move to Monaco leaves the squad with the promising Hianga'a M'bock partnering Haris Belkebla, a prosaic Algerian international whose play will be crucial to keeping attack and defence in equilibrium. The signing of Bizot was needed, and while it remains to be seen how cohesive the attack will be as they adjust to Der Zakarian's tactics, there should be more than enough about Brest going forward to avoid a place in the bottom three.

STRENGTHS

Mounié and Cardona have real potential to develop together in Der Zakarian's system — the Benin international is one of the league's best in the air, and if he maintains that superiority, the chances he can generate for Faivre and Cardona could be the difference in the team staying up or going down. In midfield, Haris Belkebla is a solid, if underrated presence, while Bizot should be an upgrade on Larssonneur. Der Zakarian, too, should be seen as an asset — even if he did not get Montpellier into Europe. The veteran manager had La Paillade playing on the front foot without fear of relegation, no mean feat given their lack of depth.

WEAKNESSES

The defence, which looks to be a back three, is the source of major doubts. Lilian Brassier's loan from Rennes was made permanent, and Brendan Chardonnet and Jean-Kévin Duverne showed flashes of potential, but with Hérelle and Bain never fit the team struggled at the back last season. Ronaël-Pierre Gabriel is still on loan from Mainz but will not do much to inspire confidence defensively, while Finnish international Jere Uronen is intriguing, but at 27 his capacity for improvement would seem minimal, and for him to come close to replicating the play of Southampton-departed Perraud would be a surprise.

VERDICT

Perraud is unquestionably a major loss for the Breton side, but their other departures have by and large been on the order of spare parts, and with Bizot perhaps an upgrade on Larssonneur, they should be more solid at the back. Der Zakarian, too, despite having set up his Montpellier side on the front foot, knows how to get a side to buckle down — as evidenced by his none-too-easy on the eye Nantes sides of the early part of the decade. Brest may not be as swashbuckling as last season, but nor will they have to spend so much of the campaign looking over their shoulders.

PREDICTED FINISH: 15th

SQUAD LIST

NAME	POSITION	NATIONALITY	AGE	AT CLUB SINCE	FORMER CLUB
Gautier Larssonneur	GK	French	24	2017/2018	-
Marco Bizot	GK	Dutch	30	2021/2022	AZ Alkmaar
Sébastien Cibois	GK	French	23	2019/2020	Paris SG
Grégoire Coudert	GK	French	22	2021/2022	Amiens SC
Jere Uronen	LB	Finnish	27	2021/2022	KRC Genk
Jean-Kévin Duverne	CB	French	24	2019/2020	RC Lens
Christophe Hérelle	CB	Martiniquais	28	2020/2021	OGC Nice
Brendan Chardonnet	CB	French	26	2014/2015	-
Lilian Brassier	CB	French	21	2020/2021	Stade Rennais
Denys Bain	CB	French	28	2019/2020	Le Havre
Ronaël Pierre-Gabriel	RB	French	23	2020/2021	Mainz 05
Julien Faussurier	RB	French	34	2016/2017	Sochaux
Paul Lasne	CM	French	32	2019/2020	Montpellier HSC
Haris Belkebla	CM/DM	Algerian	27	2018/2019	Tours FC
Hianga'a Mbock	CM	French	21	2019/2020	-
Hugo Magnetti	CM	French	22	2018/2019	-
Romain Faivre	LW/AM	French	23	2019/2020	AS Monaco
Romain Philippoteaux	LW	French	33	2020/2021	Nîmes Olympique
Franck Honorat	RW	French	24	2020/2021	Saint-Étienne
Irvin Cardona	ST	French	23	2019/2020	AS Monaco
Steve Mounié	ST	Beninese	26	2020/2021	Huddersfield
Jérémy Le Douaron	ST/RW	French	23	2020/2021	Stade Briochin
Rafiki Saïd	ST	Comoran	21	2020/2021	-
Michel Der Zakarian	Manager	French	58	2021/2022	Montpellier HSC
Daniel Le Roux	President	French	59	1999/2000	-



Clermont Foot 63

Key Man: Mohamed Bayo

Form Guide

Season	Division	Position	Points
2020/2021	Ligue 2	2nd	72
2019/2020	Ligue 2	5th	50
2018/2019	Ligue 2	10th	48
2017/2018	Ligue 2	6th	63
2016/2017	Ligue 2	12th	46

Likely XI



While Clermont have plenty of capable goalscorers throughout its team, on the evidence of last year's performance in Ligue 2, the team's fortunes this year will be inextricably tied to the ability of the Guinean international to adapt to life in the top flight.

A rangy yet deceptively powerful player, Bayo is a product of the club's academy and was raised in the city. Somewhat of a late bloomer, with first Ludovic Ajorque and then Adrian Grbic blocking his path to the first team, it took a prolific loan spell at USL Dunkerque, helping the northern side win promotion to Ligue 2 with 14 goals, for him to be noticed. Playing in a more cohesive attacking system last season, his progression continued handsomely, netting a league-leading 22 goals while adding seven assists.

His movement, creativity and finishing make Bayo the ideal focal point for Clermont's attack. He has been consistently linked with a move to Bordeaux, but the thinking here is that the 23-year-old is simply too vital to Clermont's chances of survival for the club to let him go just yet.

SIGNING TO WATCH: ARIAL MENDY

The Senegalese left-back is more likely than not to be the backup to Vital N'Simba, but slots in here almost by default. Clermont were devastatingly effective last year in most phases of play, and with no means by which to invest, the former Lens man, signed from Swiss side Servette, marks their highest-profile arrival. He had been a regular for the club last season, impressing enough to be called up for his country for Africa Cup of Nations qualifying in November, but an injury derailed his time there as Servette finished an impressive third, with Mendy playing a bit-part role in the season's second half. An attack-minded full-back who is clever with the ball at his feet, the new signing has good vision and is known for his crossing. If he is back to his best, Mendy could add an extra dimension from defence, giving the promoted side much needed depth.

SQUAD ANALYSIS

Clermont have surprised many by showing a bit more attacking verve in pre-season, averaging two goals per match in beating the likes of Montpellier, Saint-Étienne, and Nantes. The team had achieved promotion to Ligue 1 for the first time ever on the back of having the second division's tightest defence by some margin last season. That, and the play of the prolific Bayo were enough for Pascal Gastien, now taking the reins of the club for the fifth season, to see his side ease past Toulouse for promotion late on. Playing an aggressive 4-2-3-1 with each of the front four being capable of finding the net, the team's multivalent approach to attacking play worked a charm in Ligue 2, but despite what will be an impressive degree of continuity, it would be folly to expect this squad to make the jump up quite so easily.

STRENGTHS

The front four, with Bayo supported centrally by the veteran Jason Berthomier and wide players Jim Allevinah and Jodel Dossou, combined to devastating effect last season. They could yet have some joy against Ligue 1 defences, some of whom will likely be surprised by the verve with which Gastien, an avowed admirer of Johann Cruyff, plays his football. The two defensive midfielders, Johan Gastien and Jonathan Iglesias, are also canny operators, and will need to do much to add balance to the team's play, provided their age does not become a factor. The attack-minded full-backs, N'Simba and Akim Zedadka, complement the team's ethos well.

WEAKNESSES

Again, Gastien has a defined style of play, and that is admirable in a manager these days. However, executing his ideas with a group of players who have never faced opposition of the likes of Kylian Mbappé before will be another challenge altogether. The team are likely to score goals this season, but one has to wonder if the age of the front four (all save Bayo are 26 or older) says more about their potential to take the step up than anything else. The defence and goalkeeping situation is similar — Cédric Houtoundji and Florent Ogier have played with bigger clubs before, while the goalkeeper, Arthur Desmas, was 23 before playing his first match in Ligue 2.

VERDICT

Clermont have stood firm, which can be a blessing or a curse on promotion to Ligue 1. Teams like Amiens and Nîmes have impressed in recent seasons by more or less keeping the status quo, but the majority of sides who do as little in the mercato as Clermont end up being in for a rude awakening, especially given that only Houtoundji, late of Rennes, has any experience in Ligue 1. Clermont's best hopes will be to adapt to life in Ligue 1 quickly, to keep Bayo, and for Gastien to stick to his guns, but even that may not be enough.

PREDICTED FINISH: 20th

SQUAD LIST

NAME	POSITION	NATIONALITY	AGE	AT CLUB SINCE	FORMER CLUB
Arthur Desmas	GK	French	27	2020/2021	Rodez
Ouparine Djoco	GK	French	23	2018/2019	-
Lucas Margueron	GK	French	20	2020/2021	Lyon
Vital N'Simba	LB	DR Congolese	28	2018/2019	Bourg-en-Bresse
Driss Trichard	LB	French	26	2019/2020	G. de Bordeaux
Julien Boyer	LB	French	23	2020/2021	Quevilly Rouen
Arial Mendy	LB	Senegalese	26	2021/2022	Servette
Cédric Houtoundji	CB	Beninese	27	2019/2020	Levski Sofia
Florent Ogier	CB	French	32	2018/2019	Sochaux
Josué Albert	CB	French Guyanese	29	2018/2019	Quevilly Rouen
Akim Zedadka	RB	French	26	2019/2020	Marignane Gignac
Alidu Seidu	RB	Ghanian	21	2020/2021	JMG Abidjan
Jérôme Phojo	RB	French	28	2017/2018	Les Herbiers
Yohann Magnin	DM	French	24	2018/2019	-
Johan Gastien	DM	French	33	2018/2019	Stade Brestois
Salis Abdul Samed	DM	Ghanian	21	2021/2022	JMG Abidjan
Brandon Baiye	DM	Belgian	20	2019/2020	Cercle Brugge
Fred Gnalega	DM	Ivorian	19	2020/2021	JMG Abidjan
Jonathan Iglesias	CM	Uruguayan	32	2016/2017	AS Nancy
Elbasan Rashani	LW	Kosovan	28	2021/2022	Erzurumspor
Jim Allevinah	LW	Gabonese	26	2019/2020	Le Puy
Jason Berthomier	AM	French	31	2018/2019	ESTAC Troyes
Naël Jaby	AM	French	20	2019/2020	-
Jodel Dossou	RW	Beninese	29	2020/2021	TSV Hartberg
Bryan Silva Teixeira	RW	French	20	2019/2020	-
Mohamed Bayo	ST	Malian	23	2017/2018	-
Jordan Tell	ST	French	24	2020/2021	Stade Rennais
Pascal Gastien	Manager	French	57	2017/2018	Chateauroux
Ahmet Schaefer	President	Swiss	40	2019/2020	-



Form Guide

Season	Division	Position	Points
2020/2021	Ligue 1	7th	57
2019/2020	Ligue 2	2nd	53
2018/2019	Ligue 2	5th	63
2017/2018	Ligue 2	14th	43
2016/2017	Ligue 2	4th	65

Likely XI



RC Lens

Key Man: Gaël Kakuta

As goes Kakuta, so goes Lens. The former Chelsea man, on loan with Franck Haise's team from Amiens last season, has made his move permanent, and will hope to build on last season's total of eleven goals and five assists. Given a free role in a 3-4-1-2, Kakuta flourished last season, showing an impressive delivery from dead ball situations and for breaking down defences with his ability to manoeuvre in tight spaces.

While sometimes guilty of giving the ball away cheaply, Lens' hard-working side was by and large at its best when Kakuta was given ample opportunities to flourish without repercussions. His inability to finish matches was often frustrating but, with the five substitutions rule now a permanent fixture in Ligue 1, the idea that Kakuta, who won the Prix Marc-Vivien Foé as the league's best African player last season, could be taken off for a more defensive player hardly seems an obstacle to the team's success. Especially with Seko Fofana more than capable of driving the attack himself, albeit without quite the same sparkle.

SIGNING TO WATCH: DEIVER MACHADO

Machado is hardly a prospect at 27, but more than proved his worth last season with Toulouse in Ligue 2. The Colombian had an initial and unsuccessful foray into European football with Gent a few years ago, before returning to his homeland to play for giants Atlético Nacional. Haise's team last season was well-constructed and had plenty of balance, but none of his options at left-back were exactly compelling. Among Ismaël Boura, Issiaga Sylla and Massadio Haidara, there was plenty of capable defending but little in the way of the flair offered by Jonathan Clauss on the opposite flank. Seeking balance, but with little in the way of funds after exercising Kakuta's purchase option, the arrival of Machado for less than 2m looks a canny buy indeed. Fleet of foot and clever with the ball at his feet, he projects as an immediate starter, and could be a key part of Lens leaning more heavily on their attack following the departure of young centre-back Loïc Badé.

SQUAD ANALYSIS

Overshadowed by the giant leaps made by Monaco and Lille last season, Lens flew somewhat under the radar, despite spending heavily by the standards of a promoted side to add Fofana and striker Ignatius Ganago. They've continued that this season, using the sale of Badé to make permanent fixtures of last season's two loanees: second choice goalkeeper Wilker Fariñez and Kakuta. In midfield, the team have an exquisite balance among the bruising Cahuzac, the classy Fofana and the hard-working youngster Cheick Doucoure. Jonathan Clauss may be the league's best right-back not named Achraf Hakimi, and with more balance in the team's play, he could be even more dangerous provided he is afforded more space as a result. Lens are unlikely to make as sustained a tilt at European football as they did last season, the surprise factor of the 3-4-1-2 wearing off, but their gung-ho style and refusal to give up on individual matches will continue to serve them well.

STRENGTHS

With Machado adding balance to the side, and Fofana and Ganago having better luck with their fitness, there is every chance that Lens' attack, as impressive as it had been the previous season, could yet improve this campaign. Haise's system gets the best out of his players and the club's hierarchy have been unafraid to allow him to bolster the squad. A deserved reward for a performance that would have seen him named manager of the year in most campaigns. In goal, Fariñez looks a promising option, even if it remains to be seen for how much longer Jean-Louis Leca will be first choice.

WEAKNESSES

The team's striking options are somewhat less compelling without PSG loanee Arnaud Kalimuendo to offer a bit of pace alongside the more bruising Florian Sotoca and fox-in-the-box Ignatius Ganago. Moreover, the attacking players that have been brought in (Wesley Saïd, Przemyslaw Frankowski) seem unobvious fits chosen almost at random as, positionally, wide players would appear to have no place in Haise's tactical setup nor would either of the pair seem to have the level necessary to aid the club in another push for Europe. The defence is also a source of worry — Badé may be a bigger loss than people realise and Christopher Wooh, signed from Nancy for free, is a very exciting talent but will be facing a baptism by fire in being thrown into a Ligue 1 starting XI.

VERDICT

Lens' signing of Machado could be every bit as fine a bit of business as Clauss, but their parsimony in replacing Badé, who had been nothing short of a revelation in central defence last season, could be a source of regret. His composure, recovery pace and aerial ability will be dearly missed, as one cannot help but thinking that the likes of Jonathan Gradić and Facundo Medina will be just that much more nervous without the youngster behind them this season. Kalimuendo will also be a miss, but on the whole, Lens seem more than capable of finishing in or around the same place as last season.

PREDICTED FINISH: 9th

SQUAD LIST

NAME	POSITION	NATIONALITY	AGE	AT CLUB SINCE	FORMER CLUB
Wuilker Fariñez	GK	Venezuelan	23	2020/2021	Millionarios
Jean-Louis Leca	GK	French	35	2018/2019	AC Ajaccio
Valentino Lesieur	GK	Portuguese	18	2021/2022	FC Nantes
Massadio Haidara	LB/CB	Guinean	28	2018/2019	Newcastle
Ismaël Boura	LB	French	20	2019/2020	-
Deiver Machado	LB	Colombian	27	2021/2022	Toulouse FC
Facundo Medina	CB/LB	Argentine	22	2020/2021	Atlético Talleres
Kevin Danso	CB	Austrian	22	2021/2022	FC Augsburg
Jonathan Gradić	CB	French	28	2019/2020	SM Caen
Steven Fortes	CB	Cape Verdean	29	2019/2020	Toulouse FC
Christopher Wooh	CB	French	19	2021/2022	AS Nancy
Jonathan Clauss	RB	French	28	2020/2021	Arminia Bielefeld
Cheick Doucouré	CM	Malian	21	2018/2019	-
Yannick Cahuzac	CM	French	36	2019/2020	Toulouse FC
Seko Fofana	CM/AM	Ivorian	26	2020/2021	Udinese
Charles Boli	CM	French	22	2019/2020	-
Mamadou Camara	CM	Senegalese	18	2021/2022	Dakar Sacré Coeur
Gaël Kakuta	AM	DR Congolese	30	2020/2021	Amiens SC
Jules Keita	LW	Guinean	23	2019/2020	Dijon FCO
Przemysław Frankowski	RW	Polish	26	2021/2022	Chicago Fire
Ignatius Ganago	ST	Cameroonian	22	2020/2021	OGC Nice
Florian Sotoca	ST	French	30	2019/2020	Grenoble
Simon Banza	ST	French	24	2015/2016	-
Corentin Jean	ST	French	26	2020/2021	Toulouse FC
Wesley Saïd	ST/RW	French	26	2021/2022	Toulouse FC
Franck Haise	Manager	French	50	2019/2020	-
Joseph Oughourlian	President	French	49	2018/2019	-



Lille OSC

Key Man: Jonathan David

Form Guide

Season	Division	Position	Points
2020/2021	Ligue 1	1st	83rd
2019/2020	Ligue 1	4th	49
2018/2019	Ligue 1	2nd	75
2017/2018	Ligue 1	17th	38
2016/2017	Ligue 1	11th	46

Likely XI



David, who looked wholly unconvincing against PSG in the Trophée des Champions, will undoubtedly hold the key to Lille's success, or lack thereof, this season. The young Canadian, who had been the club's record signing last summer, was slow to come to life.

However, when he did, David became an important and dynamic presence, forging a productive partnership with Burak Yilmaz in attack, his confidence and ability growing by the week under the tutelage of Christophe Galtier. Thus, while it is risky to read too much into one match, and a pre-season one at that, for David to look so off the boil was a worrying sign. Yilmaz will still be an energetic presence, full of running and goals, but his minutes will have to be carefully managed.

It is imperative that David shoulder more of the attacking load and pressure this season. Should he regress, Lille, very unlikely to achieve back-to-back titles, could find themselves on the outside looking in on the top three come the end of the season.

SIGNING TO WATCH: AMADOU ONANA

The young Belgian, who arrived only days before the season started, will have to get to grips with things quickly — Renato Sanches is likely to be sold and with the Champions' League complicating the team's fixture list in short order, rotation will be imperative for Les Dogues to make a serious go of any competition in which they are involved. Where Sanches is a positive presence eager to take the ball forward and be a creator and Boubakary Soumaré, another player whom Onana will hope to replace, was more of a disruptor, Onana should split the difference between the two. An aggressive player in his style, he is adept in the air, and proficient at bringing the ball out of the defence but is not a terribly clever passer of the ball. Still just 19, he is more likely to be a longer-term replacement for Benjamin André than Xeka, but he could yet prove a pleasant surprise.

SQUAD ANALYSIS

As is stated elsewhere here, Lille are largely the same side that won the title, save Maignan and Soumaré. Yes, Sanches may yet leave, but for all that he impressed for Portugal this summer, he made just 13 starts in the league, and was frequently dropped for Soumaré in the run-in. The team's younger players, save Sven Botman, had seemed to relish the arrival of players like Yilmaz last season, operating more in the shadows. It seemed players like Jonathan Bamba and Jonathan Ikoné had regressed to some degree, willingly ceding the spotlight to the likes of the Turkish attacker. If Lille are to have a modicum of success this season, they will need more from those youngsters, as well as Yusuf Yazici who was wildly inconsistent, leading to him being dropped at crucial junctures. How well Jocelyn Gourvennec, Galtier's replacement, handles this side of things will tell more than anything how much of a hangover the champions might suffer.

STRENGTHS

The character of this team, as forged by Galtier, was nothing short of outstanding last season. In Yilmaz, André, Fonte, Xeka and others, Lille were a team that played on the edge, their intensity enough to earn them a result on more than one occasion. That intensity, though it still seems to be with the team, will have to be carefully watched with Galtier having decamped to Nice. The example of teammates Xeka and Tiago Djalo having come to blows in a recent friendly comes to mind — both ended up being suspended for the season opener against Metz. Still, though, if this fiery ethic is channeled as it was against PSG in the Trophée des Champions, Lille remain a side capable of beating anyone on their day, and could yet make some noise provided things don't boil over too often.

WEAKNESSES

In a word, depth — Lille were incredibly lucky not to have dealt with any significant injuries last season — Burak Yilmaz missed a month and Zeki Çelik a handful of matches. Botman and Fonte scarcely missed a minute, and Benjamin André was also an ever-present. Should any of that trio, or Yilmaz, for that matter, miss a significant amount of time, Lille could be in for a bumpy ride. For all that Galtier had the team working together, there were many moments in which wins for Les Dogues came off the back of a moment of individual brilliance (see Yilmaz's double against Lyon, Maignan's stoppage time save in Monaco) — without certain players, the chances of those occasions repeating themselves remain slim.

VERDICT

Lille look reasonably similar to the champion side of last year on paper, but as the old adage about squad building in football goes, if you are not improving you are getting worse, and their departures underscore that, even if goalkeeper Leo Jardim does seem to be a capable replacement for Maignan. With the likes of Fonte, André and Yilmaz another year older, and the underrated Boubakary Soumaré also having taken leave, it will be all Gourvennec can do to keep this team ticking over amidst a busy fixture list. A return to Europe next season may be the minimum expected by the board but a more pragmatic observer would see that as a job well done.

PREDICTED FINISH: 4th

SQUAD LIST

NAME	POSITION	NATIONALITY	AGE	AT CLUB SINCE	FORMER CLUB
Léo Jardim	GK	Brazilian	26	2019/2020	Rio Ave
Adam Jakubech	GK	Serbian	24	2017/2018	Spartak Trnava
Orestis Karnezis	GK	Greek	36	2020/2021	SSC Napoli
Reinildo Mandava	LB	Mozambican	27	2019/2020	Belenenses SAD
Domagoj Bradaric	LB	Croatian	21	2019/2020	Hadjuk Split
Sven Botman	CB	Dutch	21	2020/2021	Ajax
José Fonte	CB	Portuguese	37	2018/2019	Dailan Professional
Tiago Djaló	CB/RB	Portuguese	21	2019/2020	AC Milan
Kouadio-Yves Dabila	CB	Ivorian	24	2017/2018	-
Saad Agozoul	CB	Moroccan	23	2019/2020	Kawkab Marrakech
Zeki Çelik	RB	Turkish	24	2018/2019	Istanbulspor
Jérémy Pied	RB	French	32	2018/2019	Southampton
Benjamin André	DM	French	31	2019/2020	Stade Rennais
Amadou Onana	DM	Belgian	19	2021/2022	Hamburg SV
Show	DM	Angolan	22	2019/2020	1 de Agosto
Jean Onana	DM	Cameroonian	21	2019/2020	Leixões SC
Cheikh Niasse	CM	French	21	2020/2021	-
Eugenio Pizzuto	CM	Mexican	19	2020/2021	Pachuca
Renato Sanches	CM/RW	Portuguese	23	2019/2020	Bayern Munich
Xeka	CM	Portuguese	26	2017/2018	SC Braga
Rocco Ascone	CM	French	17	2021/2022	-
Jonathan Bamba	LW	French	25	2018/2019	Saint-Étienne
Yusuf Yazici	AM	Turkish	24	2019/2020	Trabzonspor
Angel Gomes	AM	English	20	2020/2021	Manchester United
Isaac Lihadji	RW	French	19	2020/2021	Marseille
Jonathan Ikoné	RW/ST	French	23	2018/2019	Paris SG
Jonathan David	ST	Canadian	21	2020/2021	KAA Gent
Timothy Weah	ST/RW	American	21	2019/2020	Paris SG
Burak Yilmaz	ST	Turkish	36	2020/2021	Besiktas
Jocelyn Gourvennec	Manager	French	49	2021/2022	EA Guingamp
Olivier Letang	President	French	48	2020/2021	Stade Rennais



FC Lorient

Key Man: Terem Moffi

Form Guide

Season	Division	Position	Points
2020/2021	Ligue 1	16th	42
2019/2020	Ligue 2	1st	54
2018/2019	Ligue 2	6th	63
2017/2018	Ligue 2	7th	62
2016/2017	Ligue 1	18th	36

Likely XI



Lorient had smashed their record transfer fee to bring in Adrian Grbic from Clermont last summer, so the signing of the promising if relatively untested Moffi from Belgian side Kortrijk for a sum nearly as high raised some eyebrows.

This was particularly true as manager Christophe Pelissier is not well-known for playing with a front two, especially one with two players as similarly imposing as the Nigerian and Grbic. It took some time for Moffi to settle, but when he did, he was a revelation.

He led the line in what was a hugely impressive second half of the season for the club, with only last year's top five picking up more points in 2021. A physical presence but also a player with a brilliant touch, Moffi was outscored only by Kylian Mbappé and Wissam Ben Yedder over that period. Placing faith in Moffi, the club have made little in the way of additions this summer, and that could yet see the Breton side in the mix for the European places, even if a mid-table finish is somewhat more likely.

SIGNING TO WATCH: IGOR SILVA

Silva slots in here almost by default, but that's not to denigrate either his abilities or experience, nor the fact that this was a position of need for Lorient. Houboulang Mendes impressed fleetingly but struggled with fitness. His competition, journeyman defender Jérôme Hégault made for a nice story but asking the veteran, who turned 35 in April, to withstand the rigours of a full league campaign is unrealistic. Silva, who arrived from Croatian side NK Osijek, is an attack-minded full-back, which should signal the team continuing to play with three behind. What the former Olympiakos player shows is an above-average ability at crossing the ball, while he is also relatively quick and has plenty of stamina. While Lorient are not exactly known for their history of bringing in flashy players, the sense here is that he should do quite nicely in aiding the attack in a more multivalent way than can Hégault or Mendes.

SQUAD ANALYSIS

Lorient were again quietly impressive down the back end of last season, racking up thirty points in 2021, form that would be firmly in the hunt for a place in Europe if replicated over the course of a full campaign. While there is certainly optimism given the way the team (eventually) settled into adopting Pelissier's tactics, the fact is that the likes of Fabien Lemoine, Jérémy Morel and Vincent Le Goff have a lot of wear on their tires. The team have also lost Andreaw Gravillon and Trevoh Chalobah, the two defenders having returned to their parent clubs. Thus, while the attack looks to be one to watch, with Armand Laurienté, Moffi and the fit-again Stéphane Diarra all capable players, there are simply too many other question marks around this team to hope for a sustained push for the top six.

STRENGTHS

Again, in Diarra, Moffi, and Laurienté, Lorient have one of the most exciting attacking tridents in the league, even if they may not get to line up together owing to Pelissier's preference down the back of last season for a 3-5-2. Outside of the attack, the midfield also has some exciting younger players in Enzo Le Fée and Quentin Boisgard, but whatever success this side have this year will be down to the organisational nous of Pelissier, a manager who worked miracles with Amiens and will be counted on to continue to do the same if his team hope to avoid a relegation battle.

WEAKNESSES

Is everywhere else an option? All kidding aside, there is little certainty throughout much of the squad. The midfield is ageing aside from Le Fée and Boisgard and the team seem to have made a grave misstep in not replacing their two loanees, Gravillon and Chalobah, who grew into the season most impressively. Julien Laporte is a league-average defender but Morel will be 38 before the season's end, and it is anyone's guess who mans the third spot. Goalkeeper is also a position which will be cause for concern, as neither Paul Nardi nor Matthieu Dreyer managed to secure the role full-time last season.

VERDICT

Lorient are, as is customary of Pelissier's sides, sure to cause more than a few upsets this season, but much like Nîmes or Dijon in recent years, teams with above-average attacks and leaky defences rarely prosper in Ligue 1. If the club could shift a striker or two (Grbic? Pierre-Yves Hamel?) to balance what looks to be a top-heavy squad with an additional defender or an upgrade in goal, things could be less nerve-wracking than last season. The fear here, though, is that Lorient are operating on a non-existent budget after last summer's considerable outlay and will do well to survive, even if they will likely keep us entertained in the process.

PREDICTED FINISH: 14th

SQUAD LIST

NAME	POSITION	NATIONALITY	AGE	AT CLUB SINCE	FORMER CLUB
Paul Nardi	GK	French	27	2019/2020	AS Monaco
Matthieu Dreyer	GK	French	32	2020/2021	Amiens SC
Teddy Bartouche	GK	French	24	2020/2021	-
Thomas Callens	GK	French	22	2020/2021	SM Caen
Vincent Le Goff	LB	French	31	2014/2015	Istres
Quentin Lecoeuche	LB	French	27	2017/2018	-
Samuel Loric	LB	French	21	2020/2021	-
Julien Laporte	CB	French	27	2019/2020	Clermont Foot
Thomas Fontaine	CB	Malagasy	30	2019/2020	Stade de Reims
Jérémy Morel	CB/LB	Malagasy	37	2020/2021	Stade Rennais
Loris Mouyokolo	CB	French	20	2021/2022	-
Igor Silva	RB	Brazilian	24	2021/2022	NK Osijek
Houboulang Mendes	RB	French	23	2018/2019	Stade Lavallois
Jérôme Hergault	RB	French	35	2019/2020	AC Ajaccio
Laurent Abergel	DM/CM	French	28	2019/2020	AS Nancy
Thomas Monconduit	DM/CM	French	30	2020/2021	Amiens SC
Fabien Lemoine	DM	French	34	2017/2018	Saint-Étienne
Enzo Le Fée	CM/AM	French	21	2019/2020	-
Quentin Boisgard	AM	French	24	2020/2021	Toulouse FC
Yoane Wissa	LW	DR Congolese	24	2017/2018	Angers SCO
Armand Laurienté	RW	French	22	2020/2021	Stade Rennais
Stéphane Diarra	RW	Ivorian	22	2020/2021	Le Mans
Terem Moffi	ST	Nigerian	22	2020/2021	KV Kortrijk
Adrian Grbic	ST	Austrian	25	2020/2021	Clermont Foot
Pierre-Yves Hamel	ST	French	27	2016/2017	-
Christophe Pelissier	Manager	French	55	2019/2020	Amiens SC
Loïc Féry	President	French	47	2009/2010	-



Form Guide

Season	Division	Position	Points
2020/2021	Ligue 1	4th	76
2019/2020	Ligue 1	7th	40
2018/2019	Ligue 1	3rd	72
2017/2018	Ligue 1	3rd	78
2016/2017	Ligue 1	4th	67

Likely XI



Olympique Lyonnais

Key Man: Lucas Paquetá

Arguably no signing exceeded expectations more than the former AC Milan man last season. Seen upon his arrival as another of Juninho's Brazilian follies, having become largely a flop with the Rossoneri following a promising start and a big money move, he took some time to get acclimated but soon proved his doubters wrong.

He initially played as a box-to-box midfielder, a more defensive role than what he is accustomed to. Nevertheless, the Brazilian took to it like a duck to water, breaking up play whilst also having enough class about him to turn a loose pass by the opposition into a chance for his side. A late-season move to a 4-2-3-1 by Rudi Garcia saw him deployed as a 10 to great effect, as he scored eight goals and added four assists in 2021 alone.

After a busy summer with Brazil, his fitness will likely need to be monitored closely in the season's early going but there's no reason to think that the former Flamengo man can't build on what was a fine first campaign in France.

SIGNING TO WATCH: PETER BOSZ

It may seem like something of a cop-out to select the team's manager here, but with only a pair of defenders (Damien Da Silva and Henrique) brought in for squad depth, the former Ajax and Dortmund boss is far more likely to impact the team's season than any additions to the playing staff. A man who is an inveterate disciple of Johan Cruyff, Bosz favours attacking football in extremis with an emphasis placed on ball retention, quick circulation and the ability to counter-press upon losing it. Lyon's attackers, stifled by the likes of Garcia and Bruno Génésio, seem to be enjoying life under Bosz - but the same can hardly be said for the team's defence if their pre-season results are anything to go on. If he can find the right balance (the returns of Paquetá and Bruno Guimarães will undoubtedly help), Lyon could yet spring a surprise or two this season.

SQUAD ANALYSIS

In the wake of the departures of their manager, as well as captain and leading scorer Memphis Depay, Lyon have a great opportunity under Bosz to refashion themselves as a team which plays a consistent style of football. This, rather than relying on individual brilliance to settle matches, as has been the case for much, if not all, of the Dutch international's tenure at the Groupama Stadium. Given the wealth of the team's academy and their smart purchases in recent years such as Paquetá, Guimarães, defender Jason Denayer, a side that is more focused on cohesion and interplay seems a better approach, as Depay's quality was unmatched by his teammates for the most part, often leaving both parties frustrated. The team have also brought Moussa Dembélé back into the fold and, while not as flash as his erstwhile teammate, he could yet flourish in Bosz's trigger-happy system, even to the point of being a dark horse for top scorer.

STRENGTHS

The team's quality in midfield is unmatched by any side outside of Paris Saint-Germain — in Paquetá, Guimarães, Maxence Caqueret and the seemingly rejuvenated Houssem Aouar, Bosz has a group with remarkable balance, talent, and depth, even if Thiago Mendes does end up being sold. Jeff Reine-Adélaïde could also be a useful piece provided he can return to his pre-injury best, and in the likes of Rayan Cherki, Islam Slimani, and Tino Kadwere, the attack, outside of Dembélé and Karl Toko Ekambi also has enviable depth. Anthony Lopes had a poor season last year, and could yet be unsettled by the Onana rumours, but has generally been a fine 'keeper, while Jason Denayer has been an unsung hero since joining the club.

WEAKNESSES

Left back was the team's primary issue last season, with Maxwel Cornet plugging the gap after playing well in last August's Champions' League final eight campaign. Cornet is a decent enough option, but there was little to be gained by keeping youngster Melvin Bard out of the team. Now, Bard is gone, and while Henrique is a specialist left back, he hardly tore up any trees in Brazil and is unlikely to provide Cornet with any meaningful level of competition. Central defence also could be problematic — for all of Denayer's quality, he is hardly the most fleet of foot, and in bringing in Da Silva to replace the departed Djamel Benlamri, or even to start ahead of Marcelo, the team hardly look suited to Bosz's desires to build play from the back and maintain calm in possession.

VERDICT

While it may seem cheap to gauge Lyon by what has been a busy preseason - in which they've missed their best defender in Denayer as well as Paquetá and Guimarães - it's clear that Bosz's methods have been taken up by the squad. What's not clear is whether the defence has the positional nous, pace, or ability to build play from the back necessary to successfully execute them. Like several other sides who could be in the mix for Europe (Nice, Montpellier), Lyon are sure to entertain, but whether or not they have the quality at the back to contend for the Champions League again is another story.

PREDICTED FINISH: 5th

SQUAD LIST

NAME	POSITION	NATIONALITY	AGE	AT CLUB SINCE	FORMER CLUB
Anthony Lopes	GK	Portuguese	30	2011/2012	-
Julian Pollersbeck	GK	German	26	2020/2021	Hamburg SV
Malcom Barcola	GK	Togolese	22	2021/2022	-
Henrique	LB	Brazilian	27	2021/2022	Vasco de Gama
Maxwel Cornet	LB/LW	Ivorian	24	2014/2015	FC Metz
Jason Denayer	CB	Belgian	26	2018/2019	Manchester City
Sinaly Diomandé	CB	Ivorian	20	2020/2021	-
Marcelo	CB	Brazilian	34	2017/2018	Besiktas
Damien Da Silva	CB	French	22	2021/2022	Stade Rennais
Castello Lukeba	CB	French	18	2021/2022	-
Léo Dubois	RB	French	26	2018/2019	FC Nantes
Malo Gusto	RB	French	18	2021/2022	-
Thiago Mendes	DM	Brazilian	29	2019/2020	Lille OSC
Bruno Guimarães	CM/DM	Brazilian	23	2019/2020	A. Paranense
Maxence Caqueret	CM	French	21	2018/2019	-
Houssem Aouar	CM/RW	French	23	2016/2017	-
Pape Cheikh	CM	Senegalese	23	2017/2018	Celta Vigo
Florent Da Silva	CM/RW	French	18	2021/2022	-
Habib Keïta	CM	Malian	19	2021/2022	-
Lucas Paquetá	CM/AM	Brazilian	23	2020/2021	AC Milan
Jeff Reine-Adélaïde	CM/AM	French	23	2019/2020	Angers SCO
Rayan Cherki	AM/LW	French	17	2019/2020	-
Moussa Dembélé	ST	French	25	2018/2019	Celtic
Karl Toko Ekambi	ST/RW	Cameroonian	28	2019/2020	Villarreal
Tino Kadewere	ST/RW	Zimbabwean	25	2019/2020	Le Havre
Islam Slimani	ST	Algerian	33	2020/2021	Leicester City
Lenny Pintor	ST	French	21	2018/2019	Stade Brestois
Peter Bosz	Manager	Dutch	57	2021/2022	B. Leverkusen
Jean-Michel Aulas	President	French	72	1987/1988	-



Olympique de Marseille

Key Man: Dimitri Payet

Payet, who has always come off as a player somewhat short of attention, or at least internal motivation, has looked thoroughly energised by the arrival of Jorge Sampaoli. After netting three goals and adding seven assists in 11 matches under the Argentine in last season's run-in, a stretch which saw l'OM pip Lens, Rennes, Montpellier and Metz to a Europa League spot, he looks just as driven on the evidence of the team's pre-season.

Form Guide

Season	Division	Position	Points
2020/2021	Ligue 1	5th	60
2019/2020	Ligue 1	2nd	56
2018/2019	Ligue 1	5th	61
2017/2018	Ligue 1	4th	77
2016/2017	Ligue 1	5th	62

Likely XI



A certain wariness is of course necessary here, as one can easily recall his incandescent start to his time as West Ham. However, given Payet's history with the club, he may well be able to sustain this, at least so long as his body permits ahead of his 35th birthday.

If Payet is on song and proving a good example to the team's cadre of youngsters, the sky is really the limit for this group, provided they can navigate what's likely to be a crowded fixture list owing to their European matches. If Payet can stay fit and finish with something on the order of 25 goals and assists combined, Marseille are in with a shout for the Champions' League places.

SIGNING TO WATCH: MATTEO GUENDOUZI

To say Guendouzi has had a star-crossed career to date would be an understatement. After leaving Lorient for a cut-rate fee owing to a dust-up with then manager Mickäel Landreau, he endured a rather up and down two years at Arsenal, seeming to regress at times before missing the Premier League's restart last year. A loan spell with Hertha Berlin was more productive, as he was afforded the type of tactical freedom there that he is more accustomed to when playing for France's youth teams. Capable of playing as a defensive midfielder, he has too often been miscast there when his long stride, physical style of play and sublime range of passing are better suited to a box-to-box role. At Marseille, Sampaoli looks set to play with a back three and Guendouzi will likely partner Boubacar Kamara in midfield, at least initially, or play as part of a three if Dimitri Payet is used as a support striker. However, his attack minded approach will no doubt be put to good use.

SQUAD ANALYSIS

It's been a challenge to keep up with all of Marseille's ins and outs this summer - or even which deals are loans and which are permanent - but it is hard to argue with most of the business Pablo Longoria has done, on paper at least. This was a squad that needed to get younger, hungrier and quicker, and even in the winter window or last year, the arrivals of players like Arkadiusz Milik and Pol Lirola underscored that aim. Players who flourished under Sampaoli were retained, but a huge corps of older players were let go in anticipation of the club's Europa League fixtures, with the target being a squad that would be, simply put, more hungry to play. While there may be some hand-wringing over such a radical set of changes, it's hard to argue with the profiles of most of the players or the excitement it's generated within the team's fan base - no small matter given what a cauldron the Vélodrome can be on its best nights.

STRENGTHS

Even as Duje Caleta-Car is rumoured to be off, with West Ham batting their eyes at the Croatian, the team's defence has an enviable amount of depth aided by the addition of William Saliba, a player who has proven his worth time and again in Ligue 1. Milik, while still not permanently a Marseille player, has all the class and instinct to lead the line, while the team's young midfielders, led by Kamara and Guendouzi, look an impressive bunch who should have enough coltish energy to succeed in Sampaoli's aggressive style of play.

WEAKNESSES

While Marseille have impressed in terms of the number of (mostly young) players that they've brought in (and there could yet be more) the brutal truth is that some of these lack the French language or familiarity with the league and could require a decent amount of time to settle in, no small caveat given that several are in only on loan deals. There will also be an immense amount of pressure on a player like Gerson, given the fee paid for him has been exceeded only by what the club paid to West Ham for Payet —if that pressure proves too much for this inexperienced side, things could easily go sideways.

VERDICT

Call it blind faith in Sampaoli, call it the glow of what was a very impressive pre-season and a decisive approach to the mercato, but the positivity surrounding Marseille makes it too difficult to bet against them, even as large swathes of their squad are unproven. With Europe in the mix, there will be enough playing time to satisfy a deep squad and the attacking talent that the team have should be more than enough to get results most weeks domestically. Provided Payet and Mandanda can continue to perform as they have to date under Sampaoli, Marseille should be firmly in the mix for the top three once more.

PREDICTED FINISH: 3rd

SQUAD LIST

NAME	POSITION	NATIONALITY	AGE	AT CLUB SINCE	FORMER CLUB
Pau López	GK	Spanish	26	2021/2022	AS Roma
Steve Mandanda	GK	French	36	2017/2018	Crystal Palace
Simon Ngapandouetnbu	GK	Cameroonian	18	2019/2020	-
Jordan Amavi	LB	French	27	2018/2019	Aston Villa
Duje Caleta-Car	CB	Croatian	24	2018/2019	RB Salzburg
William Saliba	CB	French	20	2021/2022	Arsenal
Leonardo Balerdi	CB	Argentine	22	2020/2021	Borussia Dortmund
Álvaro González	CB	Spanish	21	2019/2020	Villarreal
Luan Peres	CB/LB	Brazilian	27	2021/2022	Santos
Boubacar Kamara	CB/DM	French	21	2017/2018	-
Pape Gueye	CM/DM	French	22	2020/2021	Le Havre
Paolo Sciortino	DM	French	17	2021/2022	-
Mattéo Guendouzi	CM	French	22	2021/2022	-
Gerson	CM	Brazilian	24	2021/2022	Flamengo
Valentin Rongier	CM	French	26	2019/2020	FC Nantes
Ugo Bertelli	CM	French	18	2020/2021	-
Bilal Nadir	CM	French	17	2021/2022	OGC Nice
Franco Tongya	AM	Italian	19	2020/2021	Juventus
Luis Henrique	LW	Brazilian	19	2020/2021	Três Passos
Nemanja Radonjic	LW	Serbian	25	2018/2019	Red Star Belgrade
Dimitri Payet	LW/ST	French	34	2016/2017	West Ham United
Konrad de la Fuente	RW/LW	American	20	2021/2022	FC Barcelona
Cengiz Ünder	RW	Turkish	24	2021/2022	AS Roma
Salim Ben Saghir	RW	French	18	2021/2022	OGC Nice
Arkadiusz Milik	ST	Polish	27	2020/2021	SSC Napoli
Darío Benedetto	ST	Argentine	31	2019/2020	Boca Juniors
Bamba Dieng	ST	Senegalese	21	2021/2022	-
Jorge Sampaoli	Manager	Argentine	61	2020/2021	Boca Juniors
Pablo Longoria	President	Spanish	35	2020/2021	Valencia

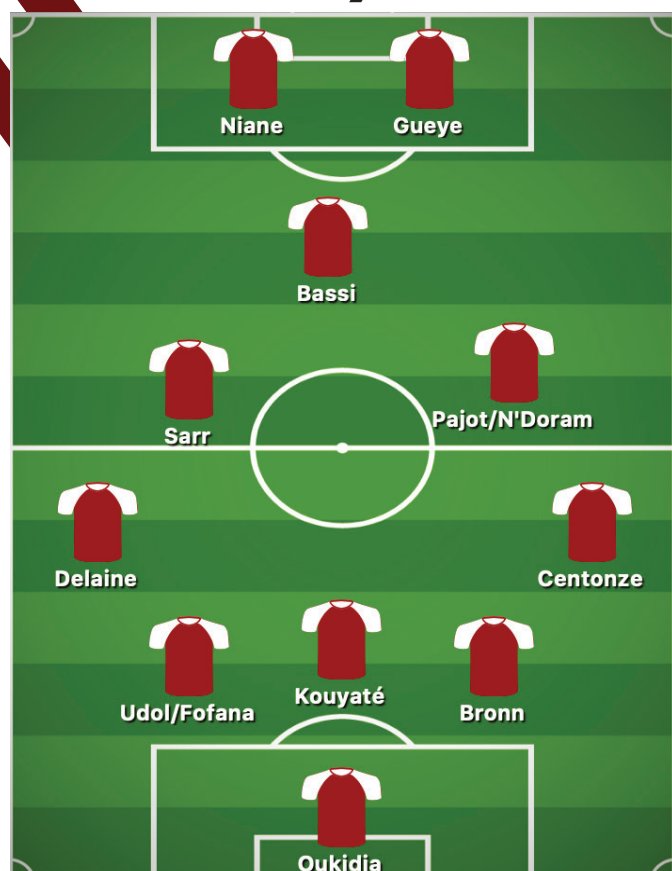
Fc Metz



Form Guide

Season	Division	Position	Points
2020/2021	Ligue 1	10th	47
2019/2020	Ligue 1	15th	34
2018/2019	Ligue 2	1st	81
2017/2018	Ligue 1	20th	26
2016/2017	Ligue 1	14th	43

Likely XI



FC Metz

Key Man: Ibrahima Niane

Niane's brilliant start to the season last year, scoring six goals in as many matches, looked to be a long-awaited realisation of the immense promise he had shown in scoring 11 goals as a 19-year-old in Ligue 2 in 2018/19. A figure that was achieved despite not being a regular starter, having played behind Habib Diallo.

It gave the club the confidence to eventually sell his fellow Senegalese forward to Strasbourg, allowing Niane to become the focal point of the team's attack. However, he was cruelly felled by a cruciate knee ligament injury just days after Diallo's exit, and those six goals would represent his year's total. He would make a return to the pitch before the close of the campaign, though, and looks well up to finally make good on that promise.

Still only 22, Niane is a rangy presence who is relatively quick and good in the air as well, making him the ideal outlet for the team's counter attacking style. If he could score 12 to 15 goals, Metz could be well on their way to another fine season, pending departures notwithstanding.

SIGNING TO WATCH: AMINE BASSI

With Farid Boulaya set to leave the club, Bassi, capped for Morocco at youth level and a player with more than 100 league appearances for Nancy despite still being 23, is his heir apparent. Joining from Metz's regional rival on a free, he struggled for playing time last year owing to a pair of absences enforced by first injury and then COVID-19, but impressed upon his return in April, even wearing the captain's armband for a handful of matches, notching three assists and three goals over the campaign's last eight matches. A slighter and more quicksilver presence than Boulaya, he should acclimate well tactically as well, having played in the same 3-4-1-2 system with Nancy. Adept from dead ball situations and on the counter as well, if he can come close to replacing Boulaya as the beating heart of the attack, Metz could again be in the mix for Europe.

SQUAD ANALYSIS

Last year, while Lille and even Lens may have surprised more than *Les Grenats* one would do well to remember that a challenging fixture list, coupled with a deep Coupe de France run, had more to do with the team falling short at the last than did any other factors. The team will lose Boulaya, as well as midfielder Victorien Angban and are likely to see the out of contract John Boye make his exit as well, but the team appear set to hold on to Fabien Centonze, whose meteoric rise has continued apace as he was arguably the division's best right back last season. Youngster Pape Sarr could also be on the move, but on the whole, Metz have looked sharp under Antonetti and will value continuity, having been undone last season by first the sale of Diallo and then a raft of injuries including to Diallo and Niane's Senegal teammate Opa Nguette, as well as a slow return to fitness from summer signing Vagner.

STRENGTHS

A criminally underrated manager despite an unimpressive spell at Lille prior to joining Metz, Antonetti is a manager who has proven time and again that he knows how to get the best out of a side and to be tactically flexible to suit his players — it's no coincidence that his having replaced Vincent Hognon in the dugout was the catalyst for the team's improved play from October onward. On the pitch, Centonze was brilliant last season, but a word is also necessary for teenage midfielder Pape Sarr as well as the defender Kiki Kouyaté, who impressed after arriving from Troyes in the summer.

WEAKNESSES

If Metz persist in playing with three at the back, which does appear to be the case, depth at centre back looks a glaring Achilles' heel. While John Boye is no longer a young man, the club have not moved to sign a like-for-like replacement, Matthieu Udol set to play on the left of a three alongside Bronn and Kouyaté. Udol is capable enough, but if one of that trio were to suffer injury, Mamadou Fofana is the only other option. Further forward, there are also doubts about how well Bassi will take to life in the top flight, despite his consistent play for Nancy.

VERDICT

Boulaya's loss and the (potential) departure of Boye will be keenly felt, but it's only fair to note that Antonetti achieved as much as he did last season with this side despite a raft of injury woes — in addition to Niane and Nguette, Kévin N'Doram, Matthieu Udol and Vincent Pajot all missed significant chunks of time. Better luck with injuries and further development from the team's youngsters, including Georges Mikautadze, a revelation on loan last season in Belgium's second division, should do just fine by Metz this season, even if another battle for a European spot likely seems a bridge too far.

PREDICTED FINISH: 10th

SQUAD LIST

NAME	POSITION	NATIONALITY	AGE	AT CLUB SINCE	FORMER CLUB
Alexandre Oukidja	GK	Algerian	33	2018/2019	RC Strasbourg
Marc-Aurèle Caillard	GK	French	27	2020/2021	EA Guingamp
Ousmane Ba	GK	Senegalese	19	2021/2022	-
Thomas Delaine	LB	French	29	2018/2019	Paris FC
Manuel Cabit	LB	Martiniquais	28	2019/2020	AC Ajaccio
Matthieu Udol	LB/CB	French	25	2015/2016	-
Dylan Bronn	CB	Tunisian	26	2019/2020	KAA Gent
Kiki Kouyaté	CB	Malian	24	2020/2021	ESTAC Troyes
Fabien Centonze	RB	French	25	2019/2020	RC Lens
Sofiane Alakouch	RB	French	23	2021/2022	Nîmes Olympique
Ernest Boahene	RB	Ghanaian	21	2020/2021	Rainbow FC
Pape Sarr	DM	Senegalese	18	2020/2021	Génération Foot
Habib Maïga	DM	Ivorian	25	2019/2020	Saint-Étienne
Mamadou Fofana	DM/CB	Malian	23	2018/2019	Alanyaspor
Kévin N'Doram	DM	French	25	2019/2020	AS Monaco
Vincent Pajot	DM/CM	French	20	2019/2020	SCO Angers
Boubacar Traoré	CM	Malian	19	2019/2020	AS Bamako
Warren Tchimbembé	RW/CM	French	23	2020/2021	ESTAC Troyes
Farid Boulaya	AM	Algerian	28	2018/2019	Girona
Amine Bassi	AM	Moroccan	23	2021/2022	AS Nancy
Opa Nguette	LW	Senegalese	27	2016/2017	Valenciennes
Cheikh Sabaly	LW	Senegalese	22	2018/2019	Génération Foot
Vagner	LW	Cape Verdean	25	2020/2021	Saint-Étienne
Lamine Gueye	RW/ST	Senegalese	23	2020/2021	Génération Foot
Papa Yade	ST	Senegalese	21	2019/2020	Génération Foot
Ibrahima Niane	ST	Senegalese	22	2017/2018	Génération Foot
Georges Mikautadze	ST	Georgian	20	2020/2021	-
Lenny Joseph	ST	French	20	2021/2022	Le Puy
Frédéric Antonetti	Manager	French	59	2018/2019	Lille OSC
Bernard Serin	President	French	71	2009/2010	-



Form Guide

Season	Division	Position	Points
2020/2021	Ligue 1	3rd	78
2019/2020	Ligue 1	9th	40
2018/2019	Ligue 1	17th	36
2017/2018	Ligue 1	2nd	80
2016/2017	Ligue 1	1st	95

Likely XI



AS Monaco

Key Man: Wissam Ben Yedder

While Ben Yedder had little impact in France's fortunes at this summer's European Championships, the striker's importance to his club can't be understated. Kevin Volland could also make a fair claim to this spot, as could young midfielder Aurélien Tchouaméni, should he be able to build on his compelling play last season.

But make no mistake, the engine that drives AS Monaco is Ben Yedder, with his incisive finishing, leadership and experience. Now leading his team into the Champions' League and to perhaps a more sustained run at the title, Ben Yedder will be eager to take his chance with both hands. Despite him being benched or taken off early by Niko Kovac frequently in mid-season, he was able to shake off this setback and finished the season with a career-best 20 goals. Only Kylian Mbappé scored more.

As his relationship with the versatile Volland continues to flourish, there's every chance that Ben Yedder could exceed those figures this season as the team builds on being last year's surprise package.

SIGNING TO WATCH: ALEXANDER NÜBEL

Nübel, understudy to Manuel Neuer at Bayern Munich, has joined the Principality side on a two-year loan deal. With top flight experience at Schalke, he is hardly callow, and he is also seen as a player with whom Kovac and sporting director Paul Mitchell are familiar given their own experience in German football. Benjamin Lecomte is a capable enough option, as his flirtation with the French national team shows, but for Monaco to realise a step forward, this position was one which badly needed an upgrade. That said, for all of Nübel's patent gifts, his lack of French and what will be a necessary adjustment to a new league could make this difficult, even if he has looked solid enough in pre-season. If he sparkles, the club could be title contenders, but more likely his play will be a slight improvement on that of Lecomte, and Monaco have success in balancing their league and European obligations.

SQUAD ANALYSIS

After a rather radical restructuring last summer, as a mass exodus of players saw the squad trimmed sharply, Monaco have had a much calmer window, shipping out a few spare parts (Benjamin Henrichs, Stevan Jovetic, Jorge) and bringing in a pair of promising young Germans in Ismail Jakobs and Nübel. While the impact that COVID-19 has had on the club's finances may have had something to do with this, the truth of the matter is that for Kovac and sporting director Paul Mitchell, the team's balance of youth and experience is more than sufficient to hope for progress, especially given how strongly the club finished the season. Nübel should be an upgrade on Benjamin Lecomte, and in Jakobs and Jean Lucas, there is also more positivity in both midfield and on the flanks, even if Caio Henrique will likely keep the German on the bench.

STRENGTHS

Kovac is the team's biggest strength without question. While his proclivity for tactical shifts was seen as tinkering in some quarters, Kovac's ability to rely on the class and finishing of Ben Yedder and Volland, as well as the duo of Youssouf Fofana and Tchouaméni in midfield gives him a more than capable spine. He also improved the team's fitness and was instrumental in the development of several of the club's younger players, chief among them Sofiane Diop. If he can coax similar improvements from the likes of Anthony Musaba and Jean Lucas, Monaco will continue to be a force.

WEAKNESSES

Goalkeeper was an issue at times last year, and while Nübel is a bonafide prospect, questions will linger about his ability to adapt to a new league and language, something which the German himself admitted in his official introduction. Depth and quality is an issue as well — in midfield, for example, the tandem of Fofana and Tchouaméni was impressive, but should one of them suffer a long-term injury, that could weigh heavily on the club. A similar issue remains in attack, as with Stevan Jovetic now gone the only credible deputies for Wissam Ben Yedder and Kevin Volland are the injury-prone Pietro Pellegri and new arrival Myron Boadu.

VERDICT

Monaco's play under Kovac last season flew under the radar to some extent — even as the team remained in contention for the title until a gutting late loss to Lyon, it was Lille who were labelled more of a surprise package, given Les Dogues' title. Now, with more expectation on the club, and the need to balance what is likely to be at least ten matches in Europe, there will be much more pressure on this still relatively young team. That, and the team's good fortune with injuries last season (only Golovin missed significant time among the team's regulars) could see a potential drop down the standings but, all things being well, they remain PSG's closest rival.

PREDICTED FINISH: 2nd

SQUAD LIST

NAME	POSITION	NATIONALITY	AGE	AT CLUB SINCE	FORMER CLUB
Benjamin Lecomte	GK	French	30	2019/2020	Montpellier HSC
Vito Mannone	GK	Italian	22	2020/2021	Reading
Radoslaw Majecki	GK	Polish	21	2019/2020	Legia Warsaw
Alexander Nübel	GK	German	24	2021/2022	Bayern Munich
Antonio Barreca	LB	Italian	26	2018/2019	Torino
Caio Henrique	LB	Brazilian	24	2020/2021	Atletico Madrid
Benoît Badiashile	CB	French	20	2018/2019	-
Axel Disasi	CB	French	23	2020/2021	Stade de Reims
Guillermo Maripán	CB	Chilean	27	2019/2020	Alaves
Strahinja Pavlovic	CB	Serbian	20	2020/2021	Partizan Belgrade
Christlain Matsima	CB	French	19	2020/2021	-
Jean Marcelin	CB	French	21	2019/2020	AJ Auxerre
Giulian Biancone	RB	French	21	2018/2019	-
Rubén Aguilar	RB	French	28	2019/2020	Montpellier HSC
Djibril Sidibé	RB	French	29	2016/2017	Lille OSC
Aurélien Tchouaméni	DM	French	21	2019/2020	Bordeaux
Jean-Eudes Aholou	DM	Ivorian	27	2018/2019	RC Strasbourg
Youssef Fofana	CM	French	22	2019/2020	RC Strasbourg
Cesc Fabregas	CM	Spanish	34	2018/2019	Chelsea FC
Jean Lucas	CM	Brazilian	23	2021/2022	Lyon
Enzo Millot	CM	French	10	2020/2021	-
Eliot Matazo	CM	Belgian	19	2020/2021	-
Aleksandr Golovin	CM/AM	Russian	25	2018/2019	CSKA Moscow
Sofiane Diop	AM	French	21	2018/2019	Stade Rennais
Keita Baldé	LW/RW	Senegalese	26	2017/2018	SS Lazio
Ismail Jakobs	LW/LB	German	21	2021/2022	FC Köln
Willem Geubbels	LW	French	20	2018/2019	Lyon
Gelson Martins	RW	Portuguese	26	2019/2020	Atletico Madrid
Gil Dias	RW	Portuguese	24	2015/2016	SC Braga
Anthony Musaba	RW	Dutch	20	2020/2021	NEC Nijmegen
Krépin Diatta	RW	Senegalese	22	2020/2021	Club Brugge
Wissam Ben Yedder	CF	French	30	2019/2020	Sevilla FC
Myron Boadu	CF	Dutch	20	2021/2022	AZ Alkmaar
Kevin Volland	CF	German	29	2020/2021	Bayer Leverkusen
Wilson Isidor	CF	French	20	2019/2020	-
Pietro Pellegri	CF	Italian	20	2017/2018	Genoa
Niko Kovac	Manager	Croatian	49	2020/2021	Bayern Munich
Dimitri Rybolovlev	President	Russian	53	2011/2012	-



Montpellier HSC

Key Man: Andy Delort

Form Guide

Season	Division	Position	Points
2020/2021	Ligue 1	8th	54
2019/2020	Ligue 1	8th	40
2018/2019	Ligue 1	6th	59
2017/2018	Ligue 1	10th	51
2016/2017	Ligue 1	15th	39

Likely XI



Like a fine wine, Andy Delort seems to get better with age. Derided as not being up to the task following a middling spell at Wigan, he has become an ever-more impressive presence with each season since his return to France, save a brief sojourn in Mexico.

His time in Toulouse may not have been exactly the stuff of legend, either, but Delort has shown that, playing for a manager who knows how to get the most out of his aerial ability, dogged pressing and inventive finishing, he is one of the league's best strikers, both in terms of his own goal return (15 in 30 matches last season) and his ability to create for others, having added nine assists last year.

He will have been frustrated at having come so close to a place in Europe in successive seasons, only to fall at the last, giving more than ample motivation for the season ahead. Under new boss Olivier Dall'Oglio, an attack-minded manager if ever there was one, his gifts will be appreciated to the fullest, further burnishing his reputation.

SIGNING TO WATCH: MAMADOU SAKHO

Sakho's itinerant career has brought him back to France some eight years after becoming an early casualty of the Qatari takeover at Paris Saint-Germain. While he is no longer playing at a Champions' League, or indeed international level - his last France cap having come nearly three years ago, Sakho still has looked a capable presence in England when fit. The caveat of fitness, though, is a big one, as Sakho failed to make thirty starts in any of his eight seasons in England and at 31 his ability to recover has been further diminished. For a club of Montpellier's size, he is worth a gamble but a note of caution should be sounded here, as he seems likely to be relied upon heavily, especially until Pedro Mendes returns from a cruciate injury. Signed on a three-year deal, Sakho has much to prove but should he be anything close to a success, Europe will beckon. The opposite could just as easily be true, however, even if the club are under no threat of relegation.

SQUAD ANALYSIS

Like almost every side outside of PSG, Monaco, Marseille and Nice, it's largely as you were for Montpellier, who cast off no small amount of experience in centre-backs Daniel Congré and Hilton, but retained the key elements of an attack that was one of the most enjoyable to watch in Ligue 1 last season. In addition to Delort, playing the archetypal centre forward role with aplomb, the wide players of Stéphy Mavididi and Gaëtan Laborde also proved vital, while the creativity of Florent Mollet and Téji Savanier, despite the latter being dogged by injuries and suspension to the tune of missing ten matches, made the midfield as equally compelling. While not as numerous as some of their competitors, the team's signings have also been interesting — in addition to Sakho, the former Chateauroux midfielder Léo Leroy looks a prospect, while the Brazilian centre-back Thuler, loaned from Flamengo, could play an important role, especially in the season's early going.

STRENGTHS

Delort, Laborde, Mavididi, Mollet, Savanier — Montpellier have a front three and midfield that are the envy of most sides in Ligue 1. Both in terms of their potency going forward and their ability to work hard as a team. There is no doubt that this team will score goals, in style and in quantity. Combining individual flair with a clearcut tactical approach, arguably no team was more enjoyable going forward last season and the appointment of Dall'Oglio is unlikely to change that. The fullbacks, Junior Sambia, Arnaud Souquet, Mihailo Ristic and Ambroise Oyongo, are also above average both in their ability to play complementary roles and in their depth.

WEAKNESSES

As electric as Delort and Laborde are in relation to each other on the pitch, their particular brand of play is so unique that were either of them to be unavailable for a long stretch of play, the team's attack would no doubt stutter, with promising but unproven youngster Elye Wahi the only real option on the flanks. The quality of the defence could be an issue as well. Mendes is a capable option but his return from injury is a long time coming, and if Thuler and Sakho or perhaps Nicolas Cozza comprise Dall'Oglio's first choice centre-back pairing for any length of time, the results could be ugly.

VERDICT

As entertaining as Montpellier were under Der Zakarian last year, there is no doubt that under Dall'Oglio they will do just as well going forward. At the back, though, there are more questions over Mendes' slow comeback and Thuler being promising but largely untested. La Paillade won't lack for goals but are also unlikely to come as close to Europe as they had in previous seasons. That said, should some of the usual suspects (Lyon?) struggle to gel or should the likes of Lens and Metz take a step backwards, this team do have the firepower to very much be back in the thick of things come spring time.

PREDICTED FINISH: 8th

SQUAD LIST

NAME	POSITION	NATIONALITY	AGE	AT CLUB SINCE	FORMER CLUB
Jonas Omlin	GK	Swiss	27	2020/2021	FC Basel
Dimitry Bertaud	GK	French	23	2017/2018	-
Matis Carvalho	GK	Portuguese	22	2019/2020	Toulouse FC
Ambroise Oyongo	LB	Cameroonian	30	2017/2018	Montréal FC
Nicolas Cozza	LB/CB	French	22	2017/2018	-
Pedro Mendes	CB	Portuguese	30	2019/2020	Stade Rennais
Mamadou Sakho	CB	French	31	2021/2022	Crystal Palace
Thuler	CB	Brazilian	22	2021/2022	Flamengo
Arnaud Souquet	RB	French	28	2019/2020	KAA Gent
Junior Sambia	RB/CM	French	24	2017/2018	Chamois Niort
Mathías Suárez	RB	Uruguayan	25	2018/2019	Defensor
Thibaut Vargas	RB	French	21	2019/2020	-
Léo Leroy	DM/CM	French	21	2021/2022	Chateauroux
Joris Chotard	DM	French	18	2019/2020	-
Téji Savanier	CM	French	29	2019/2020	Nîmes Olympique
Jordan Ferri	CM	French	29	2018/2019	Lyon
Mihailo Ristic	LW/LB	Serbian	25	2018/2019	FC Krasnodar
Florent Mollet	AM	French	29	2018/2019	FC Metz
Elye Wahi	LW/ST	French	18	2020/2021	-
Andy Delort	ST	Algerian	29	2018/2019	Toulouse FC
Gaëtan Laborde	ST/RW	French	27	2018/2019	Bordeaux
Stephy Mavididi	ST/LW	English	23	2020/2021	Juventus
Petar Skuletic	ST	Serbian	31	2019/2020	Genclerbirliği
Olivier Dall'Oglio	Manager	French	57	2021/2022	Stade Brestois
Laurent Nicollin	President	French	48	2016/2017	-



Form Guide

Season	Division	Position	Points
2020/2021	Ligue 1	18th	40
2019/2020	Ligue 1	13th	37
2018/2019	Ligue 1	12th	48
2017/2018	Ligue 1	9th	52
2016/2017	Ligue 1	7th	51

Likely XI



FC Nantes

Key Man: Randal Kolo Muani

Forwards Ludovic Blas and Moses Simon may have more of a creative influence on the way that Antoine Kombouaré wants his team to play, but it will be down to Kolo Muani, who impressed many at the Olympics on the back of a fine second half to last season, to apply the finishing touch to their service.

While not an out-and-out striker (he played mostly off the left wing with France's Olympic side), Kolo Muani's pace, reading of the game and ability with the ball at his feet make him dangerous on the counter or playing off a more conventional target man. With the sale of Imran Louza to Watford, the team lacks much in the way of central creativity.

To remedy this, Kombouaré is likely to set his team up in a 4-4-2, with Kolo Muani partnering Kalifa Coulibaly or Renaud Emond. If he can continue to show the dynamic and instinctive play that have been the hallmarks of his game over the last nine months, Nantes should easily avoid the relegation scrap.

SIGNING TO WATCH: WYLAN CYPRIEN

A revelation at Lens, Cyprien seemed to have taken the next step with some incredibly impressive displays for Claude Puel's Nice teams a few years back, to the extent that some even saw him as having an outside shot to play for France in Russia. An ACL injury soon derailed those hopes. Since, he has toured Italy where he struggled for playing time at Parma as the team were relegated. Now back in France, he is only a couple seasons removed from a decent 2019/20 campaign and, while the Les Bleus squad is more of a pipe dream than ever, his dynamism and goalscoring threat could make a real difference in replacing Louza, even if he is not as technically gifted. He may not be given as long a leash as with Les Aiglons but playing alongside Andrei Giron to he will do much to balance the relationship between attack and defence.

SQUAD ANALYSIS

Nantes, like many clubs in France, have been hamstrung by both COVID-19 and the collapse of the LFP's television agreement with Mediapro last season. As such, while they have sold the talented midfielder Louza, Nantes' only inbound transfer is Cyprien, who is not a like-for-like swap. However, he has always been an above-average midfielder in France, despite having fallen out with Patrick Vieira at Nice and struggled with injury. The team will thus rely on Cyprien and a sense of continuity to keep their place in Ligue 1 and in the latter, they look well-positioned with the likes of Nicolas Pallois, Andrei Giron to, Alban Lafont and Abdoulaye Touré being solid options with plenty of experience. The team is far from young, though, and is lacking depth in key positions. An injury to Lafont or Blas could seriously dent Les Canaris' hopes of survival. Their fortunes will mainly rest with Kombouaré, then - there is enough talent here for survival, but how he uses it will determine by how much.

STRENGTHS

In Kolo Muani and Blas, Nantes have two of the more underrated attacking talents in the French game, and in goal Lafont (still just 22!) is an above-average goalkeeper who will be eager to stake his claim for a place in the conversation for the national team squad as Hugo Lloris and Steve Mandanda are unlikely to continue past next winter's World Cup. In Pallois and Giron to, the team have combative players whose aggressive play and determination will serve their younger teammates well. Cyprien, if he is anywhere close to his best, will be an important component in midfield, even if one wonders whether playing him in a two with Giron to will weigh on him too heavily.

WEAKNESSES

Two things come immediately to mind when assaying Nantes' potential weak points, or perhaps two-and-a-half if pushed. The first, as it is for so many teams in lower-to-mid-table Ligue 1, is the lack of a proven goalscorer. Kolo Muani's fine displays this summer aside, he is not really an out-and-out striker. The second is a lack of depth, particularly in goal and at centre-back. Pallois is getting no younger and, while Giron to can of course drop back, the team lack convincing options behind the Frenchman and Jean-Charles Castelet to. Kombouaré's ability, or lack thereof, to build on what was a decent end to last season will make all the difference.

VERDICT

Nantes have been the very definition of a basketcase club under the stewardship of Waldemar Kita, who is now reviled by supporters. For once, however, the mercurial owner has stood pat, more or less, with Cyprien and Louza the only major ins and outs. Given the churn of managers and players at most other clubs this summer, coupled with a lack of buying power on the part of many, that may just be enough to see Nantes avoid the bottom two particularly if the likes of Kolo Muani can kick on.

PREDICTED FINISH: 18th

SQUAD LIST

NAME	POSITION	NATIONALITY	AGE	AT CLUB SINCE	FORMER CLUB
Alban Lafont	GK	French	22	2019/2020	AC Fiorentina
Rémy Descamps	GK	French	25	2021/2022	RSC Chareloi
Denis Petric	GK	Serbian	33	2019/2020	EA Guingamp
Lucas Bonelli	GK	French	18	2021/2022	-
Charles Traoré	LB	Malian	29	2018/2019	ESTAC Troyes
Andrei Girotto	CB/DM	Brazilian	29	2017/2018	Tombense
Jean-Charles Castelletto	CB	Cameroonian	26	2020/2021	Stade Brestois
Nicolas Pallois	CB	French	33	2017/2018	G. de Bordeaux
Molla Wagué	CB	Malian	30	2019/2020	Udinese
Fábio	RB/LB	Brazilian	31	2018/2019	Middlesborough
Sébastien Corchia	RB	French	30	2020/2021	Sevilla
Dennis Appiah	RB	Ghanaian	20	2019/2020	Anderlecht
Abdoulaye Touré	DM	French	27	2014/2015	-
Pedro Chirivella	DM	Spanish	24	2020/2021	Liverpool FC
Wylan Cyprien	DM/CM	French	26	2021/2022	Parma
Samuel Moutoussamy	CM	French	24	2017/2018	-
Ludovic Blas	AM/RW	French	23	2019/2020	EA Guingamp
Roli Pereira Da Sa	AM	French	24	2019/2020	Paris SG
Moses Simon	LW/CF	Nigerian	26	2019/2020	Levante
Anthony Limbombe	LW/RW	Belgian	27	2018/2019	Club Brugge
Marcus Coco	RW	French	25	2019/2020	EA Guingamp
Abdoul Kader Bamba	RW	French	27	2019/2020	Le Mans
Gor Manvelyan	ST	French	19	2021/2022	-
Randal Kolo Muani	ST/LW	French	22	2017/2018	-
Jean-Kévin Augustin	ST	French	24	2020/2021	-
Kalifa Coulibaly	ST	Malian	29	2017/2018	KAA Gent
Renaud Emond	ST	Belgian	29	2019/2020	Standard Liège
Bridge Ndilu	ST	French	21	2019/2020	Stade Lavallois
Quentin Merlin	ST	French	19	2021/2022	-
Antoine Komboauré	Manager	French	57	2020/2021	Toulouse FC
Waldemar Kita	President	Polish	68	2007/2008	Lausanne



OGC Nice

Key Man: Kasper Dolberg

Form Guide

Season	Division	Position	Points
2020/2021	Ligue 1	9th	52
2019/2020	Ligue 1	6th	41
2018/2019	Ligue 1	7th	56
2017/2018	Ligue 1	8th	54
2016/2017	Ligue 1	3rd	78

Likely XI



It's certainly tempting to put Amine Gouiri in this spot after a brilliant maiden campaign from the former Lyon man at the Allianz Riviera. But Kasper Dolberg, despite a frustrating domestic season, showed his quality with Denmark this summer, scoring three goals to propel them to a surprise semi-final spot at EURO 2020.

That he was even included after a tumultuous season which included a home invasion, contracting COVID-19 and missing a month with appendicitis speaks volumes of his talent. Never a player who wears his heart on his sleeve, the former Ajax man had managed 11 goals in the season prior and, barring a late sale, will be looked to by Christophe Galtier to lead the line with a physical yet mobile presence not too dissimilar to Burak Yilmaz for the coach's title-winning Lille.

If Dolberg responds well to Galtier's methods, Nice, who aren't playing European football, will be hoping for a top six finish at the least, and could even be in with a shout at the top three should some of the usual suspects evince a level of dysfunction.

SIGNING TO WATCH: CHRISTOPHE GALTIER

Nice's aggressive snapping up of young players this summer has definitely caught the eye, and one might expect Jean-Clair Todibo or Calvin Stengs to take this spot, but that would be folly given everything that Galtier has achieved in French football over the last decade. During his career, he has reached the Europa League consistently with a dogged Saint-Étienne side to a complete reinvention of Lille and had Les Dogues playing sound yet potent football on the way to a title. Galtier has shown an uncanny ability to prolong the lifespan of veteran players (Nice captain Dante may benefit here) while also improving his lot of young attackers (Nice's Gouiri, Stengs, and Justin Kluivert prime candidates this season), making him an ideal man to lead Jim Ratcliffe's INEOS funded project. Patience will have to be exercised, of course, given the turnover from last summer and the youth of the squad, but by this point one would be foolish to bet against Galtier as he takes on this latest challenge.

SQUAD ANALYSIS

With an average age of just 23.4, Nice have the second youngest squad in the league after Marseille, who will retain the captain's armband as he returns from an ACL injury. Nice's summer net spend is pushing 20m, but it is hard to argue with their approach. Most of their signings have a modicum of experience and, while missing out on William Saliba was frustrating, the likes of Stengs, Kluivert, and Pablo Rosario seem capable replacements, or perhaps even upgrades. Add in a fine, if underrated, goalkeeper in Walter Benítez and a full season of fitness from the likes of Dante, Youcef Atal, and Dolberg as well as freedom from the Europa League, which had undermined the team's start to last season, and Les Aiglons look a potent if somewhat untested group.

STRENGTHS

Again, Galtier's managerial nous will be crucial to anything that the club achieve this season, but he will also rest easy in knowing that despite the youth of his squad, he can rely on the veteran presences of Dante and Benítez, a necessary counterweight to the rest of the team's combination of inexperience and lack of familiarity with Ligue 1. The attack, spearheaded by Dolberg and ably aided by Gouiri and (likely) Stengs should also thrill, and in Hassane Kamara and Atal, the team have a fine pair of full-backs. While midfield is a bit of a question mark, there is also good depth there, something which could be crucial to Galtier finding his best eleven.

WEAKNESSES

Midfield, with the departure of last season's only real ball progressor in Pierre Lees-Melou and Morgan Schniederlin another year older, looks a bit unsteady. Mario Lemina may regain his previous level and Alexis Claude-Maurice looked a capable option as part of a three last season, but the truth is that doubts abound about too many of the team's players in this position. Few of them have had much experience either being consistent starters, or indeed in French football. Depth at goalkeeper, with Yoan Cardinale having left the club, could also be an issue, while some players may chafe at a lack of playing time, even if that is something that Galtier seemed to handle well in his time at Lille.

VERDICT

Nice will be a fun watch this season, but in some ways this represents Galtier's toughest test yet. At his previous stops, he was forced to make do on a budget (Lille's net spend was positive throughout his time there), but here the expectations will be higher, despite his team's youth. Ratcliffe will surely be patient with Galtier but there will likely be some speed bumps on the way to what is almost certain to be an improvement on last year's muddling ninth place finish. Much will depend on the team's fitness and individuals' ability to absorb playing in a new league and Galtier's methods, but it seems foolish to rule Les Aiglons out of anything, even potentially the top three.

PREDICTED FINISH: 6th

SQUAD LIST

NAME	POSITION	NATIONALITY	AGE	AT CLUB SINCE	FORMER CLUB
Walter Benítez	GK	Argentine	28	2016/2017	Quilmes
Marcin Bulka	GK	Polish	21	2021/2022	Paris SG
Teddy Boulhendi	GK	French	20	2020/2021	-
Hassane Kamara	LB	Ivorian	27	2020/2021	Stade de Reims
Melvin Bard	LB	French	20	2021/2022	Lyon
Robson Bambu	CB	Brazilian	23	2020/2021	A. Paranense
Jean-Clair Todibo	CB	French	21	2020/2021	FC Barcelona
Dante	CB	Brazilian	37	2016/2017	Wolfsburg
Flavius Daniliuc	CB	Austrian	20	2020/2021	Bayern Munich
Youssef Atal	RB/RW	Algerian	25	2018/2019	KV Kortrijk
Jordan Lotomba	RB	Swiss	22	2020/2021	Young Boys
Mario Lemina	DM/CM	Gabonese	27	2021/2022	Southampton
Morgan Schneiderlin	DM	French	31	2020/2021	Everton
Khéphren Thuram	CM	French	20	2019/2020	AS Monaco
Pablo Rosario	CM/DM	Dutch	24	2021/2022	PSV Eindhoven
Alexis Trouillet	CM	French	20	2019/2020	Stade Rennais
Hicham Boudaoui	CM	Algerian	21	2019/2020	AC Paradou
Ihsan Sacko	AM/LW	French	24	2018/2019	RC Strasbourg
Alexis Claude-Maurice	LW	French	23	2019/2020	FC Lorient
Pedro Brazão	LW/RW	Portuguese	18	2020/2021	-
Justin Kluivert	LW	Dutch	22	2021/2022	AS Roma
Calvin Stengs	RW	Dutch	22	2021/2022	AS Alkmaar
Dan Ndoye	RW	Swiss	20	2019/2020	Lausanne
Kasper Dolberg	ST	Danish	23	2019/2020	Ajax
Myziane Maolida	ST/LW	French	22	2018/2019	Lyon
Amine Gouiri	ST/RW	French	21	2020/2021	Lyon
Christophe Galtier	Manager	French	54	2021/2022	Lille OSC
Jean-Pierre Rivère	President	French	63	2019/2020	-



Paris Saint-Germain

Key Man: Kylian Mbappé

Form Guide

Season	Division	Position	Points
2020/2021	Ligue 1	2nd	82
2019/2020	Ligue 1	1st	68
2018/2019	Ligue 1	1st	91
2017/2018	Ligue 1	1st	93
2016/2017	Ligue 1	2nd	87

Likely XI



While it reflects poorly, to some degree, on both player and club that Mbappé hasn't either expressed his desire to leave or signed an extension, the team's board still projects confidence that he will re-sign. It's that albatross then, rather than predicting whether or not he will win another scoring title that makes him the ideal choice for this category.

PSG have enough talent with or without Mbappé on song and motivated to win Ligue 1 at a canter, but if he is unhappy or frustrated over his future he could be a bad influence in the dressing room. While he professes to be happy enough at his hometown club, the spectre of Real Madrid continues to loom, and a recent sale of stake in La Liga could be enough for *Los Blancos* to prepare the sort of contract that might entice Mbappé to wait out this season and depart next summer on a free.

As unlikely as that situation seems, given PSG are no slouches themselves financially, until the situation is resolved, it will prove an unpleasant distraction.

SIGNING TO WATCH: ACHRAF HAKIMI

Georginio Wijnaldum will add creativity, drive and maybe even the odd goal from midfield, and Sergio Ramos and Gianluigi Donnarumma will do much to ratchet up the pressure in terms of competition for places but Hakimi is a seemingly perfect purchase. Despite being young enough, at 22, to potentially have sell-on value, he is also a proven commodity, having impressed for both Borussia Dortmund and Inter Milan over recent seasons. Lightning quick, a skillful dribbler and unafraid to cut inside and take on a shot when he feels the need, Hakimi is the world class right-back that has so often been the missing piece for PSG in the Qatari era. If pre-season is anything to go by, he looks properly motivated and ready to terrorise Ligue 1 defences. His all-out attacking style may cause friction if not properly managed on the biggest occasions but he will no doubt be a joy to watch across the months to come in France.

SQUAD ANALYSIS

Comfortably the most active of Europe's big clubs in the transfer market this summer, PSG worked quickly and decisively to identify areas of need within the squad and seek to fill them. This single-mindedness, coming off of the back of extensions for Mauricio Pochettino and Neymar in the last six months, show a club that is focused, motivated, and ready to take the proverbial next step, even as their performance on Europe's biggest stage has continued to improve. Motivated as well by losing the title to Lille last season, the team should also approach their domestic matches with more steel-eyed determination. When players like Mbappé, Neymar and the perpetually underrated Ángel Di María are at their effervescent best, this team will be a joy to watch for the neutral, even as some would lament the hegemonic nature of the QSI project.

STRENGTHS

Two of the world's best five players in attack, two of the world's best goalkeepers, a player who looks set to be the next great right-back, plenty of experience at the highest level throughout the squad, and all of this under the charge of a manager who facilitated regular overachieving for Tottenham. Pochettino certainly took some stick for letting the league title slip from the team's grasp and being soundly beaten by Manchester City in the Champions' League but, with a fully fit and motivated squad, we should see the best from both coach and team this year. Even if there is no drama to the title race, this may just be the year that PSG arrive as a bonafide "big club" rather than a wealthy interloper.

WEAKNESSES

Let me get back to you on that? In all seriousness, there is little to quibble with in assaying the squad. If Juan Bernat can't hit the ground running, the departure of Mitchell Bakker leaves the team with a combination of Layvin Kurzawa and Abdou Diallo as options at left-back, and while the pair are virtual opposites in terms of their styles of play, they can do a job through the opening weeks of the season until the Spaniard is back to his best. The squad is somewhat bloated, to be sure, and it might be nice to see another departure or two for the sake of balance (Julian Draxler?) but even that is nitpicking *in extremis*.

VERDICT

It would take a shocking chain of events for Paris not to win the league — this edition of the team is as deep, balanced, and capable going forward as any in the Qatari era. Their summer signings have addressed areas of need rather than being mere window dressing attacking players, and in the likes of Ramos and Wijnaldum, the team have proven winners who can help them make the next step in Europe. Barring internal unrest, this team could put up record numbers to a degree that the best sides of the mid-2010s, during Zlatan Ibrahimovic's tenure with the club, did. Who knows, by the time you read this, a certain Argentinian forward may have joined the mix.

PREDICTED FINISH: 1st

SQUAD LIST

NAME	POSITION	NATIONALITY	AGE	AT CLUB SINCE	FORMER CLUB
Gianluigi Donnarumma	GK	Italian	22	2021/2022	AC Milan
Keylor Navas	GK	Costa Rican	34	2019/2020	Real Madrid
Sergio Rico	GK	Spanish	27	2020/2021	Sevilla
Alexandre Letellier	GK	French	30	2020/2021	US Orléans
Juan Bernat	LB	Spanish	28	2018/2019	Bayern Munich
Layvin Kurzawa	LB	French	28	2015/2016	AS Monaco
Abdou Diallo	LB/CB	Senegalese	25	2019/2020	Borussia Dortmund
Presnel Kimpembe	CB	French	25	2015/2016	-
Marquinhos	CB	Brazilian	27	2013/2014	AS Roma
Sergio Ramos	CB	Spanish	35	2021/2022	Real Madrid
Timothee Pembélé	CB	French	18	2020/2021	-
Thilo Kehrer	CB/RB	German	24	2018/2019	Schalke 04
Achraf Hakimi	RB	Moroccan	22	2021/2022	Inter Milan
Colin Dagba	RB	French	22	2018/2019	-
Danilo Pereira	DM/CB	Portuguese	29	2020/2021	FC Porto
Leandro Paredes	DM/CM	Argentine	27	2018/2019	Zenit St. Petersburg
Idrissa Gueye	DM/CM	Senegalese	31	2019/2020	Everton
Marco Verratti	CM	Italian	28	2012/2013	Pescara
Georginio Wijnaldum	CM	Dutch	30	2021/2022	Liverpool
Rafinha	CM/AM	Brazilian	28	2020/2021	FC Barcelona
Ander Herrera	CM	Spanish	31	2019/2020	Manchester United
Eric Dina Ébimbé	CM/RW	French	20	2019/2020	-
Xavi Simons	CM	Dutch	18	2020/2021	-
Bandiougou Fadiga	AM	French	20	2020/2021	-
Edouard Michut	AM	French	18	2021/2022	-
Neymar	LW/AM	Brazilian	29	2017/2018	FC Barcelona
Julian Draxler	LW/CM	German	27	2016/2017	VfL Wolfsburg
Pablo Sarabia	RW/LW	Spanish	29	2019/2020	Sevilla
Ángel Di María	RW/LW	Argentine	33	2015/2016	Manchester United
Kylian Mbappé	ST/RW	French	22	2017/2018	AS Monaco
Mauro Icardi	ST	Argentine	28	2019/2020	Inter Milan
Arnaud Kalimuendo	ST	French	19	2020/2021	-
Mauricio Pochettino	Manager	Argentine	49	2020/2021	Tottenham
Nasser Al-Khelaifi	President	Qatari	47	2011/2012	-



Stade de Reims

Key Man: *El Bilal Touré*

Form Guide

Season	Division	Position	Points
2020/2021	Ligue 1	14th	42
2019/2020	Ligue 1	5th	41
2018/2019	Ligue 1	8th	55
2017/2018	Ligue 2	1st	88
2016/2017	Ligue 2	7th	55

Likely XI



Still just 19, Touré burst onto the scene like a rocket for Reims, making his debut in February of 2020 with three goals in seven appearances. Looking the ideal complement to the now-departed Boulaye Dia, his pace and deceptive strength made him an ideal foil for the Senegalese, also suiting the club's desire to play on the counter.

COVID-19 would cut that fine start short, but he appeared to have hardly lost a step as he registered a goal and an assist in a draw against Monaco to kick off last season. Further success was not forthcoming, though, and as 2020 ended he was resigned to making the odd cameo appearance, finishing the season with just four goals in 33 appearances.

Having refused to train this pre-season, he has been more of a distraction than anything else, though, even as the club's hierarchy have emphasised the unlikely nature of his departure. If Touré can show what caught the eye some eighteen months ago, he may do more to see a transfer sanctioned come next summer than his current display of petulance might do this window.

SIGNING TO WATCH: ANDREAW GRAVILLON

Gravillon had an itinerant spell in Italy since joining Inter Milan, failing to really make an impression anywhere and making just two appearances in the Italian top flight, both for bottom side Benevento. His return to France last season marked a change for the Guadeloupe-born defender, as his mobility and energy became a key reason for Lorient staving off relegation under Christophe Pélissier. A coltish player whose style could use some refinement, the potential for Yunis Abdelhamid to act as a mentor both on and off the pitch is ideal, as is the complementary style of the two players. Decision-making in the tackle was at times a problem for Gravillon last season (see his red card against PSG) but he may provide stiff competition for Wout Faes or slot in alongside the Belgian as part of a back three. He also looked far more comfortable playing in France than he had in Italy, and whether he ends up at Reims long-term or not, this looks a canny buy for the Champagne side.

SQUAD ANALYSIS

It's largely as you were for Reims save the departures of Dia and David Guion. The loss of an inspirational manager and the team's leading scorer would be hard to overcome for any side in a normal season but Reims, like many in France, are hamstrung financially and are largely unable to improve their lot in the transfer market. Gravillon is a canny signing, but a more proven attacking presence would be ideal before the season starts in earnest — might an out of contract forward like Valère Germain or Nicolas De Préville be an option? On the bench, incoming coach Óscar García seems an odd choice to lead the team—he has had past success but his battles with the board at Saint-Étienne, followed by his early exit, will have rankled. Nor does his tactical approach seem to be suited to getting the best out of a club who played with a hammer-and-tongs style under Guion.

STRENGTHS

Goalkeeper Predrag Rajkovic, should the club be able to retain his services, will be looking to get back to his best and is an above-average Ligue 1 'keeper if he is in form. Defensive leader Yunis Abdelhamid is getting no younger but remains an inspirational presence in defence and looks an ideal mentor for Gravillon. Elsewhere, although the midfield is solid if unexciting outside of Mathieu Cafaro, the development of a cadre of intriguing young players in attack - including winger Nathanaël Mbuku who shone in flashes last season - bears watching, having succeeded in a relatively negative side under Guion..

WEAKNESSES

With Arbër Zeneli again injured and Valon Berisha having largely flopped since his arrival last summer, Reims will struggle for a creative influence from their midfield, even if it remains tactically sound. Goals could be a problem as well. Outside Dia no player found the back of the net more than four times last season. Touré is expected to prosper in a larger role, but it could be a long season should he not come good. Discipline was an issue last season as well, the team's bid to achieve consistency was too often undermined by suspensions.

VERDICT

Reims' success under Guion was nothing less than miraculous, as they reached Europe for the first time in more than a generation. But with him and Dia having left and Garcia's style of football seemingly ill-suited for the tools at his disposal, it's hard to see this season being anything but a relegation scrap for the Champagne side. The development of youngsters like Touré, Mbuku and Kutesa is worth watching, but little else about this team is likely to appeal to the neutral, barring a flurry of late activity in the transfer market.

PREDICTED FINISH: 17th

SQUAD LIST

NAME	POSITION	NATIONALITY	AGE	AT CLUB SINCE	FORMER CLUB
Predrag Rajkovic	GK	Serbian	25	2019/2020	Maccabi Tel Aviv
Yehvann Diouf	GK	French	21	2019/2020	ESTAC Troyes
Nicolas Penneteau	GK	French	40	2021/2022	RSC Chareloi
Ghislain Konan	LB	Ivorian	25	2018/2019	V. Guimarães
Wout Faes	CB	Belgian	23	2019/2020	KV Oostende
Andreaw Gravillon	CB	Guadeloupean	23	2021/2022	Inter Milan
Yunis Abdelhamid	CB	Moroccan	33	2017/2018	Dijon FCO
Logan Costa	CB	French	20	2020/2021	-
Mamadou Mbow	CB	Senegalese	21	2021/2022	-
Thomas Foket	RB	Belgian	26	2018/2019	KAA Gent
Fodé Doucouré	RB	Malian	20	2020/2021	-
Sambou Sissoko	RB	French	22	2018/2019	Tours FC
Marshall Muntesi	DM/CB	Zimbabwean	25	2019/2020	Orlando Pirates
Dion Lopy	DM	Senegalese	19	2020/2021	-
Moreto Cassamá	DM	Bissau Guinean	23	2018/2019	FC Porto
Xavier Chavalerin	CM	French	20	2017/2018	Red Star
Valon Berisha	CM	Kosovan	28	2020/2021	SS Lazio
Mathieu Cafaro	AM/LW	French	24	2017/2018	Toulouse FC
Ilan Kebbal	AM	French	23	2020/2021	-
Arbër Zeneli	LW	Kosovan	26	2018/2019	SC Herenveen
Nathanaël Mbuku	LW	French	19	2019/2020	-
Moussa Doumbia	LW	Malian	26	2018/2019	FK Rostov
Billal Brahimi	LW	French	21	2021/2022	-
Dereck Kutesa	RW	Swiss	23	2019/2020	FC Saint Gallen
Hugo Ekitike	RW	French	19	2021/2022	-
Alexis Flips	RW	French	21	2020/2021	-
El Bilal Touré	ST	Malian	19	2019/2020	Afrique Football Elite
Kaj Sierhuis	ST	Dutch	23	2019/2020	Ajax
Fraser Hornby	ST	Scottish	21	2020/2021	Everton
Anastasios Donis	ST/RW	Greek	24	2019/2020	VfB Stuttgart
Óscar García	Manager	Spanish	48	2021/2022	Celta Vigo
Jean-Pierre Caillot	President	French	60	2004/2005	-



Form Guide

Season	Division	Position	Points
2020/2021	Ligue 1	6th	58
2019/2020	Ligue 1	3rd	50
2018/2019	Ligue 1	10th	52
2017/2018	Ligue 1	5th	58
2016/2017	Ligue 1	9th	50

Likely XI



Stade Rennais

Key Man: Eduardo Camavinga

Camavinga, darling of Football Manager players and hipsters around the world, took what was widely adjudged to have been a major step backwards on the pitch last season. His poor form was unlikely to have been helped by the departure of Julien Stéphan, the manager who gave the precocious midfielder his chance in the first team, but he now faces a more strident challenge with the departure of partner Steven Nzonzi. The former World Cup winner's physical presence, metronomic passing and surfeit of experience made him an ideal "tutor" for the teenager.

Now, Camavinga, who had played a box-to-box role in his best moments, is likely to be tasked with a more defensive role. He clearly has the tools to handle it, but is unlikely to become a "destroyer" type than more of a constructive presence who can both win the ball and break the lines on the counter. Jonas Martin has also played this role in the past, and he could offer a bit more freedom to Camavinga but, for the moment, Génésio seems wedded to the idea of his midfield being a school of hard knocks, and only time will tell vis-a-vis the wisdom of that decision.

SIGNING TO WATCH: KAMALDEEN SULEMANA

Another summer, another livewire teenage winger. After bringing in Jérémy Doku last season, Rennes have plumped for the 19-year-old Ghanaian international forward Sulemana from Nordsjaelland. Sulemana will provide balance to the side, playing on the left while Doku operates on the opposite flank. He is a rather different player, being more of a goal threat and more direct overall in comparison to the Belgian, who is given to run opponents ragged with his pace and skill. That's not to say that Sulemana is lacking in that regard, only that he offers something different, and that his scoring acumen can hopefully serve to lessen the burden on the team's corps of strikers. In terms of raw numbers, Sulemana also contributed eight assists last season and, with Clément Grenier having departed this summer, the team could also do with more creativity, making his purchase a doubly clever one.

SQUAD ANALYSIS

Rennes are one of a very few sides to have spent this summer, bringing in both Sulemana and the highly rated young centre back Loïc Badé from Lens. Badé showed a preternatural degree of composure last season, and he will more than likely be an upgrade on Damien Da Silva. The loss of Nzonzi could yet sting, as it remains a matter of conjecture as to whether or not Camavinga is capable of being a defensive midfielder full time. However, Bruno Génésio and the club's hierarchy may view the situation as a case of the best defence being a good attack, a sign that French football continues to shake off its reputation as being an overly defensive league. While a Champions' League place is unlikely, Rennes should push Lyon and Nice hard for the top six, and also have the depth necessary to make a splash in the Europa Conference League.

STRENGTHS

The team's wide players, led by Sulemana and Doku, should be thrilling to watch, and in Tait and Bourigeaud, the team also have players who, while they may go under the radar, are no less individually gifted than their younger teammates. The defence, with Badé partnering the criminally underrated Nayef Aguerd, should be solid enough, with the former Lens man an upgrade on the aging Damien Da Silva. In the leather-lunged Hamari Traoré and Faitout Maouassa, the team have an exciting pair of attack-minded full-backs, with Adrien Truffert also likely to see playing time on the left.

WEAKNESSES

The team have a glut of would-be center forwards in Martin Terrier, Serhou Guirassy and M'Baye Niang, but none showed last season that they are capable of being a 15-20 goal striker, a quality imperative for a team with Champions' League aspirations (at least judging by their summer outlay). Terrier, who had been prolific for France's U21 side playing a central role, has a prior relationship with his manager dating to their time at Lyon, and could be the team's focal point. This could be either alongside Guirassy or in a 4-3-3, but he has never scored more than nine goals in a Ligue 1 season. Goalkeeper Alfred Gomis has also been the subject of some doubts, as he struggled to impress to the level that he previously had at Dijon, recording just five clean sheets.

VERDICT

Génésio showed a surprisingly positive approach upon taking over the reins from Stéphan. The team's signings, in Badé and Sulemana, appear to have addressed needs but the jury remains out as to whether Camavinga can remain focused enough playing as a lone sentinel. Doubts also remain as to whether among Guirassy, Terrier and Niang there are enough goals to allow the team to take the proverbial next step. If Génésio can overcome the youth of this side by playing with a modicum of balance between attack and defence, and if Gomis can regain his form of two years ago, there is also every chance for another European tilt on the part of the Breton side.

PREDICTED FINISH: 5th

SQUAD LIST

NAME	POSITION	NATIONALITY	AGE	AT CLUB SINCE	FORMER CLUB
Alfred Gomis	GK	Senegalese	27	2020/2021	Dijon FCO
Romain Salin	GK	French	37	2019/2020	Sporting Club
Pépé Bonet	GK	DR Congolese	18	2019/2020	-
Adrien Truffert	LB/LW	French	19	2020/2021	-
Faitout Maouassa	LB	French	23	2017/2018	AS Nancy
Birger Meling	LB	Norwegian	26	2021/2022	Nîmes Olympique
Löïc Badé	CB	French	21	2021/2022	RC Lens
Nayef Aguerd	CB	Moroccan	25	2020/2021	Dijon FCO
Jérémy Gélín	CB	French	24	2017/2018	-
Gerzino Nyamsi	CB	French	24	2018/2019	-
Hamari Traoré	RB	Malian	29	2017/2018	Stade de Reims
Brandon Soppo	RB	French	19	2020/2021	-
Eduardo Camavinga	CM/DM	French	18	2018/2019	-
Benjamin Bourigeaud	CM/RW	French	27	2017/2018	RC Lens
Jonas Martin	CM/DM	French	31	2019/2020	RC Strasbourg
Lesley Ugochukwu	CM	French	17	2020/2021	-
James Lea Siliki	CM	Cameroonian	25	2017/2018	-
Flavien Tait	CM/LW	French	28	2019/2020	Angers SCO
Rafik Guitane	AM	French	22	2017/2018	Le Havre
Martin Terrier	LW/ST	French	24	2020/2021	Lyon
Kamaldeen Sulemana	LW	Ghanaian	19	2021/2022	Nordsjaelland
Jérémy Doku	RW	Belgian	19	2020/2021	Anderlecht
Romain Del Castillo	RW	French	25	2018/2019	Lyon
Serhou Guirassy	ST	French	25	2020/2021	Amiens SC
M'Baye Niang	ST	Senegalese	26	2019/2020	Torino FC
Matthis Abline	ST	French	18	2021/2022	-
Metehan Güçlü	ST	Turkish	22	2019/2020	Paris SG
Loum Tchaoua	ST	French	17	2021/2022	-
Bruno Génésio	Manager	French	54	2020/2021	Beijing Guoan
Nicolas Holveck	President	French	50	2019/2020	AS Monaco



AS Saint-Étienne

Key Man: Denis Bouanga

Form Guide

Season	Division	Position	Points
2020/2021	Ligue 1	11th	46
2019/2020	Ligue 1	17th	30
2018/2019	Ligue 1	4th	66
2017/2018	Ligue 1	7th	55
2016/2017	Ligue 1	8th	50

Likely XI



While Bouanga's star has slipped somewhat of late after hitting double figures two years ago despite the season's premature end, he was still the team's leading scorer last season, and only midfielder Mahdi Camara played more minutes for Les Verts.

Comfortable as either an inverted winger on the left or in a more central role, there are even suggestions that Bouanga could be used on the right side of a 4-4-2, playing opposite Adil Aouchiche. No matter the formation, Bouanga's versatility and individual flair will be key as the team lack a central striker who has proven themselves in the top flight, with he and Wahbi Khazri most likely to be among the goals, despite their profiles being closer to wide players or second strikers.

Despite playing further from goal than he is accustomed to, and having to cope with frequently changing his position, the Gabon international remains the team's most consistently potent attacker, and even if the likes of Khazri may do more to catch the eye than Bouanga, there is little doubting who is the more complete and influential player.

SIGNING TO WATCH: ACADEMY PRODUCTS

Sainté, in the throes of what has been termed a "degraissage" or 'de-greasing', have had no incomings this summer save the return of a handful of loan players who are unlikely to play a significant role this season (Assane Dioussé, Jean-Philippe Krasso). More than that, they have also let some veteran players (Mathieu Debuchy, Kévin Monnet-Paquet, Jessy Moulin) depart so as to foster opportunities for their youngsters as well as tying them to longer-term contracts. While Les Verts have had a rough go of it since the departure of Christophe Galtier nearly five years ago, the team seem to be moving in the right direction, investing in a cadre of promising youngsters that includes goalkeepers Stefan Bajic and Étienne Green, defenders Yvann Maçon and Saïdou Sow and perhaps the team's most impressive prospect, defensive midfielder Lucas Gourna-Douath. These players, all of whom save Maçon are academy products, have the makings of a talented side and should be given plenty of room to grow in a team which should comfortably avoid a relegation battle.

SQUAD ANALYSIS

11th a season ago, and 11th again for the upcoming campaign seems a fair prediction for Claude Puel's side. Patently younger than the previous edition, this team will need a longer leash but given that few sides in the table's bottom half have spent this summer, this season looks to be the perfect opportunity for Puel, whose reputation for bringing through younger players is not inconsiderable, to let the aforementioned group come into their own. They, along with "veterans" like Harold Moukoudi, Yvan Neyou and Mahdi Camara, came on leaps and bounds last season, even if the team's end product often left something to be desired, with many of their goals coming as a result of individual brilliance rather than team play. The team may miss the experience of the likes of Debuchy, Moulin, and company, as well as the hulking defender Pape About Cissé, but Sainté will be better for it in the long run given the lack of competition for survival.

STRENGTHS

The balance in midfield is impressive, with newly minted captain Camara and Yvan Neyou defensive lynchpins while Aouchiche offers a more creative option. In defence, the tandem of Moukoudi and Timothée Kolodziejczak looks relatively solid, while the promise of Maçon, whose season was cruelly cut short by injury last year, is impressive indeed. In goal, Green and Bajic are both very young, but have plenty of potential, particularly if the Colchester-born Green can build on the good form he showed down the back end of last season. Elsewhere, Puel's hard-nosed style may not be for everyone, but for such a young squad, he looks set to be an asset.

WEAKNESSES

Aave the odd breakthrough season here and there (Max-Alain Gradel, Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang), Sainté have always seemed to score by committee, and this team looks to be no different. The difference, though, is that most of those sides had solid defences, with Stéphane Ruffier in net and a rough and tumble set of midfielders (think Fabien Lemoine, Vincent Pajot, etc.). There isn't the same spine to this side, a result of a different philosophy and the age of the squad, so more may be needed from an attack that is badly lacking in playing with any degree of cohesion, as evinced by the team's -12 goal difference last year. .

VERDICT

While there may be some growing pains this season, Puel's noted acumen for bringing through young players (Eden Hazard, Debuchy, Alexandre Lacazette) could play dividends, as the team's battle against relegation last season, coupled with the squad's imbalance, had done much to hinder their development. The lack of a proven out-and-out centre forward does remain a concern, but while most clubs have little in the pipeline, quite the opposite is true for Les Verts, and in embracing that they've given themselves every chance to reap the rewards a year or two down the line.

PREDICTED FINISH: 11th

SQUAD LIST

NAME	POSITION	NATIONALITY	AGE	AT CLUB SINCE	FORMER CLUB
Étienne Green	GK	English	21	2021/2022	-
Stefan Bajic	GK	French	19	2019/2020	-
Boubacar Fall	GK	Senegalese	20	2020/2021	Guédiawaye FC
Miguel Trauco	LB	Peruvian	28	2019/2020	Flamengo
Gabriel Silva	LB	Brazilian	29	2017/2018	Udinese
Alexandros Katranis	LB	Greek	23	2017/2018	Atromitos
Harold Moukoudi	CB	Cameroonian	23	2019/2020	Le Havre
Timothée Kolodziejczak	CB/LB	French	29	2019/2020	Tigres
Saïdou Sow	CB	Guinean	19	2020/2021	-
Yvann Maçon	RB	French	22	2019/2020	USL Dunkerque
Alpha Sissoko	RB	French	24	2019/2020	Clermont Foot
Lucas Gournu-Douath	DM	French	18	2020/2021	-
Yvan Nyou	DM/CM	Cameroonian	24	2020/2021	SC Braga
Assane Dioussé	DM/CM	Senegalese	23	2017/2018	FC Empoli
Mahdi Camara	CM	French	23	2018/2019	-
Zaydou Youssouf	CM	French	22	2019/2020	Bordeaux
Aïmen Moueffek	CM	French	20	2020/2021	-
Adil Aouchiche	CM/AM	French	19	2020/2021	Paris SG
Ryad Boudebouz	AM	Algerian	21	2019/2020	Real Betis
Bilal Bekhedim	AM	French	20	2019/2020	-
Denis Bounaga	LW/RW	Gabonese	26	2019/2020	Nîmes Olympique
Arnaud Nordin	LW	French	23	2016/2017	-
Maxence Rivera	RW	French	19	2020/2021	-
Wahbi Khazri	ST	Tunisian	20	2018/2019	Sunderland
Charles Abi	ST	French	21	2019/2020	-
Romain Hamouma	RW/ST	French	34	2012/2013	SM Caen
Jean-Philippe Krasso	ST	French	24	2020/2021	SAS Eupen
Claude Puel	Manager	French	59	2019/2020	Leicester City
Roland Romeyer	President	French	76	2004/2005	-
Bernard Caïazzo	President	French	67	2004/2005	-



RC Strasbourg

Key Man: Ludovic Ajorque

Having spent time on the books of Angers and in the lower leagues, the former Clermont striker is hardly a spring chicken at 27, but his slow-burning improvement continued apace last season.

Seen as a physically imposing target man upon his joining the Alsace side, while Ajorque remains a potent aerial threat, he has cannily displayed touch and awareness as well. With 16 goals last season, he was the top scorer outside the top six, despite often being a target of others' attention.

His aerial gifts make him a threat at set pieces, but he has scored fine goals with both feet too, while his turn of pace seems almost incongruous given his size makes Ajorque a deadly outlet on the counter too. If he can build on or come close to last season's level, he could help a push for Europe.

Form Guide

Season	Division	Position	Points
2020/2021	Ligue 1	15th	42
2019/2020	Ligue 1	11th	38
2018/2019	Ligue 1	11th	49
2017/2018	Ligue 1	15th	38
2016/2017	Ligue 2	2nd	66

Likely XI



SIGNING TO WATCH: KÉVIN GAMEIRO

Gameiro is now 34, and a nomadic existence over the last decade has resulted in a return to Strasbourg some thirteen years on. Through spells at Paris Saint-Germain, where he won the league in QSI's second season, as well as Sevilla and Atlético Madrid where he showed his quality, longevity, durability, and consistency, while racking up four Europa League titles and thirteen France caps. His more recent career has been decidedly more hit or miss, owing in part to Valencia's troubled Peter Lim ownership but also to competition for places and a churn of managers. A diminutive but deceptively strong player, Gameiro is a clinical finisher and looks to be an ideal foil for the hulking Ajorque — the two look set to play together as part of a three, with Diallo on the wing, or in a two ahead of Adrien Thomasson. Gameiro is no longer the most fleet of foot but Ligue 1 has been a poacher's paradise of late and he looks well-equipped to play a key role for his boyhood club.

SQUAD ANALYSIS

Strasbourg did well enough last year under Thierry Laurey, the man who oversaw both their return to Ligue 1 and a Coupe de la Ligue win. But following the axiom of legendary Hungarian Béla Guttmann that managers necessarily have a shelf life, he stepped down, allowing former Rennes boss Julien Stéphan to take his place. Stéphan had similarly burned out brightly at the Breton side but failed to advance the squad despite a massive summer outlay. That Rennes improved nearly instantly under Bruno Génésio will be a source of worry, as will the unbalanced nature of the Strasbourg squad, which is stuffed with attackers but worrying light across the back line. If Stéphan can find a way to get enough of the former onto the pitch, the latter may not matter as much. However, the team, despite their manifest attacking gifts, are an Alexander Djiku injury or departure away from being dragged into the relegation battle.

STRENGTHS

Adding Gameiro to an attacking stable that also includes Diallo, a fit-again Lébo Mothiba, and Thomasson seems overkill, but the number of looks which Stéphan can throw at teams means that, especially with five substitutions, it would be foolish to rule Strasbourg out of any match. In goal, the Belgian Matz Sels recovered from injury, having been selected for his country this summer, and is one of France's more underrated goalkeepers. The midfield, with Aholou back for another season, also has an ideal blend of youth and experience in a complementary set of players.

WEAKNESSES

Defence, defence, defence. The return of Sels will make a huge difference but the departures of Mohamed Simakan along with the experience, if not quality of Stefan Mitrovic and Lamine Koné will be keenly felt. The promising youngster Lucas Perrin has arrived on loan from Marseille, but should one of he or Djiku suffer an extended absence, things could be grim indeed. The young Hungarian Karol Fila will be expected to take over from Frédéric Guilbert, who was tremendous during a loan spell from Aston Villa, but his lack of experience could prove costly.

VERDICT

If Strasbourg had the quality of the attackers throughout the team, they would be an outside contender for Europe at least. However, the defence, and even the midfield to some extent, remains the province of question marks. There are also questions about Stéphan's ability to have success somewhere away from Rennes, where things had taken a sharp downturn despite none-too-inconsiderable spending on the part of the club's hierarchy. If he can recapture some of that charisma and brilliance in Alsace, Strasbourg could yet be a surprise package, but they will at least be entertaining.

PREDICTED FINISH: 13th

SQUAD LIST

NAME	POSITION	NATIONALITY	AGE	AT CLUB SINCE	FORMER CLUB
Matz Sels	GK	Belgian	29	2018/2019	Newcastle
Bingourou Kamara	GK	Senegalese	24	2017/2018	Tours FC
Eiji Kawashima	GK	Japanese	38	2018/2019	FC Metz
Anthony Caci	LB	French	24	2018/2019	-
Alexander Djiku	CB/DM	Ghanaian	26	2019/2020	SM Caen
Lucas Perrin	CB	French	22	2021/2022	Marseille
Karol Fila	RB	Hungarian	23	2021/2022	Lechia Gdansk
Marvin Senaya	RB	French	20	2021/2022	-
Ibrahima Sissoko	DM/CM	Malian	23	2018/2019	Stade Brestois
Jean-Eudes Aholou	DM/CM	Ivorian	27	2020/2021	AS Monaco
Mahamé Siby	DM	French	25	2020/2021	Valenciennes
Sanjin Prcic	CM	Bosnian	27	2019/2020	Levante
Dimitri Liénard	CM	French	33	2013/2014	FC Mulhouse
Jean-Ricner Bellegarde	CM/RW	French	23	2019/2020	RC Lens
Adrien Thomasson	AM/RW	French	27	2018/2019	FC Nantes
Mehdi Chahiri	LW	French	25	2019/2020	Red Star
Moïse Sahi Dion	AM	French	19	2021/2022	-
Ludovic Ajorque	ST	French	27	2018/2019	Clermont Foot
Habib Diallo	ST/RW	Senegalese	26	2020/2021	FC Metz
Kévin Gameiro	ST	French	34	2021/2022	Valencia
Majeed Waris	ST/RW	Ghanaian	29	2019/2020	FC Porto
Lébo Mothiba	ST	South African	25	2018/2019	Lille OSC
Julien Stéphan	Manager	French	40	2021/2022	Stade Rennais
Marc Keller	President	French	53	2012/2013	-



ESTAC Troyes

Key Man: Yoann Touzghar

Form Guide

Season	Division	Position	Points
2020/2021	Ligue 2	1st	77
2019/2020	Ligue 2	4th	51
2018/2019	Ligue 2	3rd	71
2017/2018	Ligue 1	19th	33
2016/2017	Ligue 2	3rd	66

Likely XI



The last time Touzghar, a vastly experienced player in France and someone who has won a handful of caps for Tunisia, was in Ligue 1, things did not go so well. Antoine Kombouaré's 2014/15 Lens side played relatively attractive football but the wayward finishing of Touzghar and Pablo Chavarria proved to be the team's undoing.

His mid-season absence owing to an Africa Cup of Nations run that year surely did not help matters but that no suitors emerged following Le Sang et Or's relegation, as they did for the likes of Wyllan Cyprien and Benjamin Bourigeaud, speaks volumes. Having been essentially a spare part after joining Sochaux, he has looked considerably sharper since moving to Troyes, coming back from a groin injury which had derailed his season in 2019/20.

After netting 16 times last season, the captain is, even at 34, ready to take on the top flight once more. As had been the case at Lens, the team's very survival may depend on his efficacy.

SIGNING TO WATCH: RENAUD RIPART

The former Nîmes talisman is deservedly staying in Ligue 1 following Les Crocos' relegation, and if Troyes, now entering their third season under Laurent Batlles, are to have hope of survival, his combination of scoring acumen and versatility will be vital. Equally able to lead the line on his own or work with the more physical Touzghar if need be, Ripart's attitude and professionalism as well as his familiarity with the league make him a canny signing. That said, one does have to wonder whether or not his patience will be tried by the club operating as more of a proving ground than a team trying to achieve something. With Touzghar aging, Ripart's scoring as well as his graft and ethos will be key. He will likely need to reach double figures if Troyes hope to avoid the drop.

SQUAD ANALYSIS

Since their takeover by City Football Group, Troyes have come on leaps and bounds and, unlike many of their previous promotions, this side came up by winning the Ligue 2 title with consummate ease. Their spending this summer (€16M to date) has been not inconsiderable, but lacks balance. Ripart is certainly of Ligue 1 standard and one can see the wisdom of a player like Fluminense midfielder Metinho (18) being brought in at such a young age but others, like Mama Baldé, or Rominigue Kouamé, are real headscratchers. Kouamé was unwanted by Lille and Baldé has a considerable body of evidence in flattering to deceive, while loanee Youssouf Koné is struggling to repair his reputation after a disastrous spell at Lyon. The combination of this hodgepodge of players hardly seems enough to be competitive in the top flight, particularly without a proven goalscorer — an asset which is so often the difference in France's relegation struggle.

STRENGTHS

The midfield is intriguing, with Kouamé and Tristan Dingomé playing box-to-box roles, and Florian Tardieu holding in a 3-4-3 diamond. The three should do much to protect a defence which is again cause for worry, while Brandon Dinguès offers a more creative option. In Koné and Moulin (who is admittedly slated to back up incumbent Gauthier Gallon), the team have two players who have had success in the past, and will be eager to prove their doubters wrong. The same can be said for much of this squad and their combative play under Batlles was key to their promotion — his acumen will be put to the test as he will want to get what is a vastly changed squad on board quickly.

WEAKNESSES

The team lacks coherence in the way it's structured — veteran players like Touzghar, Jimmy Giraudon or Yoan Salmier are competent enough but have proven in the past not to be of the requisite quality for France's top flight. The only player with top flight experience not to have underwhelmed may be Dingomé, but, sapped by injuries, the former Reims man may not have much left to offer at the top level, nor can he be looked to for goals. The defence, too, is largely a collection of players who have yo-yoed between the divisions. Goalkeeper Gauthier Gallon has been impressive in Ligue 2, his ability to make the step up is also under question, and he will likely lose the #1 shirt to Jessy Moulin, who joins from St Étienne after being pushed out by Etienne Green.

VERDICT

Placing Troyes second from bottom of this presumptive table may seem cruel given the investment that they've made in the face of other clubs' lack of spending. However, storm clouds are already on the horizon in terms of Batlles' attitude towards loan players, and the arrival of a figure like Metinho, whose profile hardly seems copacetic with seasoned campaigners like Giraudon or Dingomé. It could very well be that the team's investments pay off in fine fashion but all signs point to the confluence of what is functionally a Ligue 2 defence and lack of a proven goalscorer seeing this season end with a quick return to the second division.

PREDICTED FINISH: 19th

SQUAD LIST

NAME	POSITION	NATIONALITY	AGE	AT CLUB SINCE	FORMER CLUB
Gauthier Gallon	GK	French	28	2019/2020	US Orléans
Jessy Moulin	GK	French	35	2021/2022	Saint-Étienne
Ryan Bouallak	GK	French	21	2019/2020	Stade de Reims
Sébastien Renot	GK	French	31	2019/2020	Red Star
Yasser Larouci	LB	Algerian	20	2021/2022	Liverpool
Youssef Koné	LB	Malian	26	2021/2022	Lyon
Jimmy Giraudon	CB	French	29	2016/2017	Grenoble
Yoann Salmier	CB	French Guyanese	28	2019/2020	RC Strasbourg
Gabriel Mutombo	CB	French	25	2020/2021	Orléans
Oualid El-Hajjam	CB/RB	Moroccan	30	2019/2020	Amiens SC
Issa Kaboré	RB/RW	Burkinabé	20	2021/2022	Manchester City
Benrandy Abdallah	RB	French	22	2019/2020	-
Florian Tardieu	DM	French	29	2019/2020	Zulte Waregem
Eden Massouema	DM	Congolese	24	2019/2020	Dijon FCO
Calvin Bombo	DM	C.A.R.	22	2019/2020	-
Metinho	CM/AM	Brazilian	18	2021/2022	Fluminense
Rominigue Kouamé	CM	Malian	24	2020/2021	Lille OSC
Tristan Dingomé	CM	Cameroonian	30	2020/2021	Stade de Reims
Brandon Dominguez	CM/AM	French	21	2020/2021	-
Karim Azamoum	CM	French	21	2021/2022	Albacete
Dylan Chambost	AM	French	23	2019/2020	Saint-Étienne
Filip Krastev	AM	Bulgarian	19	2020/2021	Lommel SK
Levi Lumeka	LW	English	22	2020/2021	Varzim SC
Mama Baldé	RW	Bissau-Guinean	25	2021/2022	Dijon FCO
Renaud Ripart	RW/ST	French	28	2021/2022	Nîmes Olympique
Hyun-Jun Suk	ST	South Korean	30	2019/2020	Stade de Reims
Yoann Touzghar	ST	Tunisian	34	2018/2019	Sochaux
Mykola Kukharevych	ST	Ukrainian	20	2021/2022	Rukh Lyiv
Nassim Chadli	ST	Moroccan	20	2021/2022	Nîmes Olympique
Laurent Batlles	Manager	French	45	2019/2020	Saint-Étienne
Daniel Masoni	President	French	64	2009/2010	Racing FC