

# ***GET FRENCH FOOTBALL NEWS***



***2020/2021  
Ligue 1  
Preview Guide***

Eats

Rarely has French football been simultaneously seemingly on the verge of a breakthrough moment in Europe, with the Champions' League achievements of Lyon and Paris Saint-Germain not yet brought to their conclusion as I write this, or so seemingly vulnerable. For all of the achievements that teams like Lille or Lyon have had in recent years, French clubs still remain prey for those with deeper pockets, and success only makes their most talented players that much more attractive - the unsettled nature of things at both the Stade Pierre Mauroy and Groupama Stadium are testament to that.

Still, though, there is much to celebrate as a new season of Ligue 1 dawns - yes, Paris Saint-Germain look likely to stroll to the title again, but Marseille and their boisterous supporters will relish being back in Europe's elite competition after finishing second. There is joy, too, at Rennes, where the Breton side have continued their steady improvement under Julien Stéphan and been rewarded with a place in the Champions' League. For all of their achievements last campaign, though, both of those teams may struggle, as Lille did last season, to negotiate playing in Europe.

Both have made important additions this summer, though, in the form of the influential Álvaro González making his loan move permanent for Marseille and Rennes making a canny move in plucking Martin Terrier from Lyon to bolster their attack. Among their competitors, however, Lille have been the big spenders, splashing out €30m on the Canadian attacker Jonathan David, his success in the Belgian league hopefully boding well for him as he hopes to succeed the departed Victor Osimhen.

But surprisingly, it's not only in the top half of the table where we've seen some ambitious signings - Lens, Angers, and Lorient are all among the teams to have broken their transfer records this summer, while Nice, Monaco and Montpellier all have spent as well. However, by and large, most clubs have adopted a wait-and-see approach, hoping that continuity will be the path to success. With the table incredibly tight in the fight for the European places, there are divergent approaches among the clubs, but there's every expectation that the competition will be every bit as fierce this season as it was last.

The relegation battle, too, looks intriguing, as both of the promoted sides, Lens and Lorient, have showed no small bit of ambition this summer. As abject as Toulouse and Amiens were last season, many clubs in the bottom half of the table have taken that as a lesson, and there appears to be little in the way of dead certs for relegation - any one of a dozen teams could face the drop with it being much of a surprise.

There has also been a handful of changes in the league's coaching ranks, with Nîmes, Monaco Lorient, and Bordeaux all bringing in fresh faces on the bench. Again, here, the teams have taken divergent approaches with Les Crocos opting for the inexperienced Jérôme Arpinon and Bordeaux plumping for former Saint-Étienne manager Jean-Louis Gasset. Monaco have split the difference in signing up former Bayern Munich and Croatia boss Niko Kovac, and his high-pressing style of play may yet pay dividends for the Principality side.

Even with a summer of change for some clubs, there remains a further air of expectancy - with the protracted transfer window and Lyon and PSG still finishing their 2019/2020 season, both could yet look radically different come a month from now when teams will finally be able to stop fretting over which players may be tempted away, something particularly troubling for Les Gones and their potential inability to offer European football.

But more than anything, despite all this uncertainty, French football will retain the compelling quality for which it is best-known: a proving ground for the continent's finest young talent. Rayan Cherki and Eduardo Camavinga are names that will be well-known to casual observers, but the likes of Adil Aouchiche, El Bilal Touré, and Joris Chotard could easily be as highly touted come the season's end, continuing to put lie to the tired and unimaginative farmer's league trope that has dogged the league despite its success.

-Eric Devin

Chief Features Writer, Get French Football News

\*Revised version - all squad information and player ages correct as of 11 October 2020



# Angers SCO

## FORM GUIDE

Season	Division	Position	Points
2019/2020	Ligue 1	11th	39
2018/2019	Ligue 1	13th	46
2017/2018	Ligue 1	14th	41
2016/2017	Ligue 1	12th	46
2015/2016	Ligue 1	9th	50

## LIKELY XI



## KEY MAN

### SOFIANE BOUFAL

They say you can never go home again, but that doesn't seem to have deterred Sofiane Boufal, who has re-joined the club where he enjoyed a breakthrough campaign on a free transfer. His time at Southampton was far from a success, but having worked with Angers' stalwart manager, Stéphane Moulin, in the past, and being familiar with the veteran coach's demands, this seems a canny acquisition, as the team will need goals from sources other than a collectively errant set of strikers.

Boufal never played for Angers in the top flight, but his time at Lille showed him to be both a capable scorer and a brilliant creator, registering 14 goals and ten assists in his season-and-a-half with *Les Dogues* - if he could chip in with, say eight of each, Angers' battle for survival looks set to be much more comfortable. Too, there is incentive for the player himself - there have been plenty of examples of players who have found their reputation burnished by a return to France after a middling spell abroad, such as Wissam Ben Yedder or Andy Delort. With a place back in the Moroccan side at stake, Boufal ought to be properly motivated to succeed.



## ***SIGNING TO WATCH: PAUL BERNARDONI***

After two fine seasons on loan at Nîmes, the former Bordeaux man, his path to the first team at his parent club blocked by Benoît Costil, has upped sticks to join Angers. Goalkeeper was no doubt a position of need for Moulin's side, but the price tag of €7m shows a massive level of faith for a club of relatively modest means - the team's entire budget is just €45m. Bernardoni himself has been nonchalant about the price tag, remarking, "If the club have put that price tag on me, it's because they think I'm worth it." Bernardoni should indeed be worth it, as Ludovic Butelle's combination of gaffes and advancing age meant his future was unsustainable in goal, especially with centre-back pairing Romain Thomas and Ismaël Traoré getting no younger themselves. Now Angers have a position of need set for the foreseeable future, and even if his arrival forces the club to sell in other areas, that modicum of security is a powerful card to hold.

## ***SQUAD ANALYSIS***

The team's attack was anaemic last season, and nothing has been done in terms of transfers to address that matter. The arrivals of Rachid Alioui, Sada Thioub, Pereira Lage and Casimir Ninga were meant to be antidotes to that last summer, but through a combination of injury, poor form, and perhaps being a poor tactical fit, none of them nor holdover Stéphane Bahoken were able to make much of an impact in front of goal. Alioui managed six goals but only two of those were scored after the eighth week of action. More will be expected, as mentioned above, from Boufal and his bally-hooed arrival in a creative role, but this team is unlikely to pull up any trees going forward, relying instead on the shot-stopping ability of Bernardoni and the vastly experienced pairing of Thomas and Traoré to keep the gates shut, barring an unlikely return to form for Loïs Diony.

## ***STRENGTHS***

Stéphane Moulin is the longest-serving manager in Europe's top five leagues, and for good reason. Every season since the club's promotion, he has guided this team of modest means to comfortable survival whilst contending with key departures every summer. Although the shoe hasn't dropped on this season's exodus as of this writing, it would be foolish to bet against the wily veteran once more. On the pitch, in Fulgini and Thomas Mangani there is intelligence and creativity enough to keep things moving forward, while in Boufal, there is now a player who brings badly-needed flair and inventiveness to the side.

## ***WEAKNESSES***

Moulin has generally managed to develop some sort of goal-scoring threat in the recent past, be it Karl Toko Ekambi, Famara Diedhiou, or even Cheikh N'Doye, but he failed to do as much last season. As a result, Angers' survival was down as much to the lack of quality of those below them as it was their own defensive doggedness. Having a player reach even double digits in goals would be a massive boon to this team's hopes of being more comfortable in their survival, but that hardly seems to be forthcoming, something which could spell trouble, with key elements of this side physically more fragile on the wrong end of 30.

## ***VERDICT***

It's hard to bet against Moulin, but this year could be more challenging than most, given the team's profligacy in attack. Survival should be just about confirmed, but like many other sides projected to finish in this part of the table, that safety is likely to be down to the lack of quality of those sides who do get relegated.

***PREDICTED FINISH: 14th***



# Squad List

NAME	POSITION	NATIONALITY	AGE	AT CLUB SINCE	FORMER CLUB
Paul Bernardoni	GK	French	23	2020/2021	Bordeaux
Danijel Petkovic	GK	Macedonian	27	2019/2020	FC Lorient
Ludovic Butelle	GK	French	37	2017/2018	Club Brugge
Souleyman Doumbia	LB	Ivorian	23	2020/2021	Stade Rennais
Enzo Ebosse	LB	French	21	2020/2021	Le Mans FC
Romain Thomas	CB	French	32	2013/2014	Carquefou
Ismaël Traoré	CB	Ivorian	34	2015/2016	Stade Brest 29
Elhadji Pape Diaw	CB	Senegalese	25	2018/2019	Korona Kielce
Mateo Pavlovic	CB	Croatian	30	2016/2017	Werder Bremen
Abdoulaye Bamba	RB	Ivorian	30	2016/2017	Dijon FCO
Vincent Manceau	RB	French	31	2008/2009	-
Haithem Loucif	RB	Algerian	24	2019/2020	Paradou AC
Ibrahim Amadou	DM	French	27	2020/2021	Sevilla FC
Lassana Coulibaly	CM/DM	Malian	24	2017/2018	SC Bastia
Angelo Fulgini	CM	French	24	2017/2018	Valenciennes FC
Antonin Bobichon	CM	French	25	2019/2020	Nîmes Olympique
Thomas Mangani	CM	French	33	2015/2016	Chievo Verona
Jimmy Cabot	RW	French	26	2020/2021	FC Lorient
Mathias Pereira Lage	LW	Portuguese	23	2019/2020	Clermont Foot
Pierrick Capelle	LW/RW	French	33	2015/2016	Clermont Foot
Sofiane Boufal	LW	Moroccan	27	2020/2021	Southampton
Mohamed Ali-Cho	RW	French	16	2020/2021	-
Thomas Touré	LW	Ivorian	26	2017/2018	Bordeaux
Sada Thioub	RW	Senegalese	25	2019/2020	Nîmes Olympique
Farid El Melali	RW	Algerian	23	2018/2019	Paradou AC
Stéphane Bahoken	CF	Cameroonian	28	2018/2019	RC Strasbourg
Rachid Alioui	CF	Moroccan	28	2019/2020	Nîmes Olympique
Loïs Diony	CF	French	27	2020/2021	AS Saint-Étienne
Stéphane Moulin	Manager	French	52	2011/2012	SO Chatellerault
Saïd Chabane	President	French	56	2011/2012	-



# Bordeaux

## FORM GUIDE

Season	Division	Position	Points
2019/2020	Ligue 1	17th	30
2018/2019	Ligue 1	4th	66
2017/2018	Ligue 1	7th	55
2016/2017	Ligue 1	8th	50
2015/2016	Ligue 1	6th	58

## KEY MAN

### NICOLAS DE PREVILLE

The former Reims and Lille man has at times struggled to justify his price tag, but much of that is down to tactical chopping and changing on the part of the now-departed Paulo Sousa. Under new boss Jean-Louis Gasset, Bordeaux's tactics should be a more natural fit for De Préville, who will be able to play wide on the left, a position that is a more natural fit than through the middle, as it allows him to cut inside onto his right foot.

With great acceleration and an intelligent sense of link-up play, if De Préville can come closer to being the all-action presence he was at his former clubs, then Bordeaux's continuity and the prosaic style of Gasset, which echoes that of Reims and Lille rather than Sousa's more expansive approach, should see a better return than he has experienced of late.

## LIKELY XI



## ***SIGNING TO WATCH: MEHDI ZERKANE***

Zerkane is not a new signing - he arrived from Monaco last summer on a free but is yet to make his first team debut. However, he seems to have caught Gasset's eye - albeit not in his typical role as a right-sided attacker. Against Saint-Étienne in a recent friendly, then still under Sousa, he played in central midfield and offered a performance that was full of energy and verve. There is naturally plenty of competition for places there, with Otavio and Tomas Basic well-established as favourites, but Zerkane can offer a more direct and forward-thinking complement to the attack than can either of those two. In concert with Yacine Adli, he has real potential to take a step forward under a manager whose rigour will instil the necessary level of focus into his play. Already 21, he feels as if he is making up for lost time and will be well-motivated to impress a new manager.

## ***SQUAD ANALYSIS***

Bordeaux's pre-season has been a tumultuous one - they have had to deal with cancelled friendlies and an eleventh-hour coaching change. Even if the departure of Sousa will be lamented for the loss of his innovation, Gasset is the sort of manager that Bordeaux have lacked to some extent in recent seasons. In embracing Sousa, the club had perhaps slipped a few notches in the reckoning of French football, and Gasset's no-nonsense approach may do the team a world of good when it comes to developing an identity, something which has been sorely lacking in the team's recent churn of players and managers. That said, the squad is unnecessarily bloated and how Gasset knits this set of players together while keeping them all onside will be in the telling. There is plenty of experience here, but one has to wonder who will chafe under his rigorous methods, something that could quickly alienate the fans if results aren't forthcoming. It's unlikely that things will be pretty under Gasset, but there should be more than enough in this squad to achieve a comfortable mid-table finish.

## ***STRENGTHS***

The team's wealth of attacking options is impressive indeed -- Josh Maja, Hatem Ben Arfa and Samuel Kalu and would form a fine front three in Ligue 1, but none of that trio are even guaranteed starters at present. Benoît Costil continues to be a reliable presence in goal, and even as his age will make him more susceptible in a back four, Laurent Koscielny's leadership makes him an important figure both on and off the pitch. Jimmy Briand continues to chase his 100th goal at age 35, but his acumen and quality remain, having scored seven times last season in just eighteen starts.

## ***WEAKNESSES***

The squad badly needs trimming - especially in central defence where there are five options for likely two positions. A proven centre forward to support Briand is also imperative - while De Préville and Ui-Jo Hwang are impressive players, neither really has the necessary physical gifts to lead the line on their own. This is less true of Josh Maja or Alexandre Mendy, but their somewhat one-dimensional play makes them less-suited in terms of their ability to involve others. FCGB are also weak in full-back areas, with neither Loris Benito nor Maxime Poudjé the correct mixture of rapid and composed.

## ***VERDICT***

Gasset did very well with Saint-Étienne but this team, lacking in identity and over-reliant on the superannuated duo of Briand and Koscielny, may well find itself struggling again. There are plenty of positives in terms of the team's younger players, in particular Adli and Maja, but what success they have had to date needs to be proven over an entire season, something which is far from a certainty

***PREDICTED FINISH: 11th***



# Squad List

NAME	POSITION	NATIONALITY	AGE	AT CLUB SINCE	FORMER CLUB
Benoît Costil	GK	French	33	2017/2018	Stade Rennais
Gaëtan Poussin	GK	French	21	2017/2018	-
Over Mandanda	GK	French	21	2017/2018	-
Pablo	CB	Brazilian	29	2015/2016	Ponte Preta
Laurent Koscielny	CB	French	34	2019/2020	Arsenal
Mexer	CB	Mozambiquan	31	2019/2020	Stade Rennais
Vukasin Jovanovic	CB	Serbian	24	2017/2018	Zenit St. Petersburg
Paul Baysse	CB	French	32	2017/2018	Malaga CF
Loris Benito	LB	Swiss	28	2019/2020	Young Boys
Maxime Poundjé	LB	French	28	2011/2012	-
Youssef Sabaly	RB/LB	Senegalese	27	2017/2018	Paris Saint-Germain
Enock Kwateng	RB	French	23	2019/2020	FC Nantes
Otávio	CM/DM	Brazilian	26	2017/2018	Athletico Paranaense
Albert Lottin	DM	French	18	2018/2019	-
Toma Basic	CM	Croatian	23	2018/2019	Dinamo Zagreb
Mehdi Zerkane	CM/AM	French	21	2019/2020	AS Monaco
Yacine Adli	AM	French	20	2018/2019	Paris Saint-Germain
Rémi Oudin	AM	French	23	2019/2020	Stade de Reims
Hatem Ben Arfa	AM	French	33	2020/2021	Real Valladolid
Samuel Kalu	RW	Nigerian	23	2018/2019	KAA Gent
Josh Maja	CF	Nigerian	21	2018/2019	Sunderland
Nicolas De Préville	LW/CF	French	29	2017/2018	Lille OSC
Ui-Jo Hwang	RW/CF	South Korean	28	2019/2020	Gamba Osaka
Alexandre Mendy	CF	French	26	2017/2018	EA Guingamp
Jimmy Briand	CF	French	35	2018/2019	EA Guingamp
Jean-Louis Gasset	Manager	French	66	2020/2021	AS Saint-Étienne
Frédéric Longuépée	President	French	54	2018/2019	-





# Stade Brest 29

## FORM GUIDE

Season	Division	Position	Points
2019/2020	Ligue 1	14th	34
2018/2019	Ligue 2	2nd	74
2017/2018	Ligue 2	5th	65
2016/2017	Ligue 2	5th	65
2015/2016	Ligue 2	10th	47

## KEY MAN

### IRVIN CARDONA

Cardona was a badly-needed spark for the Breton side last season, and his goal return of six from fifteen starts augurs well for the campaign to come. With Gaëtan Charbonnier struggling to make the step up from Ligue 2, Cardona's scoring prowess was much of the difference between survival and the drop, something made doubly impressive by the fact that he was most frequently played wide on the left, a position that is ill-suited to his gifts.

This season, Olivier Dall'Oglio looks likely to continue to use Cardona in that role, with Steve Mounié tasked to play as the central striker and Charbonnier playing off of the former Montpellier man, although Cardona may be asked to play as a second striker at times as well. Tactical indecision notwithstanding, it is clear that Cardona will be played more often, and if he can continue to make the best of the chances he is afforded, another strong season from him is likely.

## LIKELY XI



## ***SIGNING TO WATCH: ROMAIN FAIVRE***

Brest have had a middling transfer window, their only signings of note more than doubling their club record to pry Franck Honorat from Saint-Étienne and the arrival of Steve Mounié, late of Montpellier, from Huddersfield. The €5m fee for Honorat may induce more than a few wincing, but keen observers of French football will see far more promise in the form of Faivre, plucked from Monaco's reserves. While usually played in a deeper role with the Principality side, he has impressed working closer to the strikers in the pre-season, using his workrate and extraordinary vision to evoke some local comparisons to Marco Verratti. While the diminutive Italian may be an unfair comparison, Brest's wing-based play could do well with a midfielder whose creative vision and distribution can knit things together in a way that seems beyond the reach of the likes of Haris Belkebla and Paul Lasne.

## ***SQUAD ANALYSIS***

Brest are in many ways the most difficult squad to parse in the division. While they did well to stay up, much of the veteran presence that defined the team's ethos has departed this summer, including key attackers Yoann Court and Mathias Autret. Their nominal replacements, Honorat and Romain Faivre, are certainly promising, but there is much about this team that remains up in the air, not least of all tactically. For example, much of Cardona's good form came playing either on the flank or in a central pairing with Gaëtan Charbonnier, but Dall'Oglio appears to be favouring a 4-4-1-1, which will do much to tax the defensive work rates of the wide players, with neither Mounié or Charbonnier particularly mobile. Playing a two-man midfield will also present new challenges - the departure of Ibrahima Diallo means that some combination of Cristian Battocchio, Paul Lasne, and Haris Belkebla will be asked to pick up no small amount of slack.

## ***STRENGTHS***

The loan signing of Ronaël Pierre-Gabriel from Mainz is an exciting one, and he and Romain Perraud should do much to add verticality and width to Brest's attack, pinging in crosses at will. The midfield's depth and variety is also impressive, with Paul Lasne and Battocchio the more creative options. Again, Larssonneur was perhaps the league's most underrated goalkeeper, and Cardona being the focal point of the attack could see him have a breakout campaign. Dall'Oglio's experience should also be a boon; the manager has consistently overachieved; despite his dismissal from Dijon, he is the type of steady hand ideal to keep Brest up once more.

## ***WEAKNESSES***

Brest had a superb record at home last season, winning six of fourteen matches and only losing twice. For a team whose defensive woes were manifest, a potentially season-ending injury to Denys Bain and the departure of Jean-Charles Castelletto to Nantes means that the team look wobbly indeed at the back, especially if a more open tactical system is adopted by Dall'Oglio, as already seems to be the case. However, convincing perennially under-rated central defender Christophe Hérelle to join them from Nice and reject Celtic in the process is a major coup - he should lead the back four this season with aplomb, so long as he settles fast. There are also issues with consistency; this side scored five in the league on two occasions, but also failed to score in more than a third of the matches that they played; improving that consistency and playing better on the road are imperative.

## ***VERDICT***

The experience of Dall'Oglio and the exceptional Cardona may be enough to act as a bulwark against the drop, but Brest are one of a half dozen sides who look set to struggle. Still, there is enough between this team's ambition and Dall'Oglio's attacking philosophy to make them a compelling watch, even if they appear likely to be deprived of their fervent supporters in full voice.

***PREDICTED FINISH: 13th***



# Squad List

NAME	POSITION	NATIONALITY	AGE	AT CLUB SINCE	FORMER CLUB
Gautier Larsonneur	GK	French	23	2017/2018	-
Sébastien Cibois	GK	French	22	2019/2020	Paris Saint-Germain
Denys Bain	CB	French	27	2019/2020	Le Havre
Jean-Kévin Duverne	CB	French	23	2019/2020	RC Lens
Brendan Chardonnet	CB	French	25	2014/2015	-
Christophe Hérelle	CB	French	27	2020/2021	OGC Nice
Lilian Brassier	CB	French	20	2020/2021	Stade Rennais
Romain Perraud	LB	French	22	2019/2020	OGC Nice
Ludovic Baal	LB	French Guyanese	34	2019/2020	Stade Rennais
Ronaël Pierre-Gabriel	RB	French	22	2020/2021	Mainz 05
Julien Faussurier	RB	French	33	2016/2017	FC Sochaux
Idrissa Dioh	DM	French	21	2020/2021	-
Paul Lasne	CM	French	31	2019/2020	Montpellier HSC
Cristian Battocchio	CM	Italian	28	2018/2019	Maccabi Tel Aviv
Haris Belkebla	CM	Algerian	26	2018/2019	Tours FC
Hianga'a M'Bock	CM	French	20	2019/2020	-
Ferris N'Goma	CM	French	27	2018/2019	Orléans
Hugo Magnetti	CM	French	22	2018/2019	-
Romain Faivre	CM/AM	French	22	2020/2021	AS Monaco
Idrissa Dioh	CM	French	21	2020/2021	-
Jérémy Le Douaron	RW/LW	French	22	2020/2021	Stade Briochin
Franck Honorat	RW	French	23	2020/2021	AS Saint-Étienne
Heriberto Tavares	LW	Portuguese	23	2020/2021	SL Benfica
Romain Philippoteaux	LW	French	32	2020/2021	Nîmes Olympique
Steve Mounié	CF	Beninese	26	2020/2021	Huddersfield Town
Irvin Cardona	CF/LW	French	22	2019/2020	AS Monaco
Gaëtan Charbonnier	CF	French	31	2017/2018	Stade de Reims
Olivier Dall'Oglio	Manager	French	56	2019/2020	Dijon FCO
Denis Le Saint	President	French	55	2016/2017	-



# Dijon FCO

## FORM GUIDE

Season	Division	Position	Points
2019/2020	Ligue 1	16th	30
2018/2019	Ligue 1	18th	34
2017/2018	Ligue 1	11th	38
2016/2017	Ligue 1	16th	37
2015/2016	Ligue 2	2nd	70

## LIKELY XI



## KEY MAN

### MOUNIR CHOUJAR

The talented and sprightly winger was slow to come into his own last season under Stéphane Jobard, but with Frédéric Sammaritano another year older, Jhonder Cadiz returning to Benfica, and Stéphy Mavididi ditching DFCO, there will be decidedly less competition for places in attack at the Stade Gaston-Gérard, and Chouiar stands to benefit from this more than anyone.

The heir apparent to Naïm Sliti in terms of his ability on the ball (only Neymar averaged more dribbles in the league), and his stunning eye for goal, the product of Lens' academy was a rare bright spot last season. Now, he appears well-poised to step into a bigger role as Jobard will likely have a more consistent eleven, allowing him to establish a better relationship with the likes of Baldé and Assalé, whose pace on the counter has real potential.



## ***SIGNING TO WATCH: ERIC JUNIOR DINA-EBIMBE***

The PSG loanee is unlikely to stay long in Dijon, but if he can follow up what was an impressive season on loan at Le Havre last year with something approaching the intelligence and composure he displayed in Normandy, Jobard will have the sort of lock-picking midfielder that could make the difference between survival and relegation. Played mostly on the right in Le Havre, his languid style and passing intelligence will provide good balance to the more combative and steely play of Wesley Lautoa and Didier Ndong. It is a piece that Dijon lacked last year, and even if they seem to have potentially taken a step backwards in attack with the departure of Mavididi, Dina Ebimbe could do much to make the team better able to convert defence into attack, something which hindered a team who had improved at the back since the departure of Olivier Dall'Oglio.

## ***SQUAD ANALYSIS***

With a scattershot approach to the transfer window and a lack of proven arrivals in the transfer window, the outlook is bleak in eastern France. The team is weaker in both attack and defence, and even if midfield will likely be more dynamic than last season, this could be a challenging campaign. Continued improvement on the part of Chouiar, the promise of Dina Ebimbe and the eventual return of Yassine Benzia, who joined in January from Lille but immediately struggled with injury, could see things look more coherent in attack, but questions certainly linger over the overall efficacy of this side. Even if Jobard has them well-organised, they are lacking quality and depth in multiple positions and turning once again to loanees to such a degree, even with an extended pre-season, is a testing strategy. Especially as the likes of Pape Cheikh Diop have enough professional experience under their belt to no longer be considered as lacking only in opportunities but lacking more in talent instead.

## ***STRENGTHS***

The team was impressive last season defensively - Nayef Aguerd had proved a canny signing, albeit to the point that Rennes saw fit to pluck him away, but the defence should be again hold strong. Saturnin Allagbé was quietly one of Ligue 2's better goalkeepers last season, and in Fouad Chafik, Wesley Lautoa, and Bruno Écuele Manga, there is plenty of veteran mettle. Midfield should be improved in terms of its balance with the arrival of Dina Ebimbe; the teenager should allow Dijon to offer more going forward. Chouiar will continue to be an impressive outlet when the team get forward, although how often they will be able to play on the front foot is another question.

## ***WEAKNESSES***

Putting the ball in the net was Dijon's Achilles heel last season and it will remain so this time - only relegated Toulouse and Reims scored fewer goals last season. The departures of Mavididi and Cadiz, despite their inconsistencies, mean that there will be even fewer options for Jobard - this could be a long season indeed given the team lacks a recognised striker, with neither of Assalé and Baldé really out-and-out centre forwards.

## ***VERDICT***

Dijon only survived last season because of a historically poor Toulouse side and an above-average defence. That back four may still largely be in place, but looking at the ambition of Lorient and Lens in the transfer window, demonstrably poorer opponents may not be, and it would be a surprise to see Dijon stay up, having gone six matches without a win to start the season.

***PREDICTED FINISH: 20th***



# Squad List

NAME	POSITION	NATIONALITY	AGE	AT CLUB SINCE	FORMER CLUB
Saturnin Allagbé	GK	Beninese	26	2020/2021	Chamois Niortais
Anthony Racioppi	GK	Swiss	21	2020/2021	Olympique Lyonnais
Lévi Ntumba	GK	French	19	2018/2019	-
Bruno Ecuele Manga	CB	Gabonese	32	2019/2020	Cardiff City
Wesley Lautoa	CB/DM	French	32	2017/2018	FC Lorient
Jonathan Panzo	CB	English	19	2020/2021	AS Monaco
Senou Coulibaly	CB	French	25	2018/2019	FC Mantois
Ngonda Muzinga	LB	DR Congolese	25	2019/2020	AS Vita Kinshasa
Arthur Zagré	LB	French	19	2020/2021	AS Monaco
Aníbal Chalá	LB	Ecuadorian	24	2020/2021	Deportivo Toluca
Sacha Boey	RB	French	20	2020/2021	Stade Rennais
Fouad Chafik	RB	Moroccan	33	2016/2017	Stade Lavallois
Pape Cheikh	CM	Spanish	23	2020/2021	Olympique Lyonnais
Didier Ndong	CM	Gabonese	26	2019/2020	EA Guingamp
Romain Amalfitano	CM	French	30	2014/2015	Newcastle United
Jordan Marié	CM/DM	French	28	2012/2013	-
Éric Dina-Ebimbe	CM	French	19	2020/2021	Paris Saint-Germain
Alex Dobre	LW	Romanian	21	2020/2021	AFC Bournemouth
Yassine Benzia	AM	Algerian	25	2019/2020	Lille OSC
Bersant Celina	AM/LW	Kosovar	24	2020/2021	Swansea City
Frédéric Sammaritano	LW/AM	French	34	2015/2016	AJ Auxerre
Mounir Chouiar	LW	French	21	2019/2020	RC Lens
Roger Assalé	RW/CF	Ivorian	26	2020/2021	Young Boys
Mama Baldé	RW	Guinea-Bissauan	24	2019/2020	Sporting Club
Aurélien Schneider	CF	French	22	2019/2020	Orléans
Rayan Philippe	CF	French	19	2020/2021	-
Moussa Konaté	CF	Senegalese	27	2020/2021	Amiens SC
Stéphane Jobard	Manager	French	49	2019/2020	Marseille
Olivier Delcourt	President	French	53	2012/2013	-



# RC Lens

## FORM GUIDE

Season	Division	Position	Points
2019/2020	Ligue 2	2nd	53
2018/2019	Ligue 2	5th	63
2017/2018	Ligue 2	14th	43
2016/2017	Ligue 2	4th	65
2015/2016	Ligue 2	6th	58

## LIKELY XI



## KEY MAN GAEL KAKUTA

Gaël Kakuta's return to the north of France, or more more properly Lens, as he had played for Amiens in the last two campaigns, has more than a small ring of the romantic about it. Before departing for Chelsea, where he failed to make an impact in the first team, the Lille native spent eight seasons in Lens' academy, forming part of an impressive crop of young talent that also included Serge Aurier and Raphaël Varane.

Still just 29, Kakuta's itinerant career has seen him play in Spain, Italy, Holland, the Netherlands and China, but he seemed at his happiest (and most successful on the pitch) during his spell at Amiens, where was a brilliant creative hub. His performances saw the Picardy club not only comfortably survive but also wring the best from unheralded players such as Moussa Konaté and Harrison Manzala, both of whom have faltered since his departure. Set to be given even more freedom in Franck Haise's 3-4-1-2, if Lens stay up, a long leash for Kakuta will no doubt be the impetus for it.

## ***SIGNING TO WATCH: SEKO FOFANA***

€10m on a central midfielder? Lens' previous transfer record was nearly doubled to sign the Ivorian from Udinese, despite having the more-than-capable Yannick Cahuzac and the promising Cheick Doucouré already in the fold. Usually when promoted sides spend big it's on an attacking player, such as Lorient's plucking Adrian Grbic from Clermont, but the former Bastia man's arrival looks promising. Far more forward-thinking than Cahuzac (who is likely to be relegated to a role on the bench) or the all-action Doucouré, Fofana was often played as the most advanced midfielder of the Italian side's 3-5-2, and his vision and creativity saw him rack up an impressive seven assists, despite the club being far from an attacking force, having averaged less than a goal per match. With Lens still looking far from utterly convincing going forward, having his energy and experience playing in front of a back three should be a remarkable addition for the northern side.

## ***SQUAD ANALYSIS***

Lens weren't exactly an impressive side by Ligue 2 standards last year - they had no standout individual performers and only won promotion by a single point. Given Ligue 2 is hardly known for its free-flowing attacking football, it is not uncommon to see teams come up in this manner, but Lens are a special case indeed, as the club made the decision to sack Philippe Montanier, an experienced manager and one who had done well by the club, in late February. The man who replaced him, Franck Haise, is certainly well-regarded in French football, but this is his first permanent appointment, and one has to wonder if his dearth of experience in both top-flight football and operating as a head coach could be the team's undoing. That said, experience did little to help Antoine Kombouaré at Toulouse last season, and Lens have invested in the playing staff - in addition to Kakuta and Nice youth product Ignatius Ganago, the team have added the impressive Facundo Medina as well as former Le Havre youngster Loïc Badé to bolster their defence.

## ***STRENGTHS***

The team's defence, while necessarily in need of proving itself in Ligue 1, looks impressive - Medina's mobility and physical style of play make him well-suited to a back three, and Badé has played the system as well. Jean-Louis Leca is a decent goalkeeper, and will face strong competition from youngster Wulkner Fariñez. Midfield is the province of the very no-nonsense Yannick Cahuzac and the impressive academy product Cheick Doucouré, giving Haise an ideal blend of experience and energy. Finally, playing the role of an X-factor, Kakuta at his best is a player with more talent than most sides in the bottom half of the table will be able to call upon - his ability to win a match single-handedly may yet be telling. We also hear excellent things about ex-French international Alou Diarra's development as a coach - he has been promoted to Haise's assistant for this season.

## ***WEAKNESSES***

Not to put too fine a point on it, but this team has not played very much top-flight football. Outside of Leca and Cahuzac, much of this side has featured solely in Ligue 2 or abroad, or not met with much success when they did play in the top flight. That, and the unfamiliarity of Haise with the rigours of a job at this level, could yet spell trouble, even as the early going has been impressive. More worryingly, though is a lack of a proven striker - Ignatius Ganago has impressed to date but will miss up to two months out with an ankle injury. Lens in their most recent spell in the top flight played enterprising enough football, but simply lacked a finishing touch and were eventually undone by it, something which may seem uncomfortably familiar for this year's edition.

## ***VERDICT***

Lens have been unafraid to spend this summer, knowing their return to the top flight dovetails nicely with a lucrative new domestic rights television contract. That, and Haise's ebullient style of play should be more than enough to keep the northern side safe.

***PREDICTED FINISH: 9th***





# Squad List

NAME	POSITION	NATIONALITY	AGE	AT CLUB SINCE	FORMER CLUB
Wuilker Fariñez	GK	Venezuelan	22	2020/2021	Milionarios
Jean-Louis Leca	GK	French	35	2018/2019	AC Ajaccio
Didier Desprez	GK	French	21	2018/2019	-
Facundo Medina	LB/CB	Argentine	21	2020/2021	Talleres
Issiaga Sylla	LB	Malian	26	2020/2021	Toulouse FC
Massadio Haidara	LB	Malian	27	2018/2019	Newcastle United
Jonathan Gradit	CB	French	27	2019/2020	SM Caen
Steven Fortes	CB	Cape Verdean	28	2019/2020	Toulouse FC
Loïc Badé	CB	French	20	2020/2021	Le Havre
Aleksandr Radovanovic	CB	Serbian	26	2018/2019	FK Vojvodina
Zakaria Diallo	CB	French	34	2019/2020	Montréal Impact
Clément Michelin	RB	French	23	2019/2020	Toulouse FC
Cheick Traoré	RB	Malian	25	2019/2020	EA Guingamp
Cheick Doucouré	CM	Malian	20	2018/2019	-
Manuel Perez	CM	French	29	2019/2020	Clermont Foot
Yannick Cahuzac	CM	French	35	2019/2020	Toulouse FC
Seko Fofana	CM	Ivorian	25	2020/2021	Udinese
Jonathan Clauss	RM/RB	French	28	2020/2021	Arminia Bielefeld
Gaël Kakuta	AM	DR Congolese	29	2020/2021	Amiens SC
Charles Boli	CM	French	22	2019/2020	-
Tony Mauricio	RW/AM	French	26	2019/2020	Valenciennes
Corentin Jean	RW	French	25	2019/2020	Toulouse FC
Cyrille Bayala	RW	Burkinabé	24	2017/2018	Sheriff Tiraspol
Ignatius Ganago	CF/LW	Cameroonian	21	2020/2021	OGC Nice
Florian Sotoca	CF	French	29	2019/2020	Grenoble
Arnaud Kalimuendo	CF	French	18	2020/2021	Paris Saint-Germain
Simon Banza	CF	French	24	2015/2016	-
Franck Haise	Manager	French	49	2019/2020	-
Joseph Oughourlian	President	French	48	2018/2019	-



# Lille OSC

## FORM GUIDE

Season	Division	Position	Points
2019/2020	Ligue 1	4th	49
2018/2019	Ligue 1	2nd	75
2017/2018	Ligue 1	17th	38
2016/2017	Ligue 1	11th	46
2015/2016	Ligue 1	5th	60

## LIKELY XI



## KEY MAN

### RENATO SANCHES

After some early stumbles, Sanches found his feet under Christophe Galtier, flourishing not only in a new wider role on the right but also impressing in his more customary central midfield role alongside Benjamin André. This versatility allowed Galtier to readily switch between a 4-4-2 and a 4-2-3-1 last season, a flexibility he will again enjoy in the current campaign, with Luiz Araujo looking set to play an expanded role as a result.

An all-action presence whether played wide or centrally, Sanches was touted as the next big thing in European football after a stellar run at EURO 2016. Yet, after several false starts, including a particularly ignominious spell at Swansea City, he appears to have found his feet again, his move to French football reminding the world at large of his prodigious talent. There's no reason to think a full season of his dynamism is not on the cards once more — he will be one of the prime reasons Lille look a good bet to be back in the Champions' League next season.

## ***SIGNING TO WATCH: JONATHAN DAVID***

Signed from the Belgian league for an eye-watering €30m, the Canadian youngster scored eighteen goals and registered eight assists for Gent last season. Playing both as a number ten and a second striker in Jess Thorup's 4-3-1-2, he benefitted greatly from playing alongside the far more physical Laurent Depoitre, the burly striker being an aerial threat as needed. Burak Yilmaz's signing may lead observers to think he is being signed to play a similar role, but the Turkish international, while certainly more physical than the wiry David, is not as adept in the air as the Canadian's previous partner. That said, his ability to hold the ball up and create space for players to run into should work much to the Canadian speedster's benefit. Given his relatively late arrival, there should necessarily be a bit of adjustment to a league of a higher standard, but David's instinctive finishing and pace make him an ideal replacement for Victor Osimhen - his willingness to link play may even make him an upgrade.

## ***SQUAD ANALYSIS***

Victor Osimhen took Ligue 1 by storm last year, and there's no denying the Nigerian will be missed. However, the argument must be made that Nicolas Pépé was even more influential in 2018/19 and Lille barely missed a beat, especially once they had been eliminated from the Champions' League. While Gabriel, who proved a revelation at centre back last season, will join Osimhen in departing the club, the team have a surplus of options to partner the experienced José Fonte, including Tia-ago Djalo and new signing Sven Botman, a Dutch youth international from Ajax's academy. Thus, the team's defence, an under-appreciated part of their success under Galtier, should again prove the backbone of positive results, while hardly forsaking their attacking prowess - Mike Maignan is one of Europe's most underrated goalkeepers. In attack, Yilmaz and David are intriguing signings and there are also expected to be expanded roles for Timothy Weah and Luiz Araujo, both of whom were peripheral figures last season. This means that even if Jonathan Ikoné does depart, Lille should maintain their position in jostling for the top three.

## ***STRENGTHS***

Christophe Galtier has been, over the last decade, head and shoulders the best manager in Ligue 1, perhaps briefly eclipsed by Leonardo Jardim during Monaco's title season. Adaptable in both his philosophy and tactics, the Frenchman has shown an innate ability throughout his career to roll with the punches and so long as he and Sporting Director Luis Campos maintain a strong relationship, Lille's being forced into sales, such as that of Osimhen, can be handled in stride while still putting a compelling product on the pitch. Beyond the manager, though, this team remains slyly solid defensively, buoyed by the authoritative Maignan and the veteran guile of Fonte.

## ***WEAKNESSES***

Depth at centre forward is a bit of a concern - Ikoné and Weah can play there in a pinch, but there's no obvious deputy to Yilmaz, no small issue given his age. The aforementioned duo are really wide men, or second strikers at best, and Lille have looked at their best in recent seasons with Loïc Rémy's physicality a bulwark against opposing defenders. Even if Galtier has had success with wide players scoring with aplomb in the past, for every Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang, there has often been a Brandão, making the Turkish international's fitness of paramount importance.

## ***VERDICT***

The loss of the charismatic and talented Osimhen will be keenly felt, but the smart money is on a combination of David and Sanches continuing their improvement apace. Les Dogues are less likely to focus on the Europa League and will instead choose to give individuals like exciting attacking prospect Unman Simbakoli a chance in that competition, especially given their lack of depth in certain areas. They should battle Marseille for second, even if a title challenge may be a step too far.

***PREDICTED FINISH: 3rd***



# Squad List

NAME	POSITION	NATIONALITY	AGE	AT CLUB SINCE	FORMER CLUB
Mike Maignan	GK	French	25	2015/2016	Paris Saint-Germain
Orestis Karenezis	GK	Greek	35	2020/2021	SSC Napoli
Lucas Chevalier	GK	French	18	2020/2021	-
Domagoj Bradaric	LB	Croatian	20	2019/2020	Dinamo Zagreb
Reinildo Mandava	LB	Mozambican	26	2019/2020	Belenenses
Sven Botman	CB	Dutch	20	2020/2021	Ajax
Adama Soumaoro	CB	French	28	2013/2014	-
Tiago Djaló	CB	Portuguese	20	2019/2020	AC Milan
José Fonte	CB	Portuguese	36	2018/2019	Dailan
Zeki Çelik	RB	Turkish	23	2018/2019	Istanbulspor
Jérémy Pied	RB	French	31	2018/2019	Southampton
Boubakary Soumaré	DM	French	21	2017/2018	Paris Saint-Germain
Cheikh Niasse	DM	Senegalese	20	2020/2021	-
Eugenio Pizzuto	DM	Mexican	18	2020/2021	Pachuca
Renato Sanches	CM/RW	Portuguese	23	2019/2020	Bayern Munich
Benjamin André	CM	French	30	2019/2020	Stade Rennais
Xeka	CM	Portuguese	25	2017/2018	SC Braga
Jonathan Ikoné	AM	French	22	2018/2019	Paris Saint-Germain
Jonathan David	AM/ST	Canadian	20	2020/2021	KAA Gent
Yusuf Yazici	AM/RW	Turkish	23	2019/2020	Trabzonspor
Jonathan Bamba	AM/LW	French	24	2018/2019	AS Saint-Étienne
Luiz Araújo	LW/RW	Brazilian	24	2017/2018	Sao Paulo
Isaac Lihadji	RW	French	18	2020/2021	Marseille
Timothy Weah	RW/CF	American	20	2019/2020	Paris Saint-Germain
Burak Yilmaz	CF	Turkish	35	2020/2021	Besiktas JK
Fadiga Ouattara	CF	French	18	2019/2020	-
Christophe Galtier	Manager	French	53	2017/2018	AS Saint-Étienne
Gérard Lopez	President	Spanish	48	2016/2017	-





# FC Lorient

## FORM GUIDE

Season	Division	Position	Points
2019/2020	Ligue 2	1st	54
2018/2019	Ligue 2	6th	63
2017/2018	Ligue 2	7th	62
2016/2017	Ligue 1	20th	36
2015/2016	Ligue 1	15th	46

## LIKELY XI



## KEY MAN

### YOANE WISSA

Once on the books at Angers, Wissa failed to make his mark with Le SCO, but an impressive loan spell with Ajaccio in the 2017/18 season saw Lorient take notice of his play. A regular starter on the left wing ever since, he has been both the team's creative hub and a consistent source of goals last season as well. Working off of a more physical orthodox centre forward has been much to his benefit, and his relationship with Adrian Grbic will be key; the two's potency will be no doubt magnified if they are able to find a common wavelength.

Overall, Wissa is technically skilled player with great dribbling ability, a powerful shot and frightening acceleration, if he can play within himself and translate his none-too-inconsiderable gifts to the top flight, Christophe Pelissier's side should have no trouble avoiding the drop.

## ***SIGNING TO WATCH: ADRIAN GRBIC***

Grbic, signed for a club record fee of €8.1m from Clermont, could well follow in the footsteps of Ludovic Ajorque to become the next striker from the Auvergne club to take the step up from Ligue 2. The young Austrian netted 17 goals in just 26 matches last season, and while he'll certainly face competition from incumbent Pierre-Yves Hamel, the Austrian youth international has not failed to regularly find the back of the net at any of his previous stops. The club's other signings around him, including Stéphane Diarra and Quentin Boisgard appear ready to play supporting roles as well, forming a formidable front four with Wissa. Despite his height, however, Grbic is more than just a target man in the vein of Ajorque and his crafty movement, ability to drop deep and aptitude at link-up play ought to keep Lorient among the goals.

## ***SQUAD ANALYSIS***

Lorient had the best attack in Ligue 2 last season, but even with that, there is no doubt that president Loïc Féry has made upgrading that side of things the team's focus this summer. Adrian Grbic should be an upgrade at striker, while Wissa was arguably Ligue 2's best wide player last season. There's depth as well with Hamel, veteran Sylvain Marveaux, and Umut Bozok, even if the former Nîmes man has yet to fully recapture his former brilliance. There is plenty of steel in midfield, with Fabien Lemoine back in Ligue 1 along with Laurent Abergel, whose eye for a pass may make him a better partner for promising youngster Enzo Le Fée, likely to play a deeper role with the arrival of Boisgard. Vincent Le Goff is a steady presence at left-back, while central defence has enough about it to do a job. In goal, Lorient will have probably regretted the fine play of Illan Meslier with Leeds, as questions remain over Paul Nardi, but this is by and large a balanced and sufficiently experienced group..

## ***STRENGTHS***

The club has done well in the window, as its signings provide a level of both depth and experience that is uncommon for a promoted club. There is plenty of steel in midfield, with Le Fée, Lemoine and Abergel, but the club's attack will be its bread and butter. The inventiveness and skill that the team has on the flanks, combined with the pace of Grbic, should make Lorient particularly dangerous on the counter. Then there is, of course, Pelissier's organisation and attention to detail, which was a bulwark for the survival of an Amiens side who had considerably fewer resources than do Lorient.

## ***WEAKNESSES***

Right-back is an area of massive concern for Les Merlus; it's something that may yet be addressed, but Pelissier appears set on entering the season with the callow Houboulang Mendes as the starter at right back, leaving veteran Jérôme Hergault the only other option. Mendes is certainly a prospect, quick and physically strong, if a bit rash, but there's little to support the idea he is ready to face the likes of Neymar or Memphis. In goal, Paul Nardi was capable enough last season, but Lorient's "title" was down more to their prolific attack than anything from the former Monaco man.

## ***VERDICT***

Lorient have bought well, and while they're unlikely to challenge for Europe, their combination of canny veterans and promising young players and depth should keep them comfortably above the relegation fray. Mid-table or a deep cup run is possible, but at the very least the team should be a decent watch given their array of attacking talent.

***PREDICTED FINISH: 17th***



# Squad List

NAME	POSITION	NATIONALITY	AGE	AT CLUB SINCE	FORMER CLUB
Paul Nardi	GK	French	26	2019/2020	AS Monaco
Matthieu Dreyer	GK	French	31	2020/2021	Amiens SC
Thomas Callens	GK	French	22	2020/2021	SM Caen
Teddy Bartouche	GK	French	23	2020/2021	-
Julien Laporte	CB	French	26	2019/2020	Clermont Foot
Thomas Fontaine	CB	Malagasy	29	2019/2020	Stade de Reims
Matthieu Saunier	CB	French	30	2018/2019	Granada
Andreaw Gravillon	CB	French	22	2020/2021	Inter Milan
Jérémy Morel	CB/LB	Malagasy	36	2019/2020	Stade Rennais
Vincent Le Goff	LB	French	30	2014/2015	FC Istres
Houboulang Mendes	RB	French	22	2018/2019	Stade Lavallois
Jérôme Hergault	RB	French	34	2019/2020	AC Ajaccio
Fabien Lemoine	DM	French	33	2017/2018	ASSE
Laurent Abergel	DM	French	27	2019/2020	AS Nancy
Trevoh Chalobah	DM	English	21	2020/2021	Chelsea FC
Franklin Wadja	DM	Cameroonian	25	2017/2018	VF Fontenay
Thomas Monconduit	CM	French	29	2020/2021	Amiens SC
Enzo Le Fée	CM/AM	French	20	2019/2020	-
Jonathan Delaplace	CM	French	34	2017/2018	SM Caen
Quentin Boisgard	AM	French	23	2020/2021	Toulouse FC
Sylvain Marveaux	AM	French	34	2016/2017	Newcastle United
Yoane Wissa	LW	French	23	2017/2018	Angers SCO
Armand Laurienté	RW	French	21	2020/2021	Stade Rennais
Stéphane Diarra	RW	Ivorian	21	2020/2021	Le Mans FC
Pierre-Yves Hamel	CF	French	26	2016/2017	-
Adrian Grbic	CF	Austrian	24	2020/2021	Clermont Foot
Umut Bozok	CF	Turkish	23	2019/2020	Nîmes Olympique
Terem Moffi	CF	Nigerian	21	2020/2021	KV Kortrijk
Christophe Pélissier	Manager	French	54	2019/2020	Amiens SC
Loïc Féry	President	French	46	2019/2020	-



# Olympique Lyonnais

## FORM GUIDE

Season	Division	Position	Points
2019/2020	Ligue 1	7th	40
2018/2019	Ligue 1	3rd	72
2017/2018	Ligue 1	3rd	78
2016/2017	Ligue 1	4th	67
2015/2016	Ligue 1	2nd	65

## LIKELY XI



## KEY MAN

### BRUNO GUIMARÃES

Given the transfer speculation that continues to swirl around the likes of Memphis Depay, Houssem Aouar, and Moussa Dembélé, the combative Brazilian may end up being the key to Les Gones' season. The aforementioned trio are unlikely to stick around, either in part or in total, with Lyon having failed to earn a place in Europe next season, barring Champions' League heroics. Guimarães looks set to play a deep-lying role in midfield, but make no mistake, he is far more than just a sentinel.

His energy and enthusiasm for a tackle have set the sort of standard bearer for commitment that Lyon have badly lacked in recent seasons, despite the team's surfeit of talent. Although no stranger to a booking, the Brazilian also has an enviable range of passing, and a fine sense of anticipation. Even if his manifest talent means he likely is not long for Lyon, his grinta could go a long way towards keeping the fans onside.



## ***SIGNING TO WATCH: LUCAS PAQUETA***

While the fact that Paquetá was sold to Lyon for something in the neighborhood of half of the €38M fee that brought him to Milan from Brazil, he is undoubtedly a talented player, and sporting director Juninho is betting big that playing alongside several of his compatriots for *Les Gones* will bring the best out of him, although much of that will come down to Rudi Garcia - unless the manager sees a way to shift Houssem Aouar to the left and play Paquetá centrally, he has two players of similar ability for the same position, as well as the development of Maxence Caqueret to consider. While the club are surely glad that Aouar is still among their ranks, how a player many figured would be his replacement will be used this season remains a not-insignificant challenge.

## ***SQUAD ANALYSIS***

That all of Memphis Depay, Moussa Dembélé, and Houssem Aouar have stayed is nominally a good thing for the club, even if the obstinance of Jean-Michel Aulas was the primary reason for this. However, even if the team's big three may have had their heads turned and are yet to really pull up any trees on the pitch, there is plenty of reason for optimism around this young team. Maxence Caqueret's bravura performances in midfield since the season's restart have certainly turned heads, and Rayan Cherki continues to be one of the league's most intriguing young players, and could be in a starring role more quickly than some might think given the club's potential departures. However, even if Cherki does step up, relying on the two youngsters is a trying proposition, and this team's goal-scoring acumen remains a massive question. A lack of fixture congestion will be a boon to Lyon, but there are still questions over where the goals are going to come from given the outlook for the club vis-à-vis their potential departures.

## ***STRENGTHS***

Lyon's midfield looks to be superb -- there's plenty of anticipation around the further development of Caqueret, and seeing more of Guimarães, with Paquetá perhaps playing a deeper role or as a number ten, with Aouar playing a wide role. Anthony Lopes is one of France's best goalkeepers, and Léo Dubois continues to be superb. The defence remains a bit of a work in progress, but Marcelo has looked back to being the player he was in his first season in France in this Final 8 tournament, and Djamel Benlamri will add a battling mentality to the side, alongside the experienced Mattia De Sciglio.

## ***WEAKNESSES***

If Lyon do play a 4-3-3, right wing is a concern, as Bertrand Traoré had been one of the club's more frustrating players since his arrival, but Rayan Cherki remains relatively untested. At left-back, Melvin Bard looks to be the future, but Garcia seems to need some convincing of this, as he has continued to persist with Maxwel Cornet in this role. There is also a worrying lack of depth throughout the team's attack, Toko Ekambi is a capable option to lead the line, but *Les Gones* would be facing serious questions unless Tino Kadewere can quickly prove himself ready to make the step up to top flight football.

## ***VERDICT***

It's difficult to place Lyon as yet giving the comings and goings for the club, especially as their attack has been moribund to start the season. They have been linked with several intriguing players, but on the balance of the squad at present and given the form they've displayed in their pre-season, it's hard to say *Les Gones* look positioned to do much better than last season; a slide on the part of one of last season's top three could see them sneak back into the Champions' League, but for now the team seem a step or two behind their potential rivals.

***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
Malcolm Barcola	GK	Togolese	21	2020/2021	-
Sinaly Diomandé	CB/RB	Ivorian	19	2020/2021	-
Jason Denayer	CB	Belgian	25	2018/2019	Manchester City
Marcelo	CB	Brazilian	33	2017/2018	Besiktas
Djamel Benlamri	CB	Algerian	20	2020/2021	Al-Shabab
Cenk Özkacar	CB	Turkish	20	2020/2021	Altay SK
Melvin Bard	LB	French	19	2020/2021	-
Léo Dubois	RB	French	25	2018/2019	FC Nantes
Mattia De Sciglio	LB/RB	Italian	27	2020/2021	Juventus
Thiago Mendes	DM	Brazilian	28	2019/2020	Lille OSC
Bruno Guimarães	DM/CM	Brazilian	22	2019/2020	Athletico Paranaense
Jean Lucas	CM	Brazilian	22	2019/2020	Flamengo
Maxence Caqueret	CM	French	20	2018/2019	-
Houssem Aouar	CM/AM	French	22	2016/2017	-
Lucas Paquetá	CM/AM	Brazilian	23	2020/2021	AC Milan
Rayan Cherki	AM	French	17	2019/2020	-
Camilo	AM	Brazilian	21	2019/2020	Ponte Preta
Memphis Depay	LW/CF	Dutch	26	2016/2017	Manchester United
Maxwel Cornet	LW/RW/LB	Ivorian	24	2014/2015	FC Metz
Bertrand Traoré	RW	Burkinabé	24	2017/2018	Chelsea FC
Karl Toko Ekambi	RW/LW/CF	Cameroonian	28	2019/2020	Villarreal
Moussa Dembélé	CF	French	24	2018/2019	Celtic
Tino Kadewere	CF	Zimbabwean	24	2020/2021	Le Havre
Lenny Pintor	CF	French	20	2018/2019	Stade Brest 29
Rudi Garcia	Manager	French	56	2019/2020	Marseille
Jean-Michel Aulas	President	French	71	1987/1988	-



# Olympique de Marseille

## FORM GUIDE

Season	Division	Position	Points
2019/2020	Ligue 1	2nd	56
2018/2019	Ligue 1	5th	61
2017/2018	Ligue 1	4th	77
2016/2017	Ligue 1	5th	62
2015/2016	Ligue 1	13th	48

## LIKELY XI



## KEY MAN

### FLORIAN THAUVIN

Florian Thauvin's aborted 2019/2020 season was a massive disappointment, undone before it even started owing to injury. André Villas-Boas was able to cope by using a combination of players in the French international's customary place on the right wing, but his goal-scoring acumen was badly missed, especially with Dario Benedetto frequently blowing hot and cold.

It does, of course, remain to be seen how good a relationship Thauvin establishes with the Argentine striker, but with more creativity in midfield and a more mobile forward alongside him, there is every chance that he can replicate the form that saw him average twenty goals a season in his last three full campaigns. The Champions' League will take centre stage for OM, of course, but with each of their front three now capable of a match-turning moment of brilliance, their once-inconsistent attack should be able to effectively compete on two fronts.

## ***SIGNING TO WATCH: ÁLVARO GONZÁLEZ***

In the wake of Luiz Gustavo's departure, Marseille looked certain to struggle in defence, with only the callow Dujse Caleta-Car and Boubacar Kamara as options for Villas Boas. However, the Spaniard's arrival was the catalyst for an impressive and wholly unexpected performance on the part of the defence; Caleta-Car looked a different player, his confidence buoyed by playing alongside González. Kamara flourished in defensive midfield, his mobility allowing for Valentin Rongier and Morgan Sanson to play more in support of the attack. While not the most physically imposing, González's grinta, composure and ball-winning ability made him the ideal partner for the bigger Caleta-Car. The team lost just once in the league with the Spaniard in the line-up; retaining his services for what seems a bargain €4m was imperative to OM's transfer window.

## ***SQUAD ANALYSIS***

Marseille did wonderfully well in Villas-Boas' first campaign in charge, shaking off a poor start to the season to put together a 14-match unbeaten following a heavy loss in Le Classique. The return of Thauvin will no doubt be welcomed by the former Chelsea boss, but a lack of depth looms over this squad. In central midfield, Pape Gueye looks a brilliant signing, but depth in that area was hardly a pressing need — another striker or a reserve full-back would have done far more to ameliorate the team's ability to cope with fixture congestion. Not to mention what looks set to be a heavy reliance on Payet and Steve Mandanda to maintain their strong form. The pair were key elements in the club's success last season, with Payet picking up the slack in terms of goals in Thauvin's absence. However, as he turns 34 during the season, the likelihood of a famously inconsistent player sustaining that output is surely low. Age is less of a concern for Mandanda, but he, too, may find the combination of a return to the Champions' League and a compressed league season taxing.

## ***STRENGTHS***

Marseille's midfield has the most depth in the league; Kevin Strootman, Gueye, and Michäel Cuisance would impress in most Ligue 1 sides, but all are likely to be on the bench for OM's biggest matches. In goal, Steve Mandanda rolled back the years last season, and Yohann Pélé is one of the league's better back-ups. The defence in the meantime should be improved with more experience on the part of Caleta-Car and the loan signing of promising Argentine Leonardo Balerdi from Dortmund. The forward line is one of France's best with Thauvin back to full fitness, provided Dimitri Payet continues his own brilliant form from last season.

## ***WEAKNESSES***

A lack of depth at striker and full-back is again a concern; Hiroki Sakai's versatility is a major plus here, but were one of he or Jordan Amavi to suffer a long-term injury, it would be difficult indeed for Villas-Boas to manage the team's impending fixture congestion. In attack, as much as Valère Germain is a willing worker, his return of two goals in 25 matches speaks for itself, while Kostas Mitroglou has done little to improve his status as one of the club's most ill-judged transfers in his loan spells in Turkey and the Netherlands.

## ***VERDICT***

Marseille's starting eleven is probably the most capable outside of the capital. However, their lack of depth, coupled with what is likely to be a focus on the Champions' League, will mean that they could slip a few places in the division. Concerns over the age of key players like Mandanda and Payet loom as well, despite their fine campaigns last year.

***PREDICTED FINISH: 4th***





# Squad List

NAME	POSITION	NATIONALITY	AGE	AT CLUB SINCE	FORMER CLUB
Steve Mandanda	GK	French	35	2017/2018	Crystal Palace
Yohann Pelé	GK	French	37	2015/2016	FC Sochaux
Ahmadou Dia	GK	French	20	2019/2020	-
Boubacar Kamara	CB/DM	French	20	2017/2018	-
Duje Caleta-Car	CB	Croatian	23	2018/2019	RB Salzburg
Leonardo Balerdi	CB	Argentine	21	2020/2021	Borussia Dortmund
Álvaro González	CB	Spanish	30	2019/2020	Villarreal
Lucas Perrin	CB	French	21	2018/2019	-
Jordan Amavi	LB	French	26	2017/2018	Aston Villa
Christopher Rocchia	LB	French	22	2018/2019	-
Hiroki Sakai	RB/LB	Japanese	30	2016/2017	-
Yuto Nagatomo	LB	Japanese	34	2020/2021	Galatasaray
Kevin Strootman	DM	Dutch	30	2018/2019	AS Roma
Pape Gueye	DM/CM	French	21	2020/2021	Le Havre
Morgan Sanson	CM	French	25	2016/2017	Montpellier HSC
Valentin Rongier	CM	French	25	2019/2020	FC Nantes
Michaël Cuisance	CM/AM	French	21	2020/2021	Bayern Munich
Ugo Bertelli	CM	French	17	2019/2020	-
Saif-Eddine Khaoui	AM	Tunisian	25	2016/2017	Tours FC
Florian Chabrolle	AM	French	22	2018/2019	-
Dimitri Payet	LW	French	33	2016/2017	West Ham United
Luis Henrique	LW	Brazilian	18	2020/2021	Tres Passos
Nemanja Radonjic	LW/RW	Serbian	24	2018/2019	Red Star Belgrade
Marley Aké	LW	French	19	2019/2020	-
Florian Thauvin	RW	French	27	2015/2016	Newcastle United
Darío Benedetto	CF	Argentine	30	2019/2020	Boca Juniors
Valère Germain	CF/RW	French	30	2017/2018	AS Monaco
Kostas Mitroglou	CF	Greek	32	2017/2018	SL Benfica
André Villas-Boas	Manager	Portuguese	42	2019/2020	Shanghai SIPG
Jacques-Henri Eyraud	President	French	52	2016/2017	-



# FC Metz

## FORM GUIDE

Season	Division	Position	Points
2019/2020	Ligue 1	15th	34
2018/2019	Ligue 2	1st	81
2017/2018	Ligue 1	20th	26
2016/2017	Ligue 1	14th	43
2015/2016	Ligue 2	3rd	65

## LIKELY XI



## KEY MAN

### FARID BOULAYA

Boulaya has always been a rather undersung presence for Metz. While the likes of Habib Diallo and the (now injured) Ibrahima Niane scored the goals, and the pace of Opa Nguette wowed observers and fans alike, the Algerian has been a paragon of quiet creativity. His numbers for the club (and Clermont, his previous stop) in Ligue 2 were quietly impressive, and he showed himself to be not only an important creative conduit but also a capable goalscorer, no mean feat given he is perhaps best suited to playing centrally, rather than as a winger.

This dissonance in his position has seen him be dropped at times with Metz playing a 4-3-3, but he has installed himself as a regular once more this season, and was even called up for his country in the most recent international break, starting and playing 90 minutes in a friendly. If Metz are to have any hope of survival in the wake of Diallo's departure and the injury suffered by Niane, they will need goals, and Boulaya, through his experience, is the most likely source of them, even if new arrivals Vagner and Thierry Ambrose may be given more chances by Frédéric Antonetti.

## **SIGNING TO WATCH: VAGNER**

The Cape Verdean forward, signed from Saint-Étienne for €3m, had been enjoying a stellar season on loan for Nancy in Ligue 2, scoring eight goals and adding three assists in eighteen matches, before it was cut short by a serious ankle injury. It may seem specious for Les Grenats to have spent so much on an attacker, especially given his only consistently strong play is in a limited sample size in the second division. Yet with Habib Diallo departed, the team clearly wanted a player whose profile would allow them to shift Ibrahima Niane to a central role without sacrificing his scoring contributions from the wing. Vagner, should he be able to recover from this ankle injury, is also able to play centrally, but offers far more in terms of his technical ability, something which Metz have been missing since the departure of Ismaila Sarr.

## **SQUAD ANALYSIS**

Aside from Vagner and making Thierry Ambrose's loan permanent, Metz will largely have the same squad as last season, with one major exception. With Habib Diallo having left for regional rival Strasbourg and Ibrahima Niane set to miss the season with a cruciate injury, finding a goalscorer is job one for Antonetti, and if the manager can succeed there (something that seems unlikely to date) the eastern side should be able to navigate this second season in Ligue 1 successfully, something which has eluded them over the last decade. Still, though, even if Les Grenats do struggle for goals, the elements that made the team a stubborn challenge for opponents last season remain in place. With a combative midfield made even more so with the January arrival of Vincent Pajot. FCM chose to bet on Kévin N'Doram by making his move from Monaco permanent, but we won't see him for a little while, suffering an Achilles injury in pre-season. In 2020, Metz picked up 17 points from nine matches, and with largely the same side in place, the team's confidence should be high, goalscorer or not.

## **STRENGTHS**

The physicality and resoluteness that will define the spine of this team through central defence and midfield mean that Metz will be a handful physically for most opponents, and Vincent Hognon's disruptive style of play will be a tough obstacle. It's not without some sacrifice creatively, of course, but the wealth of options that the manager has at his disposal in attack means he will be able to readily switch among players like Boulaya, Opa Nguette, and Thierry Ambrose, each of whom offer something different going forward, no small matter with five substitutes available this season. Expect a standout campaign from Dylan Bronn in the heart of the defence.

## **WEAKNESSES**

Alexandre Oukidja was badly out of his depth the last time he had featured in Ligue 1, with Strasbourg, and while he has improved since then, to the point of becoming a regular for Algeria, doubts still linger about his capabilities. Depth is also somewhat of a concern, with full-back being prime among these areas, as is the lack of an out-and-out striker, even if Thierry Ambrose and Vagner will be asked to do a job there in the short term. With Renaud Cohade making his exit, there is also little in the way of creativity in midfield. Overall, though, this side is as well-constructed as any Metz have had in the top flight in recent years, and has a fighting chance to survive come the season's end.

## **VERDICT**

Metz's youthful cadre of attackers remains a question, but their midfield and defence appear well stocked, and Antonetti seems to have a good level of tactical ability to set his team up consistently both in terms of formation and personnel, something that will aid the continued development of the team. Survival could be achieved, but there likely isn't enough here for much more than that, unless players like Fabien Centonze can perform exceptionally on a consistent basis in attacking areas from full-back.

***PREDICTED FINISH: 19th***



# Squad List

NAME	POSITION	NATIONALITY	AGE	AT CLUB SINCE	FORMER CLUB
Alexandre Oukidja	GK	Algerian	32	2018/2019	RC Strasbourg
Marc-Aurèle Caillard	GK	French	26	2020/2021	EA Guingamp
Paul Delecroix	GK	French	32	2018/2019	FC Lorient
Matthieu Udol	LB	French	24	2015/2016	-
Thomas Delaine	LB	French	28	2018/2019	Paris FC
Manuel Cabit	LB	Martiniquais	27	2019/2020	AC Ajaccio
Dylan Bronn	CB	Tunisian	25	2019/2020	KAA Gent
Mamadou Fofana	CB	Malian	22	2018/2019	Alanyaspor
Kiki Kouyaté	CB	Malian	23	2020/2021	Troyes
John Boye	CB	Ghanian	33	2018/2019	Sivasspor
Fabien Centonze	RB	French	24	2019/2020	RC Lens
Kévin N'Doram	DM	French	24	2019/2020	AS Monaco
Habib Maïga	DM/CM	Ivorian	24	2019/2020	AS Saint-Étienne
Vincent Pajot	DM/CM	French	30	2019/2020	Angers SCO
Geronimo Poblete	DM	Argentine	27	2017/2018	Atlético Colón
Victorien Angban	CM	Ivorian	24	2019/2020	Chelsea FC
Warren Tchimbembé	RM	French	22	2020/2021	Troyes
Vincent Thill	AM	Luxembourgian	20	2016/2017	-
Opa Nguette	LW	Senegalese	26	2016/2017	Valenciennes
Adama Traoré	RW	Malian	25	2018/2019	TP Mazembe
Vagner	RW/LW	Cape Verdean	24	2020/2021	AS Saint-Étienne
Farid Boulaya	RW	Algerian	27	2018/2019	Girona
Lamine Gueye	RW	Senegalese	22	2020/2021	Génération Foot
Papa Ndiaga Yade	CF	Senegalese	20	2019/2020	Génération Foot
Ibrahima Niane	CF	Senegalese	21	2017/2018	Génération Foot
Thierry Ambrose	CF/RW	French	23	2020/2021	Manchester City
Frédéric Antonetti	Manager	French	59	2017/2018	Lille OSC
Bernard Serin	President	French	70	2009/2010	-





# AS Monaco

## FORM GUIDE

Season	Division	Position	Points
2019/2020	Ligue 1	9th	40
2018/2019	Ligue 1	17th	36
2017/2018	Ligue 1	2nd	80
2016/2017	Ligue 1	1st	95
2015/2016	Ligue 1	3rd	71

## KEY MAN

### WISSAM BEN YEDDER

The joint-leading scorer in Ligue 1 last season, having formed a sterling partnership with Islam Slimani, Ben Yedder's return to France far outstripped the expectations of most observers, despite his having impressed during his time in Seville. With Monaco playing with a near-reckless abandon under both Leonardo Jardim and Robert Moreno, he enjoyed being the focal point of the attack.

Playing centrally alongside another striker saw him deliver an impressive return both from a goals perspective but also from a tactical standpoint, as his movement allowed more involvement from wide players and midfield. However, with Slimani's physicality having departed, Ben Yedder will be tasked with leading the line on his own, something which has not always been an unqualified success. If he can come close to duplicating last season's scoring form, Monaco could be a dark horse for the Champions' League, but at the very least, he should remain one of Europe's neatest poachers and an exciting watch.

## LIKELY XI



## ***SIGNING TO WATCH: AXEL DISASI***

While the immutable Yunis Abdelhamid may have won more plaudits in anchoring Stade de Reims' stellar defence last season, to say nothing of the brilliance of Predrag Rajkovic, little can be done to downplay the role that Disasi had under David Guion, stepping ably into the void left by Björn Engels. That Reims were able to extract a club-record €13m with 12 months remaining on his deal for the 22-year-old speaks volumes of importance to the Champagne side. However, more important will be how he slots in alongside his potential partner in defence. Physically imposing but not lacking for pace, he has also a sublime eye for a pass, something which allowed Reims to be sharper in that aspect of their play despite Alaixys Romao and Xavier Chavalerin not being the most cultured in front of him. His positioning, as would be the case for a player with so few professional matches under his belt, needs some work, but at this point he seems a very canny buy for Niko Kovac's side.

## ***SQUAD ANALYSIS***

Where to start with Monaco? Despite the departures of the likes of Danijel Subasic and Kamil Glik, heroes of the club's title-winning side, the squad is still bloated, as it has been for much of the recent past. How much new manager Niko Kovac will look to rotate is yet to be seen, but he does seem set on playing a 4-3-3 with Ben Yedder leading the line on his own, making pressing and the team's solidity in midfield the mandate. Retaining the striker is of paramount importance, as is surrounding him with enough creativity to make the best of his gifts - his partnership with Slimani was impressive but the team struggled in the Algerian's absence - Kevin Volland is a step in the right direction here, but more may be. If Kovac can take advantage of the considerable array of attacking talent at his disposal, Monaco should be as thrilling to watch as they were last season, but it's sorting the defence that will take some doing, including identifying a holding midfielder. Aurélien Tchouameni seems to have caught Kovac's eye, but that does set the team up as having a fragile spine, which could yet pose problems.

## ***STRENGTHS***

Central midfield is one of the most packed areas of Monaco's squad, but it also is an area of plenty of promise. Youssouf Fofana was a surprising creative spark since arriving from Strasbourg in January, and Aleksander Golovin looked to be finally hitting his stride this season before suffering an injury. Benjamin Lecomte's campaign last year was a small step backward for the former Montpellier man, but he is still one of the best five goalkeepers in France.

## ***WEAKNESSES***

Central defence, despite the arrival of Disasi, is the area of greatest worry. With Guillermo Maripan and Benoît Badiashile as Kovac's best current options, there is not a huge amount to be confident about, as both are, like Disasi, far more reliant on their physical gifts than their defensive nous. Kovac hopes to make pressing important, and perhaps in his playing a 4-3-3, the defence will be less exposed, but this remains an issue nonetheless. There is also concern over a reliable secondary source of goals - with Slimani's departure no player in the squad apart from Ben Yedder found the back of the net more than four times last season. An injury to the Frenchman could leave Monaco looking rather threadbare in attack.

## ***VERDICT***

In Ben Yedder, Volland, a now-fit Stevan Jovetic and the still-improving Golovin, Monaco have plenty of attacking options, but it remains to be seen if the team can be sure enough defensively to make the balance of results positive. Even with these foibles, though, the team were just a point off of the European places, and if things can coalesce even slightly at the back, the Champions' League may not be impossible.

***PREDICTED FINISH: 4th***



# Squad List

NAME	POSITION	NATIONALITY	AGE	AT CLUB SINCE	FORMER CLUB
Benjamin Lecomte	GK	French	29	2019/2020	Montpellier HSC
Radoslaw Majecki	GK	Polish	20	2019/2020	Legia Warszawa
Vito Mannone	GK	Italian	32	2020/2021	Reading
Fodé Ballo-Touré	LB	French	23	2018/2019	Lille OSC
Caio Henrique	LB/LW	Brazilian	23	2020/2021	Atletico Madrid
Benoît Badiashile	CB	French	19	2018/2019	-
Axel Disasi	CB	French	22	2020/2021	Stade de Reims
Guillermo Maripán	CB	Chilean	26	2019/2020	Alaves
Strahinja Pavlovic	CB	Serbian	19	2020/2021	Partizan Belgrade
Jemerson	CB	Brazilian	28	2015/2016	Atlético Mineiro
Chrislain Matsima	CB	French	18	2020/2021	-
Djibril Sidibé	RB/LB	French	28	2016/2017	Lille OSC
Ruben Aguilar	RB	French	27	2019/2020	Montpellier HSC
Aurélien Tchouaméni	DM	French	20	2019/2020	Bordeaux
Florentino	DM	Portuguese	21	2020/2021	SL Benfica
Youssef Fofana	CM	French	21	2019/2020	RC Strasbourg
Cesc Fabregas	CM	Spanish	33	2018/2019	Chelsea FC
Youssef Aït Bennasser	CM	Moroccan	24	2016/2017	AS Nancy
Enzo Millot	CM	French	18	2020/2021	-
Aleksandr Golovin	CM/AM	Russian	24	2018/2019	CSKA Moscow
Sofiane Diop	AM/CM	French	20	2018/2019	Stade Rennais
Henry Onyekuru	LW	Nigerian	23	2019/2020	Everton
Willem Guebbels	LW	French	19	2018/2019	Olympique Lyonnais
Gelson Martins	RW	Portuguese	25	2019/2020	Atletico Madrid
Samuel Grandsir	RW	French	24	2018/2019	AC Troyes



# Squad List

NAME	POSITION	NATIONALITY	AGE	AT CLUB SINCE	FORMER CLUB
Wissam Ben Yedder	CF	French	30	2019/2020	Sevilla FC
Stevan Jovetic	CF	Macedonian	30	2017/2018	Inter Milan
Kevin Volland	LW/CF/RW	German	28	2020/2021	Bayer Leverkusen
Pietro Pellegri	CF	Italian	19	2017/2018	Genoa
Niko Kovac	Manager	Croatian	48	2020/2021	Bayern Munich
Dimitri Rybolovlev	President	Russian	52	2011/2012	-





# Montpellier HSC

## FORM GUIDE

Season	Division	Position	Points
2019/2020	Ligue 1	8th	40
2018/2019	Ligue 1	6th	59
2017/2018	Ligue 1	10th	51
2016/2017	Ligue 1	15th	39
2015/2016	Ligue 1	12th	49

## KEY MAN

### ANDY DELORT

The former Caen and Toulouse man has thrived at Montpellier, his physical ebullience making him the ideal foil for Gaëtan Laborde and scoring with aplomb, averaging more than a goal every third match. More than his physicality, though, Delort provides a willingness to get stuck in and lead the press - only Gaëtan Charbonnier had more tackles than the Algerian last season in the league - and he has shown himself to be the ideal spearhead for Michel Der Zakarian's style of play both on the ground and in the air.

While adept at leading the line, Delort is also an unselfish player. Among the league's orthodox strikers, few record as many assists as Delort, who is truly a complete centre forward. Discipline is a slight concern, but overall Delort and Montpellier's marriage has been a blissful one and could yet lead La Paillade into Europe this season.

## LIKELY XI



## ***SIGNING TO WATCH: STEPHY MAVIDIDI***

Like many clubs in France this season, Montpellier have largely kept faith with last season's squad - Géronimo Rulli and the retiring Souleymane Camara are their only major departures. A new goalkeeper with a strong European pedigree, Jonas Omlin, was brought in to replace Rulli, but the club's other major arrival, Mavididi, is far more intriguing. Undoubtedly talented, with five goals in 16 starts for a Dijon side who often lacked consistency or cohesion in the attacking third, he was also the subject of some bad blood between himself and the club's hierarchy. For the moment, the Englishman may find it hard to displace one of Delort or Laborde in Montpellier's attack. However, as he has considerably more pace and technical ability than do either of that pair, his potential to stretch an opponent worn down by battling against the physicality of his teammates makes him a player with intriguing "game-breaking" potential, in the words of Der Zakarian.

## ***SQUAD ANALYSIS***

As stated above, Montpellier are doubling down on what they have - the club were only a point off the European places and that placement was achieved with record signing Téji Savanier having played sparingly, and fellow midfielder Florent Mollet also struggling with injury. Should Mollet's recovery from COVID-19 continue unhindered, and Mavididi turn into a lethal threat off the bench, Montpellier will no doubt be a more potent attacking force than the side that scored just 35 goals last season. That improvement is to be expected, and is necessary, but questions linger at the back. The ageless Vitorino Hilton has returned for another season, but alongside him, Daniel Congré's powers are waning more dramatically. Pedro Mendes has an excellent sense of positioning but still manages to be somewhat of a disciplinary liability, having been cautioned eight times in 16 appearances. In goal, Rulli will be missed, having returned to Spain following the end of his loan spell, but Omlin is a canny buy. While the Swiss league may not be a fair barometer of talent, he kept clean sheets in four of five Europa League knockout matches and projects as a fine reflex goalkeeper.

## ***STRENGTHS***

Michel Der Zakarian's resolute tactical vision means that Montpellier may not always be pleasing on the eye, but they will work hard to get a result, and can be, at their best, the equal of any side in France. The depth and variety of the strike force will be the envy of much of the league, especially if Mavididi can bed in as well as the club hope, while midfield is full of an appealing balance of creativity and bite, with Savanier as likely to make an elegant tackle as he is ping a brilliant cross-field pass. Too, there is much to be said about continuity - this will be the third season with more or less the same side for Montpellier, and that familiarity can pay real dividends given the irregularities of training in this preseason. Joris Chotard, a pitbull-like defensive midfield talent, is also one to watch.

## ***WEAKNESSES***

The age of the defence is worrying indeed, as Montpellier's goals-conceded average slipped noticeably between last season and the previous one, which hardly augurs well. A lack of depth at full-back is also worrying - Nicolas Cozza should help as he returns from injury but there is no real deputy for Arnaud Souquet, something which is also true for Florent Mollet's role in attacking midfield. Montpellier clearly have talent, but barring further acquisitions will have to ride their luck when it comes to injuries if they are again to come close to the European places.

## ***VERDICT***

There are simply too many concerns over depth and the defence's solidity to see Montpellier pushing for Europe once more. With a pre-season disrupted by COVID-19, and several teams around them looking better positioned owing to their summer windows, a mid-table finish will be frustrating for La Paillade but seems the most likely outcome.

***PREDICTED FINISH: 7th***



# Squad List

NAME	POSITION	NATIONALITY	AGE	AT CLUB SINCE	FORMER CLUB
Jonas Omlin	GK	Swiss	26	2020/2021	FC Basel
Dimitry Bertaud	GK	French	22	2017/2018	-
Matis Carvalho	GK	Portuguese	21	2019/2020	Toulouse FC
Ambroise Oyongo	LB	Cameroonian	29	2017/2018	Montréal FC
Nicolas Cozza	LB/CB	French	21	2017/2018	-
Pedro Mendes	CB	Portuguese	29	2017/2018	Stade Rennais
Clément Vidal	CB	French	20	2019/2020	-
Daniel Congré	CB	French	22	2012/2013	Toulouse FC
Vitorino Hilton	CB	Brazilian	42	2011/2012	Marseille
Arnaud Souquet	RB	French	28	2019/2020	KAA Gent
Damien Le Tallec	DM/CB	French	30	2018/2019	Red Star Belgrade
Joris Chotard	DM	French	18	2019/2020	-
Junior Sambia	CM	French	23	2018/2019	Chamois Niortais
Killian Sanson	CM	French	23	2016/2017	Thonon Evian
Téji Savanier	CM	French	28	2019/2020	Nîmes Olympique
Jordan Ferri	CM	French	28	2019/2020	Olympique Lyonnais
Mihailo Ristic	LW/LB	Serbian	24	2018/2019	FC Krasnodar
Florent Mollet	AM	French	28	2018/2019	FC Metz
Amir Adouyev	AM	Russian	21	2019/2020	-
Keagan Dolly	LW	South African	27	2016/2017	Mamelodi Sundowns
Il-Lok Yun	LW/CF	South Korean	28	2019/2020	Yokohama Marinos
Andy Delort	CF	Algerian	28	2018/2019	Toulouse FC
Gaëtan Laborde	CF	French	26	2018/2019	Bordeaux
Stephy Mavididi	CF	English	22	2020/2021	Juventus
Petar Skuletic	CF	Serbian	20	2018/2019	Genclerbirligi
Bastian Badu	CF	French	20	2019/2020	-
Yanis Ammour	CF	French	21	2018/2019	-
Michel Der Zakarian	Manager	French	57	2017/2018	Stade de Reims
Laurent Nicollin	President	French	47	2017/2018	-



# FC Nantes

## FORM GUIDE

Season	Division	Position	Points
2019/2020	Ligue 1	13th	37
2018/2019	Ligue 1	12th	48
2017/2018	Ligue 1	9th	52
2016/2017	Ligue 1	7th	51
2015/2016	Ligue 1	14th	48

## LIKELY XI



## KEY MAN

### MOSES SIMON

The Nigerian winger impressed with five goals and five assists for Nantes last season, despite being forced to play as a false nine at times. This ask led to a marked difference in tactical approach from having the hulking Kalifa Coulibaly lead the line, and a disconnect which played no small role in Les Canaris' struggles for goals. His loan signing was made permanent this summer for €5m, and with that price tag there will be heightened expectations.

Even if Simon won't necessarily be the focal point of the attack in a tactical sense, he will still be expected to have more end product than last season. Despite being more of a flair player than one would often expect to feature in Christian Gourcuff's teams, his turn of pace and dribbling ability made him one of the veteran manager's first name on the team-sheet. Now accustomed to Ligue 1 and set to feature more often as an inverted winger, a role in which he is at his best, Simon looks well-placed to improve on those numbers and allow Nantes to push up the table.



## ***SIGNING TO WATCH: PEDRO CHIRIVELLA***

The Spaniard's arrival, from Liverpool's reserves, was hardly greeted with much fanfare, but there's clearly no shame in being unable to make an impact in the Reds' first team, especially in midfield. A wiry central midfielder, he has drawn comparisons to the likes of Xabi Alonso, not least of all for an impressive range of passing, but there's more to Chirivella's play than pinging cross-field balls. He also has consistently displayed a good positional awareness, a willingness to get about the pitch when pressing and is unafraid to get stuck into a tackle. In pre-season, he has offered more of the same, and even if questions do linger over his physicality, strength is something which can be improved upon, and may not even be totally imperative playing alongside the far more sturdy Abdoulaye Touré.

## ***SQUAD ANALYSIS***

In a recurring theme throughout this guide, Nantes have not done much business this summer aside from the arrival of Chirivella, Jean-Kévin Augustin, and Jean-Charles Castelletto from Brest on a free. Castelletto will add badly needed depth at centre-back, but otherwise much of Nantes' fortunes will likely turn on their fitness. Injuries to Fabio, Charles Traoré, and Nicolas Pallois last season were disruptive at the back, but Nantes still managed to have a relatively decent season in terms of goals conceded. With Alban Lafont's loan continuing, the team should have the requisite depth to be comfortable in that department. It's in attack, however, where things start to get a bit murky. Simon was a decent pickup, but he and Ludovic Blas were the team's joint-top scorers with just five goals each - even relegated Amiens found the net more often - Augustin could help in that department, but he has looked lost since a decent first season in Germany, and may struggle to get ahead of youngster Randal Kolo Muani. Coulibaly did struggle with injury last season, and was effective enough after the departure of the late Emiliano Sala to suggest that faith in him could yet be an option as well.

## ***STRENGTHS***

Again, back to full fitness, Nantes' defence will be solid enough to at the very least avoid the drop, and to perhaps even nip at the heels of the European challengers should one of their attacking players have a breakthrough campaign. In Andrei Girotto and Pallois, Nantes have a fine pair of no-nonsense centre backs, and the attacking capabilities of Traoré and Fabio are similarly key. Midfield is a largely inexperienced group save Touré, but their collective versatility and attention to detail under Gourcuff has been impressive, with Louza and Blas, the latter of which had been the picture of inconsistency at Guingamp, the most patent beneficiaries of the veteran manager's tactical intelligence.

## ***WEAKNESSES***

A focal point in attack is something that this team has struggled without since the departure of the late Sala - even if Coulibaly fits the bill physically, his injury record and finishing ability is spotty. Again, Augustin and Kolo Muani could yet be answers here, but they will have to prove as much with their consistency. Depth at full-back is a bit of an issue as well, as the injuries to Traoré and Fabio proved, and the team having taken a flyer on the former Lille fullback Sebastien Corchia seems a canny move.

## ***VERDICT***

Injuries and the eleventh hour departure of Valentin Rongier had made Gourcuff's maiden campaign at the Beaujoire largely a frustrating one. Yet the hope here is that with a fully fit squad, he can shake off what has been a truncated pre-season and imbue this team with some of his trademark cohesion. If he can wring ten goals or more from one of his attackers, Nantes could yet surprise, but a lack of a proven focal point looks to continue to haunt this side.

***PREDICTED FINISH: 15th***



# Squad List

NAME	POSITION	NATIONALITY	AGE	AT CLUB SINCE	FORMER CLUB
Alban Lafont	GK	French	21	2019/2020	AC Fiorentina
Denis Petric	GK	Serbian	32	2019/2020	EA Guingamp
Charly Jan	GK	French	21	2020/2021	-
Charles Traoré	LB	Malian	28	2018/2019	AC Troyes
Dennis Appiah	LB/RB	French	28	2019/2020	Anderlecht
Andrei Giotto	CB	Brazilian	28	2017/2018	Tombense
Jean-Charles Castelletto	CB	Cameroonian	25	2020/2021	Stade Brest 29
Nicolas Pallois	CB	French	33	2017/2018	Bordeaux
Thomas Basila	CB	French	21	2018/2019	-
Sebastien Corchia	RB	French	29	2020/2021	Sevilla FC
Fábio	RB	Brazilian	30	2018/2019	Middlesbrough
Abdoulaye Touré	DM	French	26	2014/2015	-
Mehdi Abeid	DM	Algerian	28	2019/2020	Dijon FCO
Pedro Chirivella	CM	Spanish	23	2020/2021	Liverpool FC
Imran Louza	CM/AM	French	21	2019/2020	-
Ludovic Blas	AM/RW	French	22	2019/2020	EA Guingamp
Roli Pereira de Sa	AM	French	23	2017/2018	Paris Saint-Germain
Moses Simon	LW/CF	Nigerian	25	2019/2020	Levante
Anthony Limbombe	RW	Belgian	28	2018/2019	Club Brugge
Marcus Coco	RW	French	24	2019/2020	EA Guingamp
Abdoul Kader Bamba	RW	French	26	2019/2020	Le Mans
Kalifa Coulibaly	CF	Malian	29	2017/2018	KAA Gent
Renaud Emond	CF	Belgian	28	2019/2020	Standard Liege
Bridge Ndilu	CF	French	20	2019/2020	Stade Lavallois
Randal Kolo Muani	CF	DR Congolese	21	2017/2018	-
Jean-Kévin Augustin	CF	French	23	2020/2021	FC Nantes
Christian Gourcuff	Manager	French	65	2019/2020	Al-Gharafa
Waldemar Kita	President	Polish	67	2007/2008	Lausanne



# OGC Nice

## FORM GUIDE

Season	Division	Position	Points
2019/2020	Ligue 1	5th	41
2018/2019	Ligue 1	7th	56
2017/2018	Ligue 1	8th	54
2016/2017	Ligue 1	3rd	78
2015/2016	Ligue 1	4th	63

## KEY MAN

### KASPER DOLBERG

The big Dane was a bit slow to become accustomed to life in France, but he eventually came into his own, especially once Nice seemed to move toward tactical stability. Injuries to the likes of Youcef Atal and Alexis Claude-Maurice had initially forced Patrick Vieira to switch among formations quite often.

## LIKELY XI



Too, there was also a lack of consistency in his midfield selections, which at times limited the amount of understanding that could fostered with the likes of Pierre Lees-Melou for Dolberg, who was nominally the most forward-thinking of the central three last year. If the team can play with a more free-flowing style around the former Ajax man, he has the type of potential that can take the league by storm, especially if his teammates in attack break the lines with regularity. With the loan arrival Rony Lopes, and Claude-Maurice, both of whom harbour great goalscoring ability, the future is ostensibly bright for Les Aiglons.

## ***SIGNING TO WATCH: RONY LOPES***

Lopes' itinerant career is in no way representative of his talent, and even if he struggled to get into the team in Sevilla last season, he is no stranger to success in France, having scored 15 goals for Monaco in 2017/18. Still just 24, he has been a consistent performer when given playing time, and with Adam Ounas having returned to Napoli and Ignatius Ganago sold to Lens, there should be no shortage of opportunities for the former Lille man. Patrick Vieira is faced with a bit of a jigsaw puzzle in terms of his attack. Yet with Lopes able to play as the most advanced of a midfield three, wide on either flank, or even as a number ten, he has a piece whose versatility and penchant for invention can do much to change the outcome of a match, while also taking some of the goal-scoring pressure off of Dolberg.

## ***SQUAD ANALYSIS***

Nice's summer window has been slightly confusing - there have been some promising and intelligent purchases - Hassane Kamara was a fine player at Reims last season and should have no trouble replicating his form under Patrick Vieira, while Jordan Lotomba and Robson Bambu are intriguing prospects, to say nothing of the brilliance Jeff Reine-Adélaïde has shown when fit. But there are also some baffling moves that have been made by the club's hierarchy, including the signings of Morgan Schneiderlin and Amine Gouiri. Schneiderlin's lack of pace, especially when compared to the other options at Vieira's disposal, looks to be a bit of an albatross. While Gouiri may yet come good on the promise he evinced at Lyon, he has yet to show much in the way of consistency, or even a clear idea of what his best position is, especially with Dolberg clearly entrenched at centre forward. It's not all bad for Les Aiglons, though: Walter Benítez remains a fine goalkeeper - his signing a contract extension was key, and Dolberg and Alexis Claude-Maurice continue to improve, while in Youcef Atal, Nice may have the league's most exciting player not named Kylian Mbappé. Of course, it remains down to Vieira to knit all this together, and after a second summer of spending, the pressure will be squarely on the manager to push further up the table.

## ***STRENGTHS***

Nice did well to address their weakness at left-back in signing Hassane Kamara, and Walter Benítez is an imperious force in goal. Dolberg should score 15-20 goals - more than that could even see Les Aiglons push for the top three. Atal, too, will be once again an electric presence, having struggled with injury last season, and Dante and Robson Bambu should form a capable partnership, with the youngster having already displayed an impressive range of passing in pre-season. This will no doubt facilitate Nice's ability to make the pitch as wide as possible.

## ***WEAKNESSES***

Lopes should provide a reliable secondary goal threat, but aside from him, there appears to be a big drop-off if Dolberg is unavailable or if Nice rotate as a result of their participation in the Europa League. Ganago had impressed in flashes last season, but is now gone, so much will come down to Gouiri and Lees-Melou as decent sources of goals from midfield, but another consistent attacking threat will be vital. The sale of Christophe Hérelle felt very questionable, as well as the manner in which he was treated as he was pushed out of the exit door. Finally and most importantly, will Vieira have the gumption to back his convictions this season? No less than twenty outfield players started at least six matches last term - Vieira needs to hammer out a first-choice eleven more definitively to clearly demonstrate that the club will progress under his stewardship.

## ***VERDICT***

Aside from the acquisition of Schneiderlin, Nice seem to have a Monaco-lite model in place of buying talented young players and hoping that they have a resale value. With Lille undergoing further churn, Marseille short-handed and Rennes coping with a return to the Champions' League, the opportunity is there for Nice if Vieira can strike the right balance, even if it would probably have to come at the expense of neglecting the Europa League group stage.

***PREDICTED FINISH: 8th***



# Squad List

NAME	POSITION	NATIONALITY	AGE	AT CLUB SINCE	FORMER CLUB
Walter Benítez	GK	Argentine	27	2016/2017	Quilmes
Yoan Cardinale	GK	French	26	2015/2016	-
Teddy Boulhendi	GK	French	19	2020/2021	-
Hassane Kamara	LB	French	26	2020/2021	Stade de Reims
Stanley Nsoki	LB/CB	French	21	2019/2020	Paris Saint-Germain
Racine Coly	LB	Senegalese	27	2017/2018	Brescia
Robson Bambu	CB	Brazilian	22	2020/2021	Athletico Paranaense
Andy Pelmar	CB	French	20	2019/2020	-
Dante	CB	Brazilian	36	2016/2017	Wolfsburg
Flavius Daniliuc	CB	Austrian	19	2020/2021	Bayern Munich
Youcef Atal	RB/RW	Algerian	24	2018/2019	KV Kortrijk
Jordan Lotomba	RB	Swiss	22	2020/2021	Young Boys
Morgan Schneiderlin	DM	French	20	2020/2021	Everton
Danilo	DM/CB	Brazilian	24	2018/2019	SC Braga
Jeff Reine-Adélaïde	CM/AM	French	22	2020/2021	Olympique Lyonnais
Khéphren Thuram	CM	French	19	2019/2020	AS Monaco
Alexis Trouillet	CM	French	19	2020/2021	-
Pierre Lees-Melou	CM	French	27	2017/2018	Dijon FCO
Hicham Boudaoui	CM	Algerian	21	2019/2020	AC Paradou
Dan Ndoye	RW	Swiss	19	2020/2021	Lausanne Sport
Alexis Claude-Maurice	LW	French	22	2019/2020	FC Lorient
Pedro Brazão	LW/RW	Portuguese	17	2020/2021	-
Rony Lopes	RW	Portuguese	24	2020/2021	Sevilla FC
Kasper Dolberg	CF	Danish	23	2019/2020	Ajax
Myziane Maolida	CF/LW	French	21	2018/2019	Olympique Lyonnais
Amine Gouiri	CF/RW/LW	French	20	2020/2021	Olympique Lyonnais
Patrick Vieira	Manager	French	44	2018/2019	New York City FC
Jean-Pierre Rivère	President	French	63	2019/2020	-





# Nîmes Olympique

## FORM GUIDE

Season	Division	Position	Points
2019/2020	Ligue 1	17th	30
2018/2019	Ligue 1	4th	66
2017/2018	Ligue 2	2nd	73
2016/2017	Ligue 2	6th	64
2015/2016	Ligue 1	14th	43

## LIKELY XI



## KEY MAN

### ZINEDINE FERHAT

Nîmes struggled to sort their striker situation out last year, with no one failing to impress even if Kévin Denkey has shown flashes of potential. However, Ferhat navigated the leap to top flight football with aplomb, having arrived on a free from Le Havre to no great fanfare. A steady presence on the ball, and offering consistency from week to week, his raw numbers in terms of assists and goals were not stunning.

Yet his ability to deliver the occasional moment of improvised brilliance, especially prior to the arrival of Yassine Benrahou, allowed him to be a necessary creative hub for a side that sorely lacked an attacking focal point. With a full pre-season, there is not only hope that his relationship with Nolan Roux can be improved, but also that Ferhat will be able to play more directly himself, with Benrahou and Romain Philippoteaux sharing the creative load, perhaps making the need for a traditional target man less onerous.

## ***SIGNING TO WATCH: YASSINE BENRAHOU***

The former Bordeaux man's loan signing has been turned into a permanent deal, and if the small sample size of last season is anything to go by, he could be one of the league's breakout stars. In his nine starts, playing largely as an attacking midfielder, Les Crocos never failed to score, and only Paris Saint-Germain and Marseille found the back of the net more in that span. Lanky, clever and possessed of superb passing vision, Benrahou is also adept at free-kicks and has a good eye for goal himself. His influence will be crucial in unlocking opposing defences and getting Nîmes on the scoreboard. The team's shaky defence is a caveat to their potential success, of course, but there is a sense that Nîmes can get back to being the entertainers that they were in the 2018/19 campaign, rather than the sometimes turgid unit that somehow avoided the drop last season.

## ***SQUAD ANALYSIS***

Nîmes have largely kept faith with their squad, save a few select additions (Andrés Cubas, Patrick Burner, Birger Meling, Niclas Eliasson). Some would argue that might be illogical given Nîmes only avoided the relegation playoffs because they were cancelled, but the team showed plenty of life in the season's second half, and this was despite a raft of injuries. Paul Bernardoni, so excellent over the span of his two-year loan spell from Bordeaux, has upped sticks to Angers. However, in Baptiste Reynet, the club have brought in a replacement who may not inspire awe, but is of the minimum standard required for the top flight. Elsewhere on the pitch, the attack should be sharper with a full season of Benrahou and the return to fitness of the likes of Clément Depres, while midfield should see Cubas lining up alongside Lucas Deaux. Defence could be an issue, as none of the team's centre backs were terribly impressive last season, with the full-backs not being much better. Discipline, too, was a concern, as Nîmes saw six red cards handed out to them in a truncated season, something which will need to be corrected.

## ***STRENGTHS***

Again, Benrahou, Eliasson, and Ferhat are well worth keeping an eye on, even if much of their brilliance stems from their individual talents as opposed to their ability to work within a team. However, they will still allow Nîmes to remain a threat throughout matches, which is likely more than many of their potential rivals for avoiding relegation can boast. Reynet may have struggled at Toulouse last season, working behind a defence wracked by injury and inconsistency, but if he settles should prevent the departure of Bernardoni from being too painful.

## ***WEAKNESSES***

Central defence was a problem last year, and if Bernardoni was able to bail Les Crocos out on multiple occasions, the defence in front of Reynet will do the former Toulouse man no favours. The trio of Pablo Martinez, Anthony Briançon and Loïc Landré are all of a piece, physically imposing but inelegant, and without the sorts of players around them to balance them out, they should struggle again. Striker, too, remains a concern, as even if Denkey shows promise, the team's attacking midfield will require a more proven focal point, something which has been beyond Roux in recent seasons.

## ***VERDICT***

Nîmes under new manager Jérôme Arpinon should be more akin to the side that impressed upon first being promoted in style, but will find survival as much of a struggle as last season's team. However, only four teams had a better record in the season's second half, a statistic that is admittedly a small sample size, but could yet make Les Crocos a surprise package once more.

***PREDICTED FINISH: 16th***



# Squad List

NAME	POSITION	NATIONALITY	AGE	AT CLUB SINCE	FORMER CLUB
Baptiste Reynet	GK	French	29	2020/2021	Toulouse FC
Lucas Dias	GK	French	21	2019/2020	-
Birger Meling	LB	Norwegian	25	2020/2021	Rosenborg
Florian Miguel	LB	French	23	2018/2019	Tours FC
Anthony Briançon	CB	French	25	2014/2015	-
Pablo Martinez	CB	French	31	2019/2020	RC Strasbourg
Loïck Landré	CB	French	28	2018/2019	Genoa
Kelyan Guessoum	CB	French	21	2019/2020	-
Sofiane Alakouch	RB	French	22	2016/2017	-
Gaëtan Paquiez	RB/LB	French	26	2015/2016	-
Patrick Burner	RB	French	24	2020/2021	OGC Nice
Renaud Ripart	RB/RW/CF	French	27	2011/2012	-
Andrés Cubas	DM	Paraguayan	24	2020/2021	Atlético Talleres
Sidy Sarr	DM	Senegalese	24	2019/2020	Chateauroux
Lucas Deaux	DM	French	31	2019/2020	EA Guingamp
Lamine Fomba	CM	French	22	2019/2020	AJ Auxerre
Antoine Valerio	CM	French	20	2019/2020	-
Zinedine Ferhat	RW	Algerian	27	2019/2020	Le Havre
Lucas Buades	RW/CM	French	22	2019/2020	-
Niclas Eliasson	LW	Swedish	24	2020/2021	Bristol City
Haris Duljevic	LW/AM	Bosnian	26	2019/2020	Dynamo Dresden
Yassine Benrahou	AM	Moroccan	21	2019/2020	Bordeaux
Moussa Koné	CF	Senegalese	23	2019/2020	Dynamo Dresden
Kévin Denkey	CF	Togolese	19	2018/2019	-
Nolan Roux	CF	French	32	2019/2020	EA Guingamp
Clément Depres	CF	French	25	2015/2016	-
Karim Aribi	CF	Algerian	26	2020/2021	Etoile du Sahel
Sami Ben Amar	FW	Tunisian	22	2018/2019	-
Jérôme Arpinon	Manager	French	42	2020/2021	-
Rani Assaf	President	Lebanese	46	2015/2016	-



# Paris Saint-Germain

## FORM GUIDE

Season	Division	Position	Points
2019/2020	Ligue 1	1st	68
2018/2019	Ligue 1	1st	91
2017/2018	Ligue 1	1st	93
2016/2017	Ligue 1	2nd	87
2015/2016	Ligue 1	1st	96

## KEY MAN

### NEYMAR

While there are plenty of pundits who are quick to castigate the Brazilian for his embracing the finer things in life and for his lack of work-rate, there is no doubt that he remains as motivated now as when he arrived in the French capital three years ago. With Kylian Mbappé unavailable in the Coupe de la Ligue final and only a substitute against Atalanta, Neymar's drive and desire were palpable, and he continues to show improved maturity on the pitch, even if his off-field antics are to the chagrin of some.

## LIKELY XI



Mbappé is a brilliant talent but functions better within the right context, and no player is more integral to that than Neymar, whose flicks, stepovers and close control provide much of the space in which he thrives. The Brazilian's particular skillset also allows him to control the game on his own, and his unpredictability can turn a match in an instant in a way that very few players on the planet can do, making him undeniably PSG's best asset, Mbappé's scoring ability notwithstanding.

## ***SIGNING TO WATCH: MAURO ICARDI***

Mauro Icardi is the perfect complement to the attack, his poacher's instincts and one-touch finishing making him the proverbial icing on the cake. Of course, he needs to be placed in the right context to be at his best, but his goals ratio has allowed the team to rotate better and weather injuries to Mbappé and Neymar last season. His purchase price of €50m was a little high, given he is essentially a one-trick pony and unable to lead the line on his own, but he appears to have integrated into the squad well, no small matter in the current vintage of PSG. His limited scope necessarily places more of a burden on others, but he also has the effect of making opposing defenders extra wary as his instinctive style of play means he can pounce on the slightest mistake with consummate ease.

## ***SQUAD ANALYSIS***

PSG will definitely miss the character, if not the performance on the pitch of Edinson Cavani and Eric-Maxim Choupo-Moting, to say nothing of Thiago Silva. Whilst the departures of the second two individuals are not confirmed, the outsized influence of Silva in the dressing room hindered the construction of this team in a sustainable and organic way. Thomas Meunier didn't finish the campaign with the club, but he will also be missed, even if he seems no longer to be the player of two years ago. Whether these four players' departures augurs for additional chances for youngsters (Colin Dagba in particular could benefit here) is yet to be determined, but there is no doubt that PSG's allowing youngsters to leave with such regularity remains a problem, with Adil Aouchiche and Tanguy Kouassi the latest departures. The arrivals of Alessandro Florenzi, Rafinha, Danilo Pereira, and Moise Kean will add depth to the side, but how effective they can be on the biggest stages remains a question. However, even with those concerns, there's no question that PSG will walk to another title, with other contenders having similar concerns as they themselves negotiate playing in Europe.

## ***STRENGTHS***

Kylian Mbappé and Neymar are two of the world's top five players, and Ángel Di María isn't far off their level, especially if the Argentine can keep up the form he has showed since the beginning of 2019. Icardi remains a perfect foil for those three, and Pablo Sarabia's versatility is similarly a fillip for the team's attack. Midfield, too, looks sturdy as ever, with the arrival of Idrissa Gueye having given the team a needed bite as Herrera and Paredes provide depth. Juan Bernat was one of Ligue 1's best left-backs last year, making massive strides after a difficult first season and proving the perfect support for Neymar's defensive failings when the Brazilian is positioned as a winger.

## ***WEAKNESSES***

Alessandro Florenzi has impressed in Ligue 1, but questions remain over his pace - there are other, more defensive options here but Thilo Kehrer lacks the pace and ability to get forward, and PSG's balance in attack may suffer as a result. In central defence, too, there are slight questions over how capable a replacement Presnel Kimpembe is for Thiago Silva long-term - the Frenchman is now 25 and still seems over-reliant on his physical attributes rather than developing a positional acumen, although his recent Champions' League performances are countering this narrative. If Marquinhos needs to play more extensively in midfield this season, even with Abdou Diallo and Dagba in the fold, defence may yet be the capital side's Achilles heel.

## ***VERDICT***

The team's stirring run to the Champions' League final will have given the club's hierarchy faith in Tuchel's methods, and the German's presumptively longer leash should allow PSG to rotate their squad more and further develop their young players. Their status as a champion-in-waiting was never in doubt — it's only down to the capital side now to play like a team.

***PREDICTED FINISH: 1st***





# Squad List

NAME	POSITION	NATIONALITY	AGE	AT CLUB SINCE	FORMER CLUB
Sergio Rico	GK	Spanish	27	2019/2020	Sevilla FC
Keylor Navas	GK	Costa Rican	33	2019/2020	Real Madrid
Alexandre Letellier	GK	French	29	2020/2021	Orléans
Juan Bernat	LB	Spanish	27	2018/2019	Bayern Munich
Layvin Kurzawa	LB	French	28	2015/2016	AS Monaco
Mitchel Bakker	LB	Dutch	20	2019/2020	Ajax
Marquinhos	CB/DM	Brazilian	26	2013/2014	AS Roma
Presnel Kimpembe	CB	French	25	2015/2016	-
Abdou Diallo	CB/LB	French	24	2019/2020	Borussia Dortmund
Loïc Mbe Soh	CB	French	19	2019/2020	-
Thilo Kehrer	RB/CB	German	24	2018/2019	Schalke 04
Colin Dagba	RB	French	21	2018/2019	-
Alessandro Florenzi	RB	Italian	29	2020/2021	AS Roma
Idrissa Gueye	CM/DM	Senegalese	30	2019/2020	Everton
Danilo Pereira	DM	Portuguese	29	2020/2021	FC Porto
Leandro Paredes	CM	Argentine	26	2018/2019	Zenit S. Petersburg
Marco Verratti	CM	Italian	27	2012/2013	Pescara
Ander Herrera	CM	Spanish	31	2019/2020	Manchester United
Rafinha	AM/CM	Brazilian	27	2020/2021	FC Barcelona
Julian Draxler	AM/LW	German	26	2016/2017	Wolfsburg
Neymar	LW/AM	Brazilian	28	2017/2018	FC Barcelona
Jesé	LW/RW	Spanish	27	2016/2017	Real Madrid
Ángel Di María	RW	Argentine	32	2015/2016	Manchester United
Pablo Sarabia	RW	Spanish	28	2019/2020	Sevilla FC
Kylian Mbappé	CF	French	21	2017/2018	AS Monaco
Moise Kean	CF	Italian	20	2020/2021	Everton
Mauro Icardi	CF	Argentine	27	2019/2020	Inter Milan
Thomas Tuchel	Manager	German	46	2019/2020	Borussia Dortmund
Nasser Al Khelaifi	President	Qatari	46	2010/2011	-



# Stade de Reims

## FORM GUIDE

Season	Division	Position	Points
2019/2020	Ligue 1	6th	41
2018/2019	Ligue 1	8th	55
2017/2018	Ligue 2	1st	88
2016/2017	Ligue 2	7th	55
2015/2016	Ligue 1	18th	39

## LIKELY XI



## KEY MAN

### PREDRAG RAJKOVIC

Rajkovic was an absolute sensation last season, easily making the step up from the Israeli league to become a player who many would have as the league's best goalkeeper. Physically imposing, but possessed of a preternatural intelligence, Rajkovic is the ideal combination of physical prowess, shot-stopping and positional awareness. Where many would have been for worried about the departure of Édouard Mendy to Rennes, if anything Rajkovic significantly strengthened Reims' goal-keeping situation.

This season, Reims are likely to stick to the same principles of solidity that have made them such an obdurate opponent in recent seasons, but with the caveat of a major change in personnel following the departures of Alaixys Romao and Axel Disasi. It's nothing Reims haven't weathered before, of course, but as superb as the Serbian international was last season, he may need to be even better in this campaign, as questions abound over the club's restructured defence.

## ***SIGNING TO WATCH: VALON BERISHA***

Berisha is a perplexing player - he was clearly one to watch during his time at RB Salzburg, even being linked with Liverpool, but his spells in Italy with Lazio and in Germany were decidedly underwhelming. Moreover, he is hardly an automatic starter - Tristan Dingomé, Arbër Zeneli, and Mathieu Cafaro are all returning from injuries that saw their playing time limited last season, and have the considerable advantage of understanding David Guion's tactical proclivities. What may come to Berisha's aid, though, is his versatility. Despite his small size and ability on the ball, Berisha can comfortably play a box-to-box role, and should slot into a midfield three if, as expected, that is how Reims line up this season. More creatively-minded than Xavier Chavalerin or Marshall Munetsi, he is sometimes overly ambitious with the ball at his feet, but if he can corral this, he may just make good on the promise he had shown before his move to Rome.

## ***SQUAD ANALYSIS***

Reims have been more active than many of their peers this summer - the signings of Berisha and Anastasios Donis show real ambition. However, the departures of Hassane Kamara and Disasi don't seem to have been dealt with properly, as the team look set to rely on Ghislain Konan (who had been the club's record signing at one point) and the untested Wout Faes to take their place. Guion has a real knack for getting the best out of unheralded players (see Disasi, Thomas Foket, Moreto Cassama), but with European competition also on the table, this will be a challenging season for the Champagne side. There are positives in attack, with Boulaye Dia having had a breakout season and the teenaged El Bilal Touré being a clever option off the bench. However, overall, the squad has become rather bloated, with few departures and a host of players returning from serious injuries. Further sales may be necessary to keep the team happy, and Guion will likely be glad to have a longer-than-usual transfer window in which to get the balance right. All told, though, the presence of experienced heads like Abdelhamid could be a real boon as this relatively young side seeks to keep its well-earned position in the top half of the table.

## ***STRENGTHS***

Rajkovic is head and shoulders the team's biggest asset, and Reims will absolutely need another big season from the Serb if they hope to compete for the European places (and, indeed, in Europe) again. Abdelhamid will offer more reliability, too, and further forward there is much to be admired about the team's midfield, where Cassama looks ready to take another step forward, ably replacing the departed Romao even as the team may be more flexible tactically. Dia similarly looks set to build upon a sterling campaign last season, while a bevy of creative players should offer the forward more in the way of chances.

## ***WEAKNESSES***

Reims scored just 26 goals last season - only an historically poor Toulouse side fared worse in that department. Berisha is a player who may help in that regard, but aside from some flashes with Salzburg in Europe, he has done little to impress against a higher standard of play, failing to find the net for Lazio or Fortuna Düsseldorf in a loan spell. In defence, the departure of Axel Disasi leaves plenty of questions - it's true that the former Paris FC man was relatively unheralded but it's not even clear who will partner Abdelhamid on a regular basis - Faes appears to have the upper hand here but didn't exactly make a name for himself on loan at Oostende last season - the Belgian side had the league's second-poorest defence.

## ***VERDICT***

Reims have done consistently well under Guion to manage transfer departures, but one has the feeling that the current window, especially when coupled with fighting on multiple fronts may be a bridge too far the Champagne side, who are famously loath to rotate their eleven. Too, while their incoming players are intriguing, one has the feeling that they don't necessarily address needs, at least not immediately.

***PREDICTED FINISH: 10th***



# Squad List

NAME	POSITION	NATIONALITY	AGE	AT CLUB SINCE	FORMER CLUB
Predrag Rajkovic	GK	Serbian	24	2019/2020	Maccabi Tel Aviv
Yehvann Diouf	GK	French	20	2019/2020	AC Troyes
Ghislain Konan	LB	Ivorian	24	2018/2019	Vitória Guimarães
Thibault De Smet	LB	Belgian	22	2020/2021	Sint-Truidense
Wout Faes	CB	Belgian	22	2019/2020	KV Oostende
Dario Maresic	CB	Austrian	20	2019/2020	Sturm Graz
Yunis Abdelhamid	CB	Moroccan	32	2017/2018	Dijon FCO
Thomas Foket	RB	Belgian	25	2018/2019	KAA Gent
Xavier Chavalerin	DM	French	29	2017/2018	Red Star
Marshall Munetsi	DM	Zimbabwean	24	2019/2020	Orlando Pirates
Moreto Cassama	DM	Guinea-Bissauan	22	2018/2019	Porto
Tristan Dingomé	CM	French	29	2018/2019	AC Troyes
Valon Berisha	CM/AM	Kosovan	27	2020/2021	SS Lazio
Mathieu Cafaro	AM/RW	French	23	2017/2018	Toulouse FC
Fraser Hornby	AM	Scottish	20	2020/2021	Everton
Arbër Zeneli	LW	Kosovan	25	2018/2019	Herenveen
Nathanaël Mbuku	LW	French	18	2019/2020	-
Moussa Doumbia	LW	Malian	26	2018/2019	FK Rostov
Dereck Kutesa	LW	Swiss	22	2019/2020	Saint-Gallen
Boulaye Dia	CF	French	23	2018/2019	Jura Sud
El Bilal Touré	CF/RW	Malian	18	2019/2020	Afrique Elite
Kaj Sierhuis	CF	Dutch	22	2019/2020	Ajax
Anastasios Donis	CF/RW	Greek	23	2019/2020	VfB Stuttgart
David Guion	Manager	French	52	2017/2018	Cannes
Jean-Pierre Caillot	President	French	59	2004/2005	-



# Stade Rennais

## FORM GUIDE

Season	Division	Position	Points
2019/2020	Ligue 1	3rd	50
2018/2019	Ligue 1	10th	52
2017/2018	Ligue 1	5th	58
2016/2017	Ligue 1	9th	50
2015/2016	Ligue 1	8th	52

## KEY MAN

### SERHOU GUIRASSY

While most observers would point to the prodigious midfield sensation Eduardo Camavinga as being the key to Rennes season, given his preternatural ability to control a match, it is Guirassy on whom this season's fortunes will rise and fall, as evidenced by his fine start to the league campaign.

Not only club have brought in an ideal foil for him in Martin Terrier, who has greater pace and scoring instincts when compared with Adrien Hunou, the former Lyon player offers a far more physical (and defensively hard-working) complement. But the finishing will still be down to Guirassy, who has been one of France's best strikers in the calendar year. If he can play with a modicum of consistency, perhaps edging his goal total closer to near twenty with better service, Rennes can assure themselves of another top three finish, but if he stumbles, things could sour quickly.

## LIKELY XI





## ***SIGNING TO WATCH: MARTIN TERRIER***

Terrier's return of six goals in 35 appearances for Lyon last year will hardly have turned the head, but keener eyes will recognise that the former Lille man was mis-used by Rudi Garcia last season, on top of the fact that he was faced with competition from Memphis Depay on the left side of Les Gones' attack. However, at Rennes, even with the team set to play a 4-3-3, he is far more likely to be used centrally, being able to spell Guirassy or M'Baye Niang at striker whilst also playing on the left. With Terrier not only good in the air but accustomed to working as a foil for a more orthodox striker, the potential for a very fruitful relationship looms. As Rennes hope to make a better impression in the Champions' League than their predecessor, Lille, did, that will no doubt be key as well.

## ***SQUAD ANALYSIS***

Rennes have been a neutral's favourite of late - their thrilling win over Real Betis in 2018/19's Europa League, followed by a gripping tie against Arsenal, were things of pure exultation, to say nothing of their Coupe de France title in 2019. It's difficult, too, to root against Camavinga, whose maturity on the pitch is beyond his years, or manager Julien Stéphan, whose fresh-faced charm belies a consummate and clever tactician whose systems work without obvious stars, no mean feat in French football. The club's summer business has been canny, with Martin Terrier an upgrade at centre forward and Daniele Rugani and Nayef Aguerd adding depth in defence - one might take issue with allowing Souleyman Doumbia to depart for Angers, but with former Nice fullback Dalbert Henrique in on loan, there is depth behind the currently injured Faitout Maouassa, or the former Nancy man could even play further up the pitch to make the best use of his pace. Elsewhere, the return to full fitness for the underrated Jonas Martin will give the team a more mobile option to partner Camavinga against particular opponents, while Flavien Tait should prove more influential as well, the former Angers man himself having struggled with injury last season.

## ***STRENGTHS***

Depth is far and away the most impressive of the Breton side's assets. Having plucked Nayef Aguerd from Dijon, they have two capable players in every single position on the pitch. This should allow Rennes to balance what is shaping to be a busy fixture list as they navigate the Champions' League. Last season's standouts, including Camavinga, Hamari Traoré and Maouassa, should make the next step up, allowing Rennes to convincingly fight on multiple fronts while easing the pressure on younger players like Jérémy Doku and Yann Gboho.

## ***WEAKNESSES***

Not counting Reims & PSG, Rennes had the best defence in 2019/20 in Ligue 1 and have conceded just twice in five pre-season matches, but they have looked a little loose at the back to start the season, with Romain Salin standing in for new signing Alfred Gomis. However, the lower calibre of their opposition in the preparation period should also be considered in that assessment. Overall, though, it's difficult to poke holes in this side - one could quibble over Guirassy or Niang being of the requisite quality for the Champions' League, but either is certainly more than capable of reaching double digits in Ligue 1.

## ***VERDICT***

Rennes may go missing on some nights when it comes to putting the ball in the net, but this team's collective ethos and tactical flexibility are unrivalled. In Camavinga they have a player who is the envy of every big club the world over, and in Stéphan they have a manager who is one of the best young coaches in Europe. This season's Champions' League campaign could cost them a shot at another, but they will remain a difficult opponent on any given evening domestically.

***PREDICTED FINISH: 2nd***



# Squad List

NAME	POSITION	NATIONALITY	AGE	AT CLUB SINCE	FORMER CLUB
Alfred Gomis	GK	Senegalese	27	2020/2021	Dijon FCO
Pépé Bonet	GK	French	17	2019/2020	-
Romain Salin	GK	French	36	2019/2020	Sporting Club
Faitout Maouassa	LB	French	22	2017/2018	AS Nancy
Dalbert Henrique	LB	Brazilian	27	2020/2021	Inter Milan
Adrien Truffert	LB	French	18	2020/2021	-
Daniele Rugani	CB	Italian	26	2020/2021	Juventus
Nayef Aguerd	CB	Moroccan	24	2020/2021	Dijon FCO
Damien Da Silva	CB	French	32	2018/2019	SM Caen
Gerzino Nyamsi	CB	French	23	2018/2019	-
Hamari Traoré	RB	Malian	28	2017/2018	Stade de Reims
Brandon Soppy	RB	French	18	2020/2021	-
Steven Nzonzi	DM	French	31	2019/2020	AS Roma
Eduardo Camavinga	CM	French	17	2018/2019	-
Benjamin Bourigeaud	CM	French	26	2017/2018	RC Lens
Clément Grenier	CM	French	29	2018/2019	EA Guingamp
James Léa Siliki	CM	French	24	2017/2018	-
Jonas Martin	CM	French	30	2019/2020	RC Strasbourg
Yann Gboho	AM	French	19	2019/2020	-
Martin Terrier	LW/CF	French	23	2020/2021	Olympique Lyonnais
Flavien Tait	LW	French	27	2019/2020	Angers SCO
Jérémy Doku	RW	Belgian	18	2020/202	Anderlecht
Romain Del Castillo	RW	French	24	2019/2020	Olympique Lyonnais
M'Baye Niang	CF	Senegalese	25	2018/2019	Torino
Adrien Hunou	CF	French	26	2013/2014	-
Serhou Guirassy	CF	French	24	2020/2021	Amiens SC
Georginio Rutter	CF	French	18	2020/2021	-
Julien Stéphan	Manager	French	39	2018/2019	-
Nicolas Holveck	President	French	49	2019/2020	AS Monaco



# Saint-Étienne

## FORM GUIDE

Season	Division	Position	Points
2019/2020	Ligue 1	17th	30
2018/2019	Ligue 1	4th	66
2017/2018	Ligue 1	7th	55
2016/2017	Ligue 1	8th	50
2015/2016	Ligue 1	6th	58

## LIKELY XI



## KEY MAN

### DENIS BOUANGA

There's no question that Bouanga (provided he stays amid interest from a host of clubs set to play in Europe) was Sainté's key man last year, his form blossoming under Claude Puel in impressive fashion, notching 11 goals in 26 appearances since the veteran manager replaced Ghislain Printant.

His importance to the team will be even greater as the club embark on a "dégraissage," which, under the aegis of Roland Romeyer is likely to see the club shed a raft of its experienced (read higher-salaried) veterans. Pacy and adept with the dribble, but with an eye for goal as well, it's easy to see why the Gabon international has been linked with a move abroad. Some project him as the same sort of late-blooming star that his countryman Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang has been and while it's an overly simplistic comparison, one can certainly see the merits of it, and a similarly big next step up would be unsurprising.

## ***SIGNING TO WATCH: ADIL AOUCHICHE***

The former Paris Saint-Germain midfielder looks set to be given the reigns to Les Verts' 4-2-3-1, replacing Ryad Boudebouz in an attacking role. Goalscoring from midfield is something that Saint-Étienne have been missing since the departure of Rémy Cabella, and the teenager appears to have the goods to deliver, possessing not only excellent close control but a powerful shot and fine instincts. His nine goals in five matches at the 2019 U-17 European Championships served as notice of that, and in his brief forays into first team football, he has shown more of the same. Too, Cabella may be an apt point of comparison, as in addition to his goal contributions, Aouchiche is also an adept presser of the ball, and his willingness to get stuck in is something which will allow Sainté to be an obdurately dangerous opponent no matter their level.

## ***SQUAD ANALYSIS***

Owing to their impending departures, Les Verts are somewhat hard to predict. There is a surprising amount of young talent in this team, and Puel has a decent reputation for bringing through youngsters, having handed debuts to the likes of Eden Hazard, Alexandre Lacazette, and a slew of players at Monaco. His use of Charles Abi, Aouchiche, and defenders Aimen Mouffek and Harold Moukoudi in the season's early going augurs well for these players being given a chance. Romain Hamouma, should he stay, also looks brighter than he has in years, having shaken off the injuries that have plagued him in recent campaigns. Midfield seems to be in flux, as Yann M'Vila could be off, and while there is plenty of promise around the likes of Zaydou Youssouf and Mahdi Camara, the former Sunderland man's experience cannot be discounted, especially with Stéphane Ruffier and Loïc Perrin out of the picture. The signing of Aouchiche is a major coup, but the departures of Perrin and William Saliba mean the defence will essentially be rebuilt on the fly, and the tete-à-tete between Stéphane Ruffier and Puel has been an ugly distraction in the pre-season.

## ***STRENGTHS***

The team should be stronger at the back this season, as injuries to both Saliba and Perrin robbed the team of much in the way of a consistent partnership in central defence. Moreover Moukoudi showed good potential despite his age, and Timothée Kolodziejczak and Mathieu Debuchy will add some needed experience. Bouanga has been a joy to watch under Puel, and Aouchiche looks bright indeed, while Abi has shown potential as well. If those three, along with Hamouma and the versatile Arnaud Nordin, get on the same wavelength, Sainté may just have a coherent attack, something that the club has been lacking for some time.

## ***WEAKNESSES***

A centre forward would be nice; Robert Beric, despite his effectiveness as a target man, was quickly discarded by Puel, and Loïs Diony has departed as well. Abi has impressed in pre-season, but a more experienced option would probably calm some nerves, with Jean-Philippe Krasso an interesting wildcard but completely unfamiliar with professional football. Depth at full-back could be a worry as well, given the injury suffered by the promising Yvann Maçon. Mathieu Debuchy has done a fine job, but at 35, the rigours of a full season may prove challenging. In goal, Jessy Moulin has shown himself capable in a limited sample size, but with fewer than twenty league matches played in his career, he remains unproven.

## ***VERDICT***

If Bouanga stays, and the likes of Aouchiche, Yvan Nyou, and Abi take concrete steps to fulfilling their exceptional potential, then Sainté could be comfortably mid-table, if only because of the lack of talent below them. Goals will be a struggle, but there is a promising young defence in the making here, and while they might not catch the neutral's eye, Les Verts' cadre of young talent will make them compelling to keener observers.

***PREDICTED FINISH: 12th***



# Squad List

NAME	POSITION	NATIONALITY	AGE	AT CLUB SINCE	FORMER CLUB
Stefan Bajic	GK	French	18	2019/2020	-
Jessy Moulin	GK	French	34	2005/2006	-
Timothée Kolodziejczak	LB/CB	French	29	2018/2019	Tigres
Gabriel Silva	LB/RB	Brazilian	29	2017/2018	Udinese
Miguel Trauco	LB	Peruvian	27	2019/2020	Flamengo
Pangiotis Retsos	CB	Greek	22	2020/2021	Bayer Leverkusen
Harold Moukoudi	CB	Cameroonian	22	2019/2020	Le Havre
Sergi Palenica	RB	Spanish	24	2019/2020	FC Barcelona
Mathieu Debuchy	RB	French	35	2017/2018	Arsenal
Yvann Maçon	LB/RB	French	22	2019/2020	USL Dunkerque
Alpha Sissoko	RB	French	23	2019/2020	Clermont Foot
Aimen Moueffek	RB	French	19	2020/2021	-
Yvan Neyou	CM	Cameroonian	23	2020/2021	SC Braga
Zaydou Youssouf	CM	French	21	2019/2020	Bordeaux
Mahdi Camara	CM	French	22	2018/2019	-
Adil Aouchiche	AM	French	18	2020/2021	Paris Saint-Germain
Ryad Boudebouz	AM	Algerian	30	2019/2020	Real Betis
Denis Bouanga	LW	Gabonese	25	2019/2020	Nîmes Olympique
Arnaud Nordin	LW	French	22	2016/2017	-
Kévin Monnet-Paquet	LW/RW	French	31	2014/2015	FC Lorient
Romain Hamouma	RW	French	33	2012/2013	SM Caen
Maxence Rivera	RW	French	18	2019/2020	-
Wahbi Khazri	CF	Tunisian	29	2018/2019	Sunderland
Charles Abi	CF	French	20	2019/2020	-
Jean-Philippe Krasso	CF	French	23	2020/2021	SAS Epinal
Claude Pue	Manager	French	58	2019/2020	Leicester City
Roland Romeyer	President	French	74	2010/2011	-





# RC Strasbourg

## FORM GUIDE

Season	Division	Position	Points
2019/2020	Ligue 1	10th	38
2018/2019	Ligue 1	11th	49
2017/2018	Ligue 1	15th	38
2016/2017	Ligue 2	1st	67
2015/2016	National	1st	58

## KEY MAN

### LUDOVIC AJORQUE

While Ajorque's goalscoring figures last season weren't quite as impressive as his maiden season in eastern France, having comfortably made the step up from Ligue 2, it is clear that in largely keeping faith with a team that has managed convincing mid-table finishes under Thierry Laurey, the lanky centre forward will continue be the focal point of the attack.

Deceptively mobile and possessing a good touch, despite his aerial ability and powerful physique, the stereotype-defying Ajorque will no doubt benefit from having another out-and-out centre forward alongside him in attack. Especially one in Habib Diallo who can share the goalscoring load. Injuries to the likes of Nuno Da Costa and Kévin Zohi, neither of whom were really proper strikers, prevented Ajorque from forming this sort of relationship last year. There's much to suggest that both he and the former Metz man are well-positioned to reap the rewards.

## LIKELY XI



## ***SIGNING TO WATCH: HABIB DIALLO***

To see Diallo, so instrumental in Metz's survival last season, move to a regional rival for a relatively cut-rate fee was a surprising turn of events in the transfer window's waning days, but there's no doubt that the Senegalese will make a big impression for Thierry Laurey's side. While he has more often been played as a lone striker, there is plenty of scope for his being a success alongside Ludovic Ajorque, with the former Clermont man and Lébo Mothiba having been a hit together previously.

## ***SQUAD ANALYSIS***

Before tackling Strasbourg's team, it's necessary to address the elephant in the room, as the team's pre-season preparations have been hamstrung by a rash of players having tested positive for COVID-19. By the time Strasbourg kick off their league season, at Lorient, the team will have played fewer friendlies than many of their rivals as a result, and the players returning from quarantine will have had just days to get back into any sort of playing rhythm. The long-term injuries to Matz Sels and Lebo Mothiba are disappointing as well, but the club's late transfer moves, in bringing in Diallo and Jean-Eudes Aholou, will add reinforcement in areas where it's badly needed, and show that the hierarchy has plenty of faith in Laurey, his tactical philosophy, and this side's manifest strength in depth. In every position, there is a capable player, and a capable backup, save perhaps Adrien Thomasson in attacking midfield. Moreover, the club continues to house some of the league's most underrated players in Kenny Lala, Alexander Djiku and Sels, as well as intriguing youngsters such as the versatile Anthony Caci and Mohamed Simakan -- something enviable for most clubs operating at RCSA's financial level.

## ***STRENGTHS***

Depth and continuity are the two biggest feathers in this team's cap; without much meaningful movement in either direction save Diallo, Majeed Waris and Aholou, and a capable option in terms of depth at every position, Strasbourg are uniquely positioned to cope with the slightly compressed time frame of this season. The defence, with the rapidly improving Mohamed Simakan and Anthony Caci, should be a strong suit again, while midfield's lanky dynamism, anchored by Sissoko, will be key on the counter. The forward line, too, boasts an admirable amount of versatility, with each of the team's five strikers offering something slightly different, something that could be key in turning matches late on, given that five substitutions are now available.

## ***WEAKNESSES***

Dimitri Liénard continues to defy both time and expectations, and has now become a bonafide club legend as he enters his eighth season with the side. However, if he were to suffer an injury, Strasbourg would be robbed of much of their creativity in midfield, to say nothing of his set piece delivery. In goal, Matz Sels' extended absence owing to a ruptured Achilles is frustrating, but the club will feel they have a capable deputy in the form of Bingourou Kamara, despite his lack of experience. Overall, though, for a club of Strasbourg's means, there is fairly little to worry about heading into this campaign.

## ***VERDICT***

Strasbourg could have real potential to take a run at the European places, as without the distraction of an early start to the season, or a third domestic cup competition in the absence of the Coupe de la Ligue, Laurey should be able to minimize rotating his team, letting his swashbuckling football carry the day. However, the defence and midfield look worryingly disorganized, potentially suggesting that Laurey's magic has begun to lose its effect on this side in his fifth season at the helm. Survival is unlikely to be an issue, but perhaps because of the quality of the sides likely to finish below them.

***PREDICTED FINISH: 18th***



# Squad List

NAME	POSITION	NATIONALITY	AGE	AT CLUB SINCE	FORMER CLUB
Matz Sels	GK	Belgian	28	2018/2019	Newcastle United
Bingourou Kamara	GK	French	23	2017/2018	Tours FC
Eiji Kawashima	GK	Japanese	37	2018/2019	FC Metz
Lionel Carole	LB	French	29	2018/2019	Galatasaray
Anthony Caci	LB/CB	French	23	2018/2019	-
Mohamed Simakan	CB	French	20	2019/2020	-
Alexander Djiku	CB/DM	French	26	2019/2020	SM Caen
Lamine Koné	CB	Ivorian	31	2019/2020	Sunderland
Stefan Mitrovic	CB	Serbian	30	2018/2019	KAA Gent
Ismaël Aaneba	CB/RB	French	21	2018/2019	-
Kenny Lala	RB	French	29	2017/2018	RC Lens
Ibrahima Sissoko	DM/CM	French	22	2018/2019	Stade Brest 29
Jean-Eudes Aholou	DM/CM	Ivorian	26	2020/2021	AS Monaco
Jean-Ricner Bellegarde	CM	French	22	2019/2020	RC Lens
Dimitri Liénard	CM	French	32	2013/2014	FC Mulhouse
Sanjin Prcic	CM	Bosnian	26	2019/2020	Levante
Adrien Thomasson	AM	French	26	2018/2019	FC Nantes
Mehdi Chahiri	LW	French	24	2019/2020	Red Star
Ludovic Ajorque	CF	French	26	2018/2019	Clermont Foot
Lebo Mothiba	CF	South African	24	2018/2019	Lille OSC
Majeed Waris	CF	Ghanian	29	2019/2020	FC Porto
Kévin Zohi	CF/RW	Malian	23	2018/2019	-
Idriss Saadi	CF	Algerian	28	2017/2018	Cardiff City
Habib Diallo	CF	Senegalese	25	2020/2021	FC Metz
Thierry Laurey	Manager	French	56	2016/2017	Gazelec Ajaccio
Marc Keller	President	French	59	2012/2013	-