



GFFN 100: 2021



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Despite the chaos continuing off the pitch, most recently via the explosion in fan unrest in Ligue 1 stadia this season, 2021 was a superb year for French football on the pitch. Highlights include Lille's glorious title win in May as Christophe Galtier's side beat PSG and Monaco on the final day as part of a dramatic climax, Lionel Messi's arrival in Ligue 1 - the significance of which can't be understated both sportingly and financially - and the league itself becoming far more dynamic, intense and expansive as young coaches and young players fight to be noticed. As a result, judging this year's 100, especially at the top end, was as tricky as ever with talent flooding the French game across the past year. In the pages ahead you'll find 100 profiles on French football best 100 players in 2021, including, for the first time, an interview with our winner.

The Get French Football News 100 comprises our selection of the top one hundred talents that French football has to offer, judged solely on their performances in 2021. To be eligible for the GFFN 100, the player must have been a registered squad member of a Ligue 1 or a Ligue 2 club on the 31st December 2021.

Players that are eligible are judged on all their professional appearances in 2021, regardless of whether or not they were playing abroad for a part of the calendar year. This applies to the international appearances they might have accumulated as well. Players are ranked in descending order: with the highest-rated talent ranked 1st and the 100th highest-rated talent ranked 100th.

A negative (-) sign with a number next to it shows that the player has dropped in ranking compared to last year's performance and by how many places, and vice versa with a positive (+) sign. No plus or minus sign indicates a new entry into the Get French Football News 100, not historically, but in comparison with last year.

The Get French Football News Team





T H E
1 0 0



100

AGE : 20 POS : DM

KHÉPHREN
THURAM

Being the son of French football royalty is never easy, but it's something that Nice midfielder Khéphren Thuram has dealt with relatively comfortably so far in his fledgling career. At just 20 years old, the former Monaco man is continuing his progression in Nice's starting line up and has made himself a mainstay in a young but exciting team.

A big part of Thuram's 2021 has been his growth as an all-round midfielder, and one who could be an asset in many different ways. His long, rangy frame allows him to extend his slide tackles further than others and his reading of the game has grown exponentially in 2021, proving that his minutes on the field are translating very well into his in-game decision making.

His defensive capabilities allows him to sit deeper in midfield and occasionally fill in as a third centre-back when needed as well. This is a guy who will simply not be bullied off the ball.

What this year has demonstrated is that Thuram has a bright future ahead of him, with a lot of room to grow in terms of his range of passing and quickness on the ball.

However, those will both come with time. What is important for the defensive midfielder now is how he grows in Christophe Galtier's side. Can he take his form of 2021, which is a little bit reminiscent of West Ham's Declan Rice from a few seasons ago, and become a midfielder who is not only hardly ever bullied off the ball, but can also transition defence into attack?

Khéphren Thuram is by no means the finished article, but the potential in him is massive and one that should excite fans of both Nice and perhaps fans of the national team too.

Thuram will be a brilliant player in the future and it wouldn't be a surprise if a few teams are looking at snatching him up in the summer of 2022.

Tom Scholes



99

AGE : 24 POS : RB

POL
LIROLA

Ligue 1 hasn't exactly been a happy hunting ground for Spanish footballers. There have been exceptions, however, such as Fernando Morientes' near-legendary loan spell at Monaco, and Juan Bernat has been a canny, if underrated, presence for PSG, as has Ander Herrera, but given how many Frenchmen have played, and impressed in La Liga, there has scarcely been a consummate level of reciprocal crossings of the Pyrenees.

Pol Lirola, then, has been aiming to change that, finding himself firmly ensconced in a Hispanophone setting alongside countrymen Pau López and Álvaro González and manager Jorge Sampaoli after impressing since joining Marseille in January.

But unlike other players who have arrived in France more for their language skills than what they bring to the football pitch (such as Alex's stay at Paris Saint-Germain), Lirola has been an impressively freewheeling presence at Marseille since arriving from Fiorentina, initially on loan, shortly before the arrival of Sampaoli. Having come through Espanyol's youth system he would eventually catch the eye of Juventus, as a presumptive replacement for Dani Alves, before joining first Sassuolo and then La Viola.

Capable of playing both as an orthodox right-back or as an inverted winger, Lirola's willingness to adapt to the technical complexities of Sampaoli's systems has made him a valuable asset for the manager. And while his leash has been considerably shortened by a general 'buckling down' on the defensive side of the ball, his combination of pace and close control has a wonderful ability to leave defenders in its wake.

Obviously, his talents shine brighter in a more all-action tactical set-up, as he'd had at Sassuolo or in the chaotically entertaining early days of Sampaoli's tenure, but he remains an exciting live-wire presence, and, at only 24, there's also no reason to think that he can't be turned into a more complete player with a bit more tutelage.

Even if the likes of Boubacar Kamara and Valentin Rongier remain "safer" options for Sampaoli's hybrid right-back-come-midfield role, Lirola's versatility will continue to ensure he has a place in the squad, as will a busy fixture list for the club.

Eric Devin



98

AGE : 38 POS : CB



97

AGE : 28 POS : AM

DANTE BONFIM

When the announcement was made that INEOS were to take over at OGC Nice, few will have been happier about the change in leadership than players like Dante.

At 38-years-old, the next couple of seasons will likely see Dante out of a starting role, but the veteran defender is, for now, in a position to make a final push at footballing success while he's still able to play at a high level. This season has proven that Dante is still capable of doing just that. However, initially, Dante's year may appear to have been a little lacklustre. Just judging on-field performances, Dante's season may seem underwhelming outside of a very impressive performance against PSG. However, underwhelming does not necessarily mean poor, and he remains the unequivocal leader of the Nice defence and the team as a whole.

If we are looking at his season in the context of the intangibles that he brings to the pitch, then there is no doubt that Dante is still an effective defender and, when we review his numbers, they stand up against some of the league's top players. Having missed the first part of the year due to injury, in his first 16 matches following his return in August, Dante won 30 challenges and 26 aerial challenges, a respectable number when compared to a player like Presnel Kimpembe who won 25 challenges plus another 18 aerial challenges over the same period. Dante has always been an athletic centre-half, but no man escapes the hands of time and the Nice man has been beaten when tracking back on occasion this year, most notably against Metz, Monaco and PSG - but who could blame him of struggling when covering Kylian Mbappé.

Similarly to how fellow Brazilian centre-back Vitorino Hilton, who left Montpellier last season at 43-years-old, who stayed relevant for so long, Dante has used his timing and footballing IQ to stay competitive. Outside of covering Mbappé, Dante reminded everyone he's a big-game player with a classic commanding performance in Paris at Nice battled to a 0-0 draw at the start of December, racking up ten clearances and starting attacks from the defence. Players like Dante, Hilton and Zlatan Ibrahimović always seem to be able to slow those hands of time because they understand the game at the highest level and are able to play to their considerable strengths. Going into 2022, despite his age and slowing legs, Dante is still a top defender and an elite leader at the highest level with just enough gas left in the tank.

Tony-Thomas DesRois

FARID BOULAYA

As they breathed a huge sigh of relief following the 4-1 win over Lorient, giving them their first home win in 11 months as well as a fighting chance of staying up, one player in particular continued to split Metz fans' opinion - as he has done since his arrival in north-eastern France.

Farid Boulaya was comfortably man of the match, scoring a sublime free kick and playing a part in the three other goals. He showed, not for the first time, that when he's in the mood he's almost unplayable. Unfortunately, the 28-year-old is too often not in the mood and - perhaps fittingly for someone whose hero was Samir Nasri - can be maddeningly frustrating. Boulaya started as he meant to go on after joining Metz in the January 2018 transfer window, his failed panenka seeing Metz lose a Coupe de France shoot-out and immediately attracting the boo boys. He redeemed himself the following season with some stellar performances helping Metz to win Ligue 2 and promotion. The truncated 19/20 saw Metz hunker down to secure Ligue 1 safety by whatever means necessary. In that context, the mercurial playmaking talents of Boulaya were perhaps considered an unnecessary risk, and his appearances mostly came from the bench.

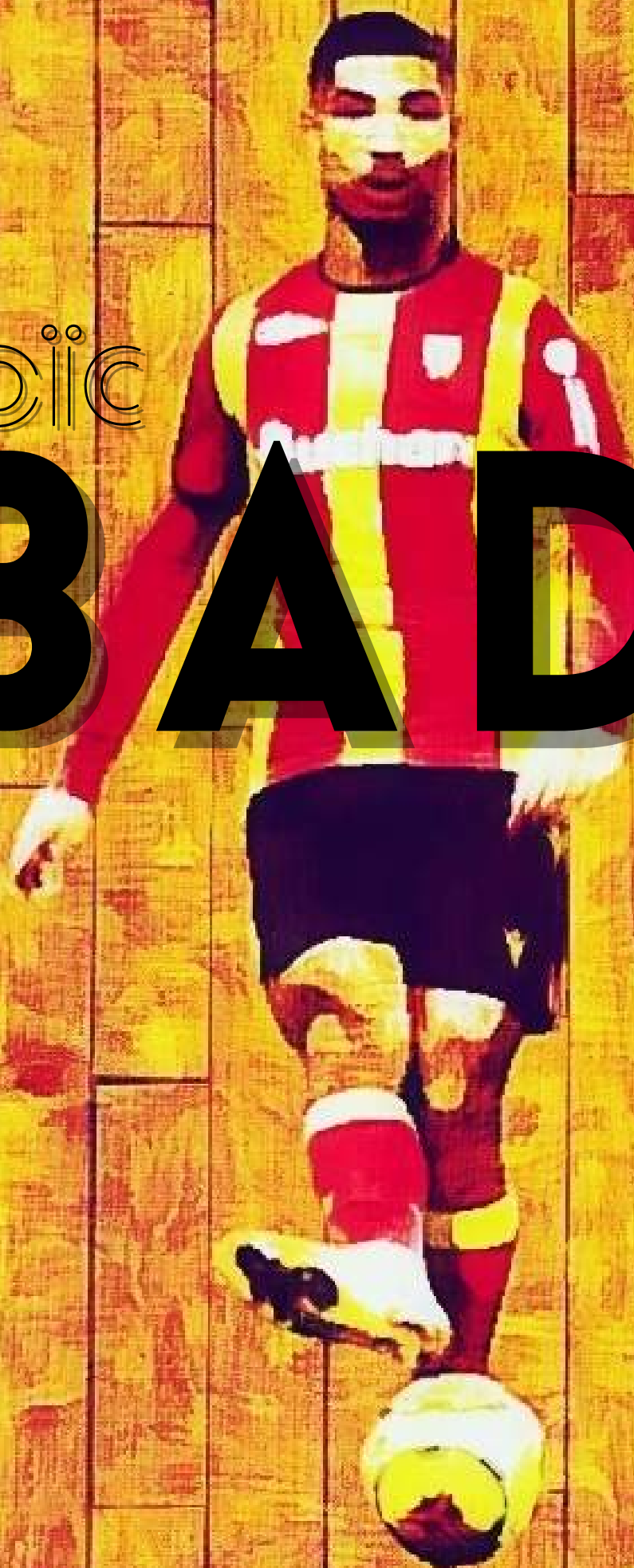
However, 20/21 saw Frédéric Antonetti return as coach and again look to his playmaker. In a career-best season, Boulaya made 32 Ligue 1 starts, scored six crucial goals and produced eight assists as Metz achieved their best finish in two decades. Three of those goals and six of the assists (including a stunning pass to set up a last-minute winner at Lyon) came in 2021, earned Boulaya three Algeria caps and, so he thought, a big summer move. However, the transfer never materialised and, amid rumours that he was unsettled, he missed the beginning of this season through "injury". He was desperately missed and Boulaya was quickly brought back in. In his 10 matches since then, he has scored three goals (topping the European charts for direct free kicks scored in the past two seasons), notched one assist and been at the centre of the rare moments where Metz have looked closer to last season's performances.

Some of Metz's more cynical fans may say that his recent form could be something to do with an approaching transfer window and Algeria's African Cup of Nations squad announcement. Whatever the reasons, his performances, for as long as Metz are able to retain him, could be the difference in Les Grenats' fight for survival.

Jeremy Smith

Loïc

BADÉ





96-23

POS : CB

AGE : 21

Over the last few years, France has seen a bountiful supply of talented young centre-backs emerge. Whilst many have ventured overseas to seek further opportunities, one player, for now at least, has elected to remain in Ligue 1.

21-year-old defender Loïc Badé has seen his stock rise sharply since breaking through at Le Havre back at the beginning of 2020. In less than two years, Badé has gone from a Ligue 2 prospect, to a breakout season with Lens in Ligue 1 and on to an eight-figure move to Rennes, whilst simultaneously being linked with some of European football's powerhouses. But what kind of player is he, and could he make that big move and what does the future hold for him?

Born in the Paris suburbs, Badé grew up playing for local sides, including now-Ligue 2 Paris FC. He was initially deployed as a defensive midfielder, however, with his coach at Paris Mathieu Lacan labelling him a "defender who likes to take risks", Badé eventually dropped back into central defence. He then joined Le Havre in 2016 - given the number of top class players who emerged from their academy, the Normandy club know what they are doing when it comes to nurturing young talents.

Having risen through the youth teams, Badé eventually made his senior debut in January 2020. Immediately, he looked at home in the Le Havre defence and, in his seven games before the pandemic brought the season to an early finish, Badé and his defence managed to keep three clean sheets, conceding only five goals in the process.

Despite not reaching double figures in appearances, Badé, who was out of contract in July 2020, was snapped up by newly promoted Ligue 1 side Lens. His new coach, Franck Haise, praised him as a player "with great potential" and one who "can defend strongly and use the ball well out of defence". Badé slotted seamlessly into the back three system used by Haise, one often used at Le Havre too. It was in this three-man defence that Badé was able to demonstrate his standout qualities.

His strength, reading of the game, pace and comfort on the ball all helped underline that great potential. Haise also praised his attitude and the fact that, even at a young age, he was unafraid to take responsibility in defence. Team mate Ignatius Ganago added that "when you see him on the pitch, he's so confident and assured, you'd think he's 26 or 27."

An excellent debut top flight season, which included comparisons with Raphaël Varane - who also emerged at Lens, helped the northern club to an impressive seventh place finish in the league. It also saw interest in the player increase significantly. Liverpool, Leeds, Newcastle, Leicester, Brighton,

Arsenal and AC Milan, were just some of the clubs to closely monitor Badé. Surprisingly to some, however, it was Rennes who came out on top in the battle for his signature, with Badé joining for a not insignificant fee of €20m.

Speaking after completing the move, Badé confirmed the interest of other clubs but stated that conversations with Rennes' sporting director Florian Maurice and coach Bruno Génésio helped convince him of the move. Badé noted that the club regularly played in Europe and that he wanted to "experience something bigger and play against bigger teams". It was this, together with the project put to him by Maurice, which convinced Badé to sign. Maurice described Badé as already having "the profile of a modern central defender - athletic, dynamic, strong in the air and able to read the game. He is a young player who had a very good season with Lens. I have known him for some time and we are extremely satisfied to have him at the club".

With Rennes deploying a back four, Badé has had to adapt quickly to playing in a central defensive duo instead of a trio. This perhaps has exposed areas of his game that still need work. Indulging in his love for taking the ball forward, but only having one partner to cover him, has resulted in costly lapses in concentration and the player too easily falling out of position, leaving space to be exploited.

In trying to recover possession, he can also be forced into committing card worthy tackles. That inexperience resulted in two yellow cards during the defeat to Angers in August. Communication is also an area for him to focus on as he looks to take on a more senior role. These attributes, however, are simple to work on, and it's easy to forget he only has around 50 senior games under his belt. Further experience will certainly go a long way.

As further recognition of his potential and performances to date, Badé was rewarded with a first call up to the French under 21 squad in August. Whilst Rennes have made an inconsistent start to the new season, and Badé has not been totally blameless - even occasionally dropping out of the side in recent games for his protection, he's still a young and inexperienced player. With many new players to be integrated at Rennes, Badé, more than others, will be afforded the time to settle by Génésio, especially when considering this new formation.

However, with a large transfer fee to his name, most observers will be expecting Badé to at least hit the heights of last season. If he does that, irons out some wrinkles in his game and continues to develop as expected, then his name will be at the top of many a watchlist come next summer.

Rich Allen

95⁻⁷¹

AGE : 27 POS : RB

LÉO
DUBOIS

Compared to his impressive 2020, this year might be considered something of a disappointment for Léo Dubois. 12 months ago, Lyon sat atop Ligue 1 after a deep run into the Champions League the previous summer. Part of this form was much to do with Lyon's tight defence, of which Dubois was a fundamental part: by Christmas 2020, OL had conceded 16 goals and kept six clean sheets in the 2020/21 Ligue 1 season.

Fast-forward a year, and Les Gones currently sit all the way down in 12th, with one of their worst defensive records in years. In the first 16 games of the season, Lyon have conceded 25 goals, the most since 1983 (when they were relegated) and kept only three clean sheets. While this is not entirely the fault of Léo Dubois, as club captain this season, it is he who must lead the search for a solution.

In a world where the full-back position is being rapidly redefined, Léo Dubois is a notable example of the more traditional kind. This calendar year, his attacking contributions amount to a single goal and five assists across all club and national competitions. By comparison, the league's most dangerous right backs have been much more effective. Take Lens' Jonathan Clauss, who currently boasts a total of 5 goals and 13 assists on the year, or Hakimi, who has accumulated eight of each. But going forward is not necessarily Dubois' job. Consistently featuring on the right of Lyon's back four, his strength lies in his defensive talents.

And it is for these talents that he has been awarded a further 7 international caps in 2021. However, while he is so important for Lyon, the same can certainly not be said for his involvement in the national setup. Although he was selected for the 26-man Euro 2020 squad, he was unable to gain a single minute of game time in the tournament, and has otherwise only completed two full matches of 90 minutes with Les Bleus this year. Arguably, this is a result of his traditional style as a right back, since Didier Deschamps has leant further towards a wingback system in his 3-4-3 formations this year. Indeed, in replacing Kingsley Coman in the position during November's fixture against Finland, he looked tentative, with minimal ability to make positive, attacking movements. If Deschamps is to stick to this formation, it would not be a surprise to see a player like Clauss take the reins in place of Dubois.

Jack Wadding



94

AGE : 27 POS : CB

GUILLERMO
MARIPÁN

We know the history of Brazilians and Argentines in Ligue 1 well while Carlos Valderrama, Edinson Cavani and José Luis Chilavert lay claim to Colombian, Uruguayan and Paraguayan influence on the French game. Peru and Venezuela have also contributed, with Saint-Étienne left-back Miguel Trauco a regular for his country and promising goalkeeper Wilker Fariñez an important part of Lens' future. Chile, however, has made little impact, with Marco Estrada, part of Montpellier's 2012 title-winning side, the only name to have made much noise.

But, as canny an operator as midfielder Estrada was, players of real star quality, the likes of Alexis Sanchez, Arturo Vidal, or Charles Aranguiz, have largely kept to Europe's bigger leagues, or Spain, where the language barrier is nonexistent. But that may slowly be changing thanks to Guillermo Maripán, AS Monaco's hulking centre-back. A pure product of the Universidad Catolica youth system, he first arrived in Europe in 2017, where two seasons with Deportivo Alavés helped the club secure their place in the top flight before moving to Monaco in 2019 for €18m. The fee, which was a club record for a defender, was high, but Monaco were working hard to restructure the team, having also brought in the likes of Wissam Ben Yedder and Gelson Martins that summer while making a more definitive step away from the side that won the Ligue 1 title in 2016/17. His acclimation took some time but, before he long, he was an automatic first-choice under Robert Moreno, using a blend of canny physicality and aerial ability in concert with an underrated passing game to help build play from the back, as the Spaniard desired.

The installation of Niko Kovač, in concert with the signing of Axel Disasi and the continued improvement of Benoît Badiashile, might have spelt doom for the Chilean, whose lack of pace can be a liability, but he not only shook off this pressure but thrived, scoring an impressive five goals last year to add a threat at set-pieces whilst also helping out his more callow teammates. Despite a brief struggle with injury early in the season, following a busy summer at the Copa America, he's returned to both fitness and form, being an ever-present as his return to the eleven has coincided with an uptick in the team's domestic form. While much more improvement from Maripán is unlikely given his age, his ability to provide a steady, veteran presence at the back for his young teammates makes him an invaluable piece of the puzzle as Monaco seek a return to the top three.

Eric Devin

93⁻⁵

AGE : 34 POS : CB

NICOLAS
PALLOIS

Rugged, committed, grizzled, a campaigner — one look at Nicolas Pallois' greying beard, imposing figure and icy stare intimates that the veteran Nantes defender is not a player who doesn't suffer fools, but there's far more to his play than that. Since making the trip up the Atlantic coast from Bordeaux in 2017, he has appeared in more than one hundred league matches for Les Canaris and emerged as a beacon of consistency amid a parsimonious atmosphere of near-constant churn of managers and teammates.

Born in Normandy, he was once on the books of Caen, but an itinerant career saw him drift from club to club across France's top two divisions before an impressive spell at Niort caught the eye of Bordeaux. Les Girondins, whose defence had previously struggled for consistency with a lack of a consistent presence alongside Lamine Sané, would push for a place in the top three for much of the season's early going. A lack of consistency in attack was the team's undoing in that regard, but they still managed to scrape sixth place and an attendant Europa League spot, with Pallois winning the club's Player of the Month award three times.

An impasse over his contract in the summer of 2017 saw him join the team's hated Atlantic derby rivals, and even if he's been no stranger to a booking, his combative and fiery play have been an underrated part of Nantes continually beating the drop despite the upheaval that has characterised the reign of president Waldemar Kita. That's not to say, however, that he's a one-dimensional character; his sorrow over the passing of good friend and teammate Emiliano Sala in 2019 was palpable, displaying a level of emotion rarely seen among professional athletes, whilst also displaying a lighter side in announcing his international retirement in 2019.

Too, under Antoine Kombouaré, more has been asked of him, and he has responded with aplomb, becoming far less agricultural in his play and reaching a level rarely seen since his best days in Bordeaux. Out of contract in the summer and already 34, Pallois may not have much more football left in him, but his assured, yet bellicose nature has been a wonderful part of Ligue 1 for the past decade, and his presence will surely be missed when he decides to hang up his boots.

Eric Devin

92

AGE : 21 POS : AM

YACINE
ADLI

For all his midfield wizardry, Yacine Adli's biggest contribution to salvaging Bordeaux's cataclysmic 2020/21 season will have arguably come off the pitch. As the defeats piled on one after the other in the spring, sending the club sleepwalking towards relegation, it was the 20-year-old who raised his voice and pointed the finger at his complacent, even disinterested teammates.

The former PSG man would lay bare the club's internal disarray and conflicts, explaining more was needed "at every level". Also in Adli's firing line was the team's lack of ambition - "Everyone needs to be aware that to compete for the top of the table, you need to be demanding" - and the squad's lack of unity. Even after the 3-0 win over Lens, the midfielder refused to let his guard down, lamenting the club's "catastrophic" season.

That the French youth international was the one to stand up and take responsibility among the raft of seemingly apathetic veterans is a testament to his character. That's not to say that Adli himself was immune from criticism for his performances, but the midfielder showed a sense of impetus that made him stand out on more than one occasion.

His move to AC Milan is the logical next step, where he will move this summer having been loaned back to FCGB last off-season, and Bordeaux will be hard-pressed to find a replacement matching his impact in breaking opposition lines. Les Girondins have further foundered in the current campaign, chiefly staying above the relegation zone by the skin of their teeth.

Bordeaux would eventually survive last season - their 12th-place finish in no way indicative of their performances over the season - thanks in part to the midfielder's ability to drive the ball forward and pick out key passes. In a similarly diabolical start to the 2021/22 campaign for Les Marine et Blanc, Adli has once again shown what he can do - albeit in flashes - notching six assists, as well as a solitary goal in a comeback win over Reims.

Adept both as an advanced midfielder and further back with some defensive duties, it's clear that Adli has the technical tools, the guile and the desire he needs to go far. After a nerve-testing spell at one of Ligue 1's most chaotic clubs, a move to the San Siro might just be the start of something special for the former PSG man.

Raphaël Jacobin

A stylized, high-contrast portrait of footballer Jeremy Doku. He is wearing a red and orange football jersey with a white Jordan brand logo on the chest. The jersey features the name 'LAUNAY' on the right chest and a large white number '5' on the front. On the left sleeve, there is a patch for 'LIGUE 1 Uber Eats'. The background is a vibrant, abstract mix of red, orange, and blue. The player's face is rendered with bold, geometric shapes and a wide-eyed expression.

J É R É M Y D O K U



POS : WF
AGE : 19

The key members of Belgium's national team squad have something in common: age. The golden generation are all either nearing or in their thirties, with their chances of international silverware seemingly slipping despite still being ranked number one in the world. Roberto Martínez's EURO 2020 squad included just one player under 24, one seen as the future of the team - Rennes' teenage winger, Jérémy Doku.

Still just 19, Doku has already racked up one full season in the Belgian top flight and one in Ligue 1. With his eye-catching pace, an unpredictable style fools defenders on a weekly basis. Already touted as Sadio Mané's replacement at Liverpool, Doku is yet to match Mané's goalscoring exploits, however. Even at RB Salzburg and Southampton, Mané was a threat and, under Jürgen Klopp, the Senegalese wide man has become a reliable goal scorer and someone to depend on. Doku, meanwhile, is often almost unplayable with the ball at his feet but erratic in front of goal. Nevertheless, this special talent is raw but ready and, under the right coach, he could be developed into a superstar.

Comparisons between Doku and Mané come from Klopp himself. Aged 15, Doku was invited to Liverpool's training ground, where, according to his father, David, Klopp "explained to us that Jérémy could replace Mané in a few years". Since becoming Rennes' record signing, and Anderlecht's record sale for a hefty fee of €26m, Doku has made great strides. He's evolved into a winger capable of withstanding the physical nature of a top five European league while also impressing during European cameos.

The Belgian typically plays off the right, allowing him to beat his full-back down the line with blistering speed, but he's equally capable of playing on the left and cutting inside. Two goals and three assists in Ligue 1 last season don't inspire but if he were to move to the left on a more regular basis, he could find that goal-scoring touch. A problem with that plan comes via Rennes' new signing Kamaldeen Sulemana (19). The Ghanaian was brought in from Danish club FC Nordsjaelland, despite interest from Manchester United, and has already hit the ground running on the left with three goals in his first six league starts, more than Doku managed in 26 league starts last season.

However, comparisons could be made with a younger Raheem Sterling who managed to score 18 goals and add 11 assists playing on the right for Manchester City in their Premier League title winning 2017/18 campaign. A shaky finisher at best in his early days, Sterling has perfected the art of arriving at the back post under Pep Guardiola - it's something Doku could learn from. Frighteningly fast and standing at just 5'7, Doku is nimble, tricky, and hard to predict. What differentiates him from many

other wingers is his versatility of style. At times he takes little touches of the ball, just like Sterling, before quickly changing direction. He can also opt for a couple of heavier touches into space, relying on his pure pace to beat his man, akin to Adama Traoré, making him tough to defend against.

Difficult to bully off the ball, Doku's physicality can now compete with seasoned professionals despite his youthfulness. He always looks to beat his man and isn't afraid of losing out in a duel. Some wingers are discouraged if their opponent is dominating, but not Doku, he instead uses that as fuel to go again, and usually he ends up winning the battle. Of 6.6 attempted dribbles per 90 last season, he was successful with 4.3. That 65% success rate was far better than Neymar's 56% and higher than Lionel Messi's 64% in La Liga. In fact, Doku's 4.3 successful dribbles per 90 ranked second in Ligue 1 for players with over 1,000 minutes, first for players with over 2,000 minutes and sixth across Europe's top five leagues using the same metric.

That goes to show just how dangerous he is, and the fact he's still a teenager is even more encouraging. Wingers do tend to peak earlier than those in other positions, but Doku still has several years before he reaches his top level, making the next few years arguably the most important of his career. Natural development aside, Rennes coach Bruno Genesio could have a major impact on the player Doku becomes, especially over the next 12 months. Wingers often find their killer instinct in their later years, so Doku has time to discover that trait.

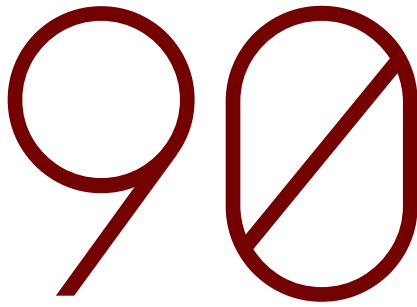
Italy right-back Giovanni Di Lorenzo will be well aware of Doku's abilities. The Azzurri triumphed in their EURO 2020 quarter-final clash with Belgium but it was Doku who arguably shone brightest. His eight dribbles were not only a match-best but more than double second placed Nicolò Barella with three. With Doku a constant threat down the left, Di Lorenzo was forced to stay alert for the entire 90 minutes and made a huge seven tackles, but Doku caused him more problems than any other attacker in the tournament.

The next step for Doku is producing regular output. His xG and xA per 90 tally last season was a measly 0.24, so not only is he failing to rack up impressive goal and assist numbers, but he isn't getting in the right positions either. That frame of mind and knack for being in the right place at the right time will come and, for someone in the 97th percentile for progressive carries per 90 in Europe's top five leagues (10.78) according to FBRef, Doku has a significant base to build upon. Struggling with injuries, the Belgian has managed just 201 minutes of league action so far this term but, with Liverpool sniffing around, a move away from Ligue 1 could be imminent. For one of the division's most dangerous prospects, it would be fully justified.

Cameron Smith



**PAPE
MATAR
SARR**



POS : CM
AGE : 19

Having joined Metz through the club's successful partnership with Génération Foot in Senegal, the 18-year-old Sarr had a breakthrough season in 2020/2021 under coach Frédéric Antonetti's guidance and was already attracting interest from across Europe. Last summer, Pape Matar Sarr was one of the most sought-after youngsters on the market. With Tottenham eventually winning out over the likes of Manchester United, Chelsea, Everton, Lyon and Nice in the race to sign the Senegal international, he was then loaned back to FC Metz for the season.

His performances this campaign have not demonstrated the upward trajectory that one would have expected after last season's promise. However, there is no doubt that, should Sarr fulfil his potential sooner rather than later, he could potentially become a truly world-class midfielder.

Born in September 2002 into a family with a football heritage, he quickly showed enough talent to attract interest from a major European club, his first coach Mamadou Saer Barry claiming that Manchester City had made enquiries when he was just 9. At the 2017 U17 World Cup Senegal fell to Spain in the Round of 16, but Sarr impressed in the group stage. The then-16-year-old assisted two and scored three from midfield, including a superb free kick against the USA. Senegal moved straight on to the Zone A U20 Union of West African Nations tournament. A hat-trick against Sierra Leone helped the lion-cubs to the final against Mali, where Sarr scored one and forced an own goal for a tournament-winning 2-0 win. 2020 saw Senegal compete in the Arab Cup in Saudi Arabia, Sarr setting the team on the way to another trophy with four more goals, including another unstoppable free kick in the semi-final victory over Egypt.

Barcelona, Atletico and Monaco were now making enquiries for the 17-year-old starlet, but Metz took up their first option to bring Sarr over to north-east France in the summer, following in the footsteps of Diafra Sakho, Sadio Mané and Ismaïla Sarr, among many others. He began the 2020/21 campaign with the reserves but Antonetti, on his return to the bench, immediately brought the midfielder into the first team squad and he made his debut as a substitute in a late-November defeat to Brest. Sarr remained in the first team squad thereafter, making 22 appearances, of which 18 were starts, and notching three goals and helping Metz to their best league finish this century. Sarr's wide-ranging skillset means that he can play anywhere in the midfield. Although his Senegal youth exploits have been in a more offensive position, he has mainly been used thus far either in a more defensive role or as the box-to-box piston. He has shown his proficiency in reading the game, winning back possession with a well-timed tackle or interception and then using his ability on the ball to break lines, either with his range of passing or taking the ball forward himself.

While his defensive statistics are respectable, he appears at his most comfortable in a box-to-box role - although he is willing to play in both: "In Senegal I played mainly as a number 8. Here, I've been mostly playing as a number 6 but I am comfortable in either position". He has a great range of passing, including a very accurate long ball. As his youth international exploits suggest, he also likes a shot from distance. While they can sometimes be wild, it is clearly another area in which he looks to have real potential, two of his three goals last season coming from outside the area (the third a brilliantly controlled but powerful volley). Tall and elegant, Sarr could build up his body strength but has the potential to be a danger at set-pieces, whether taking them himself or using his height and already impressive aerial ability.

Unsurprisingly for one so young, Sarr can look raw at times and all areas need work. His concentration can waver and he often seems to tire as matches progress, but he has shown that he can mix it with the best of them, last year pulling out Man of the Match performances against both champions Lille and runners-up PSG. In March, his performances were rewarded with his full Senegal debut against Congo. He lit up a drab match with an all-action first-half display, including a visionary defence-splitting pass which put Mané through on goal, only for his fellow Generation Foot and Metz alumnus to hit the bar. PSG and Senegal midfielder Idrissa Gueye was impressed: "he's my type of player - I admire him a lot - loads of talent - he's the future of Senegal".

This campaign has been a case of second season syndrome for Sarr. This is despite showing a great combination of strength, skill and vision in beginning the move for a great team goal against Lille. A variety of factors can be put forward: his £15m move to Spurs may mean that he is either a little less motivated or not keen to risk serious injury playing for Metz; or he is a victim of his versatility, having been played in several positions and not given a chance to settle in one; or perhaps he has been affected by the drop-off in form of the team in general - although the question may be asked whether the team is poor because he is, or whether it is the reverse? Either way, he wasn't helped by the fact that, early in the season, the playmaking onus fell on him, a responsibility and role that he is too young and inexperienced to shoulder. Since Farid Boulaya's return to the first team, he has been free to return to his box-to-box role, but his attitude has been found wanting at times, even leading to being dropped from the starting line-up in recent matches. Perhaps this is the wake-up call that he needed and, returning to the starting XI for Metz's recent six-pointer against Lorient, he set the tone for a comfortable win by being on hand to score an early opener. The season so far has shown that Sarr is a talent, but with a long way to go before he is the finished article. Metz fans will hope that he begins to start showing that potential before he leaves for London in the summer.

Jeremy Smith

89⁻³⁵

AGE : 30 POS : AM

GAËL
KAKUTA

When France won the 2010 Under-19 European Championship with a team including the likes of Alexandre Lacazette and Antoine Griezmann, it was Gaël Kakuta who won the player of the tournament award and, with it, the unofficial title and poisoned chalice of “the next Zidane”. Great things were of course expected of Kakuta, and the peripatetic career that has followed has inevitably been somewhat of a disappointment. However, for the first time in many years, Kakuta appears fit, settled and happy and this is reflected in his excellent performances on the pitch.

Although he began his youth development at Lens, Kakuta was quickly snaffed by Chelsea where he won the youth team player of the year award in 2008. His performances earned him a promotion to the first-team squad under Luiz Felipe Scolari but a bad leg and ankle break, followed by suspension after a contractual dispute between Lens and Chelsea, delayed his professional debut. In the 09/10 season Carlo Ancelotti made him Chelsea's youngest ever Champions League starter but Kakuta remained frustrated. And so began an itinerant career – in the past ten years Kakuta has played for 12 clubs across six countries, making eight loan moves (six of them from Chelsea). Unsurprisingly, considering his failure to settle anywhere for any sustained period of time, Kakuta's success has been limited – particularly compared to the high hopes held for him early in his career. However, a successful loan period from Hebei China Fortune to Amiens in 2017/18 gave him renewed exposure in France and, after fair to middling stays at Rayo Vallecano and back at Amiens, Kakuta completed his career circle and returned home to Lens, in time for their return to Ligue 1.

Last season, Kakuta starred as Les Sang-et-Or's main playmaker as they comfortably retained their place in the top flight, notching 11 goals and five assists in 35 matches and being at the centre of all Lens' positive play. Franck Haise's team have continued to win friends this season and Kakuta continues to play a central role, with two goals and one assist so far. This season, Lens have several players who have excelled on a consistent basis and so Kakuta's importance has arguably gone down a little, but he is still the team's main offensive conductor in the centre of the pitch. With a team finally showing the faith to build a team around his talents, he is at last showing the ability that many knew he possessed all along.

Jeremy Smith

88

AGE : 33 POS : CM

JOHAN
GASTIEN

Shortly after joining Clermont, Johan Gastien gave an honest, level-headed assessment of his own ability: “my agent has always been clear with me: I'm a good Ligue 2 player. And I totally accept that. I enjoyed playing [15 matches] in the top flight with Dijon, but I am not at the level of Ligue 1, I'm aware of that. But then, some players who are not as good as me have the chance to play in Ligue 1, so anything is possible.”

Three years later and at 33 years old, Gastien is proving himself both right and wrong: he has had the opportunity to play again in the top flight – but he is also showing that he is not at all out of place there, and perhaps he and his agent underestimated his ability after all. He was not far off the mark when saying that he is a good Ligue 2 player. A stalwart at that level, the defensive midfielder has amassed second-tier 260 appearances since making his debut under his father Pascal in 2008 at Chamois Niortais. Gastien made a reputation for himself as a reliable, if unspectacular, player in long stints at Niort and at Dijon before moving on to upwardly-mobile Brest in January 2017. Although a regular there too for 18 months, Gastien fell out with coach Jean-Marc Furlan and at the age of 30, was reunited with his dad by signing at Clermont.

Ignoring jibes of nepotism from opposition players, Gastien has been well worth his father's faith, featuring in 35 matches last season as he helped Clermont to their first ever promotion to the top flight. This season he has doubled his total number of Ligue 1 appearances with 15 matches – a number that might have been higher were it not for two red cards. Gastien says of his style of play, “I like playing it simple, not carrying or dribbling the ball. My job is to win the ball, pass it off and then make myself available to receive it again. I still run a lot but, with age, I now think more. Beforehand I played backwards and sideways but, as the years pass, I now push myself to play it forward, to break the lines”. This style – willing running, ball-winning, forward-thinking but knowing his limitations and leaving the fancy stuff to more talented teammates, makes him the ideal fulcrum around which Clermont's popular attacking game is built. It remains to be seen whether it will save them from an immediate return to Ligue 2 but, whatever happens, the team is winning a lot of friends along the way. As Gastien himself observes “playing football is not forever, so we might as well enjoy it as much as possible while we can”.

Jeremy Smith



87

AGE : 31 POS : CM

GEORGINIO
WIJNALDUM

Georginio Wijnaldum hasn't had the expected impact upon Ligue 1 since his arrival from Liverpool on a free transfer, even stating himself that he is unhappy over his start to life in France's capital. The Dutch midfielder became an icon on Merseyside for being dependable in the difficult moments and endearing himself to fans by producing pivotal displays crucial times like his brace in Liverpool's 4-0 comeback win in the Champions League over Barcelona in May 2019.

A favourite of Jurgen Klopp's, if Gini was available he would always play, and that was the case at the end of the 2020/21 season as the defending Premier League champions endured an injury crisis. Wijnaldum had to be a leader in a difficult time for the Reds as experienced players like centre-back Virgil Van Dijk were replaced with much more inferior and inexperienced players like Rhys Williams. The former Newcastle midfielder featured 38 times in the league and a further 14 times across the Champions League and domestic cup competitions in the 2020/21 season. His leadership and experience were vital in an upturn in form for Liverpool as they managed a miracle turnaround to qualify for the Champions League. The Dutch midfielder played in every game during a ten-game unbeaten run. After a successful but bitter ending to the season, the 30-year-old joined his international teammates for EURO 2020 which saw the Dutch national side disappointingly exit at the last 16 stage. Wijnaldum, however, saw relative success as he managed to net three times in four matches.

Since arriving at the Parc de Princes, Wijnaldum has struggled to force his way into Mauricio Pochettino's plans as a first-team starter. Paris have continued to soar and the fact Gini hasn't played a major part in that is a testament to the riches they possess. Despite not being a regular, it hasn't been all doom and gloom as Wijnaldum played his part for a team that looks set to run away with the Ligue 1 title and has successfully qualified for the knockout stages of the Champions League. His best performance in PSG colours came in the UCL as he managed to save Pochettino's blushes with a brace in a 2-2 draw against Leipzig. Wijnaldum hasn't had the best of starts to life in France but that doesn't mean there isn't a player of high class at Paris' disposal. With a series of winner's medals to his name, 86 caps for his country and arriving on a free transfer, given time and opportunities, he could still turn out to be an inspired piece of business in 2022.

Liam Wraith

86⁻³³

AGE : 22 POS : CM

YOUSOUF
FOFANA

If 2020 was the year Paris-born Youssouf Fofana confirmed he had the talent to perform at the highest standard of Ligue 1, 2021 was the year he learned to cope with fierce competition for a spot in Niko Kovač's starting eleven, with the added pressure that European football demands.

Fofana started 2021 like he finished 2020, playing alongside his good friend and fellow midfielder Aurélien Tchouaméni. He started every league game and was substituted sparingly, proof that his stamina and fitness levels can easily cope with playing a game a week. His discipline could have been better though, as he was one of only 7 Ligue 1 players to reach double figures in yellow cards, with 10. The big question was, how would Fofana manage with 2 games a week?

The midfielder has started only 9 league games in 2021 - from 14 appearances overall - and for this there are two reasons. Firstly, competition for a starting berth is fiercer. He may be the 50% of the duo with Tchouaméni, but there is no question that the now full-French international is the leader in the Monaco midfield. Fofana has to fight for his place against the likes of Jean Lucas & Eliot Matazo, who have sometimes been preferred in the league, depending on the system.

He has also had to discover the demands of European football: performing twice a week isn't the same kettle of fish as just on the weekend, even if Fofana has kept his fitness levels up well enough. The midfielder has been an ever-present in Monaco's Europa League campaign, but this has been to the detriment of league appearances.

Still only 22, Fofana can still go out and enjoy himself but needs to see where his priorities lie especially this early in the season. Playing the Europa League may see him with longer stints on the bench (whether he starts or not, as he does tend to be the first to get subbed by Kovac). The ex-Strasbourg man is currently taking in the biggest leap of his career and so far adjusting to it adequately - but not brilliantly - which is nonetheless still no small feat for a player his age.

Philip Bargiel



85

AGE : 24 POS : WF

CENGİZ
ÜNDER

In a career that has sputtered and moved fitfully, despite evincing plenty of talent in his native Turkey, has Cengiz Ünder finally made a home for himself in Marseille? Arriving on loan from Roma, the Turkish international, still just 24, was part of a massive overhaul this summer, following the arrival of Jorge Sampaoli in the spring. While bringing in young players once hailed as the next great thing (William Saliba, Mattéo Guendouzi) was a theme, none of the summer's arrivals have had quite the span of highs and lows that have characterised Ünder's career.

A native of Sındırgı in the country's west, he came through at Altınordu, an unassuming second division club. Ünder then made his name at Başakşehir, where he contributed greatly to the team's surprising second place finish in 2016/17. His spell in Istanbul would last but a year, though, as he joined AS Roma after just one season of top-flight football. Having also earned his first senior caps for his country, he would thrive under the management of Eusebio di Francesco, becoming a key player as Roma finished third and reached the semifinals of the Champions League. However, between the arrival of Claudio Ranieri the following season, and an ill-advised celebration showing support of Turkey's invasion of Syria, he soon fell out of favour with both his manager and the club's supporters. A loan deal to Leicester City looked to be a lifeline, especially with Brendan Rodgers' aptitude for improving young players. However, he made just a solitary league start in a campaign that was blighted by injury. With the emergence of Nicolò Zaniolo at his parent club, there was also no chance for a regular place under José Mourinho, so he made the transalpine journey to Marseille, where he has thrived in Sampaoli's tactical ambiguity.

Ünder is most often used on the right as an inverted winger — being left-footed, he is adept at cutting in from the flank and beating opponents one-on-one. Some of his troubles at the very highest level stem from his lack of defensive workrate, which has frustrated plenty of his previous managers. However, what Sampaoli asks of his attacking players in that regard is very little, and Ünder has responded in kind, scoring a career-high four league goals to date. His confidence for his club has also been reflected in his play for his country. He has increasingly become Turkey's key creator as they look to qualify for the next World Cup despite a tough draw, the future looking increasingly bright for an undoubtedly talented player.

Eric Devin

84

AGE : 31 POS : ST

FLORIAN
SOTOCA

Not a professional until the age of 25, the career of Florian Sotoca, now a fixture for Lens as they continue to battle for a place in Europe, is something of a marvel. We're relatively accustomed to players being late bloomers in France — the likes of Olivier Giroud, Laurent Koscielny, Téji Savanier and Andy Delort being prime examples. However, they had at least featured for top flight sides at some point in their careers. Sotoca, though, upon joining his hometown club, amateur side FU Narbonne, would stay put for seventeen years, before moving up the coast to join Montpellier in 2015.

His spell with La Paillade was an unsuccessful one, as he played but a solitary minute of league football, before joining Grenoble in France's third division the following season. With eight goals in 31 appearances, he turned in an impressive season, helping the team win promotion to Ligue 2 via the playoffs. But whether he could replicate that success in the professional ranks remained to be seen. He would do so, and then some, scoring 12 goals and adding five assists, playing both centrally and on the right as the Auvergne side finished a surprising ninth. When Lens, historically one of France's biggest clubs but a team who had fallen into a frustrating cycle of promotion and relegation, came calling, he leapt at the chance. Sotoca finished as the team's top scorer as Le Sang et Or surprisingly won promotion when the season was called to a halt. Despite being recognised as the team's Player of the Year for the calendar year, the arrivals of Arnaud Kalimuendo, on loan, and Ignatius Ganago, for a then-club record fee, meant that his opportunities would seem to be limited at the highest level.

However, with Kalimuendo being used as more of a wide player and Ganago struggling with injury, he would feature in all but a handful of matches. He found the net eight times playing both centrally and on the right, on the occasions that Franck Haise opted to play three attackers. Surprisingly pacy given his size, and with an eye for the spectacular when it comes to his passing and scoring, Sotoca may look like a prototypical target man, but he is far more than that when on the pitch. Constantly applying the necessary graft and skill to bring life to Lens' attack, even if the team's wingbacks and Gaël Kakuta are more likely to catch the eye, he offers testament to the idea that there will always be a place in the French game for a late bloomer. Nevertheless, his consistent displays and Lens' lofty place in the table show he is more than just a narrative.

Eric Devin

83⁻⁶⁹

AGE : 26 POS : CB

JASON DENAYER

Although recent months have seen Jason Denayer dogged by injury, that is only some mitigation to the Belgian's slide down our rankings. One of the most consistently impressive defenders in the league last year, his composed play helped save his team's blushes on many occasions, despite Anthony Lopes struggling at times for form. Also a decent aerial presence, Denayer has also a knack for chipping in with an odd goal, making him a consummate fan favourite. His preternatural sense of calm has also helped make him a fixture for his country as well.

This year, it has been quite the opposite — Lopes has been the league's best 'keeper in the first half of the season, while Lyon's defence, despite the arrival of experienced heads Jérôme Boateng and Damien Da Silva, has been ragged in extremis. They have regularly been conceding goals late in matches, belying a lack of focus. As well as this, his performances at the Euros were also uneven, as he was dropped for Thomas Vermaelen in the knockout rounds.

Much of this has to do with the marked differences between the approaches of Rudi Garcia and his dogged, even, negative approach to defending and Peter Bosz's high-octane pressing game. However, one has to wonder if Denayer isn't altogether fed up with Lyon, as his contract is set to run down come the end of the season, and there appears to have little progress made on an extension.

Indeed, despite being the club captain, Denayer never seems to be the most vocal leader on the pitch. With youngsters like Castello Lukeba and Sinaly Diomandé emerging alongside him, a dash of veteran nous has been more often found coming from the likes of Boateng. With Lukeba coming to the fore and Bosz seeming to prefer to play with three at the back, a system that does little to hide his lack of pace, one might even wonder if there is a place for him in the squad as the club seek to potentially cash in come January.

Admiring glances from Roma and Napoli and an agent who seems determined to engineer a move abroad don't help Les Gones' case, and despite some notably heroic performances over the past three-and-a-half seasons, it may be in both parties' best interest to cut ties.

Eric Devin



82

AGE : 26 POS : WB

PRZEMYSŁAW FRANKOWSKI

Since their return to Ligue 1, Franck Haise's Lens have marked themselves out as one of the division's most entertaining teams to watch. Last season, their gung-ho attacking style was very reliant on right-sided wing-back Jonathan Clauss. This year, the club has doubled its threat, having added Przemysław Frankowski to mirror Clauss on the left side.

"Frankie" is the latest in a long line of Polish players to represent Lens, and sporting coordinator Florent Ghisolfi had said that bringing in a Pole was one of his objectives. But Frankowski is far more than just tokenism, even if some eyebrows were raised when he was signed from the MLS. Lens fans needn't have worried. The Polish international, who surprised many of his compatriots by choosing to move to Chicago Fire (becoming a teammate of world champion Bastian Schweinsteiger) when approaching the peak of his career, shows the same sense of adventure on the pitch too.

Known for his versatility (goalkeeper is pretty much the only position in which he has not played at some point in his career), the right-footed 26-year-old was signed to replace Clauss in case of his departure, but has instead taken ownership of the left flank. Not only within the Lens team, but during most matches too. Beginning the season with three appearances off the bench, Frankowski has started every match since. He has amassed four assists and notched the same number of goals in the process. This included the only goal of the game as Lens won the Derby du Nord over Lille for the first time in 15 years, and a spectacular curled finish into the top corner as Lens beat Marseille 3-2 at the Vélodrome, in one of the matches of the season so far.

A strong candidate to appear in a Ligue 1 Team of the Season to date, Frankowski's buccaneering style of play was a major factor in Lens sitting second in the table as late as the third week of November. It perhaps should also be considered a factor in Lens having since gone five matches without a win and holding comfortably the worst defensive record in the top half of the table. It is unlikely, however, that Lens fans – let alone neutrals – would have it any other way: Frankowski epitomises Lens' style of play and that style epitomises what, for many, football should be: attacking, exhilarating, skilful and fun.

Jeremy Smith

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81⁻⁵⁵

POS : AM
AGE : 23

To paraphrase Jose Mourinho: "Nice guys never win, so be a bastard". Leaving to one side the accuracy of that statement, in today's modern game, drive, commitment and assertiveness are under-rated qualities. Usually, natural ability needs to be applied precisely, consistently and with confidence in order to be effective at an elite level. Lyon's Houssem Aouar has all the ability he needs, but using it to engineer tangible results is where he struggles. It's why, at 23, his game has failed to develop since breaking through as a teenager. Evolution, however, may finally be near.

Having emerged as a teenager from Lyon's prolific academy as a graceful, smooth-operating midfield creator, Aouar's growth seriously stalled last season. A sprinkling of influential displays in big wins over Monaco, Nice and Nantes in the middle of the campaign were more than evened out by repeatedly wasteful or anonymous outings across the year. In general, it seemed the sharpness and intensity to Aouar's game had evaporated during the summer of 2020. This was after a standout 2019/20 campaign which returned career-best figures of ten assists and nine goals across all competitions, despite the French season being cut short by COVID-19. Rarely has Aouar led by example or dominated as an attacking midfielder of his quality should do, even against Ligue 1's weaker sides. Although he impressed in 2020's rearranged Champions League final eight, since then there's been a sense that Aouar's lack of presence in games has held him back in his development. He has yet to evolve from a supremely gifted young creator into a reliable leader capable of rescuing and orchestrating his team when needed. With Memphis Depay gone, there is a void to fill in that regard at Parc OL.

Instead, however, his performances have often proven wet and meek as he drifts in and out of matches. While he isn't expected to tear around midfield launching into tackles, rarely does the Frenchman perform when his teammates might look to him for leadership. Former OL coach Rudi Garcia stated in May that Aouar needed to be "mentally better prepared to face difficulties in a season, or even in a match." However, there is, perhaps, a shift underway. Across October, freed by Peter Bosz's more fluid front four used in the absence of a strikers Moussa Dembélé and Islam Slimani, Aouar started look like the player his talent insists he should be. His intensity and proactivity notably increased, while there's a feeling that he's begun to express himself more confidently. An unusually confrontational 'pipe down' gesture aimed at Saint-Étienne fans in the Rhône-Alpes derby last month underlined his burgeoning boldness.

Aouar's inability to regularly and effectively apply his talent is at least partly a failure of coaching. While it's too early to appraise

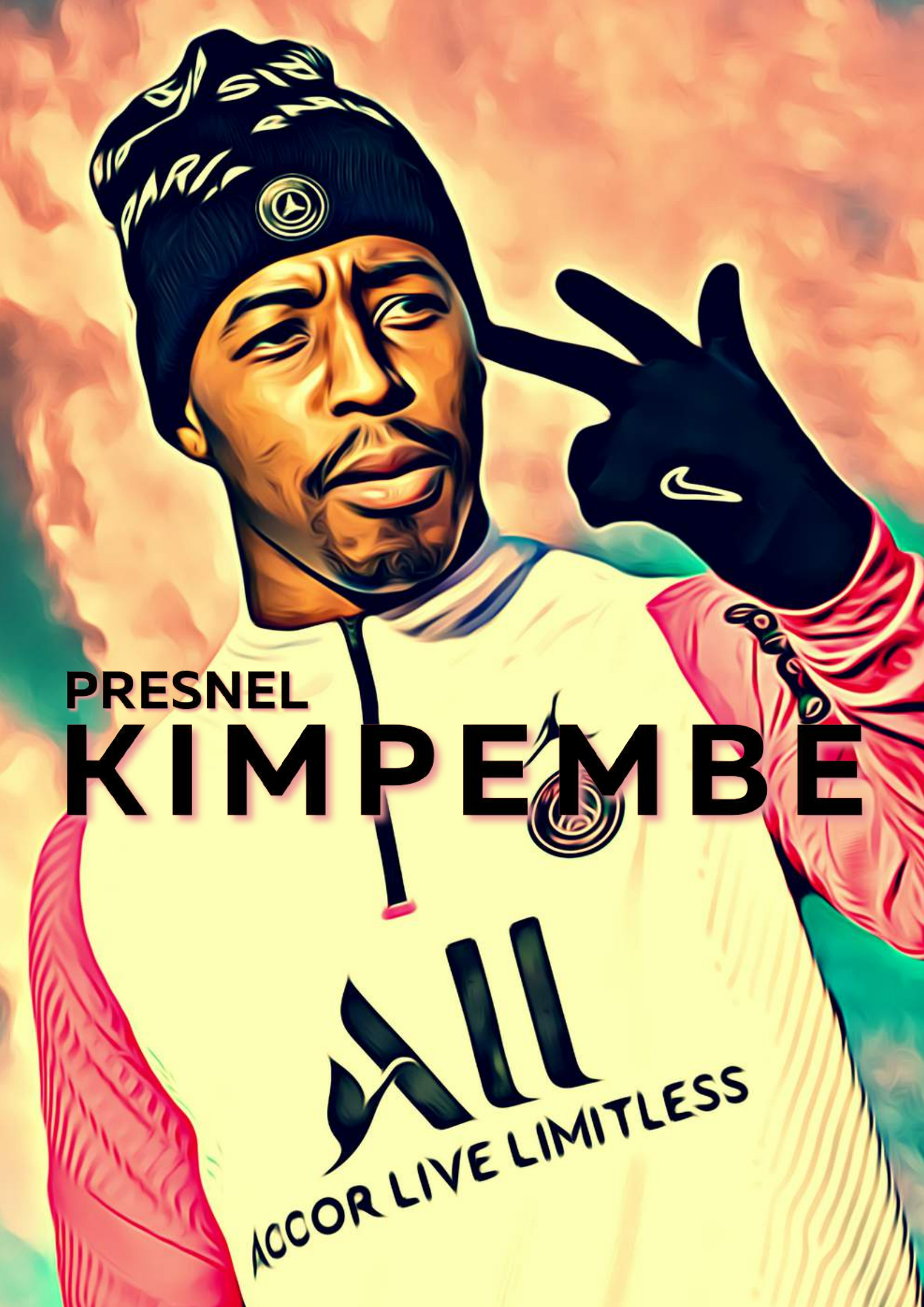
Peter Bosz's lasting influence, although the signs are promising, if Aouar had been fortunate enough to emerge under one of the world's leading coaches, he might be a very different player today. Jürgen Klopp or Pep Guardiola, say, rather than Rudi Garcia and Bruno Génésio. Although his form over the last 18 months barely warrants such a move, past links to Liverpool and Manchester City remain enticing, as Aouar is a player who needs the right guidance and to be emboldened. Weak form over an extended period has drastically affected Aouar's transfer stock. He previously turned down Arsenal, citing the Gunners' inability to offer regular Champions League football, amid broad but less concrete interest from other major clubs. But Lyon remarkably struggled for any offers at all last summer. This was despite reports in August that Aouar could be one of a group to be transfer listed for poor attitude following an abject defeat at Angers.

His contract up in 2023, next summer could finally bring a resolution to Aouar's transfer saga. With just a year to go on his deal and Lyon already willing to accept far less than the €50m Arsenal were prepared to pay, plus the reality of his weakened appeal dawning on both club and player, an opportunity for a cut-price deal could emerge. If the 23-year-old can maintain his improved form, someone could get a bargain. As a record of 37 goals and 33 assists across 193 senior Lyon appearances underlines, Aouar's tangible output needs improving. He has never reached double figures for goals in a single season across all competitions. Encouragingly, his output improves to ten direct goal contributions across 15 career Champions League games.

Those numbers underline a recent uptick. Although Aouar can still flitter in and out of games, he's started to impose himself more regularly this season. A hard fought battle with Saint-Étienne goalkeeper Etienne Green, Aouar eventually breaching the Englishman's defences in a 1-1 draw, was a highlight, as was a domineering Europa League display against Brøndby. Overall, although it's typically quiet, Aouar is finally starting to develop a steady consistency, influencing OL's results over an extended period as a player of his talent should, perhaps aided by his captaining of the side on occasion this term. Aouar's lengthy dip in form may be partly explained by some troublesome persistent injuries last season and a COVID-19 diagnosis, as often outlined by the player himself.

Following October's win over Lens, in which Aouar scored a rare header, he explained: "I feel better and better, I no longer have any physical problems so I'm now at 100% and I can give everything". A 'nice guy' for too long, Houssem Aouar's renewed sense of belief and a bullish competitiveness could yet help him become the player he has always threatened to be. This season could be career defining.

Adam White



PRESNEL

KIMPEMBE

ALL
ACCOR LIVE LIMITLESS



80-62

POS : CB
AGE : 26

It has been quite a ride for Presnel Kimpembe since his Paris Saint-Germain debut, in October 2014 against RC Lens at the Stade de France. "I remember it was a beautiful atmosphere that night," said Kimpembe reflecting on his first minutes in professional football aged just 19. "I came on for Thiago Motta in the 76th minute, it was such an honour for me". Many young players came through the ranks at PSG during that period, but were unable to forge a career at the club, who had changed their recruitment strategy following the Qatari takeover in June 2011. But Kimpembe was different.

The Titi from Beaumont-sur-Oise, one hour north of Paris, possessed qualities that could not be overlooked despite PSG boasting a star-studded squad. Kimpembe gradually turned himself into a household name, became a trusted member of the team and, crucially, a leader in the dressing room. The departure of Thiago Silva in 2020 gave Kimpembe the opportunity to take on a vice-captaincy role, filling in for centre-back partner Marquinhos, when unavailable.

The defender has developed physically and mentally, and his game has shown signs of huge technical improvement. This has helped him capture a plethora of domestic honours, including four Ligue 1 titles, four Coupe de France wins and four Coupe de la Ligue successes. Add to that, a Champions League runners-up medal and World Cup success with France.

With a CV boasting appearances in the biggest games in world football, Kimpembe should be a player spoken in the highest regard and one that should be in the mix when it comes to Team of the Year nominees, but this is rarely the case. Concentration has long been a flaw attributed to Kimpembe, and it is one that just does not seem to go away. On top of that, moments of ill-discipline that have caused avoidable difficulties for his teammates and some unneeded red cards, such as the one he was shown at Rennes in May – a game which all but killed off PSG's title hopes.

The 26-year-old freely admits that he has "matured" and, to the watching eye, he has. But there are still moments of madness, erratic episodes and positional deficiencies. Despite this, Kimpembe continues to be a key fixture at one of Europe's top club's and for the French national team. On his day, Kimpembe is as good as any central defender in world football, with a mix of aggression, poise, calmness and excellent ball-playing ability. Add in endurance, pace in short bursts and a will to put it all on the line and you have a world-class centre-back.

In Kimpembe, Paris Saint-Germain possess a defender with an abundance of talent, a local boy with a true love for 'his club' and one who sees no reason why he should move elsewhere to

play his football. Unless, of course, his game time was to be significantly reduced or if he fell down the pecking order. The signing of Sergio Ramos on a free transfer this summer fuelled speculation as to whether Kimpembe had a long-term future at Paris Saint-Germain. News began to circulate that he may be surplus to requirements and that PSG were looking to unveil a new-look backline of the ex-Real Madrid man and captain Marquinhos.

As reported by French sports daily L'Équipe in July, European champions Chelsea, now managed by ex-PSG coach Thomas Tuchel, were interested in the potential acquisition of the World Cup winner, whose contract runs until 2024. It was reported that Kimpembe was waiting to see how the early stages of the season would pan out for him amid the integration of Ramos into the set-up at PSG. Kimpembe reacted by throwing himself into games, playing his first preseason match at the end of his first week of pre-training back with the squad after Euro 2020.

A near ever-present so far this season, Kimpembe is off and running in what could be a key campaign for the Frenchman. A stark contrast to Ramos, who had to wait until November to make his first PSG appearance due to a long-running calf complaint, Kimpembe has been an imposing figure so far this term and has deputised well as vice-captain. Without being outstanding, the Frenchman has prolonged his form from the summer's European Championships, despite a brief spell out injured in the autumn.

Unlike his central defensive partners Marquinhos and Sergio Ramos, Kimpembe is not one to regularly venture forward and score key goals at big moments despite being more than capable of doing so. Amazingly, Kimpembe has only scored one professional goal for Paris Saint-Germain, which came in the club's 2-0 Champions League win against Manchester United in 2019.

With Ramos' availability still in question, the question of Kimpembe's long-term role will remain at least until coach Mauricio Pochettino has his full quota of centre-backs to choose from. Will Pochettino opt for a three man defence, with Kimpembe occupying the left-sided berth? Perhaps the Argentinian tactician will pair Kimpembe with Ramos, pushing Marquinhos into a defensive midfield role? Or could Ramos take the place of the Paris academy graduate? All eyes will be on PSG to see how this intriguing situation unfolds but, if it should become apparent that Kimpembe is to be used sparingly, there will undoubtedly be no shortage of suitors for the PSG man. However, for now, with the capital's club embarking on what they hope will be a historic season, Kimpembe is likely to be a player Pochettino relies upon, as Paris launch their assault on domestic and European honours. As far as Presnel Kimpembe is concerned, his journey at PSG is far from over.

Lee Davey

79⁻⁴

AGE : 24 POS : CM

BRUNO
GUIMARÃES

Ever since Bruno Guimarães arrived at Lyon for a fee of £18m from Athletico Paranaense as Juninho's first marquee signing as sporting director, he has been a mainstay in midfield. He immediately became a favourite with fans of Les Gones with an impressive performance against Juventus in February 2020, who have been insistent that he is given the platform to succeed.

In the early stages of 2021, the Brazil international will have been slightly frustrated with Rudi Garcia in a run of games where he made few starts - although contracting COVID-19 didn't help him. Despite a lack of European matches for OL, Garcia opted for Guimarães' countryman Thiago Mendes to play the deeper role for his side, taking into account the impressive run of form the former Lille man showed at the end of 2020. The preference for Mendes appeared bizarre to some, due to Guimarães' obvious technical skillset.

He did manage to score 3 goals and 1 assist in the 2020/21 season though. Including a brace against Lorient when he netted a penalty and slotted home with a great finish after a one-two with Slimani and sitting the goalkeeper down.

The summer saw success internationally for OL's number 39, as he captained Brazil at the delayed Olympic Games in Tokyo. His leadership helped inspire the young Brazilian squad all the way to the final before beating Spain after extra time, adding an Olympic Gold Medal to his Copa Sudamericana he won back in his homeland.

The arrival of Peter Bosz has seen the 24-year-old in much higher favour. Guimarães has featured 16 times for Lyon this season and has been an integral part of the side. OL have struggled this season, currently lying in 13th place, but Bruno's performances have been one of the bright spots in what has been a difficult campaign.

With 3 assists so far and acting as the senior man in midfield with Maxence Caqueret acclimatising to regular minutes in a double pivot, Guimarães has shown signs of the early form that made him an immediate hit. His passing range has been a key part of transitions for OL, with most attacks moving through the Brazilian. He has amassed some very impressive stats, which include completing more than 67 passes per 90 with a success rate of 88%, according to FBRef.

Liam Wraith



78

AGE : 28 POS : AM

ADRIEN
THOMASSON

Since joining Racing Strasbourg in 2018 as a free agent after his contract had expired with Nantes, Adrien Thomasson has quickly emerged as a fan favourite among the Meinau faithful. The French-Croatian attacking midfielder has only missed three league games in the last three seasons for Le Racing, and has so far in his Strasbourg career racked up 24 league goals and 12 assists in 112 appearances.

Thomasson joined the youth ranks at the now defunct Évian Thonon Gaillard FC from FC Annecy in 2011, at the age of 17. In his younger years, he had been a talented skier, even going so far as competing in regional ski slalom competitions until the age of 14, when he decided to focus on football.

After Évian's relegation from Ligue 1 at the end of the 2014-15, he joined Nantes for a fee of €800,000. After making 110 appearances, scoring 13 times, Thomasson moved on to Strasbourg on a free transfer.

Thomasson is an immensely versatile player, who mainly plays as a right sided attacking midfielder under Julien Stéphan. He can also play centrally and on the left side, as a deeper box-to-box midfielder, as a support striker and even as a right-back, where he began his career playing. He has a good eye for a killer ball through to his striker(s) - whether that be Ajourque, Gameiro, Diallo or Moïse Sahi - and is a skilled dribbler, with exceptional agility.

He is also very quick off the mark and has been known to score a few acrobatic goals over the course of his career. Rather interestingly for a player who generally plays so far up the pitch, he enjoys the pressing game. Thomasson averages over 27 pressures per game according to FBRef, ranking him in the top 2% in Europe's top five leagues for players in his position.

Although no longer a young talent, Adrien is showing with Strasbourg, particularly this season, that he is still improving. If Strasbourg continue to fight for the European places, as they have done in the first half of the season, their Franco-Croatian maestro will play a key part in that.

James Evans



77

AGE : 36 POS : GK

JEAN-LOUIS
LECA

Although Lens' success and popularity this season have very much been based on their attacking swagger, with the defensive side of the game occasionally appearing an afterthought, their goalkeeper Jean-Louis Leca is quietly proving a formidable and important final rampart for Les Sang-et-Or.

A relatively late developer, Leca began his career at hometown club Bastia as a long-term understudy to Nicolas Penneteau, before strangely following Penneteau to Valenciennes. He soon returned to Bastia, however, in a swap deal with Macedo Novaes. A proud Corsican – he even caused a riot and earned himself a ban after unfurling a Corsican banner following a high-tension match against Nice – Leca again bided his time before becoming the club's number one choice and playing two full seasons as starter as Bastia aimed to continue to punch above their weight in Ligue 1. Perhaps it was because he was playing for such an unfashionable side that his often-excellent performances went unheralded. In 2015-16 he kept 14 clean sheets in 34 appearances and the following season, despite Bastia's relegation, he kept a further 9 clean sheets as he occasionally looked like a one-man salvation mission.

As Bastia dropped to Ligue 2, Leca retained his top-flight place by moving to Corsican rivals AC Ajaccio. Leca amassed a record of 11 clean sheets in 32 matches – all the more impressive coming in another relegation fight. Ajaccio entered the relegation/promotion play-off and Leca's penalty shoot-out save helped the team beat Le Havre, but ACA eventually went down after losing 4-0 on aggregate to Toulouse – although tellingly, when Leca was forced off with injury at half-time in the first leg, the score was still 0-0. The following season, the goalkeeper moved on to Lens and kept 20 clean sheets in 36 matches, although more play-off heartbreak came as he was sent off against Troyes and missed both legs of the defeat to Dijon. 2019/20 finally proved the successful year as 14 clean sheets in 27 helped Lens to promotion, and Leca has remained the club's Ligue 1 first choice for the past 18 months, fending off the rivalry of Venezuela international Wilker Farfán. Unsurprisingly, considering Franck Haise's team's style and the higher level, the number of clean sheets has gone down. However, his experience, his assured command of his area and his excellent reflexes (including a triple save this season against Lille to secure a first derby win in 15 years) make him one of Ligue 1's most underrated players.

Jeremy Smith



76

AGE : 21 POS : LB

MELVIN
BARD

One of the drawbacks of having an established nationwide academy like the one at Lyon is that a lot of talent comes and a lot of talent goes. In the case of Nice left-back Melvin Bard, it came, probably should have lasted but it went very soon after being given it's Ligue 1 berth.

At 21 years old, Bard is starting to gain experience and become a valid member of Nice's backline. He actually made his Ligue 1 debut in December 2019, replacing Rafael da Silva at half-time in a 4-0 win at Nîmes but he didn't play again that season. Not only due to competition but also because of the pandemic which stopped all league football in March 2020 before the season was ended early.

The following season, Bard was linked to several European heavyweights such as Bayern Munich after promising pre-season performances. However, Maxwell Cornet's second career as a left-back or left-wing-back meant that he was a starter in most games and, if not, Mattia De Sciglio would deputize for the now Burnley man. In 2020/21, Bard was restricted to just four Lyon starts and 10 substitute appearances which, given the competition, is not so bad for a then 20-year old.

Then the summer of 2021 came and Lyon sold Bard to Nice for €3m shortly after the left-back extended his contract. Was it Lyon who made a good deal by selling and making money from a youth product that had barely played or did they make a huge mistake in only getting a couple of million for a player that could be worth so much more in the future?

One guy who is definitely enjoying this summer acquisition is the new Nice boss Christophe Galtier who is very happy with his first-choice left-back – something Bard wanted first and foremost was to play as much as possible – detailing how he likes Bard going forward once his side are in possession.

You can tell that heads have spun at Lyon since his departure such have been his performances for Les Aiglons. At the start of the season, new Lyon manager Peter Bosz was quite critical of Bard but, before Nice welcomed Lyon at the Allianz Arena in late October, his words were less harsh. Has Bard made everyone at Lyon realize that they have made a mistake?

Philip Bargiel

16th

ETIENNE GREEN



75

POS : GK
AGE : 21

Nominative determinism is the notion that people are more likely to pursue certain areas of work that have some connection to their name. Few embody that idea more than Etienne Green. Born in Colchester to an English father and a French mother, the 21-year-old has become France's leading goalkeeping talent after bursting into the first team at Les Verts (the Greens) of Saint-Étienne earlier this year. Although seemingly made for Saint-Étienne, having declared for England, Green could become the Three Lions' next great goalkeeper.

At the start of last season, Green wasn't even one of three goalkeepers included in Claude Puel's senior squad. However Green has since asserted himself as Les Verts' number one and a leading Ligue 1 young talent. Green marked his debut in April 2021 with a clean sheet, a string of smart stops and a penalty save. Upon returning to the dressing room the keeper was met by a wall of noise as teammates celebrated his save from Renaud Ripart's spot kick, a moment Green said he'd remember "for the rest of my life." He only got his chance at all due to Stéphane Ruffier's acrimonious departure, first choice Jessy Moulin's COVID-19 diagnosis and his understudy Stefan Bajić suffering with injury, "a coincidence of circumstances, I'm fortunate" recalls Green. Nevertheless, he emphatically seized his opportunity via standout displays against Brest, Lille and Marseille as Puel's changes eventually finishing eleventh.

This term, Green's reflexes have remained similarly cat-like while his performances have become increasingly assured. A first half battle with Lyon's Houssem Aouar in the Rhône-Alpes derby before the October international break was a high point. The keeper made three saves from the Frenchman, two of which were world class. Twelve saves across consecutive August draws with Lille and Lens, including a pair of one-on-one stops from Burak Yilmaz and Jonathan David, helped ASSE to some valuable points too. Speaking in a quiet southern English accent with a subtle Essex twang, there's an ineffable quality to the unassuming Green's displays. Although he lacks the physicality of some of his peers and barely fills his 6'4 frame – former ASSE youth coach Mickaël Dumas says "he's always had a slender profile... he filled out later than others" – the Englishman has a knack of producing match-winning flying stops at crucial moments, drawing parallels with a young Iker Casillas. Meanwhile, as evidenced by his withdrawal with concussion after a collision against Strasbourg at the weekend, despite a reserved manner, Green is fearless in attempting to command his area and not scared to take a beating in defending his goal.

Former Saint-Étienne captain Mathieu Debuchy described Green to L'Équipe as "a good guy, respectful, discreet, attentive, incredibly calm, and hard working". Dumas meanwhile explained that "his greatest quality is his mastery of his emotions, his technique, his relationship with the ball, and his decision making. Whether he plays or not, he always trains well

and rarely gets injured". Enthused ASSE defender Timothée Kolodziejczak adds that Green, despite an understated, even shy, persona, "gives a lot of serenity to our defence." As a young and inexperienced player, mistakes have been made too. Green is, to his credit, one of Ligue 1's more proactive goalkeepers but that willingness to take responsibility has led to avoidable errors. A rash lunge at Kylian Mbappé's feet to concede a late penalty as Puel's side lost 3-2 in Paris last season and a similarly ill-advised dart from his line to fell Monaco's Myron Boadu, which resulted in his dismissal last month, are notable examples. Although Green actually won the ball, and will still be flabbergasted VAR didn't rescue him, the penalty he saved on debut was awarded after Green himself brought down Nîmes' Karim Aribi.

"He must improve his communication, especially with his defenders, and impose himself in match situations" Debuchy concedes. Puel affirmed that "he needed to assert his character and his personality. He's intelligent and calm, but was rather introverted." Nevertheless, that overriding quality and maturity despite so few senior outings has attracted reported interest from Premier League sides in Tottenham and West Ham. But Green's connection to Saint-Étienne remains strong. Being from the area, his mother named him after the city and the now 21-year-old has been associated with the club since the age of nine, even acting as a ball boy in the past.

Green also lists former ASSE keeper captain Ruffier as an idol. "He was a great leader of the team and someone I admired," Green told the Ligue 1 Show. "When I was about 17, I had the luck to come and train with him several times and I was like: "Wow". I thought he was amazing, so I tried to replicate his game a bit. His saves on the line were amazing and so were his reflexes." Despite leaving Colchester at just four, Green announced he'd made "a painful choice, if not an impossible one" to declare for England instead of France this summer. Green wrote on Instagram that "it's like asking someone to choose between their parents... It's not a rational or opportunistic choice, [they're] two great countries and two great teams that have always made me dream."

Having previously been called up by France's under 21s, Green made his England under 21 debut against Andorra earlier this month. He will be eased in, with Jordan Pickford routinely impressing in an England shirt ahead of a solid crop of younger English keepers. However, in truth, Green should already be pushing for a spot in Gareth Southgate's senior squad and has the potential to become England's next number one. Although the Saint-Étienne keeper will be heading many scouting reports across the continent, consistent game time should be his aim for now. For the wider footballing community, however, despite a low-profile, remembering his name won't be too difficult.

Adam White



KAMALDEEN SULEMANA



74

POS : WF
AGE : 19

Rennes' summer transfer window showed intent. With the full backing of the club's hierarchy for the project that former Lyon partnership of director of football Florian Maurice and coach Bruno Genesio are trying to build, more than £70m was spent by Les Rouges et Noirs on top talents including Lovro Majer, Gaëtan Laborde and Loïc Badé. But the transfer that caught the eye of many was the £13.5m spent on Ghanaian teenage winger Kamaldeen Sulemana from Danish club Nordsjaelland.

As a relatively unknown quantity, questions arose when Rennes broke the Danish Superliga transfer record to secure the teenager's services. However, during his time in Denmark, Sulemana showed he could turn out to be an astute investment for the Breton based club. His impressive end to the 2020/21 season was one of many reasons why Ajax and Manchester United were also linked with the player before he made the switch to northern France.

Ahead of the Danish top-flight being broken into two halves for the final part of the season, Sulemana's early form in the regular league season last year will have left fans of Nordsjaelland wanting more. The Ghanaian only managed two goals in the main league stage of the season in 2021 before the championship group broke off in April. Knowing his ability to score and create, this will have been disappointing for all parties, especially with some of Europe's biggest clubs linked with acquiring the player's services. Despite this slight dip in form in the early stages of 2021, he thrived when it came to the business end of the campaign. In the Championship stage of the Superliga, Sulemana featured nine times for the former Danish champions and it's safe to say that he was the star in those matches.

The 19-year-old netted six times and assisted twice in a stellar run of form for a Nordsjaelland team which eventually failed to qualify for European competition. Scoring five times in five games, including a brace in a 4-3 win against Randers, at the start of the championship round saw Sulemana named the Superliga's player of the month for April. After such a run, fans of the 2012 title winners will have known Sulemana's time at the club was coming to an end. Since he arrived in Normandy, Rennes have benefited from typical sparks of brilliance as he continued his run of form at the end of the 2020/21 season. Although the step-up in level to Ligue 1 has undoubtedly meant that the Ghanaian has had to acclimate to a higher intensity of play and a more physical style, this hasn't stopped him from producing.

Sulemana's game has a specialist skill - dribbling. Ligue 1 fans have been treated to many a thrilling moment since his arrival with the Ghanaian international often taking off on foraying runs or tormented opposition defenders with his skill. Confidence is often linked to players who attempt lots of

dribbles, but Sulemana has the execution and efficiency to back up that belief in his ability. As of mid-December, the versatile forward has averaged over four dribbles per 90 minutes (4.41 at the time of writing) since he arrived in Ligue 1 which is only beaten by PSG's world record signing Neymar. This effortless ability to carry the ball forwards, embarrass defenders and start attacks makes him one of Europe's outstanding dribblers - ranking in the top one percent for dribbles completed and players beaten per 90 minutes.

Prolificity in front of goal is another part of the Ghanaian's game which has flourished in his first six months for Les Rouges et Noirs. Sulemana has managed five goals in 25 appearances in all competitions so far, which may not seem like such a high total but when you look into the number of shots he's taking and how he's scoring these goals, it's a good return. Sulemana is averaging one goal per 246 minutes of Ligue 1 action, a figure not unsatisfactory for a player operating wide left or wide right of a stand-alone striker. A goal every three games is impeccable for most players, never mind someone who's just 19 and making his debut season in one of Europe's top five leagues and in European competition too.

The frequency at which he's scored during his first six months of Ligue 1 action is impressive, but his efficiency in front of goal is even more so. An efficient finishing ability is rare but Sulemana seems to have it in abundance. In Ligue 1, Sulemana has had six shots on target in his first 16 appearances which resulted in four goals - a success rate of 67%. He's also massively outperforming his xG which stood at 2.1 after 16 matches. The manner in which he's scored his goals is impressive as well. On his debut against Lens, he cut inside after beating his man and curled a superb strike home off the post, announcing himself to Ligue 1 with a bang. However, a goal against Metz typified Sulemana's style. After bringing the ball down with an excellent first touch, he teased helpless Metz defender Matthew Udol and beat him with ease, before unleashing a beautiful strike that sailed in off the crossbar.

The selfless side to Sulemana's game is something that often goes unnoticed. From a creative perspective, he's often involved in linkup play and transitions, which isn't surprising considering the dangerous positions he occupies thanks to some excellent dribbling and positioning. An assist came in a standout performance against PSG which ended Mauricio Pochettino's side's unbeaten run at the start of the season. In addition, from a defensive perspective, he also presses effectively and often wins the ball back in front of the defence, which leads to enticing counter-attack opportunities.

2021 is the year that Kamaldeen Sulemana announced himself to football fans globally for both Rennes and Nordsjaelland and, at just 19, he's destined for big things in 2022 and beyond.

Liam Wraith



73

AGE : 22 POS : ST

TEREM
MOFFI

Terem Moffi's transfer from KV Kortrijk to Lorient marked a major outlay for Les Merlus, with £7.2m spent to secure his signature. In the early stages of the move, the transfer looked to be a failure, with just 2 goals in his opening 11 appearances before the turn of the year. However, in January, the Nigerian international really found his stride.

As Lorient looked destined for a relegation scrap going into 2021, it was evident a prolific goalscorer was going to be key to any hopes of survival. Moffi was the man to step into that mould.

The 22-year-old ended 2020 with a strike against Nice and he carried that form into January with a vengeance. Featuring 4 times in January, he netted the same amount of times, including two goals in vital 3-2 victories against fellow relegation strugglers Dijon and title-challenging PSG. His strike against Paris came in dramatic fashion, with a winner in stoppage time.

Whilst he found his goalscoring touch, which proved Lorient made the right decision to break the bank for his services, his overall interplay was vital for their safety too. As the pinnacle of the forward line, he became responsible for attacking transitions as part of his partnership with now-Brentford forward Yoane Wissa. Creativity is a big part of his game, and his three assists in the 2020/21 season show that.

After his hot spell in January, he went onto score 13 goals in all competitions across 22 appearances in the second half of the 2020/21 season. As with his winner against Paris, many of these goals came in important moments, and in most cases were decisive in matches. This included a hat trick in a 4-1 win over Bordeaux, and a brace in a 2-2 draw against Monaco. He was truly the inspiration of Lorient's survival success.

In 2021/21, Moffi's goalscoring touch has slightly faded but he has still been an important cog in Lorient's team. With 5 goal contributions in 16 appearances, the Nigerian has had a hand in 36% of the goals Christophe Pélissier's men have scored.

Maybe 2022 could be the inspiration for Moffi to rediscover his goal scoring touch.

Liam Wraith

72⁻⁹

AGE : 32 POS : CM

ANDER
HERRERA

One of the few positives from the Mauricio Pochettino era at Paris Saint-Germain has been the upturn in goalscoring form from the former Athletic Club and Manchester United midfielder Ander Herrera, who, for a brief period of time, was popping up with a few goals towards the latter end of 2021 to helped PSG out.

Herrera, predominately a deeper midfielder who tends to either break up play or keep the ball moving, occasionally found himself moving into more advanced positions in the early games of the 2021/2022 Ligue 1 campaign.

Through this he was perhaps occupying the role that was intended for Georginio Wijnaldum, but the Spaniard was slightly more effective early on. Against Brest, Herrera opened the scoring by following in on an Mbappé shot that fell his way in the box whilst covering the left side of the midfield well.

He performed similarly against Clermont, scoring only the second brace of his entire career. Again, when PSG's stars were faltering in the Champions League away at Brugge, Herrera found himself open at the edge of the box to score their only goal of a disappointing 1-1 draw.

Whilst the 32-year-old may not be the flashiest player at the club, or even the flashiest midfielder in the squad, there are occasions where his importance shines through.

He may not be Marco Verratti - who is? - yet he can prove to be an adaptable player when needed. The Spaniard has made a large number of appearances for PSG this season.

While many acknowledge the midfield is an area PSG need to improve on, Herrera's reliability and adaptability in his role - and various others - means that whoever manages PSG in 2022 will have an experienced, reliable and more than capable midfielder in their ranks - something every top club in Europe needs in order to succeed.

Tom Scholes



71

AGE : 22 POS : GK

ALBAN
LAFONT

Despite being part of an out-of-sorts Nantes side last season, Alban Lafont remained a stalwart in the west of France. Managers have come and gone since he was loaned to Les Canaris by Fiorentina in 2019, before being finally brought outright last year, but Lafont has remained between the sticks and suffered through horrible defensive displays without giving up and is now reaping dividends of new-found confidence in the FCN backline thanks to Antoine Kombouaré's methods (or is it lack of methods of his predecessors?).

At 22-years-old, Lafont already has 200 Ligue 1 games under his belt and encountered disappointment abroad which helped forge his character. He was never really able to adapt to life in Florence, playing for Fiorentina, and it's possible that this experience helped him during Nantes' rocky season.

The club finished 18th and only avoided the drop courtesy of a play-off win against Toulouse, Lafont's old club. It's clear that work has been done in terms of building up confidence by Kombouaré, especially with the 10 outfield players and not just with Lafont. On his line, his ability has never actually been questioned and reports linking him to a big move are starting to resurface, be it domestically or abroad.

Staying in France, rumours keep sending Lafont to Marseille, the player had previously been linked as an eventual successor for Steve Mandanda back in late 2019 as a "Numéro 1 bis" - a French expression meaning you're the understudy but good enough for the number one jersey.

With current OM first choice keeper Pau Lopez only on loan from Roma, maybe this summer is the opportunity for Lafont to get that big move to the South Coast. The reported €10m fee is certainly something Nantes chairman Waldemar Kita is interested in.

Abroad, rumours take Lafont mainly to England with Everton, Leicester City and Wolverhampton Wanderers all keeping tabs on the former Toulouse man. Will he be open to another adventure outside of France?

Philip Bargiel



70

AGE : 33 POS : CB

JÉRÔME
BOATENG

Jérôme Boateng is used to winning. The German's tally includes an enormous 27 major trophies. But the nine-time Bundesliga winner currently sits in 13th place in Ligue 1 with Lyon. What was sold to Boateng at the end of the summer was a chase for the Champions League qualification that Les Gones had just missed out on the preceding May. So, to be engaged in a midtable battle with last year's relegation play-off winners, Nantes, will certainly have been unexpected.

Going into this season, Lyon had every right to be hopeful. Hefty sales of Maxwell Cornet for €15m to Burnley and Joachim Anderson to Crystal Palace for €17.5m, as well as the end of Memphis Depay's contract, cleared the way for the arrival of three vastly experienced players, Emerson Palmieri, Xherdan Shaqiri and Boateng, who share four Champions League trophies between them. However, while the arrivals from Chelsea and Liverpool were intended to fill positions vacated by outgoing transfers, Boateng's deadline day signature seemed to materialise from nowhere, just weeks after OL's starting centre-back, Marcelo, was suspended from the first team after poor behaviour following a 3-0 loss at Angers.

If Boateng had been so crucial to Bayern's ninth consecutive Bundesliga winning side, playing 76% of all available league minutes, he has been equally important in Lyon since his arrival, featuring 78% of the time. Given his magnificent depth of experience and the role that was vacated for him to fill, this is hardly a surprise. But what is shocking is OL's defensive form this season. Even with the 2014 World Cup winner's experience, Lyon conceded 25 goals in the first 16 games of the season, the most since 1983 when they were relegated, and kept only three clean sheets. So, it appears that, while Boateng and left-back Emerson have been quickly introduced to the Lyon squad, the back four are not yet performing at the level expected.

While it's probably now too late for Jérôme Boateng to maintain his nine-year trophy-winning streak, outside of the Europa League perhaps, it's not too late for Lyon to revitalise their efforts to chase the podium and that all-important Champions League spot. Should they win their game in hand against Marseille, five points would be all that remains between them and third-placed Rennes. But in order to do that, Boateng's defence will need to tighten up without delay.

Jack Wadding



ARNAUD
KALIMUENDO



69

POS : ST AGE : 19

For a club with such a clear transfer policy - superstar names on big wages - Paris Saint-Germain's academy is severely underrated in world football. Moussa Diaby, Christopher Nkunku, Odsonne Edouard, Boubakary Soumare, Dan-Axel Zagadou, Alphonse Areola, Presnel Kimpembe, Moussa Dembele, and Kingsley Coman are all recent success stories. Looking further back, both Nicholas Anelka and Patrice Evra also spent time in the PSG academy, so it's certainly a production line that works.

However, the biggest problem has been effectively promoting these youngsters into the first team. Of the most recent graduates, only Kimpembe is still at the club, and the France international is the exception to the norm that suggests academy products won't get a real chance. That fact is why the others have left in search of football elsewhere - many of them are now household names in footballing terms.

The latest PSG youngster to seek a brighter career away from the Parc des Princes is 19-year-old striker Arnaud Kalimuendo. Kalimuendo is still contracted to Paris but he's currently, for the second consecutive campaign, on loan at Lens. Of course, a return to PSG could be on the cards, especially given Kylian Mbappé's contract situation, Mauro Icardi's lack of game time and form and Kalimuendo's output since joining Lens, but it seems unlikely, despite his talent.

An out-and-out forward, Kalimuendo can just about do it all. Standing at 5'10, he's not the biggest physical presence through the middle but he's more than capable of holding his own against Ligue 1's most domineering centre-backs. A technical striker who isn't limited to the space inside the 18-yard box, Kalimuendo has the ability and freedom to roam a little, but he still possesses the goal-scoring instincts to be in the right place at the right time.

With neat feet and a burst of acceleration that would trouble any defender, Kalimuendo is a unique brand of number nine. According to FBRef.com, as of mid-December, his 5.29 progressive carries per 90 minutes over the past year ranked in the 86th percentile across Europe's top five leagues, proving that the Frenchman tends to drop deep before driving forward with the ball.

He pairs that with over 16 pressures per 90, which is the same number as Mbappé and Lionel Messi combined. But, it's Kalimuendo's intelligent movement that stands out. His incisive runs in behind create a multitude of one-on-one opportunities, often finding himself in space inside the penalty area. That's doesn't happen by chance, it's by design - the sign of an elite goal-scorer. For now, the teenage Kalimuendo is far from an elite striker but the form he's displayed in 2021 points towards

a promising future.

After scoring in the final game of 2020, Kalimuendo went on a slight goal drought to begin the year until scoring and assisting in a 4-2 win over Nantes in mid-February. He struck a further three times and grabbed two assists to round off an impressive breakthrough campaign. Strikingly, Kalimuendo scored roughly every 173 minutes last season, a better rate than Monaco's Kevin Volland, who averaged a goal every 176 minutes, although Kalimuendo's sample size was far smaller. With a low centre of gravity, and an appreciation of what's around him, Kalimuendo isn't a selfish striker but he knows how to get in the right areas. Always lively, he's rarely someone who can be marked out of a game, and even when he doesn't score, he always seems to be an important aspect of Lens' game plan.

In 2021/22, the Frenchman has stepped it up a notch. After a disappointing start to the campaign in terms of goals, he scored his first two of the season in a 2-0 win over Reims at the start of October. The first was a confidently dispatched penalty but the second was a classic Kalimuendo goal. On the counter-attack, he made a slight movement to the right, before darting left and opening his body up to receive the pass. One exquisite first touch later, and he was through on goal. After one more touch to set himself, he coolly slid the ball past Predrag Rajković to seal the points for Lens.

With the close control to match any of Ligue 1's forwards, Kalimuendo is devastating on the break and his clinical finishing, as well as two-footedness, is underlined by his xG overperformance. According to Understat, he should've netted 3.32 before the final Ligue 1 round of 2021 but he'd scored five.

A fully-fledged France under 21 international, a senior call-up may be a stretch right now but his form for the youth side will be doing his chances no harm. During the November internationals, he scored twice and assisted once as France ran out 7-0 winners over Armenia. His first goal was a lovely placed finish into the far corner with effortless precision after cutting inside from the left flank, while the second demonstrated his goal-scoring instincts, being the first to react to Sofiane Diop's deflected shot before tucking away nicely.

Kalimuendo is a modern forward, his incisive speed, decision-making, intelligence, and technical ability are all of the highest level. 2021 has put him in the shop window and PSG will be lucky to keep hold of him come next summer if they can't offer him a permanent place in their first team. The 19-year-old is good enough to play European football and, with Lens pushing for a Europa League spot this season, he could well fire Franck Haise's side to a top-six spot, despite the club only being promoted from Ligue 2 in 2020. His ceiling is sky high and, in 2022, Arnaud Kalimuendo will only get better.

Cameron Smith



SOFIANE

BOUFFAL



68

POS : AM
AGE : 28

Say the name Sofiane Boufal and one thing comes to mind - his solo goal for Southampton against West Brom. Picking the ball up inside his own half at St. Mary's back in October 2017, the winger danced by Allan Nyom, Grzegorz Krychowiak, Jake Livermore, Craig Dawson, and Gareth McAuley, before placing a delicious shot past Ben Foster and into the bottom corner. It was a moment of pure magic and was justly named Premier League goal of the season. However, that strike was one of just two goals that Boufal netted that campaign, which tells the story of his Saints career.

Boufal arrived on English shores for a club-record £16m off the back of an impressive spell at Lille. He'd scored 11 and assisted four in his final league season in France and big things were expected. Coming with a reputation as a mazy dribbler with immense close control, a turn of pace and a low centre of gravity, Boufal demonstrated all these things at Southampton.

The one thing he didn't show was the end product needed to compete in the Premier League. In 50 league appearances, 23 of which were starts, Boufal scored a measly three goals and added just two assists.

Now back at Angers, having been part of their academy before moving to Lille, Boufal has rediscovered his form and is finally delivering on the promise he previously displayed in Ligue 1. Now 28, Boufal is arguably the king of flair and flamboyance in France, and his technical ability has been firmly on show this calendar year. Underlining his vast improvement in the final third, he's already netted five and assisted four in 18 Ligue 1 games so far this campaign.

His 2021 didn't start in spectacular fashion, however. Injury troubles and a lack of consistency cursed the Moroccan once more and he failed to contribute a goal or an assist in the second half of the 2020/21 season.

He was still his enigmatic self with his quick feet and intelligence on the ball ensuring he couldn't be marked but poor end product remained. But, since the start of this current campaign, things have changed dramatically. Boufal has added goals to his ability with the ball at his feet but his underlying numbers haven't dipped. The one difference is his position on the pitch.

While he's always been a left-winger, cutting inside to wreak havoc, this season he has been deployed through the middle in a strike partnership, mostly with youngster Mohamed Ali-Cho, as part of Angers' 3-5-2 system under new coach Gérald Baticle.

For someone with such low goal-scoring numbers, it seemed a bizarre move but it's become a stroke of genius by Baticle. Boufal is still completing 3.4 dribbles per 90 minutes but his shot count has increased from 1.6 per 90 last term to 2.2 this time around.

Boufal still tends to drift out to the left flank but the freedom he has to roam is getting the best out of him with the Moroccan popping up on the right at times while also dropping deep to pick up the ball when needed. 2021 has proven that he is still as good as his talent previously suggested.

In a 2-1 defeat to PSG earlier this campaign, Boufal delivered the inch-perfect cross for Angelo Fulgini's opener and, while it couldn't prevent an unfortunate loss, it demonstrated the advancements in his game. The Boufal of before wouldn't have come up with such an assist and, although he does still play with his head down on occasions, he's become far more spatially aware of his surroundings this year.

The one criticism of Boufal has always been his inability to produce meaningful contributions in the final third, but he's managed to rectify that this season. Against Reims at the start of December, Boufal scored and assisted in the same game for the first time since April 2019, when he did so on loan at Celta Vigo against Girona, to mark his vastly improved attacking exploits. The goal in that game did come from the penalty spot, which was expertly placed, but it was awarded after his shot which was handled inside the box, and the assist came via a perfectly-weighted ball into the path of Fulgini.

Boufal has made his name as a tricky winger with dancing and deceiving feet but, in 2021, he's added so much more to his game. His intelligence on the pitch has improved, and he now makes the right decision more often than not. At last, Boufal has stepped up to become a player who can be relied upon and contribute regularly.

Angers have been one of the most exciting teams to watch in Ligue 1 this season with their dynamically fluid football catching the eye and Boufal has been a key catalyst. He's not lost his graceful dribbling style but he's blossomed into one of Ligue 1's best forwards and, if he keeps it up, Angers will stay well clear of relegation again. His relationship with fellow creator Fulgini is one of particular note and it's a credit to Baticle that Boufal has evolved into this new 2021 version of himself.

Now 28, it may be finally time for Boufal to fulfil his potential in 2022.

Cameron Smith



67

AGE : 27 POS : ST

ARKADIUSZ MILIK

Since starting out in 2010, 27-year-old Arkadiusz Milik has seen a career of ups and downs. From injuries to fierce competition, the Pole has had to deal with different obstacles that interfered with his progression. After several months without playing time due to a contract extension feud with Napoli, Milik joined Olympique de Marseille on loan with an option to buy during the 2021 January transfer window. His task was to become the prolific forward OM had desperately been looking for, as Dario Benedetto's performances failed to convince.

His time in the South of France started perfectly with 9 goals in 15 games, including a hat-trick against Angers that would guarantee OM European competition the following season. Had Marseille finally found their long-awaited "Grand Attaquant" ("great striker")? Even if six little months are too short to tell, it was enough for the forward to show his large panel of qualities - finishing, timing, placement, ability on set-pieces and in the air - and comfortably settle in at the forefront of OM's attack.

Overall, Milik's first six months were a success, only dampened by his fragility that led him out of the squad for four games. Throughout his career, the Pole's body has been his biggest enemy and his arrival in Marseille was no different. His most recent injury occurred while on international duty right after OM's last game of the season.

It left him on the sidelines for 128 days, prevented him from representing his country in the Euros and made him miss the first eight Ligue 1 games of the season. A blow that broke his scoring dynamic he started during his first six months in Marseille.

Milik made his long-awaited comeback against Lille but has since struggled to find the back of the net, with just 1 goal in 9 Ligue 1 games since October 3. Even if the Pole scored 4 goals in 3 Europa League games, his influence on the team has been far from convincing and the emergence of Bamba Dieng has made these difficulties even more obvious.

Now the question remains : can Milik find confidence and efficiency again to support a Payet-dependent OM in the Conference League and in Ligue 1? Only time will tell.

Adrien Dryll



66

AGE : 27 POS : LB

REINILDO MANDAVA

It's taken 27 years for Reinildo Mandava to get his hands on major silverware, and 2021 felt like a reward long in the making for Lille's ever-reliable left-back. Not only did he become a Ligue 1 winner but also earned a spot in the UNFP's team of the year; that's not bad for someone signed for just €3m.

As Lille stormed to the title from the new year onwards, Reinildo didn't miss a single game and in the 21/22 season, Reinildo has started 21 of a possible 26 matches so far. Lille are unbeaten in the Champions League when the former Benfica defender starts. His year could have gone worse, though.

Had Christophe Galtier decided to persevere with Domagoj Bradarić's inexperience in the first team, Reinildo may have found his game time cut. Instead, it was the promising 21-year-old Croatian left-back who was limited to 199 league minutes from January through to May.

Despite not even registering a goal or an assist for Lille in over 80 appearances for the club, Reinildo provided value over his understudy throughout the year.

Always busy and energetic, Reinildo produced solid defensive displays against PSG and in the second half against Lyon in Lille's famous 3-2 comeback win in April. At 5'11 and switched on to every move, Reinildo can seem like a brick wall at times to opposition players.

Across the 20/21 season, Reinildo won 60% of his tackles, the second-highest score in the Lille squad according to FBRef. He made the most tackles and interceptions per 90 minutes in the squad too. His recent efforts in the Champions league have seen Reinildo top the group stage charts for dribblers tackled, finish fifth for blocks and first for tackle success rate.

With numbers like those and considering his performances produced against the best in France, Reinildo deserves more plaudits.

He's helped Lille to their first title in a decade, their first Champions League knockout stage qualification in their history and he's done it as the only Mozambique international to be playing in a top-five league.

Alex Barker



65

AGE : 27 POS : CB

ALEXANDER
DJIKU

Over the course of the last year or so, Alexander Djiku has emerged as one of Strasbourg's star players and one of the stand-out defenders in Ligue 1. The French-born Ghanaian centre-back broke Le Racing's transfer record when he joined from Caen in the summer of 2019 for a reported €4.5m and, so far, he's proved that he was well worth that price.

Djiku spent his youth career at Corsican club SC Bastia, where he played as a central defender, but, being versatile and quick, he often operated as a full-back too.

The Ghanaian international made his Ligue 1 debut with them aged 20 in 2014 but, with Bastia facing relegation amid financial troubles at the end of the 2016/17 season, he joined SM Caen for a fee of €2m. After two seasons with Caen, though he was linked with Marseille, Lyon and Sevilla, it was Strasbourg who secured his services in the summer of 2019.

Djiku is a complete defender. Despite not being the tallest of centre-backs at 182cm, he's good in the air and is a no-nonsense tackler while he also reads the game well and is always alert to danger. He's good on the ball too, an important skill for any modern centre-back.

According to his former coach at Caen, Patrice Garande, he also displays immense leadership qualities while his 3.51 interceptions per 90 minutes as of December ranks him in the top 1% of centre-backs in Europe's top five leagues this year.

The 27-year-old defender's good form with Strasbourg earned him a call-up to the Ghanaian Black Stars in October 2020, and he's since made 11 international appearances. Should he be called up to the African Cup of Nations squad in February, he will definitely be one to watch in an exciting Ghanaian team that also contains Rennes' exciting young winger Kamaldeen Sulemana.

The Strasbourg vice-captain will be a key player in the side's season heading into 2022. It would not be at all surprising if, at some point in the future, larger clubs start taking an interest in him, especially if Ghana manage to go far in Cameroon this winter.

James Evans



64

AGE : 34 POS : GK

BENOÎT
COSTIL

France's perennial reserve option Benoît Costil was the reason Les Girondins' abysmal form at the back end of last season did not feature more thumping defeats. The former Rennes man's cool-headedness and commanding presence has been key in masking some of the flaws of a disoriented and disaster-prone Bordeaux defence.

Playing behind what is statistically one of the worst defences in the league has meant that the 34-year-old is called into action more often than many of his fellow goalkeepers. Nevertheless, he has often stepped up to the task and come up with impressive reflex saves and decisive interventions.

The Frenchman very clearly stands out as one of the few leaders in the team, all the while keeping his head down and working hard when the club's situation both on and off the pitch could have just as easily warranted a push for a move away.

To his credit, the Normandy native made little fuss last year when his captaincy was handed over to Laurent Koscielny and has generally looked to keep a low profile despite many at the club looking to replace him in past seasons. His initial arrival at the club in 2017 was met with animosity from sections of the Bordeaux fanbase, having replaced fan favourite and long-time number one Cédric Carrasso, but with time Costil has come to be one of the more popular members of the squad.

Having been the undisputed first-choice goalkeeper since his arrival, his stature and authority in the squad, beyond his shot-stopping skills, will once again make him a key asset in Bordeaux's fight to avoid relegation this season.

Costil nevertheless emerges from 2021 with an international title to his name, having been included in Les Bleus' squad for the Nations League finals. Didier Deschamps had explained that he picked the former Caen man as a result of his club form, but also recognised that the goalkeeper was a regular in his France squads.

With just the one cap to his name - a friendly against Ivory Coast in 2016 - Costil will nevertheless fancy his chances at making the squad for next year's World Cup, especially if he plays a hand in a Bordeaux revival.

Raphaël Jacobin



63

AGE : 27 POS : RB

FRÉDÉRIC
GUILBERT

On-loan Aston Villa right-back Frédéric Guilbert has proven to be a solid addition to Strasbourg's roster since joining in January 2021. Guilbert's energy down the right flank and defensive capabilities have been vital for the side from Alsace after it seemed as though they would be in trouble having lost Kenny Lala to Olympiakos in the same transfer window.

Guilbert started his career at Caen, however. After the expiry of his youth contract, he was released by the Malherbe club and picked up by third-tier side AS Cherbourg before moving to Bordeaux a year later after an outstanding debut season in senior football. He made 46 appearances for Les Girondins before moving on loan to his former club Caen for the 16/17 season.

At the end of the loan, Caen decided to make the move permanent, picking him up for €1.5m before Guilbert joined Aston Villa in January 2019 for €5m but he was loaned back to Les Vikings for the remainder of the season. In his first season with Villa, he was the first choice right-back but after the arrival of Matty Cash from Nottingham Forest, he struggled to find his way back into the team and was subsequently loaned to Le Racing in January 2021.

Guilbert is a pacy right-back, who is just as adept going forward as he is in defence. Last season under Thierry Laurey, he was deployed as a traditional right full-back in a 4-3-1-2, whereas, under new coach Julien Stéphan, he's been playing a little further forward as more of a wing-back in Stéphan's 3-5-2 system.

Since joining Strasbourg, Guilbert has contributed seven assists in 29 games and ranks in the top 10% of full-backs in Europe's top five leagues for interceptions, pressures, tackles, dribbles completed and assists per 90 minutes.

Although his future may be in doubt at Aston Villa, he is most definitely a talented wing-back or full-back and would be a solid addition to most Ligue 1 sides should he leave the Villains next summer. If he continues to impress at La Meinau into 2022, Strasbourg will certainly be keen to make the deal a permanent one but they won't be the only club interested.

James Evans



62

AGE : 27 POS : WB

JIMMY
CABOT

In September 2020, a little winger joined Angers SCO on a free transfer. It was a switch that didn't make much fuss and went almost unnoticed but, in truth, Jimmy Cabot probably didn't mind, as he isn't the kind of guy to put himself forward and seek attention.

In the Maine-et-Loire city, under the previous coach Stéphane Moulin, however, Cabot struggled to find a regular spot in the Angers starting eleven. Things worsened in February 2021 when he was left out the side for eight games after a ligament injury.

But one event turned things around for Cabot in 2021. In March, the longest-serving Ligue 1 manager at the time and club legend Stéphane Moulin announced his departure from Angers after a decade in charge. From then on, Jimmy Cabot's status changed drastically as novice new head coach Gérald Baticle took over and reorganized the team's system, giving up on Moulin's traditional 4-2-3-1 and going for a more exciting back-three set-up.

In this new configuration, Jimmy Cabot was positioned on the right as a wing-back, in a role that fitted him perfectly and highlighted his numerous qualities such as pace, skill, stamina and explosivity. On his flank, Cabot became one of the coach's favourites, playing almost every single minute in the league; 1,514 out of a possible 1,530 across Angers' first 17 Ligue 1 games this season.

This new position led Cabot to become one of the best individual performers in the league, boasting the highest number of progressive carries per game (7.62) while becoming the best assister in his team with six to date and, most impressively, the best tackler in the league.

Describing Cabot's influence on the pitch should not be limited to personal stats. His progression also benefitted the whole squad. For example, in many games he's been the main attacking threat and the one pushing play forward quickly as well as directing the attacks. His form has been so impressive that a feeling of dependence has emerged.

Overall, Cabot's transformation from a standard winger or attacking midfielder to a quality wing-back is due to Gérald Baticle's work with the player and has helped Angers remain in the top half of the league table before the winter break.

Adrien Dryll



61

AGE : 21 POS : DM

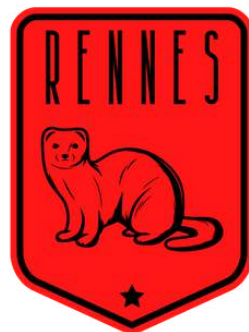
CHEICK
DOUCOURÉ

Much is made of the surfeit of young attacking talent that dots Ligue 1 at present. Kylian Mbappé, despite having just turned 23, looks to be the old man in a league that boasts the likes of teenagers Mohamed Ali-Cho, Hugo Ekitiké, Arnaud Kalimuendo and more. Young defenders have been impressing as well this season, with William Saliba and Castello Lukeba looking comfortable at their respective Olympiques. In midfield, AS Monaco's Aurélien Tchouameni has carried the banner alongside his club teammate Youssef Fofana, but one player has been largely overlooked in the centre of the pitch this season.

Lens' young Malian midfielder Cheick Doucouré has indeed often been in the shadows when it comes to football. Among other young players in the league, the aforementioned cadre will surely elicit more excitement and, even at his club, Séko Fofana's insistent brilliance and the blood-and-thunder of Yannick Cahuzac are given to make far more of an impression on the casual observer than would the lanky 21-year-old. Coming from the same Bamako academy that produced Salif Keita and Brighton's Yves Bissouma, Doucouré came to Lens in 2018, quickly becoming a regular in the first team, having been spotted by Éric Roy at the under 17 World Cup.

A player who manager Franck Haise knew well from his time working with the reserves, Doucouré has been one of the coach's most trusted players. A slight, unassuming presence on the pitch, he gets through a massive amount of work for Les Sang et Or. His willingness to get stuck into breaking up play allows the likes of Fofana and the team's flying wingbacks a much longer leash, and it also allows Haise to add slight tactical wrinkles when needed, either by design or by injury.

Indeed, while Lens have cooled, albeit slightly, as the new year approached, they were no less effective with or without Gaël Kakuta, who had been the lynchpin of the team's attacking play last season, ably switching among a 3-4-1-2, a 3-4-3 or even a 3-5-2 with Fofana getting forward and Doucouré playing a more box-to-box role. Always a reliable defensive presence, he has this season begun to evince more attacking qualities, and with Patrick Berg arriving from Bodo/Glimt, there looks to be ample opportunity for Doucouré to add to his three assists, underscoring that, as the player himself put it to L'Équipe in November, "sooner or later they'll be talking about me."

Eric Devin60⁺⁶

AGE : 29 POS : RB

HAMARI
TRAORÉ

Despite being a leather-lunged ever-present for Rennes, and having been a key figure in what's unequivocally the club's best run in their history, including a first-ever appearance in the Champions League, Malian right back Hamari Traoré has always suffered a lack of reputation. Born in Bamako, he made his first foray into European football with Paris FC. After a solitary season in the first team, he moved to Belgium to play for top-flight side Lierse, where he came a regular in his second season, helping the club narrowly avoid relegation.

A move to Reims, then in Ligue 2, followed, and it was under Olivier Guégan that Traoré first impressed. Benefitting from a move into central defence on the part of Aissa Mandi, he made for a pacey and deceptively strong presence despite his apparent lack of height or physicality, his shuttling runs up and down the flank doing much to pin back his opposite numbers. With Hassane Kamara doing much the same on the opposite flank, the Champagne side were a difficult opponent, even if a historic comeback by Toulouse consigned the club to relegation by a single point, the team's hopes of survival undone by a lack of attacking talent. A radical restructuring of the team would follow that summer, but Michel der Zakarian's arrival would see the club miss out on the playoffs, and 2017 saw Traoré on the move again, joining Stade Rennais. Along with Ismaila Sarr and Faitout Maouassa, Traoré was part of an ambitious overhaul on the club's part, and despite facing competition from club legend Romain Danzé, he was a starter from day one, helping the club to finish fifth, despite missing a month on the sidelines.

The following season saw further progress, with the team making a historic run to the last 16 of the Europa League and winning the Coupe de France before finishing third the next campaign. While the team's maiden appearance in the Champions League didn't exactly go according to plan, Traoré has continued to play with the same combative verve as always, whipping in crosses with aplomb and urging the team forward. Now club captain, the arrival of players like Gaëtan Laborde and Martin Terrier has further burnished his assist numbers — only Jonathan Clauss has more among Ligue 1 full-backs — and man of the match displays against opponents such as PSG and Lyon are also to his credit. Now 29, it's unlikely that Traoré will make another step up, but he continues to be what he's always been: a willing runner, adept at crossing the ball and eager to get stuck in, making him a firmly above-average Ligue 1 full-back.

Eric Devin



59

AGE : 29 POS : CB

JONATHAN GRADIT

At 29-years-old, Jonathan Gradit is one of the few names on this list that didn't have it all his own way when making the grade in top-flight football.

Born in Talence, a suburb of Bordeaux, young Jonathan was an avid Girondins fan and went to games frequently, eventually not only as a spectator. He was part of the squad that made the Champions League group stage shortly after the club's 2009 title win. But sadly a toe infection worsened and Bordeaux decided not to give him his first professional contract. Gradit had put on weight and knew that he faced an uphill battle to make it as a pro. However, the defender joined the local gym and started playing fifth-tier football for Bayonne. The pounds were lost and Gradit earned a move to then Ligue 2 club Tours with whom he spent three years as a quality right-back. Back then, his main quality was his stamina.

After Tours signed seasoned right-back Alassane Touré, Gradit decided it was time for a change and actually paid to leave the club and join Fabien Mercadal at SM Caen. The player and the coach respected one another a great deal, Gradit was confident that Mercadal would coach in Ligue 1 while Mercadal was convinced that the defender would play in the French top-flight while comparing Gradit to Bayern Munich legend Philipp Lahm.

At this point in the 2018/19 campaign, Gradit stopped playing at right-back after the role was taken by Frédéric Guilbert but an injury to Paul Baysse gave Gradit his chance as a centre-back. Most teammates wouldn't praise Gradit's aerial prowess or his agility but he compensates with some hard work and a strong reading of the game.

When Gradit left Caen for Lens he found himself as neither a right-back nor a centre-back but part of a three-man defence in Franck Haise's 3-4-1-2 system. It's a system that has worked like charm, especially for Gradit. A regular starter for Lens since coming back up to Ligue 1, Gradit feels right at home in the north of France as the whole squad is made of players who didn't have it all their own way in their careers and had to fight to play at this level today.

Equally hard-working, Gradit and Lens have enjoyed a successful 2021. Club and player have turned out to be the perfect match.

Philip Bargiel



58⁻²⁰

AGE : 24 POS : RB

ZEKI CELIK

Zeki Celik did everything possible to explode onto the wider European stage in the first half of 2021, except secure a big move away from Lille. His Transfermarkt value peaked at €21m in May, as he deservedly got his hands on the Ligue 1 trophy but, despite being a consistent right-back, often in form in 2021 - especially pre-summer - the 24-year-old is still battling away in France.

Some may argue that the Turk's current status is a little underwhelming given his ability, but the current state of affairs could also be seen as natural after Celik bombed with a hugely disappointing Turkey at EURO 2020. Celik's lazy tackle against Wales gave away a penalty which effectively sealed Turkey's fate at the Euros.

On matchday two of the new Ligue 1 season against OGC Nice, Celik also helped set the tone for Lille's stuttering start to 21/22. After dawdling on the edge of his own box, Celik was pickpocketed by Amine Gouiri who promptly set up Nice's second goal in a 0-4 battering.

These points feel low due to Celik's superb form last season. He missed just two games from January onwards, netting crucial goals against Nice and Metz, and he assisted the important late equaliser against Montpellier in April. Lille would have fallen behind PSG with just six matches left of the season had his looping cross not found Luis Araujo near the back post.

A technically gifted dribbler, Celik is the more damaging of Lille's full-backs going forward, with left-back Reinildo Mandava not making a single goal contribution in over 80 games for Lille. Celik is impressive defensively too, though, sitting in the top 50 Ligue 1 outfielders for tackle success rate in 20/21 according to FBRef. His recovery pace and tidy tackling helped shield José Fonte, the right sided centre-back, from dangerous threats.

It was assumed Celik would leave Lille in the summer. With his contract running out in 2023 and Roma, Tottenham and Arsenal reportedly interested, his exit appeared certain. A move never came to fruition though. Still, even with a slight drop in momentum in the second half of 2021, Celik's performances in the first half of this year prove the Turk's quality. 2022 could yet be his year.

Alex Barker



57

AGE : 25 POS : AM

ANGELO
FULGINI

Many Ligue 1 players were greeted by a new coach this year but the most surprising managerial switch came when Stéphane Moulin, after a decade of synergy and growth as Angers SCO head coach, parted ways with the club in the summer.

Midfielder Angelo Fulgini had been the standout player at Angers SCO during the 2020/21 season. As he converted a header in added time against the future champions, Lille, on the final day, supporters believed they were watching the 25-year-old's last appearance in the colours of the western club. In the past 18 months he'd finally delivered on his promising talent, displaying versatility as a powerful carrier of the ball in the most advanced position of a midfield three or as a number 10 in a 4-2-3-1, dropping into pockets of space to receive passes on the turn and drawing countless fouls.

Statistics from FBRef show that Fulgini was fouled more times than any other Ligue 1 player last season, a ranking he leads by quite a distance with 141 fouls. The nearest to him was Yoane Wissa of Lorient with 95. The Angevin playmaker had been taken down at least twice more than anyone outside of the top 10 of most fouled players in Ligue 1 that season.

Unfortunately, Fulgini has encountered difficulties adjusting to his new role as the number 10 in Gerald Baticle's 3-4-1-2 system with the resurgent Sofiane Boufal occupying many of the spaces the former Valenciennes man used to operate within. However, with Baticle's recent 3-5-2 alteration, Fulgini is encouraged to drop into deeper areas of midfield and receive the ball on the turn. In this role, the mazy dribbler has flashed back to his old self and the player that caught the eye of many clubs from across Europe.

Angers president, Saïd Chabane, made it clear in the summer that his star man would not move for anything less than €15m. While there was interest and bids arrived, most notably from Feyenoord, none met the asking price. Despite the failed transfer, the attacker didn't clash with the club and has instead invested in his new coach's style. The asking price of €15m remains the same, as does the fact that, looking at his performances this year, it's surely only a matter of time before another Angers SCO attacking talent moves on to pastures new.

Thomas Wiseman



56

AGE : 29 POS : ST

HWANG
UI-JO

After a lukewarm first 18 months in the southwest of France, forward Hwang Ui-jo's form exploded into life at the turn of the year as he was increasingly deployed in his more favoured central position, rather than on the wing. The South Korean's 16 goals this calendar year has been the best performance by a Bordeaux striker since Argentine Fernando Cavenaghi's late-2000s exploits for the club and equals fellow South Korean Heung-Min Son's haul despite playing 11 fewer games in all competitions. One of the few to emerge from Bordeaux's year-long gradual collapse with a bolstered reputation, Hwang's tireless performances were one of the major contributors to the team's unlikely survival.

Standing out amid a team of disinterested veterans and inconsistent performers, it's clear why Hwang has become a fan favourite over the past twelve months. His tireless dedication and persistence in getting to every ball have been key in making his team's attack click, even if service to him has sometimes been lacking. Although his conversion rate can leave something to be desired, it's clear that Bordeaux have more than got their money's worth from his €2m in 2019.

His panoply of shooting possibilities make him a threat from anywhere in the final third, whether that's via clinical finishes in one on one situations or curled efforts from outside the box. It's no surprise that rumours of a move to Marseille - transfers between the two clubs are surprisingly common, considering the historic animosity between them - appeared over the summer. The forward also featured at this summer's Olympic Games, notably scoring a hat-trick in the group stage against Honduras. Nevertheless, South Korea would eventually bow out in the quarter-finals to future bronze medallists Mexico in an entertaining 3-6 defeat that saw Hwang score his country's final goal of the tournament.

With six goals to his name so far this season, having missed six weeks through injury, it's evident that Hwang will once again be key to Bordeaux's chances of staving off the drop. Now, though, with Honduran forward Alberth Elis hitting the ground running after his summer arrival, the former Gamba Osaka man may no longer have to shoulder the entire goalscoring burden for Bordeaux moving forward.

Raphaël Jacobin



NUNO MENDES



55

POS : LB

AGE : 19

Paris Saint-Germain have made a habit of securing superstars on expensive deals, aiming to appeal to their ever-growing marketing appeal. In a side akin to the Galácticos of Real Madrid's early-2000s, there's one player different from the rest, one whose profile is alien-like in comparison to his team-mates. Signed from Sporting CP on loan with an option to buy in the summer, it's 19-year-old Nuno Mendes.

Buying established stars for big money is the usual model that the Parisians abide by in the transfer market, but the shrewd acquisition of Mendes diverts away from that directly, and it's a credit to his talent. The last notable teenager that PSG signed on an initial loan deal was Kylian Mbappé - and that hasn't worked out too badly, has it?

Now, to say Mendes will live up to similar heights is foolish, but in regards to solely his position, left-back, he certainly has the potential to become the best in the world. Just 18 months ago he was a fairly unknown quantity, but Mendes soon established himself in Sporting's starting XI, and caught the eye of Europe's elite clubs. Liverpool, Manchester United and Real Madrid were said to be interested, but PSG managed to seal a deal for the Portuguese international, and although he hasn't nailed down a consistent spot in Mauricio Pochettino's side, he's had a promising start to life in France.

It was in Sporting's first Primeira Liga-winning season since 2002 that Mendes burst onto the scene. Quietly operating under the radar at the start of the season, he was on the tip of every scout's tongue come May. With defensive intelligence so infrequent in modern full-backs, to complement his flying attacking endeavour that could easily be mistaken for that of a wide forward, Mendes is an outlier, an exception, a world class talent.

It's no coincidence that as soon as Mendes was selected as Sporting's first choice left-back, they managed to win the league title. Now, his impact wasn't that dramatic, but with the great importance of full-backs in today's game, it certainly helps to have arguably the most promising wide defender in the world on your side. Breaking Porto and Benfica's stranglehold on Portuguese football was no easy feat, yet for Mendes it seemed like it was.

Conceding just 20 league goals all season, the fact that Mendes simply never seemed to lose a one-on-one battle aided Sporting's challenge massively. His form in the back-end of the 2020/21 season earned the full-back a first Portugal senior cap in March 2021, and a call-up to his nation's European Championship squad over the summer. He didn't manage to get on the pitch during the tournament, but for someone so young, it was an impressive achievement simply to be called up.

Rarely does a full-back stand out on the pitch; their role usually consists of being a link player between attack and defence, but if you're one of the few full-backs that catch the eye, you must be special. And Nuno Mendes certainly is. Watching him is a pleasure: with his close control, composure on the ball, as well as his pace and power immediately standing out. There's such maturity in his game that you'd be forgiven for thinking he was 29, not 19, yet he possesses the youthful energy needed to play his box-to-box role.

To attract the attention of PSG is no easy feat, yet it was expected for Mendes given the nature of his calendar year. Juan Bernat's return to full fitness has hampered his progress in Paris, but it won't be long before he establishes himself as first choice, if they choose to activate their option to buy.

João Cancelo is one of the only full-backs in world football who likes to drive inside and underlap rather than overlap his winger, and that's mostly because he's deployed on the left for Manchester City despite being right-footed. Mendes is another such breed, as he always bursts inside his opposite number, even though he plays on the side of his stronger left foot. With excellent technique on his right as well, he's been almost impossible to mark since breaking through at Sporting, with his darting runs not limited to the touchline. With that being said, Mendes is more than capable of an overlap and cross, but he's not limited to that; for someone so young to have developed such a trait is so rare.

The fact he's been involved in just one goal this year, a pinpoint assist for Nuno Santos against Boavista back in January, simply doesn't tell the full story. Mendes was a constant outlet for Sporting, with his technical proficiency meaning he was always an option, and while he hasn't hit the ground running at PSG, he is still learning his trade, so a drop-off is to be expected.

That being said, when he's taken to the field for his new side, he's still been quietly impressive. Left-back was a problem position for PSG with the aforementioned Bernat's long-term injury set-back, and at the start of the campaign Mendes certainly filled that hole.

With four tackles and interceptions, a shot, two dribbles and a 93.5% pass accuracy on his first Ligue 1 start against Lyon, Mendes displayed his talent from the off. Although he's struggled for minutes lately, 2021 has been the year that the Portuguese international, with 11 caps to his name since his debut in March, has truly announced himself as a future world-beater. The only teenager to have started a league game for PSG this season, Mendes is certainly one to watch for the future, but 2021 proved that he is ready right now.

Cameron Smith

FABIEN



CENTONZE



54⁺²⁰

POS : RB
AGE : 25

FC Metz have had a difficult start to the season, hamstrung by a range of factors including a poor transfer window. The squad has been left in need of refreshing and re-motivating after failing to sell first-teamers expected to leave for good fees. One of those players is right-back Fabien Centonze, who, at 25, seemed ready to make a big move. Although it didn't come about, a positive campaign could not only put him back in the shop window but potentially give him an outside chance of a call-up to the France squad for next year's World Cup.

Hailing from Voiron, in the shadow of the Alps, a 19-year-old Centonze made his debut for local club Evian-Thonon Gaillard at the beginning of the 2015/16 season. Although he had come through the ranks as a right-winger, club coach and PSG legend Safet Sušić had no hesitation in bringing him into the first team to solve a problem at right-back, a show of faith by the man to whom Centonze says he owes everything.

Centonze went on to make 30 Ligue 2 appearances that season, continuing to plug gaps at right-back, left-back and on both wings. Despite impressing in all positions, Centonze couldn't prevent ETG from being relegated at the end of the year. However, he'd done enough to show he had the quality to play in the top two divisions and was recruited by Corinne Diacre for her Ligue 2 Clermont side.

Over two full seasons, Centonze established himself at right-back, while helping the club improve to a sixth-place finish with one of the best defences in the division. This drew the attention of RC Lens, who recruited Centonze in the summer of 2018 for their Ligue 2 promotion push. Despite forming part of another very stingy defence, Centonze couldn't save Lens from defeat in the promotion play-off final and so, as the club remained in the second tier, he joined newly-crowned Ligue 2 champions FC Metz for a chance in Ligue 1.

In just over two seasons in Lorraine, Centonze has continued his upward trajectory, showing not only that he's a Ligue 1 calibre player, but also one of the best right-backs in the division. In his first season, which was eventually cut short by the COVID-19 pandemic, Centonze bedded in with the rest of Les Grenats' defence to focus on Ligue 1 survival. As the season progressed and Centonze and others became accustomed to the top flight, the team's football became more adventurous. When the campaign ended, Metz were in an upwardly-mobile 15th with Centonze part of a top 10 defence, having provided three assists in the final third of the season.

The 2020/21 campaign began with Metz general manager-turned-head-coach Frédéric Antonetti talking of how he had spoken to Centonze about the need to keep up his

development in order to reach the achievable goal of a call-up to the France squad. Centonze's season mirrored that of Metz, using the previous season's positive finish as a springboard to show more confidence and more tactical flexibility while playing more expansive football.

Arguably, Centonze was the main reason Antonetti decided to switch from a back four to a back three. The right-back's past experience as a more attacking player, his supreme fitness (he's missed just four matches in the past three seasons) and his defensive acumen make him a perfect wing-back. Although he contributed just one goal and no assists, Centonze was a crucial member of the team – and the league's seventh-best defence – as they finished tenth, Metz's best finish since 1999, having been in sixth place as late as March. A rarity in modern football in that he's a full-back whose main strength is defending, Centonze had shown himself to be an all-around talent who reads the game well. He's good in the air and is strong in the tackle, with a great engine and burgeoning leadership abilities.

Unsurprisingly, last summer saw him linked with a handful of bigger clubs, including Marseille, Roma and Tottenham. However, no move came and, again mirroring his team, this season has seen his form drop off a little, as the club suffers from something akin to 'second season syndrome' and a litany of injuries which have meant no chance for an established defence to build a rapport. Centonze has even had to fill in at centre-back. Despite this, Centonze's right flank has shown itself to be far less vulnerable than the left side, and he's added another facet to his game, scoring three goals in nine matches, making him Ligue 1's joint-highest goalscorer among defenders.

Centonze already has more than 200 professional appearances to his name and has shown his ability as both a defensive and an offensive defender. He is capable of shouldering the pressure of both fighting a relegation battle and challenging for Europe and has earned his stripes and his opportunity at a higher level. Although not necessarily of the elite level required for a title-chasing or Champions League team, Centonze would not look at all out of place in a side fighting for Europa League success and European qualification from anyone in the top five leagues.

With the France squad suffering from a dearth of quality right-backs and Didier Deschamps looking increasingly like to move to a 3-4-3, thus on the look-out for a quality piston on the right flank, Centonze has every incentive, should he secure a more lucrative move, to impress and force his way into the World Cup-winning coach's thoughts. Top Premier League and Bundesliga sides should be queuing up to help Centonze follow the likes of Robert Pirès, Franck Ribéry, Kalidou Koulibaly and Sadio Mané in leaving Metz for stardom.

Jeremy Smith



KASPER

DOLBERG



53⁻⁹

POS: ST
AGE: 24

Kasper Dolberg is one of the more polarizing starlets in European football. At times, a well-oiled goal-scoring playmaker or striker, Dolberg can too often fade into the peripheries.

At 24, however, the Danish striker still has the opportunity to fulfil his much-heralded potential after a few rocky years in Ligue 1 with OGC Nice. Although his future may yet take flight outside of the French Riviera, with the Premier League still a viable option, the Dane has flattered to deceive at times in Ligue 1 where his goal-scoring returns had dried up after a strong rookie season in 2019/20 in which he was voted the club's player of the season. Dolberg only registered six Ligue 1 goals in the 2020/21 campaign, but a strong EURO 2020 has elevated his stock once more and put clubs across Europe on alert again. Crystal Palace were seen as a possible destination last summer, a move that would have seen the player again link up with former Nice head coach Patrick Viera. Dolberg excelled under the Frenchman in his debut Ligue 1 campaign but any potential deal was scuppered with the deadline day arrival of Odsonne Édouard at Selhurst Park from Celtic.

Still, as Viera had identified, Dolberg's movement, dynamism and pace would be well suited to the Premier League, particularly if his hot start to the new season, at last, becomes the norm. One could put his fluctuating stats down to the exuberance of youth, yet off-field incidents have further contributed to Dolberg's up and down times in France. The Dane had his Porsche stolen and house robbed while away on international duty in September 2020. This robbery followed another incident involving former teammate, Lamine Diaby-Fadiga, who admitted to stealing the Dane's luxury watch in September 2019. Despite having only played two full seasons in France, by the end of the 2020/21 campaign Dolberg's capacity for growth at Nice appeared to have reached a natural stasis. Managerial upheaval has not helped his case but a change of scenery could still do the former Ajax man a world of good. Nice will likely look to recoup close to the €20m they paid Ajax in 2019 for the player if they are indeed going to part with their man. However, upper management at the club have expressed reluctance to sell their prized assets.

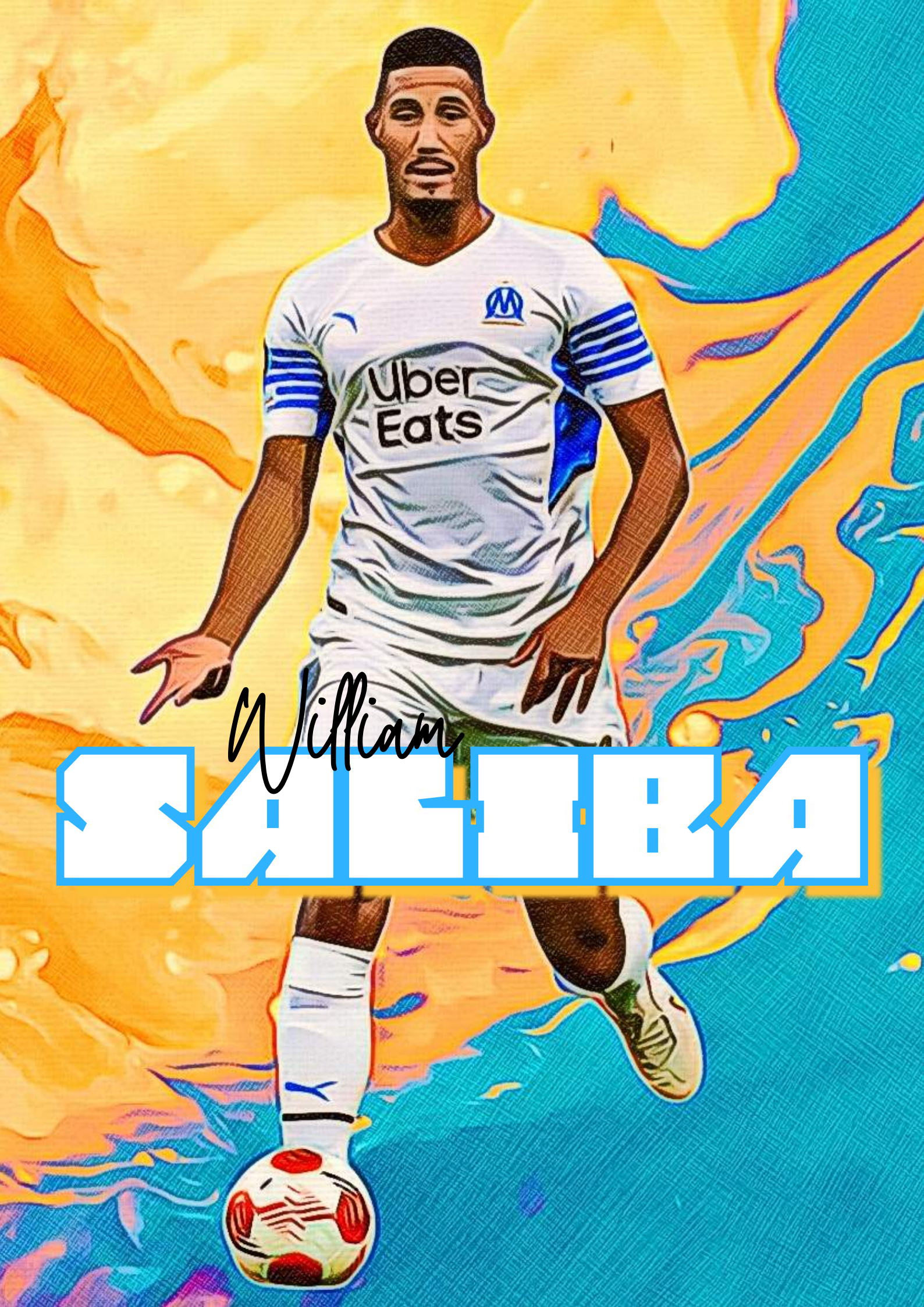
With a much-revitalised Dolberg's successful opening to the new season in mind, sporting director Julien Fournier had previously claimed the player was more than happy on the French Riviera, as reported by GFFN last year. "[Kasper] has absolutely no desire to leave. He feels good at Nice, where he has everything he needs to enjoy himself. We explained to him everything when he signed. We are no longer a club that serves as a springboard for clubs like Aston Villa or Fiorentina, no disrespect to those clubs. We want to be that for the biggest." Despite the strong backing of the club's hierarchy, this statement came in a pre-pandemic era where star players were

less expendable than they are now with finances tightened considerably across the league. However, Nice's ownership group, under the guidance of British billionaire Jim Ratcliffe, has invested significantly into the infrastructure of the club. The arrival of last year's title-winning coach from Lille, Christophe Galtier, being a notable statement of intent. For now, the former Lille and Saint-Étienne coach will be counting on Dolberg to live up to his potential if the Frenchman is to come close to replicating his success of last season. Prospective suitors will also be assessing Dolberg to see if his EURO 2020 goals can be the springboard for the Dane to morph into the more prolific and consistent forward that has long been promised. His strikes against Wales and the Czech Republic in the summer propelled Denmark on their incredible run to the semi-finals of the tournament, where they eventually lost to runners-up England.

Dolberg has a contract until June 2024 and is still Nice's record transfer, so the club will be looking for a significant return on their investment if they do part ways. If Crystal Palace are no longer viable candidates for a switch, another Premier League team suited to his style of play could be Brighton, with the club still looking for an intelligent playmaker to excel in Graham Potter's possession-based side. Still, Dolberg – not to mention Fournier – may see this as a fall from grace, even if the Seagulls are excelling in the Premier League this season. Wherever he lands, Dolberg certainly has the ability to make the step up, as evidenced by a pair of audacious chested finishes earlier this season. The first, against Marseille – a game now expunged from the record after mass crowd trouble – saw the 23-year-old ghost in at the near post to apply the deftest of flicks with his chest and divert a cross into the far corner past Steve Mandanda. The skill of the second somehow surpassed that of the first. Darting past his marker, Dolberg converted Melvin Bard's cross with a spectacular diving chested finish to effectively win the game for Nice away at Nantes.

Last season's meek Dolberg, devoid of confidence, had been replaced by a bullish, positive striker enjoying some of his best form in France to date. A poacher's brace in August's 4-0 demolition of champions Lille further helped hint at lasting progress. However as Autumn became Winter, Dolberg regressed a little after he was noticeably affected following a diagnosis of diabetes and he has scored just once for Nice since September. A worrying run of form, injury, health and competition issues aside. Nevertheless, after a positive 2021 overall, should the Danish international look to make a move to 2022, he'll be looking for a side offering regular European football, something that Nice have not been able to provide so far. However, a strong start to 2022 will be required for any move to occur, and Christophe Galtier will be hoping the Dane can again start to excel as part of his exciting young team. At the stage of his career, if Dolberg is to realise that sizable potential, another year fading to the peripheries won't do.

Ciarán Brennan



William

SATIBA



52

POS : CB
AGE : 20

So long the darling of Arsenal fans, having arrived from London from Saint-Étienne with much expectation in the summer of 2019, William Saliba's career has become itinerant to the extent that it's scarcely plausible that he's still just twenty years old. Born in Bondy, the same Paris suburb that produced Jonathan Ikoné and Kylian Mbappé, Saliba has taken perhaps longer than some have expected to continue his upward trajectory, but there's no doubt that he is again among the most talked-about young defenders in Ligue 1, having rapidly become a hero to the Vélodrome faithful since joining Marseille on loan this summer.

Saliba is an ever-present in Jorge Sampaoli's teams — no player, including goalkeeper Pau López, has played more minutes for the Argentine. He caught the eye with an inch-perfect tackle on Mbappé in Le Classique in October, but he is far more than that for the southern side. In Sampaoli's ever-mutating tactical systems, his combination of pace, elegance in the tackle, and composure allow for a maximum of freedom not only for his fellow Arsenal loanee, Mattéo Guendouzi, who has also blossomed this season, but also for the team's wingbacks, Cengiz Ünder and Pol Lirola. Comfortable centrally in a back three but generally used on the right, Saliba has even played right back on occasion, a testament to his versatility.

It's true that he's still prone to the odd gaffe, but as the clean sheets for l'OM rack up, it's become increasingly difficult to ignore the regularity of his performances. These have helped transform the team from a nearly comically gung-ho outfit into the league's most parsimonious. Knitting together any number of formations with his metronomic passing, Saliba's preternatural assurance on the ball and ability to cover his teammates allows Sampaoli to experiment with players in new positions, as he balances the demands of European football with the need for the club to be playing in the Champions League next season. Before making his first-team debut for Saint-Étienne at the age of just 17, Saliba had come through the ranks under the tutelage of Mbappé's father, Wilfrid, a well-respected coach at AS Bondy, the same club where Kylian had also cut his teeth. That acumen on the part of the senior Mbappé, who is, like Saliba, of Cameroonian descent (and has been tracked by their national team), is something the defender has readily acknowledged. He told *Le Populaire*, "Wilfrid Mbappé taught me everything and if I am where I am today, it is thanks to him".

Another coach at Bondy, Tonio Riccardi, also remembers Saliba well, purring about the defender's physical gifts whilst acknowledging the (still extant) faults in his play. "He was an athletically advanced player, he was already 1.80m, and when he was 12, he had started playing with the U15s. Because of his size, he was technically a little clumsy but that was more than

compensated for by his strength." Following his spell in Bondy, he moved to FC Montfermeil, where he spent two years before joining Saint-Étienne in 2015. While there, he became a part of France's youth set-ups, featuring regularly for the U-16s and becoming captain of the U18s. Given his first start by Jean-Louis Gasset, he soon became a fixture despite a cadre of more experienced defenders — Loïc Perrin, Timothée Kolodziejczak, and Neven Subotić also being in the frame, his arrival hastening not only the Serbian's departure after being forced out of the XI but the use of Kolodziejczak as a left-back.

Saint-Étienne, despite having a squad that seemed better suited to a relegation scrap than a place in Europe, were galvanised by Saliba's arrival into the team. They finished fourth, and he soon made a big-money move to Arsenal, following in the footsteps of defenders like Laurent Koscielny and Gaël Clichy to make a move from Ligue 1 to the Emirates. Loaned back to Saint-Étienne the following season as a condition of the sale, things quickly soured as a series of injuries, including a broken foot and a bad hamstring injury limited Saliba to just a handful of matches. Back at Arsenal the following season, though, things were hardly better. Despite Europa League participation offering more matches on a regular basis, Saliba struggled for game time, but solace was soon offered in a January loan move to Nice. Playing alongside Jean-Clair Todibo, if Saliba didn't thrive next to his fellow loanee, he would at the very least gain badly-needed confidence. He said as much to TF1, "For me, the best choice was to join OGC Nice because there is a good project, a good team, a good level of ambition, who like to play in a certain way". While Todibo's move was made permanent this summer, Les Aiglons failed to pick up Saliba's option, but another loan was sealed, as he joined an ambitious project at Marseille.

While Saliba's personality and drive has made him a fan favourite at the Vélodrome much in the same vein as Guendouzi, there has also been an element of the unseemly in his career. This includes an infamous video published on Snapchat earlier this year from three years back, which earned him a one-month ban from the FFF. While he's since shaken this off, and even played as captain in Les Espoirs' matches this autumn, an incident like this is still worrying. Even if he is a young man, not to recognise the edict that once something is on the Internet, it's there forever, is somewhat worrying. That said, he does not seem cowed by the incident, and there has been nothing to report in this fashion since his return to Ligue 1. What lies ahead, then, will be determined by both his parent club, and Marseille. Surely Sampaoli and company would love to have him in the team indefinitely, and it hardly seems, given Arsenal's summer purchases of Ben White and Takehiro Tomiyasu, that the Gunners have much long-term interest. But it's also doubtful that OM can afford his valuation. So for fans of Ligue 1, the edict must be to enjoy him while we can.

Eric Devin



51

AGE : 30 POS : ST



50

AGE : 24 POS : CM

WAHBI KHAZRI

Wahbi Khazri is perhaps one of the most underappreciated players in Ligue 1 but, for some reason, he's never reached the heights he's capable of consistently. That's not to say his accomplishments are unsubstantial. Khazri is a former Ligue 1 player of the month and Tunisian Footballer of the Year, and, for a time, he was a leading candidate to become the next big thing to emerge from French football. At 30-years-old, he's been as dangerous as he's ever been in 2021, an especially impressive feat considering the form bottom club Saint-Étienne are in.

Despite a fluctuating spell at the club overall, this year Khazri has become one of the best signings Saint-Étienne have made in their recent history. The Tunisian captain is a secondary striker with the ability to create his own chances and score from distance with power or finish in the box with the touch of a true central forward. For years Saint-Étienne were without a consistent double figures goal scorer but that changed with the Tunisian's arrival. The shadow or secondary striker role is one of the most exciting roles in football and there are few players in Ligue 1 who can play it as well as Khazri. This season he has seven goals including the likely goal of the season, scoring from the furthest ever recorded distance in Ligue 1 history during October's 1-1 draw against Metz. With 103 goal contributions across 226 Ligue 1 games to date, no matter what happens from here in, Khazri will go down as one of the greatest Tunisian players ever.

In an attempt to steady the ship before his recent sacking, Claude Puel had utilized several different formations and gameplans. Through it all, Khazri's ability to play anywhere across the attack allowed him to have another statistically productive season while his work rate has noticeably increased since falling out with Puel at the start of last season and his subsequent reintroduction to the side. For any incoming coach, such as the recently appointed Pascal Dupraz, knowing you have a player like Khazri at your disposal checks a box off of your list of needs. Les Verts are one of the most historic clubs in Ligue 1 and they are in trouble, Khazri was quoted as saying they are on a mission to save the club. With that type of motivation, unusually overt for Khazri, this season could become one of the best of his career on a personal level, despite his team's struggles.

Tony-Thomas DesRois

IBRAHIMA SISSOKO

One of the unsung heroes in Racing Strasbourg's squad, central-midfielder Ibrahima Sissoko definitely deserves more attention than he currently gets. For a couple of years now, Sissoko has been putting in a shift for Le Racing and has cemented his position in their starting eleven. Since Strasbourg secured his services in the summer of 2018, he's played over 100 league games for the club but it's easy to forget he's still only 24-years-old.

French-born Sissoko, who is of Malian descent, is yet another product of the Île-de France talent production factory. Born in Meaux, he played for his local side CS Meaux until the age of 16 when he was picked up by Paris-based semi-professional club US Torcy. A year later, after shining in the national under 17 championships, he was signed by Brest.

He signed a professional contract with the Breton club in July 2015 and made his Ligue 2 debut against Évian Thonon Gaillard in April 2016, aged just 18. After making 32 appearances for Brest over the following two seasons, he signed a four-year deal with Strasbourg in June 2018, with the Alsace club paying a fee of €2m.

Before this season, Sissoko never really shone in terms of goal contributions. His main role in Thierry Laurey's Strasbourg side was to sit in front of the back four and collect loose balls before handing over to his more attack-minded colleagues in Dimitri Liénard and Adrien Thomasson, among others.

Under new manager, Julien Stéphan, however, his role has changed somewhat. With the security that the five-at-the-back system brings, Sissoko has been granted more licence to roam and get forward. This season, the 6'4 midfielder has already racked up a goal and five assists in 15 league games after having only contributed three goals and three assists in the previous 91.

Strasbourg's November player of the month looks a real 'one to watch' this season and, if he can keep up these good performances, it is only a matter of time before he draws interest from bigger clubs in need of a well-rounded midfielder.

James Evans



49

AGE : 29 POS : FW



48

AGE : 26 POS : WF

KARL TOKO-EKAMBI

Since making his loan spell at Lyon permanent for just over £10m in 2020, Karl Toko-Ekambi has been an integral part of the attacking setup at the Groupama Stadium. With the forward having a mixed season, many were surprised that Lyon decided to sign him permanently. But a solid year in 2021 has shown that Juninho's investment looks to be paying off.

Flying high at the top of Ligue 1 at the turn of the year, Lyon were blessed with some of the best form of the AFCON winner's career as he netted 9 times in the opening months of the 20/21 season. Operating on the left side of a front three for Rudi Garcia's set-up, Toko-Ekambi was in fine fettle as he linked up with Memphis Depay and Tino Kadewere in one of Europe's most lethal strike forces. Sometimes the attacking movement and interplay by the front three was electric, with Toko-Ekambi often finishing moves. As performance levels took a hit throughout the OL squad at the start of 2021, he was able to maintain a decent level of form, managing to contribute to 3 goals in the opening 6 matches of the year. In spite of such an impressive start, the 28-year-old scored just one goal against Marseille before scoring two against Nice to end the campaign in defeat. This is understandable though, considering the passing of his father, as the forward himself has recognised its the detrimental effect on his on-pitch performances.

Although the end of 2021 has seen inconsistency in Lyon's performances, Toko-Ekambi has been one of few able to make a noticeable difference in the final third. Scoring 5 goals in 14 appearances and assisting a further two, the forward is only behind Paquetá in the scoring charts for OL in Ligue 1. It is in Europe where the Cameroonian has been stealing the headlines, though. He has raised a few eyebrows with his impressive performances in Europe, after scoring six goals in six appearances. Highlights from his performances include his brace against Scottish champions Rangers in the opening match of the Europa League group stage. The first of this double was a brilliant strike - Brilliant being his middle name, incidentally - which saw him cut in from the left-hand side before arrowing a curled effort home from 25 yards to silence a packed Ibrox. His 2021 has seen highs and lows, but his form at the end of the year has been vital to OL's impressive record in European competition. He could be the key man in any successes the club have going into 2022.

Liam Wraith

MOSES SIMON

Sometimes, the goalscorers don't always get all the plaudits. This saying could certainly apply to Nantes' popular Nigerian Moses Simon, who has enjoyed a good start to the 2021/22 season after a rocky start to the year and quite a few uncertain career paths.

As a youngster, Simon played for Nigerian club GBS Academy and was eyed by Ajax who, fending off Liverpool and Tottenham, gave him a pre-contract back in 2013. But, after an unsuccessful pre-season, the Dutch club decided not to enroll Simon. Being in Europe, he then spent a year in Slovakia playing for AS Trenčín, where he made a name for himself with a hat-trick against Serbian outfit Novi Sad in the 13/14 Europa League. This achievement earned him a move to Gent, where he scored 21 goals in over 100 games and established himself as a solid left winger with an eye for the killer pass.

After 3 years in Belgium, Simon moved to Spain, at Levante, where things didn't go to plan. The Valencia-based club loaned him to Nantes for a season with a €5m option to buy. Again, all is not rosy at Les Canaris, who would have a terrible season, not scoring much and conceding goals galore. Multiple managerial changes happen in the 2020/21 season (never a good sign) but ex-PSG & Valenciennes gaffer Antoine Kombouaré managed to steady the ship (only just), winning the relegation play-off against Toulouse. Nantes stayed up, and breathed a huge sigh of relief. Kombouaré has done a great job in the summer in installing fight and determination in his troops, and this goes with spending the aforementioned €5m to acquire Moses Simon. This season, the Nigerian has been ever-present, starting high on every game on the left wing of a 4-3-3, with Ludovic Blas on the right and Kolo Muani to finish things off in the middle. Levante complained that he didn't score often, and while that is still the case at Nantes, Simon happens to be the 4th best passer of the league at the time of writing.

The pinnacle of Simon's season happened very recently in a 3-2 win over Lens. Nantes were 0-2 down at half-time and Kombouaré had benched Simon, arguing that he was playing too much between being always on the starting line-up (and never subbed) for Nantes and being called regularly by the Super Eagles. Kombouaré would send Simon on with 20 minutes and the Nigerian scored the winning goal, a great solo effort emphatically finished off. The manager would go on to say that Simon had a "champion's attitude". Sounds about right.

Philip Bargiel



Maxence Caqueret





47⁻²⁴

POS : CM
AGE : 21

2020 witnessed the incredible rise of Lyon midfielder Maxence Caqueret. The Frenchman's emergence in the Champions League coincided with Rudi Garcia's side going as far as the semi-finals of the competition after eliminating Manchester City and Juventus. Caqueret was seen as a main protagonist of a memorable campaign, as Les Gones upset the odds in a competition increasingly dominated by the superpowers of the sport. Naturally, Caqueret caught the attention of many.

With that build-up and subsequent expectation, 2021 was going to be a vital year in Caqueret's fledgling career, especially considering the backroom changes and instability around his club. Even though the year was not going to define the Frenchman, it was expected to say a lot about his progression and eventual destination.

It would be unfair to compare Caqueret's 2019/20 campaign to any other season that he's had so far in his career. It was his first-ever season as part of the club's first team and it's easy to forget that the 19-year-old version of him played just three games in the Champions League that year while playing less than 600 minutes in Ligue 1.

He excelled in a small sample size and, as generally happens, that small sample size placed a weighty, perhaps unfair, amount of pressure on the midfielder's young shoulders. He, like many young players before him, was expected to match those levels every following season. Development, however, isn't always linear.

In truth, Caqueret hasn't had an exceptional 2021. But that doesn't mean that he hasn't been very good a lot of the time. With Lyon having lost talisman forward Memphis Depay for free to Barcelona and left-sided player Maxwell Cornet to Burnley, there was room for more players to grow in stature under a new manager in Peter Bosz who has made a name for himself in helping burgeoning talents to flourish at more than one club. And arguably, now, Caqueret's profile now stands above the much more lauded Houssem Aouar's.

Under Bosz, Caqueret has been a regular beside Bruno Guimarães in a double pivot midfield, their technical ability helped as the pair swap between roles of sentinel and instigator. Caqueret's positional sense and ability on the ball makes him a good fit for the more defensive midfield role but his impressive ability to progress the ball through central areas from deep makes him an even better man to fill the slightly more advanced role next to Guimarães.

Across the first 18 Ligue 1 matchdays this season, the

Frenchman has played 6.23 progressive passes per 90 minutes putting him in the 91st percentile across Europe's big five leagues. He also excels in the art of carrying the ball forward in a progressive manner, allowing Lyon to break lines quickly, and Bosz has historically been the sort of manager who likes his teams to progress through the lines at pace.

While Lyon haven't really glittered as a Peter Bosz side can just yet, because of a lack of consistent pressing, Caqueret has nevertheless been the best presser at the club, bar the scarcely used Tino Kadewere, with a tally of 24.7 pressures per 90 minutes as of mid-December. Lyon's league position of 13th is certainly an underperformance considering their squad quality and that they have generated the fifth-highest xG this season in Ligue 1.

Bosz's Bayer Leverkusen and Dortmund sides were never great defensively either but that hasn't stopped Caqueret from proving defensive attributes. He's in the top five leagues' 96th percentile for tackles won per 90 minutes and he's actively involved in interceptions too.

More than anything, his reading of the game and positioning has proved vital in bringing through these strengths on the pitch. While there was criticism aimed at Caqueret over his alleged inability to create, the Frenchman has now begun to cover more distance than he did in the past. He isn't just a right-sided operator anymore and his range has certainly expanded.

That could certainly be the first step towards becoming more of a creative influence and, with that, Caqueret could start to live up to comparisons with Marco Verratti, who excels at just about everything on the pitch. The likes of Guimarães and Aouar are much older than Caqueret and are much better in terms of chance creation in the final third, but that's normal considering the gap in experience and progression.

Since the 2019/20 campaign, he's become ever more reliable and has grown in stature while taking on more responsibility and showing that he's plenty mature for someone who's still just 21. Perhaps, that's the biggest compliment that can be paid to a player who's at one of the most demanding clubs in the country. Even though there's still been limited consistency to Caqueret's performances in 2021, there're also many signs that he can soon become a more consistent performer.

It is fair to say that Guimarães is arguably closer to joining a bigger club than Caqueret because of how he's grown since joining Lyon, but the Lyon local is very much on the right track.

Kaustubh Pandey



BOUBACAR

KAMARA



46⁻²¹

POS : DM
AGE : 22

Boubacar Kamara elicits considerable pride in Marseille. As one of the few youth players to imbed himself, for several seasons now, in the first team, the Marseille-born Kamara is the pride and joy of a proud city. Kamara has bucked the trend – Maxime Lopez, now of Serie A club Sassuolo, aside – where many of the youth players churned out by OM's much-maligned academy have failed.

The young central defender turned defensive midfielder has gone from strength to strength in each of his senior seasons in Provence. Now, at 22-years-old, he has been at the heart of Marseille's team through highs and sometimes painful lows – a relatively common experience for a player during a long stay at the Velodrome. Nevertheless, Kamara has developed into a versatile player, showing confidence on the ball as the engine that kicks off attacks as OM play out from the back. The young Frenchman is a calm operator in a dynamic system under Jorge Sampaoli, where defensive stability has often gone out of the window, especially at the start of the season, amid Sampaoli's characteristic organised chaos.

Over the course of his Marseille career, after making his debut at right-back having just turned 17 in 2016's Coupe de la Ligue tie at Sochaux, Kamara has shone in three very different systems under three very different managers. As the chaotic Robert Louis-Dreyfus era came to a conclusion back in 2016, incoming coach Rudi Garcia made it his goal to promote a handful of young players. Kamara became one of the earliest beneficiaries of targeted investment into first-team pathways for those developed at the Centre de Formation, joining fellow graduate Lopez in the senior squad.

In truth, Kamara would've made it anyway. Revered for some time by those at the club, Kamara was long a key figure in the youth ranks, having captained several age groups since his first foray into the Marseille academy aged just five back in 2005. Much had been made of the emergence of a lanky, powerful central defender with an eye for a cutting pass and was beginning to excite an OM fanbase that had precious little to cheer during the 2016/17 campaign. Having initially started out in his favoured centre-back position under Garcia, it was André Villas-Boas who moved the player further upfield as he sought to underpin a stoic style of no-frills, just results football. Being perhaps one of the better passers in the team, it was felt that the Marseille-born youngster was more useful in front of the defence than amongst the centre-backs.

Such versatility and a consistent ability to perform in more than one key position has gained Kamara many admirers, not least in Manchester where City have long been credited with interest. However, Kamara is keen to avoid being labelled a 'jack-of-all-trades but a master of none' figure. In 2019, Kamara explained:

"I'm a central defender. It's my usual position. That's where I want to settle down. After that, if I have to help the team when there are injuries or suspensions [so be it]. It's the coach who makes the choices." While he clearly feels his best football is played at the back, – Villas-Boas even mused that Kamara the midfielder was "temporary... I also look at him when he plays as a central defender, he has a great future in that position" – Kamara has now spent more than a year in a different role.

It's that versatility which cost him a place in France's under 21 squad for their European Championship campaign last season, not being as combative as specialists such as Monaco's Aurélien Tchouaméni and Eduardo Camavinga, now of Real Madrid, in midfield, while not being as experienced at the back as Leicester City's Wesley Fofana or Kamara's Marseille teammate William Saliba. It remains to be seen how Kamara can carve out an identity in an otherwise crowded field of competitors.

Nevertheless, Kamara continues to shine at Marseille under Jorge Sampaoli. In tandem with a host of midfield partners, Kamara leads a solid but technical group boasting assured defensive tenacity, a solid passing mechanism and excellent collective reading of the game. Marseille have grown into a solid defensive unit that now seems to churn out clean sheet after clean sheet despite Sampaoli's gung-ho-looking set-up.

Having been handed the captain's armband at Marseille but with his contract up at the end of the season, Kamara's fledgling career is at a crossroads. Wolves and Newcastle tried their luck with late bids at the end of the transfer window but were unsuccessful. However, many in Marseille believe that their young star could do a lot better than such Premier League upstarts, although Newcastle's recent takeover may change the perspectives of all involved as broader interest starts to intensify with January upon us and the player now able to sign a pre-contract agreement with another club.

The elegance and composure with which Kamara plays has become a major selling point in converting the 21-year-old into, in theory, Marseille's biggest bankable talent. L'Equipe reported OM had offered a two-year contract extension beyond next summer in an attempt to eventually generate a transfer fee for the player. However, Kamara was reportedly upset over the club's persistence in trying to move him on during the summer window and will now likely leave on a free transfer at the end of the season.

Despite his, and others, best-laid plans, the pride of Marseille is indeed becoming something of a jack of all trades but Kamara himself only wants to be a master of one as a powerful, elegant centre-back. Given his displays at the base of midfield, however, he might not get his way any time soon.

Mohammed Ali



45

AGE : 27 POS : LB

EMERSON
PALMIERI

It's been a mixed year for Emerson Palmieri. The Italian was quite evidently not a part of Thomas Tuchel's plans at Chelsea in the latter half of last season and was restricted to just two league appearances all season. He fared better on the European stage, however, playing six times and even scoring in the Champions League last 16 tie against Atlético Madrid.

He would go on to leave London with a Champions League medal at the end of the campaign, as well as a Super Cup win in August, adding to his Europa League title from a couple of seasons beforehand. Although successful in terms of silverware, it was clear that the former Roma man's spell in England was tailing off, finding himself third in the left-back pecking order. A spell away was needed in order to reignite his career, or at least prove himself a credible alternative to teammates Ben Chilwell and Marcos Alonso.

Nevertheless, the 27-year-old was thrust into the spotlight this summer as Italy's all-action left-back Leonardo Spinazzola went down injured in the EURO 2020 quarter-final against Belgium. The Roma man had impressed early on and questions were raised as to whether his unavailability for the rest of the tournament would hamper the Azzurri's title chances. Emerson was even pointed out as the weak link in Roberto Mancini's star-studded lineup. However, the São Paulo native proved a more than adequate replacement in a string of performances culminating in an impressive display in the final.

His move to Lyon has seen him withdraw from centre stage but Emerson has nonetheless been one of the few bright spots in a mostly cataclysmic season for Les Gones both on and off the pitch. His defensive solidity and contributions going forward - notably a goal against Troyes - have made his time in France a success so far, at least on a personal level. Les Gones have a permanent option on their loan deal for the Italian and Emerson himself declared he would like to stay on. All signs are pointing to a more long-term spell in Ligue 1.

Emerson leaves 2021 with a much busier trophy cabinet but the true test of his abilities will be establishing himself as a mainstay in the Lyon team and helping the club back to the Champions League heights of the past decade.

Raphaël Jacobin



44

AGE : 21 POS : AM

SOFIANE
DIOP

While it's been easy to get excited about the likes of Hugo Ekitiké, Rayan Cherki, Arnaud Kalimuendo and Amine Gouiri among the best young attackers in Ligue 1, one player has outshone the lot of them in terms of his maturity, consistency, and versatility.

AS Monaco's Sofiane Diop came through at Rennes before joining the Principality side on a free transfer in 2018. Given the ability of Leonardo Jardim to improve young players, and the impending departures of the likes of Thomas Lemar, Rachid Ghezzal, and Gabriel Boschilia among other putative competition, it seemed a good move for a player who had already been capped for France's under 18s.

To say that things may not have turned out the way the then-18-year-old planned would be an understatement. He was a regular under Jardim but Thierry Henry had little time for the youngster, and he spent the second half of the season with the reserves before joining Sochaux on loan in 2019/20. While he was hardly a nailed-on starter for Les Lionceaux, he did start to find his feet prior to the season's abortive end.

Back at his parent club, he soon became an ever-present for Niko Kovač, adding dynamism to a youthful midfield alongside Aurélien Tchouameni and Youssef Fofana. Initially played in a three-man midfield ahead of his two countrymen, Diop's versatility has been a boon to his importance for Kovac, with the Croatian regularly changing systems and personnel. Also able to operate on either flank or as a number ten, his dogged play and inventiveness have even seen him edge ahead of established players such as Aleksandr Golovin or Gelson Martins.

He also has shown an impressive eye for goal, netting seven times last season before an ankle injury robbed him of the last month of the season (and perhaps, with it, a place in the Champions League group stages). After renewing his contract in August, he's picked up right where he left off, and already has seven goals and five assists across all competitions. He's also been integral to France's under 21s, helping the team to five wins and a draw in their qualifying group. With Golovin potentially on his way out in January, there's even less competition for Diop, and it's not difficult to see him in consideration for the senior squad if his improvement continues apace.

Eric Devin



43

AGE : 23 POS : AM

LOVRO
MAJER

No one on this list has made an impact like Lovro Majer has at Rennes this season. Both in terms of quality and surprise. Part of Rennes significant summer transfer outlay which matched PSG's, Majer was the least heralded of sporting director Florian Maurice's acquisitions.

The Croatian's impact was delayed considerably by a hip injury that saw the 23-year-old miss seven games after his late August arrival from Dinamo Zagreb. Fitness remained an issue through October as the midfielder was slowly eased into the side off the bench before a low-key first start in the Europa Conference win at home Mura. Majer's first league start against Lyon just before the November international break proved to be worth the wait, however.

Majer orchestrated the team performance of the season so far as Bruno Génésio's Rennes obliterated the coach's former club 4-1, a scoreline that flattered OL. In tandem with the guile and grace of Flaven Tait, Majer drifted serenely around midfield calmly and confidently dictating play with an untouchable air; picking passes, driving past opponents and appearing out of nowhere in and around the box. Majer fittingly rounded off his performance by scissor kicking home to finish a glorious team move for 2-0.

Majer was unplayable again in Rennes' next outing, a 2-0 win over Montpellier, and posted perhaps his most impressive display of the lot four games later in creating the first four, including all three of Martin Terrier's hat-trick, as Rennes thrashed Saint-Étienne 5-0 in early December to end Claude Puel's reign at the club.

There's a simplicity to Majer's midfield play. Whether he's used as a deep-lying playmaker as a number 10 or as the most forward-thinking of a midfield three, with icy precision he gives the impression that the result of a beautifully lofted pass was never in doubt and that his neat side-stepping of a defender had been planned weeks in advance.

Incredibly, Majer has started just nine games for Rennes, only six have been in Ligue 1, and that small sample size makes his placing on this list tricky but if he continues this form for the next 12 months he'll top the next edition of the GFFN 100.

Adam White



42

AGE : 23 POS : AM

LUDOVIC
BLAS

France's 2016 under 19 European Championship winning side contained the likes of Kylian Mbappé, Amine Harit and Marcus Thuram, all of whom have gone on to establish themselves in top European leagues. Another one of the stars of that tournament was Ludovic Blas. A player not so familiar to audiences outside France, Blas is well on his way to becoming more of a household name across the continent.

Hailing from Guingamp's academy, Blas moved to Nantes in 2019, but this year has been his time to shine. Now 23, Blas is finally delivering on the promise of his talent.

He's always been a classy dribbler, cutting in from the right-wing onto his strong left foot as if his foot is glued to the ball, but, this year, he's combined that ability on the ball and the vision he's demonstrated throughout, with execution and timing.

While his end product was often rushed and ineffective, in 2021 Blas has fixed those issues, and he's become a dynamite player, capable of winning a game on his own.

With six goals in the second half of last season, including one to help Nantes secure victory in the Ligue 1 relegation play-off, and seven so far at the start of this campaign, it's been Blas' best goal-scoring calendar year to date.

That can also be seen in his underlying numbers. Blas is completing around 50% less dribbles per 90 than he did last season (1.6 to 3.0) according to WhoScored as of mid-December, but he's become more effective in the opponents' half.

His xG + xA per 90 minutes of 0.46 in 2021/22 is 0.1 more than last year, and 0.2 more than the year before that. Blas is becoming more reliable and more consistent in the final third.

With a high defensive work rate to boot, Blas is the ideal winger for a side like Nantes, but if he continues the electric form he's displayed in 2021, then it won't be long before bigger clubs come sniffing.

Cameron Smith



steph
MANI DIDI!



41

POS : ST
AGE : 23

As an Englishman to have played in Ligue 1 Stephy Mavididi is part of a very small minority. But considering some of the failures of the past including Joe Cole and Joey Barton, Mavididi's has been rather successful.

The now 23-year-old forward's time in Ligue 1 started when he arrived on loan at Dijon from Juventus in the 2019 summer transfer window. Dijon enabled him to gain his first top-flight experience and, after 10 goal contributions in 28 games, Montpellier made the move to bring him to France permanently.

Since arriving at the Stade de la Mosson, Mavididi has become increasingly instrumental for an impressive Montpellier attack. In the 2020/21 season alone, he managed to net nine times in Michel Der Zakarian's high intensity attacking set-up. Five of those strikes came in 2021 on an impressive run of scoring which saw the former Arsenal man score five times in the space of six Ligue 1 matches.

The most impressive performance from the 23-year-old in the second half of last season came in a 2-1 win over Rennes in which he scored a brace to win the match for his side. For his first strike, he expertly stayed onside from a Têji Savanier free-kick and, at full stretch, managed to send the ball home beyond a hopeless Alfred Gomis for his first goal in almost two months. His second strike was even more impressive. Teammate Elie Wahi was unable to capitalise on a great chance before his rebounded effort fell to an onrushing Mavididi who was able to beat Da Silva with ease thanks to a lovely scooped touch before smashing home.

After such an impressive performance and his second top-flight brace, he went on to score three more times in his next five appearances before embarking on a baron spell in front of goal in the last seven games of the season. The former England U21 international wasn't able to finish the season emphatically but his impressive eye for goal and strikers instincts certainly raised a few eyebrows in France and across the channel back home in Britain.

Mavididi's instincts in front of goal are exceptional due to the time he spent occupying that role in the youth academy at Arsenal. As a professional, he features mainly on the left-flank due to his right footedness and the ability to make diagonal runs and cut in to cause defenders problems but his versatility is one of his best assets and there have been times where he has featured both through the middle and on the right flank for Montpellier.

Before the start of the current season, Mavididi was rumoured to be attracting interest from other Ligue 1 clubs including Marseille. Considering his impressive start to life in France, it is no wonder that teams in European competition were interested in his services. A move didn't transpire in the summer but that hasn't affected his performances in the first half of the 2021/22 season.

In 18 appearances this season, the former Preston and Charlton loanee has scored six times which is already two-thirds of the tally he achieved in 40 appearances last season. Mavididi is undoubtedly an impressive finisher and his 15 goals for Montpellier prove that for someone relatively inexperienced at the top level but some may criticise him for the lack of output when it comes to setting up his teammates.

Chance creation isn't his strongest point and his stats show that but this season there has been a noticeable improvement. After going 40 appearances without an assist last season, the Derby-born forward has managed to assist three times this term.

One of the ways he's creating these dangerous chances and managing to convert frequently is his pace. Whether it be running in behind or speeding onto a loose ball, Mavididi often manages to wander into opportunities and spaces with his pace and this creates dangerous chances for teammates or one for himself to shoot.

As mentioned, the main asset of Mavididi's game is his finishing, the positions he finds himself in and the number of shots that he takes. With such an emphasis on this in his game, it wouldn't be a surprise to see him move into a more central position more often in the future and occupy the role of a centre forward for either Montpellier or his next club.

At just 23 years of age, 2021 has been a major year for his development as he continues to thrive in France's premier division. If he is able to replicate this form going forwards and improve areas of his game like chance creation and assists, Montpellier have an incredible talent on their hands that is far from the finished article but has all the potential to become one of the best attacking talents in Ligue 1.

Liam Wraith



ROMAIN

FAIURE



40⁺¹⁹

POS : AM
AGE : 23

"In football, you can be the king of the world one day and be very low the next," Romain Faivre told Ouest-France earlier this year, neatly summing up his own undulating career to date. Precociously talented as a graceful, visionary number ten, cast in the mould of some of France's greatest creators, the late-blooming Faivre's immediate future is destined to be away from Brittany. But the prospect of longer-term success remains uncertain.

Few in France can match Faivre's ability to progress play via his direct dribbling or by picking a defence dissecting pass. They're two attributes the player prides himself on. "What makes the difference between a good player and a great player is the ability to play forward, to break lines, to find the passes," Faivre explained in February. An elegant creator, Faivre's former youth coach Didier Jousse told First Time Finish Faivre had "a left foot like a hand." Comparisons can be made with Hatem Ben Arfa, a player Faivre describes as "a genius" and with whom he bears more than a striking physical resemblance. Partly thanks to some Ben Arfa-esque elusive dribbling, by mid-October last season Faivre's lightning start included a 68% dribbling success rate, surpassing Neymar's 51% at the time as Ligue 1's leading dribbler. Although often deployed out wide, Faivre's best position is his favourite, the number ten. Tellingly, the Frenchman told L'Équipe in January he "adores Ronaldinho, he really made me love football."

Such ability has brought some major highlights for Faivre after emerging at the start of the 2020/21 campaign. Most memorably, Nice (2-0) and Saint-Etienne (4-1) were dismantled last Winter by Faivre, whose header also beat title-chasing Monaco. This season, Faivre posted a landmark display as he inspired Brest's ultimately unsuccessful second-half comeback against PSG. It was his glorious backheel assist for Frank Honorat that got Brest back in the game just after halftime before a run from inside his own half ended with a deft assist for Steve Mounié to again reduce the gap late on. Although Faivre is already 23, he remains surprisingly inexperienced at senior level. Only fleeting appearances under a succession of coaches meant the majority of his playing time at previous club Monaco came with the reserves in France's sprawling fourth division. Having joined Brest, the 2020/21 campaign was his first full senior season, meaning only 55 Ligue 1 games have been accrued so far. Having missed out on the rigour, intensity and street smarts that are often bred when playing at a high level as a youngster, Faivre notably lacks consistency and often a certain presence to his performances. For each thrilling effervescent display, such as the one against PSG, there are several vacant and ineffective outings. It's a flaw Faivre freely admits. "At times, I disappear," the Frenchman conceded. "When my team has less of the play, I mustn't let myself get frustrated. I'm 22, this is my first pro season, some start at 18 in Ligue 1. Everything is relative. I'm still learning."

This calendar year hasn't accurately represented Faivre's true level either. The first half of last season, with Faivre plunged into the hectic Ligue 1 life as a starter at Brest having been barely on the fringes at Monaco, brought by far his best form. Freed by Olivier Dall'Oglio's characteristic joyously expansive outlook, Faivre led a form Brest side in what seemed to be a burgeoning European challenge. Faivre's first 16 league games brought seven goal contributions and a string of sparkling, creative displays but just four more contributions were added across the rest of the campaign as Brest barely avoided relegation. With little initial warning of his quality, Ligue 1 defences may have simply taken their time in learning to combat Faivre, the player suggesting as much back in February. "Compared to the first part of the season, I can feel more players in my zone," the former France under 21 international said. "They stick to me and prevent me from turning. A lot of things have changed, I have to adapt."

Regardless of his occasionally glorious but often anonymous form during the second half of last season, Faivre received considerable summer interest. His contract running to 2025, a €15m asking price brought enquiries from Bayern Munich, AC Milan and Borussia Mönchengladbach. Both Gladbach and Milan were on the verge of signing the Frenchman before both deals collapsed. Despite a call from Paolo Maldini and the player refusing to travel to Strasbourg in August, Faivre later apologising, Milan were unable to broker an agreement with the Breton club while the Germans were unable to sell other players to free up funds in time. As a result, Faivre remains Brest's biggest sellable asset and renewed interest in 2022 is more than likely, with the player's potential suitors plentiful. Indeed, Le Parisien reported in May that PSG, Bayer Leverkusen, Borussia Dortmund, Leeds, Rennes and Nice, as well as Milan and Gladbach, had all contacted Faivre's entourage. L'Équipe, meanwhile, reported interest from Lyon as early as last December.

Overall this season, the 23-year-old's form has been intermittent but is slowly gathering pace. After a slow start, Faivre now has 12 goal contributions in 18 Ligue 1 games, already one more than he managed in 36 league outings last season despite now playing under the traditionally more stoic Michel Der Zakarian. Despite his numbers accelerating as winter arrived, at one stage the local press questioned Faivre's commitment. "We expect more of him," Der Zakarian stated in the autumn. "Whether that's in how he creates, providing better passes, being more efficient or scoring more goals." Regardless of his effortless creative elegance, Faivre needs to maintain consistency and intensity. That big move, perhaps to an elite European club, is all but secure it seems and Faivre has the ability to transition from a prospect into a great, but feeling like 'King of the World' at one of those bigger clubs is still a long way off as it stands, regardless of his talent.

Adam White



39₋₂₈

AGE : 31 POS : GK

ANTHONY LOPES

Having graduated from Lyon's academy in 2012 and made his first team debut in the same year, Anthony Lopes has been attached to the club ever since. In what has been a tumultuous year, 2021 has seen him both revered and abhorred by fans of Les Gones whilst being a mainstay between the sticks. The Portuguese international started the year in great form having made a massive contribution to a team that had just been crowned Champions d'Automne - the best team in the first half of the season.

Lopes' excellent start to the Ligue 1 season started to fade after a fatal mistake at home to Metz in January. Leya Iseka took the ball around him with ease after poor positioning to score and inflict OL's second defeat of the season in stoppage time. After Lyon surrendered more goals with a weaker defensive unit in the second half of the season, Lopes' job was made much more challenging. The drop-off in the keeper's form was evident with OL conceding a further 7 goals in the second half of the season as he produced his worst save percentage, 70.8% according to FBRef, since 2015/16.

Although Lyon missed out on Champions League football, Lopes was still an important member of their side, playing 38 times in the league and making some vital saves that kept their hopes of qualifying alive at times. However, some fans believed his time at OL would be coming to a close as the season ended. As the summer transfer window began and Peter Bosz arrived, speculation arose that the Euro 2016 winner would be replaced to make room for Ajax's Andre Onana. Difficulty in negotiations saw the deal collapse for Onana, and after attempts to replace him failed, Lopes has found renewed motivation in 2021/22.

Despite a rocky start to life under Bosz with OL struggling in Ligue 1, Lopes has been undeniably brilliant. With a much-improved save percentage of 75% this season and being the saving grace on more than one occasion, he's been the shining light in an overwhelmingly poor start to the 2021/22 season for OL. Brilliant moments like his triple stop in the derby against Saint-Étienne and a man of the match performance in a 4-1 defeat against Rennes has saved Lyon from further embarrassment several times. If Lopes' incredible form runs into 2022, it is hard to imagine he won't be responsible for any turnaround in OL's fortunes.

Liam Wraith



38

AGE : 22 POS : CM

MATTÉO GUENDOUZI

While making him a tough and irksome competitor, Guendouzi's combative, belligerent attitude has often been problematic. However, that provocative persona fits perfectly at the Velodrome, especially in the eyes of a notoriously vociferous fanbase. Unsurprisingly, the now 22-year-old was one of the first on the scene after Dimitri Payet was floored by a bottle thrown by Nice fans earlier this season. A mass brawl ensued.

Typically for Guendouzi, however, his 2021 has been inconsistent after an unproductive loan spell with Hertha Berlin during the second half of last season and some low points at Marseille since too. His all-action, rumbustious style can energise those around him and push teams forward but it also carries a sense of dangerous randomness, as if all hell could break loose thanks to one late tackle or overly ambitious pass.

After a slow opening at the Velodrome, fortunately, a more positive Guendouzi became increasingly the norm as summer became autumn. Initially, he was often deployed unusually far forward, almost as a second striker at times, in Jorge Sampaoli's gung-ho 3-6-1 and Frenchman adapted well to an unusual role and continued to impose himself on games. So much so that he was called up to Didier Deschamps' France squad for the September internationals and won his first cap in November.

Although notable defeats to Lens and Brest were characterised by Guendouzi's characteristic sloppiness, a riotous display in the 3-1 win over Saint-Etienne, a domineering performance in the 4-1 thrashing of Lorient and a fierce midfield outing in the 0-0 draw with PSG were all considerable highlights as the midfielder slowly became an integral part of Sampaoli's team while finding himself in his natural deeper role more often.

Until this season, Guendouzi's career had promised much but delivered little. With Marseille, however, there's already a sense that this could be his chance to find the consistency and control to complement his undoubted technical ability and warrior-like attitude. Without him, Sampaoli's team would lose much of its bite, persistence and vibrancy.

Still just 22, Guendouzi has proven that his quality and potential remain intact and he's finally found the right environment to help them flourish.

Adam White



37⁺⁵⁶

AGE : 24 POS : FW

MARTIN TERRIER

A clinical finish in a one-on-one, a backheel flick and a gracefully curved ball into the top corner. Ask any player in the world and that's probably the definition they would give for a perfect hat-trick. This 'coup du chapeau' was completed by Rennes' forward Martin Terrier in his club's victory over Saint-Étienne this season. It was the latest example of the former Strasbourg prospect's renaissance under Bruno Génésio.

The pair - who had already worked together in Lyon during the 2018/19 season - met again in March 2021, as the former Beijing Guoan coach replaced Julien Stéphan. Bruno Génésio's task was a hard one: to replace Julien Stéphan, the most successful Rennes manager ever.

In a difficult season, one of few satisfactions came via Terrier. In the last 11 games of the 2020/21 season - the 11 first under Génésio - Terrier scored five times and gave three assists.

This season, Rennes have been one of the most entertaining teams in the league, comfortably sitting fourth at Christmas having produced some great football. Terrier has played 25 games so far in all competitions, scoring 9 and assisting two. He's already equalled last season's tally.

The arrival of players like fellow striker Gaëtan Laborde and attacking midfielder Lovro Majer have aided Terrier's good performances. The Croat is the best example, as he provided all three assists for the forward's hat-trick against Saint-Étienne. Another parameter that could explain Terrier's transformation is his positioning.

This season, Terrier has played most of his games as a striker in a 4-4-2, alongside Laborde, finally settling in one position. It allowed him to score more goals, while still contributing some elements of wing play, gracing the pitch with his quality movement with the ball.

After his stellar performance against Saint-Étienne, more is expected from the Frenchman. 2022 could be the year he finally realises his potential.

Adrian Dryll



36

AGE : 21 POS : CB

JEAN-CLAIR TODIBO

When you've watched football for many years, you can recognise top talent when you see it. With Jean-Clair Todibo this year, his talent has been startling obvious since joining Nice, as has his room for further growth. So much so, it's easy to forget that he's still just 22. He's the kind of player that will make his former clubs regret ever letting him leave.

Todibo made a similarly immediate impact as a teenager when breaking through at Toulouse in late 2018. Just ten senior games into his career, his languid defensive grace, his ability to cleverly wriggle away from danger and his vision on the ball had Barcelona making longing glances across the Pyrenees.

There, however, Todibo's career began to stutter. Furious at his insistence on leaving having not signed a pro deal, meaning minimal compensation for one of the club's most talented academy graduates ever, Toulouse exiled Todibo from the first-team squad. Although less acrimoniously, Todibo found himself similarly distant from first-team football in Spain, resulting in a series of loans.

Leant to Schalke and Benfica during his time at Barcelona, with neither club picking up the buy-out clause set in his contract, some questioned whether he was destined to realise his potential and become the top defender he seemed destined to become at TFC, but his spell at Nice is starting to put an end to any doubts.

Having been a little too keen to take risks at Toulouse, he's now comfortable on the ball and knows what pass to make at what time. His tackling is superb, with his quickness and agility allowing him to keep up with the best, as he showed in Nice's 0-0 draw away at PSG where he dealt with Kylian Mbappé comfortably. He's become an outstanding defender and is a joy to watch for those who still enjoy the art of defending.

Whilst he may not be a household name just yet, give it a few years and the €8.5m Nice paid for him will look like a bargain. Christophe Galtier's side have one of the tightest defences in Ligue 1 by goals conceded and a lot of that has to do with the brilliance of Jean-Clair Todibo. He's only going to get better in 2022.

Tom Scholes



MOHAMED

BAYO



35

POS : ST
AGE : 23

Mohamed Bayo was central to Clermont's promotion push last year and he has continued to make headlines in Ligue 1. Having grown up in the area, Bayo was living a Clermont fan's dream last season as he fired 22 goals in 38 games to take Les Lanciers into the top flight of French football for the first time in the club's 110 year history.

The now 23-year-old Bayo's early Clermont career was mixed as he found himself regularly playing with the reserves, struggling to break into the first team. Searching for minutes and first-team experience, he joined USL Dunkerque on loan. Having scored 16 times across 36 games for the third tier National 1 side in the 2018/19 and 2019/20 seasons, Bayo returned to his boyhood club for the 2020/21 campaign and finally made his mark by helping to achieve promotion, finishing as Ligue 2's top scorer.

Clermont's promotion campaign impressed throughout as Pascal Gastien led his side to a second-place finish, claiming 72 points and the highest goal difference in the division in the process. Bayo was crucial. Not just as a goal scorer but also as a creator, adding seven assists to his 22 strikes. The total meant the Guinean international contributed to 47.5% of Clermont's Ligue 2 goals last season – a magisterial contribution to the greatest season in Les Lanciers' modern history.

The Clermont born striker has remained prolific in Ligue 1. Having totalled 11 contributions so far, with nine goals and two assists in eight games 18 games into the season, only Jonathan David and Wissam Ben Yedder have scored more goals than the Guinean. Bayo's excellent domestic form in France has also seen him recently receive international recognition of late, making his international debut in March 2021 for Guinea against Mali in a 1-0 victory.

Having scored in an opening brace of 2-0 wins at the start of the campaign, Bayo drew interest from Bordeaux before the end of the transfer window. However, with the promoted side so reliant on the striker, Bayo stayed put and announced his intention to do so with a red pill or blue pill Matrix themed Twitter post at the end of August before signing a new deal until 2024. A €6m fee was discussed but Bordeaux were unable to raise sufficient funds through player sales.

The 23-year-old is supremely confident in his scoring ability which is shown in his shot-taking numbers. His 3.39 shots per 90 minutes in Ligue 2 last season ranked him in the top three shot takers per 90 in the league and would have made him one of Ligue 1's top four shot takers after taking a league-high 116 shots in France's second tier. Bayo's shot numbers increased

over his first four top-flight starts at 4.1 shots per 90, a number only bettered by five players, and despite Clermont worsening form since then he's still average 2.56 shots per 90 placing him inside the top 25 in Ligue 1. His accuracy and clinical edge in front of goal also can't be understated, with 47.5% of his shots hitting the target last season while just under 19% of his shots found the back of the net.

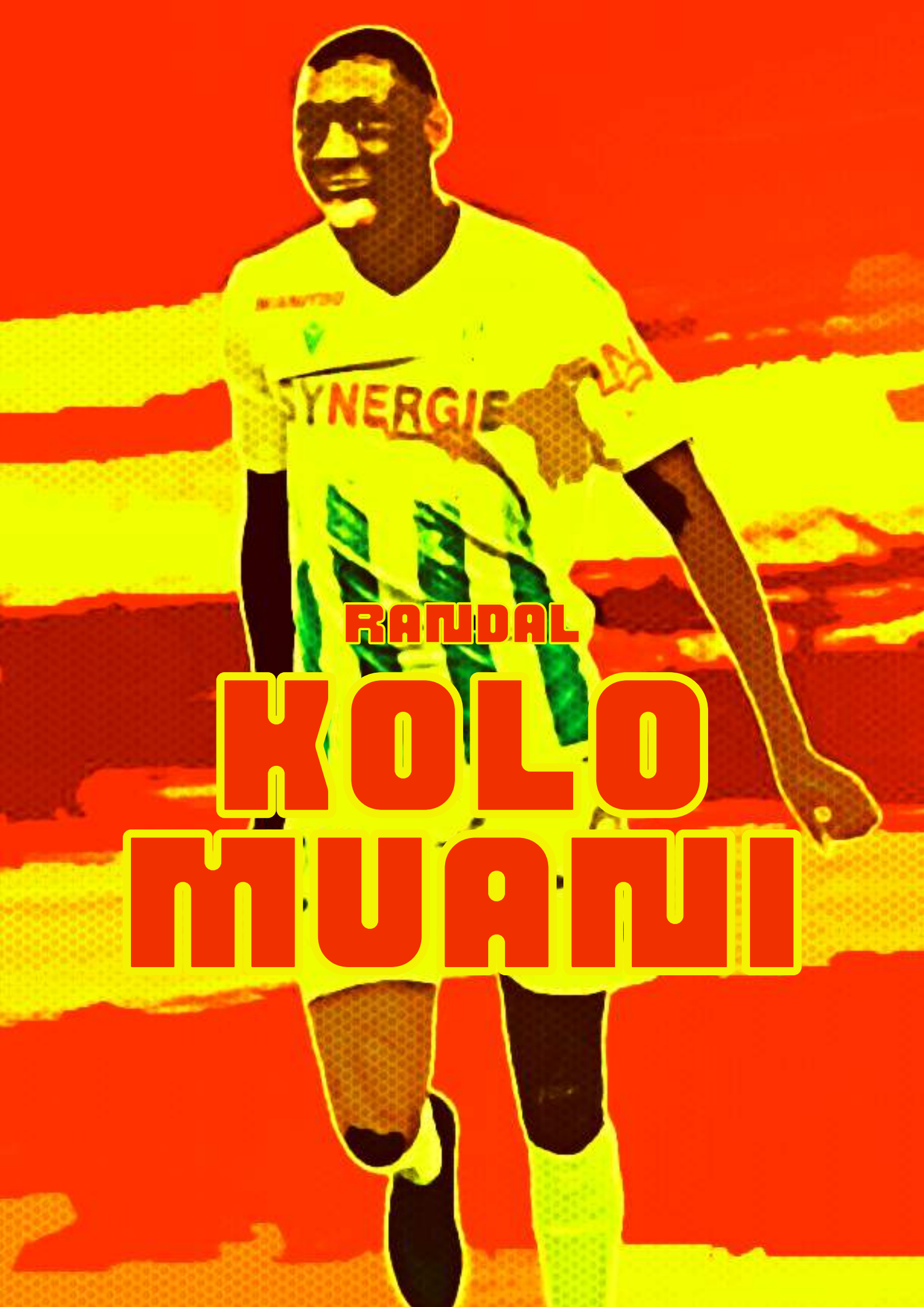
Bringing others into the game is in the DNA of any modern striker and Bayo is no different. His first touch is somewhat unconventional but effective and he can be often seen receiving the ball and turning his man with what looks to be an awkward or heavy touch but somehow his close control allows him to escape and get his shot away or play in a teammate with a technique reminiscent of a young Romelu Lukaku. An unconventional forward, Bayo isn't your natural number nine. With impressive aerial ability and a clinical edge, he could be classed as a traditional penalty box striker, but his ability on the ball, awkward but effective first touch and creative vision make Bayo a much more well-rounded player.

Despite that new contract and Clermont's unwillingness to sell, Bayo will be highly sought after next summer should he maintain his form. Although the signings of Mbaye Niang and Alberth Elis will complicate things, Bordeaux would still be a good fit for Bayo. Looking abroad, Bayo could be a great fit for German football. His ability to play quickly and on the turn fits the style and tempo of many German clubs. If Wolfsburg were to lose Wout Weghorst, Bayo's stature and playing style could make him an ideal replacement for the towering Dutchman.

West Ham were also linked too while clubs lower down the Premier League table will also be looking for a reliable goal scorer who can keep them up next summer and Bayo's style would suit teams like Brentford or Southampton. A continued run of stellar form from Bayo in Ligue 1 this season will undoubtedly see the Guinean international edge onto many more clubs' radars in the near future.

Having dropped off a little in output after those opening four games, from which Clermont took eight points, Bayo has contributed a steady stream of goals across the autumn despite his team slipping back towards the relegation zone. Goals against Lens and Lorient helped secure desperately needed draws while he netted a crucial winner last month at Angers. Bayo is proving that, regardless of the opposition or the quality and form of those behind him, he's a reliable and consistent goalscorer - a rare commodity in Ligue 1's bottom half. Unfortunately for Clermont, however, that means the local lad is unlikely to remain local for much longer.

Liam Wraith



RANDAL

**KOLO
MUANI**



34

POS : FW
AGE : 23

Nantes found themselves in dire circumstances last season. Staring down the barrel at relegation after one of the worst seasons in their modern history, Les Canaries needed someone to depend on. That man was 22-year-old Randal Kolo-Muani. The Paris born forward became one of the most promising talents in Ligue 1 as his performances played a big part in helping Antoine Koumbaré's men to safety.

With 17 goal contributions in the league, scoring nine goals while adding eight assists plus a relegation play-off strike against Ligue 2 hopefuls Toulouse, Kolo-Muani was Mr. Dependable for Nantes last term. Nantes are a historic club, last winning Ligue 1 in 2001, and relegation would've been a travesty. The French under 21 international had a hand in 36.2% of Nantes' league goals, meaning, without him, that nightmare may have otherwise been a foregone conclusion.

Born in Bondy, the same Paris suburb where Kylian Mbappé was raised, the young Kolo-Muani played for local side US Torcy where his talents were spotted by Nantes. Having moved to Brittany in 2015, the forward signed his first professional deal in 2018 after impressive performances for Les Canaries' reserves before making his senior debut in a 3-0 defeat to Saint-Étienne in November 2018.

Initially, Kolo-Muani struggled to make an impression, however, and was limited to just four first-team appearances in the 2018/19 campaign. Searching for minutes, he was loaned out to third-tier Boulogne where he soon flourished thanks to his creative abilities rather than goal scoring talents, making five assists in 14 appearances while scoring three times.

Upon his return to Stade de la Beaujoire, Kolo-Muani quickly established himself as one of the most sought-after talents in Ligue 1 during the 2020/21 campaign despite playing for a struggling side and suffering through three coaching changes. It was his goal and assist that earned a famous 2-1 win at PSG back in March, nonchalantly jinking past Marquinhos to slam home an equaliser, before four goals in the final three games made sure Nantes avoided the bottom two. Those displays catapulted the young forward into Sylvain Ripoll's France Olympic squad last summer, and, despite a woeful French campaign, Kolo-Muani was perhaps the only young player to emerge with his reputation enhanced.

Although discussion over what exactly his best position is continues, given his abilities as a number ten and out wide, Kolo-Muani has primarily been deployed as a centre-forward in France but tends to make runs into the wider channels. His intelligent movement and ability to run in behind makes him unpredictable for defenders. With blistering speed, the versatile forward is often found harrying opposition defences to win the

ball back as the leader of the press, as evidenced by his 4.24 successful presses per 90 over the last year.

Also confident with the ball at his feet, Kolo-Muani attempts 3.37 dribbles per 90 with 1.62 being successful. That may seem unproductive but, when successful, the results are impressive with the young Frenchman averaging 1.18 carries into the penalty area per 90 and 0.16 goal-creating actions per 90 which are created from a dribble, placing him in the 98th percentile of top five league forwards. The Nantes man also wins an impressive 2.46 fouls per 90.

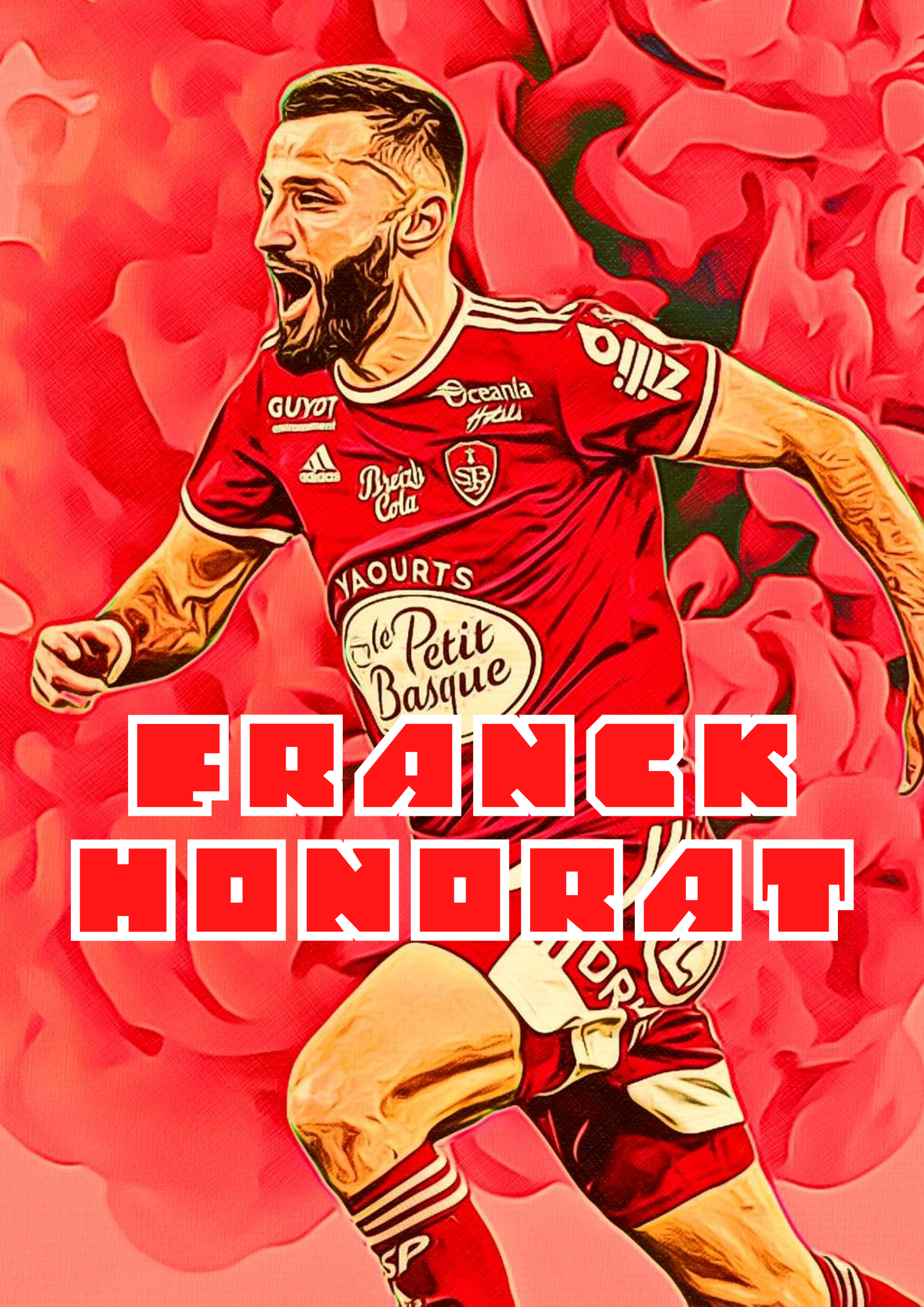
Kolo-Muani makes up for a lack of consistent cutting edge via his creativity, tallying just two fewer assists than goals across his senior career so far. Nevertheless, 17 goals from 65 senior Nantes appearances to date shows Kolo-Muani is, at this stage of his career, still not overly prolific but he is very much capable of the specular, as he has shown this season. Against Metz back in August, as a cross was fired in from the left, Kolo-Muani made a smart near-post run before gracefully flicking the ball home with the outside of his foot to take the lead. At Angers, close control in the box thrillingly sat down two defenders and Angers' goalkeeper Paul Bernardoni before he emphatically fired home as part of a stand out display in a superb 4-1 triumph.

Unsurprisingly, the 22-year-old has caught the eye across the continent. Eintracht Frankfurt were heavily interested last summer, reportedly offering a five-year contract. Playing attacking, expansive football and often counterattacking, Eintracht's style would have fit Randal nicely. After offers of €5m were rejected and Nantes threatened to report the German club to FIFA, Frankfurt's interest cooled. Lyon also tested the waters on deadline day as they went in search of a versatile and technical striker but Nantes, so late in the window, weren't interested in negotiating.

Last January, OGC Nice, RB Leipzig and Brentford were also all rumoured to be interested in the Frenchman. Given their preference for attacking styles with quick and calculated transitions, all would suit Kolo-Muani's abilities. The 22-year-old's contract is set to expire in the summer and Frankfurt are again likely to be an interested party with the player free to discuss terms with other clubs from January 1st.

Surprising many, Nantes are a long way from the dire circumstances of relegation trouble this season. That improvement is in no small part down to the form and development of the 22-year-old French forward. A versatile, technical, graceful creator, Randal Kolo-Muani remains Nantes' Mr. Dependable. But, given he's available on a free transfer at the end of the season with his list of suitors growing all the time, for how much longer?

Liam Wraith



FRANCK HONORAT



POS : FW
AGE : 25

Stade Brestois 29, or Brest as they are more commonly known, do not often get any recognition until it is time to spin an innuendo or two. Football aficionados tend to know them because of it, but not much else. These days, there is a bit more knowledge of them because of the buzz around midfielder Romain Faivre and his incredible potential. What that often means for teams not widely watched by neutrals is that other players within the team fade into the background, regardless of what they show. Basically, the well-known franchise player casts a shadow over other players in the team. For Franck Honorat, this has been the reality.

If there were to be a list of Ligue 1's most underrated players, Honorat would be somewhere near the top. For all the quality that the inimitable Faivre brings to the side, it is Honorat who happens to be Brest's X-factor player. Calling him the perfect sidekick would do his talents a great disservice, as he carries too much of a threat on his own to be that. He is a menace operating down the wings with his ability to smartly receive the ball and get it into the more dangerous areas with his explosiveness.

When he isn't helping to carry the ball into the final third, he is getting it into the penalty area and causing enough chaos to force something. 8 goals last season in Ligue 1 – the second highest at the club, just one short of the highest – also shows his eye for goal. In fact, the best part is that he beat his xG by a tally of 4.4, the third-highest difference in Ligue 1, according to FBRef. Considering the fact that the likes of Cardona, Faivre and Charbonnier were all within 1.0 of their xG, it is easy to see his importance for them.

For long, those who have watched Honorat consistently – specifically in Ligue 2 – have been aware of his potential. There was always the question of whether he could reproduce what he showed at Clermont Foot for a Ligue 1 side, and his short spell at Saint-Étienne did not exactly assuage any doubts. It is at Brest, however, that he has truly come into his own. His debut season gave him much needed continuity, with 36 league appearances in total, 28 of which were starts.

His 8 goals, 4 assists did not quite capture his excellence all season long, with those assist numbers failing to reflect his creative work for a side that finished 17th. There was still ample evidence of his work, however, with 14 big chances created, making him the joint 5th best final ball creator in the league. Only Memphis Depay, Ángel Di María, Florian Thauvin and Farid Boulaya created more. Perhaps if his teammates could finish more effectively, he would have had double figures in assists and gotten more hype he deserved.

This season though, Honorat has picked up from where he left off. His brilliant start to the campaign has been one of the reasons why Brest became the form team of the division recently, with 6 straight wins. The most impressive performance of that run came against Marseille at the Vélodrome where Honorat scored the winner, a thumping shot after neat interplay with Jérémy Le Douaron and a smooth run down the middle. The goal showed all that Honorat is about: the explosiveness, his smart movement, his accurate shooting and his ability to combine smartly with teammates. Marseille did not know what hit them.

The most striking thing about Honorat is his strong technical ability, which is backed up by his deceptively good close control. Despite not being a volume dribbler or one that completes a lot of them, he is still able to do a lot of ball-carrying because of his skill set. If he were a 9, he would be halfway in the Karim Benzema mould, and it shows when he goes on one of his runs. He obviously does not have the supreme quality of the Real Madrid man, or even half of it, but there are similarities in how he carries the ball and draws opposition players to himself.

This season so far, he leads Ligue 1 in crosses into the penalty area. He is third for passes into penalty area, carries into the final third and total shots on target. It is clear to see how much of Brest's good form is linked to him and the work that he does. He has also created 7 big chances, which means he is on course to match his tally for last season.

Whenever Faivre does leave Brest, Honorat would be expected to shoulder a lot more responsibility to make up for the hole that would be left behind. On the evidence of what we have already seen from him, there is no doubt that he would be up for it. Brest look likely to remain in the division and may not even have to deal with any relegation struggle this time around, under the guidance of Michel Der Zakarian. In Honorat, they have a player who guarantees an offensive threat, one who continues to be an X-factor that most mid-to-lower table teams often need.

2021 has been the year in which Franck Honorat really came into his own. All that potential he carried finally started to show at the level required. There is a lot more to come from him in 2022, and it is looking increasingly likely that he will start to command a lot more attention beyond France.

More eyes will be on him as the season progresses. At 25, it is just the right time to start peaking.

Astorre S. Cerebrone

32⁺⁴⁰

AGE : 29 POS : ST

KEVIN
VOLLAND

Within months of his arrival on the Mediterranean, Kevin Volland had already forced his way into the limelight of French football. Signing quietly from Bayer Leverkusen in early September 2020, the German had already bagged seven goals by the end of the year, accounting for his placement at 72nd spot in last year's edition of the GFFN 100. The continuation of his impressive form into the new year has earned him a much higher position this time around.

By the end of the 2020/21 Ligue 1 season, Volland had contributed 16 goals to the Monégasque campaign, a total which could have been far higher had teammate Ben Yedder ceded his penalty-taking duties: the Frenchman converted 10 spot kicks across the season. Nevertheless, the German's contribution helped the Principality side squeeze ahead of Lyon onto the podium, granting them a place in the Champions League qualifying round.

Even without penalties, Kevin Volland ranks as the highest scoring German in elite club football with 19 goals in the last calendar year (ahead of Serge Gnabry and İlkay Gündoğan on 17). It was precisely this form that merited his first call up for the national side since 2016 in February of this year. Unfortunately, he has not been able to capitalise on the opportunity, making five substitute appearances for a total of 64 minutes, 10 of which in the group stage of Euro 2020. Given the limited game time, it is hardly a surprise that he has been unable to contribute a single international goal involvement this calendar year. At the age of 29, there remains little time for Volland to stake a real claim on Die Mannschaft's starting XI.

Indeed, the German may even have worked his way further up the list had he continued his goal-scoring record of 2020/21 into the new season. Unfortunately, this has not been the case. Over the course of last season, Volland defied expectations in scoring 0.51 goals per 90 minutes, from an xG of just 0.34 per 90, according to FBRef. This season, his record of just 0.31 goals per 90 from roughly the same expected goals is proof of a drop-off following the summer break. This is one of the reasons for which Monaco currently sit in seventh position, three points off the podium. If they are to genuinely contend for next year's Champions League spots, Volland will have to find the form with which he finished the last campaign.

Jack Wdding

31⁺⁶⁴

AGE : 27 POS : AM

BENJAMIN
BOURIGEAUD

Benjamin Bourigeaud, another one of the Lens youth academy success stories, continues his steady climb up the Ligue 1 ladder. It seems not too long ago that he was a young prospect and now, just a month away from turning 28, he seems to have arrived in his prime.

The Frenchman can be described as a central midfielder, who can be deployed as a wide player depending on the system and assignment. Bourigeaud is not quite a box-to-box player but definitely plays from line to line when called upon, not quite a playmaker but one who creates chances and has the ability to play in tight spaces.

This season Bourigeaud has managed four assists, managed 103 progressive passes, the fifth most in Ligue 1 and 38 completed open play passes into the penalty area. Only Lionel Messi has more this season. So, clearly, Bourigeaud is having a very promising season, and these contributions have helped Rennes regain form under Bruno Génésio. So much so that they're perhaps the team to beat as it stands in Ligue 1 and in the Conference League this season.

Bourigeaud's individual skills are highlighted by his touch, range, and crossing ability with his right foot. The 27-year-old is effective from distance on a set piece, and he doesn't hesitate to let off a shot. The only thing that may be stopping Bourigeaud from being on more bigger clubs' radars is that he doesn't have the speed to be deployed as a true winger. The Frenchman is at his best in systems that favour his abilities.

That said, Bourigeaud is by no means a one-trick pony. The term "system player" can often be used in a pejorative sense. However, it still takes quality to be successful in that system. The 4-4-2 and 4-3-3 used by Rennes allow Bourigeaud to utilize his motor and pinpoint crossing to be a quality right midfielder.

Génésio has figured out a way to get all of those on his list of quality midfielders into a winning team. Deploying Flavien Tait and Lovro Majer in the midfield, Bourigeaud wide and rotating midfielders like Jonas Martin and Santamaria has been a formula for magic so far.

Tony-Thomas DesRois



A full-page action shot of a football player, Ludovic Ajorque, in a blue jersey with a white number 23 and a green and yellow logo. He is diving horizontally towards the left, with his right arm extended forward and his left arm bent. He is wearing white shorts and white socks. The background is a solid blue color with a diagonal line running from the top left to the bottom right. The player's shadow is visible on the ground below him.

LUDOVIC AJORQUE



30⁺⁵⁶

POS : ST
AGE : 27

Strasbourg have one of the best attacking line-ups in Europe this season by numbers, no thanks in part to Ludovic Ajorque. The 6'6 centre-forward has already got 14 goal contributions in 17 games, second-best in Ligue 1 behind Kylian Mbappé, and his nine goals and five assists mean only Kylian Mbappé has contributed to more goals in Ligue 1 this season. No doubt the 27-year-old will have garnered the attention of Europe's top scouts, and there are even some who believe he has his place in the French national team, should this immense form continue.

Ludovic Ajorque was born on the island of Réunion, a French overseas territory located in the Indian Ocean around 500 miles east of Madagascar. Ludovic is of both Réunionese and Malagasy descent and was approached by the Madagascan FA in 2018 but he declined to switch national allegiance, claiming that he would rather concentrate on club football at that moment. He also has some family pedigree in the sport. His father, Jean-Noël, played for the Lens reserve side between 1990 and 1994 before spending the entirety of the rest of his career on his home island of Réunion.

Ajorque arrived in Metropolitan France in 2012 when Angers took a chance on the then 18-year-old. At 20, he signed his first professional contract but he would only ever play a single game for Angers, in the first round of the Coupe de la Ligue. The following two years he was loaned out, firstly to Le Poiré-sur-Vie VF then to Luçon VF, both third-tier teams at the time. Considering where he is now, it's shocking to think that by his 22nd birthday Ajorque had never made a single appearance in the top two tiers of French football.

In the summer of 2016, Ajorque transferred to then Ligue 2 club Clermont. In his first season, he scored five and assisted four in 28 league appearances, helping the Auvergne club to a mid-table finish. The following season he was a lot more prolific. In 36 games he managed 14 goals and three assists, making him the sixth-highest goalscorer in Ligue 2. That earned him the opportunity to play Ligue 1 football with Racing Strasbourg. He has so far played 118 games in all competitions for Le Racing scoring 47 goals and assisting 17. Notably, he holds the record for the quickest brace scored in Ligue 1, scoring in the 69th and 70th minute in a 2-2 draw with Lyon during the 2018/19 season - 103 seconds between the goals.

Ajorque's goalscoring ability has seemingly gone unnoticed for a while now. Last season he finished the season on 16, making him joint fourth top goalscorer alongside Burak Yilmaz, Gaëtan Laborde and Kevin Volland. An incredible feat considering his club only survived relegation on the final day. This season, after 19 matchdays, the Strasbourg man is joint third in the scorers' table with nine goals from his 17 games.

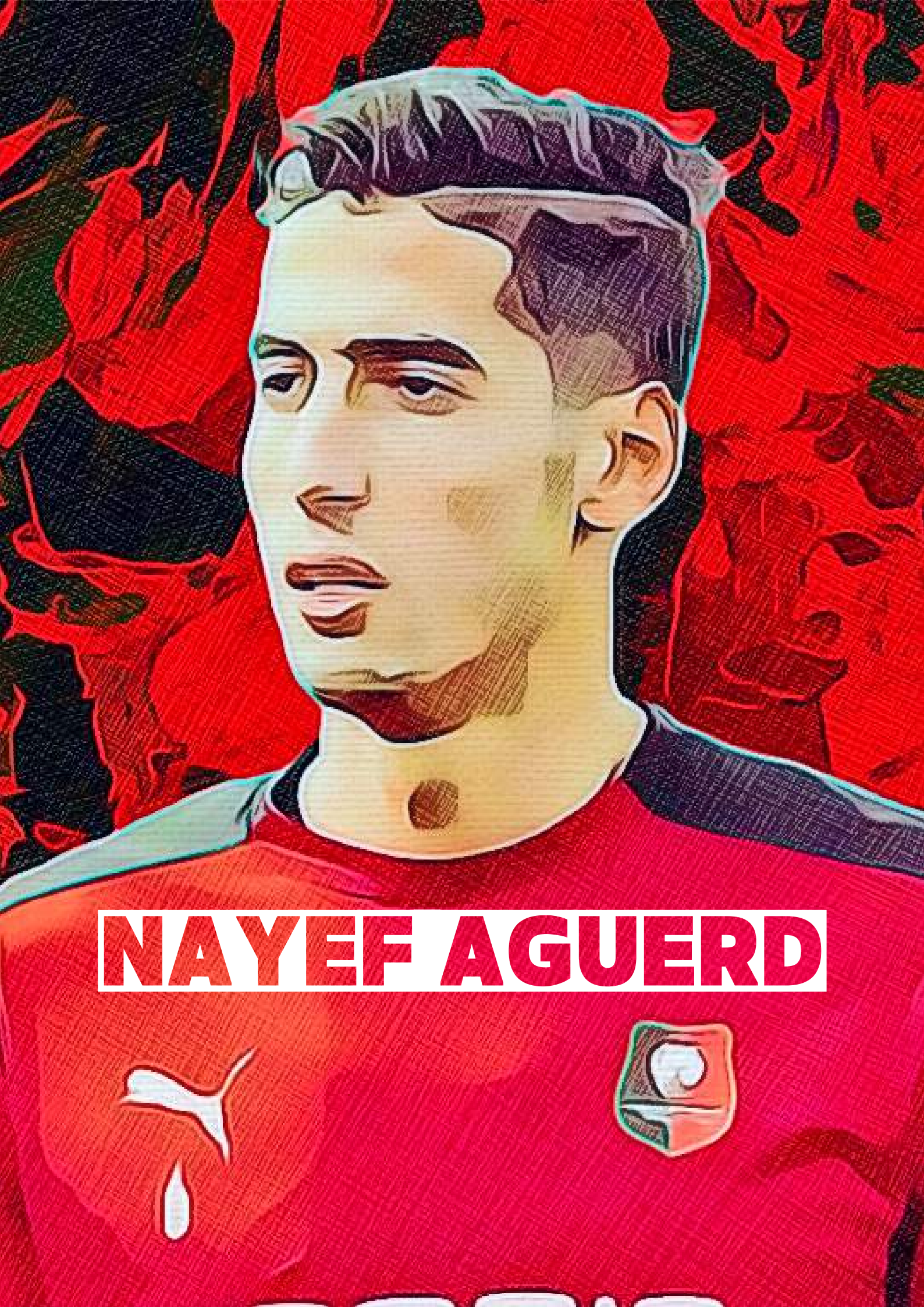
It's not only his scoring record that impresses - he has the ability to bring the best out of his teammates too. Speaking to Téléfoot, Strasbourg midfielder Adrien Thomasson explained: "He's an altruistic player, who doesn't just think about his own statistics." It's a fact backed up by his five assists in 17 games this season. Thomasson also remarked on his work rate and willingness to defend. "There's also his way of giving it all, defending for the team. He's the first to press and the first to come back and defend." According to FBRef, Ajorque averages 1.18 clearances per 90 minutes, putting him inside the top 12% of attackers in Europe's top five leagues this season, and 1.3 tackles per 90 (top 9%). Being 6'6", he's also an enormous asset on set-pieces at both ends, winning 5.27 aerial duels per 90 and ranking in the top 6% of attackers.

After an impressive start to the 21/22 season, some fans are starting to consider him a candidate for the French national team, although he does have very strong competition in his position. Didier Deschamps does not tend to shuffle his squad between international breaks, with any changes to his squad often being injury-related or due to extreme drop-offs in form. For the World Cup in Qatar this year, Ajorque is up against Kylian Mbappé, Karim Benzema and Wissam Ben Yedder. For the fourth option, Deschamps has a large pool of French talent at his disposal. Marcus Thuram was called up for the Euros this summer and has four caps to his name but suffered an injury in August which put him out for two months. The extremely talented Gaëtan Laborde is yet to win a cap despite his impressive form for Montpellier and now Rennes in 2021.

The one thing that Ajorque has on these guys is his similarity to Olivier Giroud, who was consistently picked by Deschamps due to his ability to play the role as the hold-up striker who brings others into play. This comes with the caveat that Ajorque is not exactly the most versatile player. He doesn't have the athleticism or the dribbling ability to play out wide if needed that Marcus Thuram does, for example.

If any club were interested in "Le Volcano Bomber", as the Strasbourg fans have affectionately named him due to his Réunionese roots (Réunion being a volcanic island) and his hard-man looks (bomber as in the album by rock band Motörhead), his market value is currently estimated at around £11m. However, it's doubtful that the club would be interested in selling. Strasbourg will be looking to retain his services at all costs to help them push for the European spots this season.

James Evans



NAYEF AGUARD



29⁺⁴

POS : CB
AGE : 25

When you're a defender in a team competing on the wrong end of the table, there's always the likelihood that perceptions of your ability will not match reality. Things like clean sheets and goals conceded will almost certainly make you look bad. And even if you are able to beat all that to earn a positive reputation, bigger teams would still think twice before committing to a transfer. For Nayef Aguerd, this may have been one of the main reasons why he never got the respect he deserved while at Dijon. Admittedly, he didn't play a lot of games due to injuries and the premature end to the 19/20 Ligue 1 season due to the pandemic. However, in the games in which he did play, the signs were there. He was a diamond in the rough.

Dijon were not always the eyesore that we saw in 2020/21 when their relegation was inevitable months before it happened. In fact, while Aguerd was there, they were one of the more exciting teams in the league – even if results didn't always reflect that.

They were a team loved by neutrals, not just because of how they played but also because of the players they had on show. Aguerd may not have had the swagger of forward Mounir Chouiar or the relentless hustle of striker Julio Tavares, but he was often a rock at the back.

Whenever he played, the Dijon defence looked a lot less vulnerable, the quality of their build-up was elevated and he was so dominant in the air that he affected things in both boxes. Poor performances were obviously expected every now and then but it was clear he could slot seamlessly into a team with bigger ambitions. That team turned out to be Stade Rennais, who swooped for the Morocco international in the summer of 2020, paying just over €4m.

As far as bargains go, Aguerd has been up there for Rennes and indeed Ligue 1. They were a team playing Champions League football for the first time in their history when they signed him. Going from Dijon to a team playing at such a level was always going to be a huge ask, but Aguerd has handled it brilliantly. Their Champions League campaign was forgettable but he still performed admirably while consistently delivering fine performances in Ligue 1.

In fact, he played 35 of their 38 league games and finished the season with more appearances in all competitions than in any other season in his professional career. It was evidence of his quality and that he was able to quickly become a key member of the side in just his first season, despite the huge jump.

It was in December 2020 that Aguerd really started to enjoy his football as Rennes turned around a wretched start to the season. Even during February 2021's dip in results, Aguerd remained one of the shining lights. Julien Stéphan's departure and Bruno Génésio's arrival didn't affect his place in the team or his importance as Rennes experienced a resurgence that pushed them to a sixth-place finish and qualification for the maiden Europa Conference League. Aguerd's contributions were key and many took notice. As a result of his performances, he was nominated for the Marc-Vivien-Foé prize, awarded to the best African football player playing in the French Football Championship.

In the summer, he was the subject of a €20m bid from English Premier League club West Ham, but Rennes refused to let him go. Slowly but surely, he'd finally caught the eye not just in France but in England. In hindsight, they made the right choice because his profile has kept rising and his start to the 2021/22 season has been nothing short of brilliant. Again, he's been dominant in both boxes, while also showing his range as a defender. At the time of writing in mid-December, he led the league in touches, was third for aerials won, third for clearances, third for percentage of aerials won, fourth for progressive passing distance and sixth for progressive carrying distance. He was also second for pass targets – as he was last season – a sign that he always knows where to be to receive a pass and constantly makes himself available.

Whether you need the Moroccan to lead your build-up with his progressive passing or carrying, or you need him to deal with threats, he responds emphatically. On top of that, he's already scored five goals in all competitions as well. Rennes topped their Europa Conference League group which included Tottenham Hotspur and are currently title long-shot contenders along with Marseille and OGC Nice.

In 2021, Aguerd also became more important for the Moroccan national team. From four caps in four years before 2021, he now has over 10 caps and looks set to be an important member of the team going to the African Cup of Nations at the start of 2022. He has also been an important part of their flawless World Cup qualifying campaign and will expect to play in Qatar if Morocco get past the final phase of qualifiers.

When the year began, eyes were starting to turn towards Nayef Aguerd, as many wondered just how good he was and would become. At this point, it's clear he's one of Ligue 1's top defenders. It's inevitable that teams bigger than West Ham will look his way in 2022. It remains to be seen if Rennes will be able to keep their star asset beyond this season.

Astorre S. Cerebrone



RENATO

SANCHES



28⁻¹⁹

POS : CM
AGE : 24

In 2016, Renato Sanches pipped the likes of Marcus Rashford, Ousmane Dembélé and Leroy Sané to the prestigious UEFA Golden Boy award after being crowned Young Player of the Tournament at EURO 2016. His performances the season prior with Benfica, as well as his arrival onto the international scene with the Seleção, earned him a big-money move to German giants Bayern Munich. After a few injuries mixed in with a disastrous loan spell in the Premier League with Swansea City, young Renato had gone from future Ballon d'Or winner to one of Europe's biggest flops of the decade. The Portuguese, now 24, has seemingly changed his career arc and is once again a potential transfer target for Europe's "superclubs".

Renato was born to a São-Toméan father and a Cape Verdean mother in one of the many impoverished suburbs of Lisbon. His parents split up not long after he was born, and he grew up with his mother in a suburb called Musgueira. Some of his key traits as a professional such as his aggression to win the ball back, his natural flair and his dribbling ability can be traced back to playing football on the narrow streets and concrete pitches of Musgueira against kids much older and taller than him.

At the age of nine, Benfica's academy snapped him up for a price of just €750 and 25 footballs from his local side, Águias de Musgueira. After a successful season in the Portuguese second division with Benfica's B team, he was given his first-team debut in November 2015, aged just 18. An impressive second half of the season earned him a place in Portugal's EURO 2016 set-up where he really broke onto the scene.

His performances caught the eye of many major European clubs such as Manchester United and Real Madrid, but it was Bayern Munich that splashed the cash, spending an initial €35m which could have risen significantly if he met certain objectives. A tough first season at the Allianz Arena led manager Carlo Ancelotti to send him out on loan to Premier League side Swansea City. Sanches featured in just 12 league games for the Jacks, making his last appearance on the 2nd January 2018. His now-infamous short pass out of play, to seemingly no one, at Stamford Bridge summed up Sanches' time in Wales.

Having made just 17 appearances the following season back with Bayern, Renato revealed his intention to leave the club in August 2019. Just seven days later, Lille announced his signature for a club-record €20m. Since arriving in Lille, Renato has rediscovered his feet somewhat. He initially was played on the right of a double pivot in a 4-2-3-1 system, before moving out to the right-wing. When Galtier returned to a 4-4-2, Sanches was played centrally again as a tireless box-to-box midfielder. Renato won Lille's player of the month award for both

December 2019 and January 2020 as injuries to Yusuf Yazici and Timothy Weah meant he returned to the right-wing.

Renato's fine form meant that he held his starting position up until the season was ended prematurely – rather unfortunately timed for Les Dogues considering they missed out on the Champions League by a solitary point. Yet another hamstring injury in late 2020 meant Sanches lost his starting spot to the talented Boubakary Soumaré, now of Leicester City. Despite this, Sanches' versatility provided vital depth in various positions. Versatility is the word that comes to mind almost immediately when one thinks of Renato Sanches. He is adept at playing anywhere in the central and right-sided positions of the midfield, from a holding number six sweeping up the danger in front of the back four, an eight spraying pinpoint passes out wide, or even a tricky number ten, progressing the ball up the pitch into the final third.

Renato has all the attributes of a world-class midfielder, he just needs to prove that he can handle the fitness demands of the highest level of the professional game, the frequency at which he gets injured could be the sticking point for any potential suitor. Sanches has blistering pace and acceleration, is a silky dribbler, and can certainly pick a pass. It's rare to find a player so comfortable in the attacking phases of play that also defends with such determination. It is clear how Sanches earned his nickname "O Bulo" or 'The Bull'. The relentlessness of his pressing to win the ball back for his team and his strength to knock opposition players off the ball is unique.

This summer it seemed as though Renato would be on the move again, with Lille being in need of cash after the pandemic and financial mismanagement that hit the club hard over the last year or so. Liverpool were interested in the Portuguese midfielder, although they were unwilling to meet Lille's €40m valuation. It had been reported that Juventus were tempted to make a swoop too. However, Renato's agent revealed that there had been no such contact from any representative of the club. The player himself revealed in the autumn that he would have signed for Barcelona had he not been injured before the end of the window.

With the January transfer window upon us, it's not unfeasible for Lille to try and offload Sanches, cashing in on the player who has only 18 months left on his contract, instead of waiting and reducing his price further, even potentially losing him for free if no agreement is made by January 2023. Renato Sanches would probably cost somewhere in the region of €30-35m, an absolute steal for a player of his quality and potential. It's easy to forget that he is still just 24 years of age and has plenty of years left in the tank yet. Wherever his future may lie, the golden boy turned flop is certainly shining once again.

James Evans



CAID
HENRIQUE



27

POS : LB
AGE : 24

With Juan Bernat injured, and Jordan Amavi and Hassane Kamara suffering precipitous drops in form last season, the question of Ligue 1's best left-back remains one that's not terribly easy to answer. Mozambique international Reinildo was a key element of Lille's title-winning side last year, but his standards have admittedly dropped in the current campaign. Nuno Mendes, the teenage prospect signed from Sporting Clube de Portugal, is the latest example of Paris Saint-Germain's largesse, but he is far too inconsistent in terms of his defensive abilities to really be considered in the upper echelon just yet.

Might the answer lie, then, not in France, but in the Principality of Monaco, where Caio Henrique has surely but slowly established himself under Niko Kovač? On the evidence of both the early stages of this campaign and AS Monaco's brilliant form in last season's run-in, the 24-year-old can stake a claim to that title. No left-back in the league has more assists than the Brazilian's five, with another three coming in European play. He has also made more tackles than anyone else in the Europa League, being a key factor in helping his team not only rebound from the disappointment of narrowly missing out on the Champions League group stage, but also navigate arguably the competition's most difficult group unbeaten.

Of course, none of this was a given for Henrique, who arrived at the Stade Louis-II in the summer of 2020 without having made much of an impact in European football, despite having just turned 23. A product of Santos' vaunted youth academy, he had joined Atletico Madrid in 2016 for a paltry €300,000, not for a lack of prospects but for he and the club having reached an impasse on contract negotiations. A captain of Brazil's U-20 side and a key part of the side that qualified for the Olympic Games in Tokyo, he was a regular for Los Colchoneros' reserves. However, he found a place in the first team hard to come by. With Filipe Luís and Lucas Hernandez firmly entrenched ahead of him, that was never to be the case.

A succession of loan spells back to his home country followed, at Paraná, Fluminense — helping the Carioca to the Copa America quarter finals — and Grêmio, the last of these being curtailed by the pandemic. He performed admirably in Série A, although his clubs foundered. However, despite impressing on loan, he looked no closer to finding a path to the first team. After the departures of Hernandez and Filipe Luís, countryman Renan Lodi arrived in 2019. With Mario Hermoso capable of filling in at left back and Yannick Ferreira Carrasco looking sharp as a wingback, he was still far from being a nailed-on starter. Left-back had been a problematic position for AS Monaco prior to his arrival. Following the departure of Benjamin Mendy, the team had employed a veritable rogues' gallery at the position, with the likes of Antonio Barreca, Fodé Ballo-Touré, Gil Dias, and Jorge representing the better part of €40m spent on the

position. The Frenchman, signed from Lille, was impressive enough going forward, but lacked the tactical rigour to succeed at the level of Monaco's ambitions, while about the remaining trio, the less said, the better. Thus, with nearly one hundred appearances as a professional, and costing a relative snip at €8M, his move across the Pyrenees was beneficial for both clubs and the player. Djibril Sidibé was a capable option at the position, having played there regularly for Lille, should Henrique's move not work out. The Brazilian also offered a level of tactical versatility in being able to play up and down the left flank, either as a wingback, as an orthodox left back, or even on the wing in a flat midfield four.

He started the 2020/21 season injured, but once fit, became a regular part of the first team. Having come on at halftime in an embarrassing 4-1 loss to Lyon in late October, he would go on to feature in every match, both cup and league, save two, for the rest of the season. He would help spur the team to a legitimate title challenge that was undone only by a last ditch save on the part of Lille's Mike Maignan, and a freak loss to a ten-man Lyon side. Henrique admitted to CodeSport that his adaptation wasn't exactly smooth, but he sees Ligue 1 as being "very physical. The attackers are fast, always looking for space. We defenders absolutely need to be focused at all times. The slightest inattention can have big consequences".

After an uneven start in Ligue 1 for the club, the current season has seen more of the same brilliance. Recent results have seen the team click into gear domestically as well as in Europe, edging closer to the top five on the back of recent results, improving defensively at the same time as Wissam Ben Yedder and Kevin Volland have hit form. The 24-year-old explained to Nice-Matin early this season that, in addition to the rigour with which he plays, he also views his experience, increasing comfort with the language and maturity as being key in establishing himself as a role model for younger teammates. "I may have a little more experience now, I feel comfortable expressing myself, to set an example for the young players in the squad."

He has dovetailed brilliantly with the similarly versatile summer signing Ismail Jakobs. A more cautious presence than the younger German, Henrique's profile is that of a player who may lack pace, but his intelligence, work rate, and cultured left foot allow to affect the team's attacking play to a far greater extent than might a pacier player or one more with more flair about their game. Interest from abroad, and also from Paris Saint-Germain, has bubbled under on the back of last season, showing Henrique's performances haven't gone unnoticed outside the Principality. However, a debut for Brazil's senior team isn't forthcoming. For the moment, rather, Henrique is satisfied with focus on progress in the Europa League and a top-three place in the league, his improvement testament to both the club's acumen in the mercato and his own motivation.

Eric Devin



ÀNGEL
DI MARIÀ



26⁻²²

POS : FW
AGE : 33

This time last year, Ángel Di María sat in fourth place among the Get French Football News 100, with the final comments concluding that he would “continue into his thirties as one of the game’s greatest unsung heroes”. If this was true before the arrival of his compatriot Lionel Messi to the City of Lights, it is even more so now.

Di María’s entire career has been marked by superstar teammates, both for his club and his country: Ronaldo and Bale at Real Madrid, Mbappé and Neymar at PSG and Messi and Agüero with Argentina. You could argue that it’s a privilege to play with such talented players, as Di María said himself in January of this year, when he stated that “I have already played with Cristiano Ronaldo, Neymar, Mbappé,” but, “if I could play with Leo as well... I could happily retire after that!”

But, as it became clear in the early weeks of the 2021/22 season, the arrival of Lionel Messi only added more competition for places that are already scarce in the PSG starting XI. And Di María, being the third of the front three, was, on paper, the obvious choice to move aside for Messi. However, this has not necessarily always been the case. Although the 33-year-old sits some way down our list in comparison to last year, in light of his circumstances this season, this ought to be considered an achievement in itself.

If Argentina’s victorious Copa América campaign this summer was anything to go by, you’d have feared for Di María going into the 2021/22 Ligue 1 season. It’s safe to say the tournament was a stage for Lionel Messi, whose four goals and five assists dominated the South American winter. Comparatively, Di María had a very quiet tournament, only being involved in a single goal in his five appearances leading up to the final. The final, however, was the exception. He stepped up when he was needed, scoring his only goal of the tournament to beat Brazil and take home Argentina’s first Copa América trophy since 1993. And what a goal it was: a perfectly executed lob over Ederson from just inside the box. The skill, composure and technique displayed in that single moment is exactly why Di María remains such a valuable asset for both Argentina and PSG.

More importantly, these attributes are displayed on a regular basis by the South American. For example, forty days after his Copa-winning lob, Di María pulled off an almost identical finish against Brest, while the whole world was watching, waiting for Messi’s first minutes in the side. Indeed, Messi’s relatively inconsistent game time has been one of the headlines of PSG’s 2021/22 Ligue 1 campaign. In the four months following his signing, he only accumulated a little more than 500 minutes of Ligue 1 football, missing seven games altogether. Unexpectedly,

this has left the door ajar for Di María, who has managed eleven league appearances, nine of which have been in the starting XI.

While he has not blown sides away this campaign, he has been consistently useful, particularly when his fellow forwards fail to turn up. In the league, Messi has so far amassed a single goal and three assists, while Neymar has managed three of each. Di María has matched Neymar’s attacking output with 48 fewer minutes of game time and has also outperformed his compatriot.

A perfect example of this crucial role within the squad is Paris Saint-Germain’s game against Lille at the end of October. This season, PSG have managed to give themselves an 11-point lead after 17 games, particularly through the salvaging of points in the face of defeat. At the Parc des Princes against Les Dogues, it was Di María who led the comeback. A dismal first half display and a knee knock led to the half-time substitution of Messi, to be replaced by Icardi. With Lille leading 1-0 at the start of the second half, PSG were able to turn up the pressure and Di María’s contributions proved crucial. In the 74th minute, he cleverly found Marquinhos with a chipped cross, and the centre back was able to tuck it away to equalise. Fifteen minutes later, he buried a powerful shot past Grbić from just inside the box. It has been moments like these where it has been impossible to ignore the impact of the unsung hero.

Despite his important contributions in the league, Di María has struggled somewhat in the Champions League. The Argentine is still yet to register a single goal in this calendar year. For a player so woven into the DNA of the competition, having won it with Real Madrid and registered the most assists just two years ago, this is certainly a surprise. In fact, the last time Di María had competed in the Champions League and failed to register a group-stage goal was the 2012/2013 season. Perhaps this is partly a result of Messi and Mbappé’s dominance: between them, they have amassed fifteen goal involvements in the six group games. Indeed, it certainly has something to do with his three-game suspension following the red card he received at the Etihad in last year’s semi-final.

Nonetheless, Ángel Di María has defied the odds in 2021. Playing under Messi now for both club and country can’t be easy, no matter how much of a privilege it may seem. While he may have been drowned out of the Champions League so far, he has been vital in the maintenance of PSG’s league campaign, a domain in which Messi and Neymar have, as yet this season, failed to shine. Should he keep performing the way he has, there is indeed nothing stopping him from maintaining his status as PSG’s unsung hero for the next few years. And, most likely, Paris Saint-Germain will need him to be just that.

Jack Wadding



**WISSAM
BEN
YEDDER**



25⁻²⁰

POS : ST AGE : 31

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

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

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

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

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

The 2020/21 campaign under Kovač ended with Ben Yedder contributing to ten goals in the last two months to take the club to the Champions League qualifiers having, incredibly, been in contention for the title on the final day of the season. While the months before that were riddled with inconsistencies, the Frenchman's contributions were often still decisive.

At the start of 2021, he registered a brace and an assist in the 3-2 win over Montpellier before scoring another decisive brace in a 2-1 win over Nice.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kaustubh Pandey



Neymar



24⁻²²

POS : FW
AGE : 29

"I go out when I can. I go out when it's possible, when I know I don't have training the next day. I won't stop doing it. What's the issue? I need to be held to account over what I do on the pitch, yes. But what I do outside?"

Neymar knows what real beauty is. He has displayed it through his tricks and flicks for over a decade. His intemperate love for the fabric of football however, is the reason why he has never reached, and may never reach, the heights of Ronaldo and Messi. At 22, teammate Kylian Mbappé has shown far more application in his nascent career to date. It speaks volumes that he so strongly pines for a move away from PSG and Neymar, a man who as recently as September he referred to as a "tramp."

Since his £200m arrival in 2017, Neymar's on field production has dropped significantly year on year. From an initial league outlay of 19 goals in 2017/18, last year he produced only nine. Charm is an essential tool for the attainment of real power, and while his €30m a year contract runs until 2025, he finds himself playing a tertiary role behind Mbappé and the newly-acquired Lionel Messi at PSG.

His meagre return of 3 league goals so far this season and no Champions League goals this calendar year do not reflect the statistics of a happy man. Having missed 8 matchdays so far this season, it would be remiss to not question his lifestyle as a contributing factor. Speaking to Brazilian YouTube channel Fui Clear earlier this year, Neymar expressed his displeasure with the criticism of his off-field antics.

"It's a lack of respect when people say, "Oh, Neymar doesn't look after himself, Neymar is this, Neymar is that. How do you last 12 years at the top without looking after yourself? Nobody takes that into account. I can look after myself. I have a physio and a personal coach with me almost 24 hours a day – to do what, nothing?"

At 29, it's a fine line between accepting your fate and losing your spirit. With this in mind, the advice from Nasser Al-Khelaifi all the way down to his physio should perhaps be, to borrow a Kanye West lyric, "what you doing in the club on a Thursday?"

Head coach Mauricio Pochettino certainly seems to echo these sentiments. Asked about his summation of Neymar's non-performance at Marseille earlier this season, he rather curtly responded "I am satisfied with what he did today".

The Argentinian has not been able to imprint his methodology at PSG in any way similar to that of his Spurs teams. While his midfield and defence are doing their part, his star-studded front line do not exactly press from the top.

It seems an awkward fit a year into the project, and while PSG's top brass would like to see Zinedine Zidane in the hot seat, the former Galáctico seems to have his eyes firmly fixed on being the next head coach of Les Bleus.

For now at least, Neymar and co have their eyes fixed solely on Champions League glory, whether or not they have the balance in their team to compete with the likes of Chelsea, Manchester City or Real Madrid, who they face in the round of 16.

Another year of Champions League mediocrity will surely see the departure of Mbappé to Real Madrid and while Neymar appeared happy with the arrival of Messi in the summer, his recent Ballon d'Or win must have had him seething with jealousy.

The Brazilian is acutely aware of his legacy and how he is to be perceived going forward, especially in his homeland. He spoke earlier this year about the possibility of Qatar being his last World Cup adventure for the national team.

"I think it's my last World Cup. I see it as my last because I don't know if I have the strength of mind to deal with football any more. So I'll do everything to turn up well, do everything to win with my country, to realise my greatest dream since I was little. And I hope I can do it."

At this critical juncture of his career, Neymar can either stick or twist. It begs the question however, if Neymar abandons his happy-go-lucky lifestyle, does he lose his intrinsic charms as a player? We'll soon find out.

Ciarán Brennan

Valiso Guele





23⁺⁶²

POS : DM
AGE : 32

When PSG signed Idrissa Gana Gueye, they probably had him down as a player who could do for them what Casemiro has been doing for Real Madrid for years. At a fundamental level, they were not wrong to expect that. After all, the evidence from his four years in England, and even his previous time in France at Lille before going to England, suggested that he had all the tools for the job.

He was expected to be the guy to bring balance to the PSG midfield and give the more expressive on-the-ball players like Verratti and Paredes freedom to do their thing. What they did not realise, however, was that Casemiro himself had improved on-the-ball over the years. From a fairly limited player in his first year or two at Madrid, he became a lot better in possession. For Gueye, signed at 32, it was probably unfair to have that expectation.

One thing that Gueye himself must not have expected was the extra responsibility that would fall on his lap to do things on the ball, due to the injury troubles that constantly mess with PSG's dynamic. Beyond that, when a club has had Thiago Motta in midfield for years in the past, the standards for what a defensive midfielder should be become higher. You could not simply be a destroyer. You had to be immaculate on the ball, a player who could evade pressure with ease and help to bring the ball out of defence.

Unfortunately, the Senegal international just isn't that player. It pays to give players responsibilities they are suited for, and minimise situations where they have to do things they have little to no facilities for. Admittedly, that is down to coaching, but in the breakneck world of PSG, players just do not get a pass.

This is not to say that Gueye has not sometimes shown flashes that suggest he could sometimes do these things. A case in point would be his best ever game in a PSG shirt – that 3-0 victory over Real Madrid in the 2019/2020 group stage game. On that night, he was unplayable both on and off the ball. He ripped Real Madrid to shreds, and earned a memorable hug from Thomas Tuchel after the game for it.

Many must have thought that was a sign of things to come, and that performance may have given people an unrealistic expectation of the on-the-ball Gueye. As it turns out, flashes just aren't reliable. Being able to consistently show these things is the only acceptable evidence that a player is capable of it.

Those days seem so far away now. 2020/2021 was the season when PSG were beaten to the league title once again, for the first time in four years. A lot of things contributed to it, but nothing was a bigger problem for both Thomas Tuchel and Mauricio Pochettino than the midfield. The team was constantly

overrun by all and sundry, from Ligue 1 to the Champions League and back.

Everybody had a feast, and very often, it was on Gueye watch. It would be unfair to blame him solely for it as every PSG midfielder was culpable, but his part in the problem cannot be ignored. His limits on the ball had become a bigger issue than anybody anticipated, but worse, his indiscipline. Nothing showed his propensity for putting his team in trouble than the Champions League second leg at the Etihad when he bagged an unnecessary red card and pretty much handed the initiative to Manchester City.

Against Leipzig, in a must-win Champions League game this season, he was also taken off because he started to look like a walking red card. Already on a yellow, he carried on playing recklessly, so much that Pochettino had to do something about it. That type of situation is undesirable for managers, and forces them into unplanned tactical tweaks. That instantly makes the player a liability. Against Club Brugge a few weeks later, the other issue showed up. He was caught napping on the ball while trying something he did not have the facilities for. The end result was a goal, and a visibly frustrated Marquinhos losing it twice in 20 seconds. The Brazilian was visibly upset.

For all his shortcomings, Gueye is still a very important player for PSG. No midfielder in the team seems capable of doing a job as good as him defensively. When he isn't playing, the team clearly misses something and it is easy to see. He might not always be great, but he is always essential for them, at least until they can sign a midfielder who can reproduce his strengths. If they go far in the Champions League in 2022, he has to be in the XI. His goalscoring exploits at the start of the season, including a thunderous strike against Manchester City, show that the midfielder can come up with vital moments for the team.

In truth, it was not always bad in 2021 with him. That also happens to be the problem. When he has been good, he has been excellent this year. As a player whose presence is so often emphatic, it never comes as a surprise. When he has been poor though, it has been bad. And sometimes, he is brilliant but then ruins all his good work with recklessness that marks him as a walking red card.

While Idrissa Gana Gueye should get full marks this year for a string of impressive performances, it is impossible to not highlight the bad which has often cost his club. As it turns out, he is just that kind of player. You have to take the good with the bad and have a balanced view of things. Ultimately, it has been a good year for him, one that should have been so much better.

Astorre S. Cerebrone



22⁻¹⁶

AGE : 35 POS : GK

KEYLOR
NAVAS

In football, there's a group of players who are widely accepted to be amongst the best in the world in their own respective positions, but are still routinely overlooked when it comes to widespread praise and awards. Someone like Marquinhos, for example.

To those who watch him, they know he's one of the best defenders in the world but he never seems to get much acclaim from outside of Paris Saint-Germain fans and regular viewers of Ligue 1.

But atop the list of under-appreciated players has to be Marquinhos' teammate in Paris, the man he helped form a defence with over the past few years. That man is Keylor Navas.

Navas has routinely been overlooked throughout his career, both at Real Madrid, where he was replaced by Thibaut Courtois, and at PSG where he returned to training following the 2021 offseason to find that the club had signed a newer, younger goalkeeper.

Gianluigi Donnarumma's arrival came off the back of arguably Navas' best season in Paris, making some vital saves in big games against Barcelona and Bayern Munich in the Champions League. Yes, he was at fault for one of the Man City goals in the semi final first leg, but that was a rare blip in an otherwise excellent campaign.

The Costa Rican became the first CONCACAF player to win Ligue 1's Player of the Month award in April, showing how important he was to PSG. Perhaps the biggest compliment you could give Navas was that amongst all the stars in Paris within the squad, for the past year perhaps none have been as important to the team as Navas.

If he wasn't the number one 'keeper, goodness knows how different things could have been for the Parisians, who have often needed his saves to scrape through games.

Tom Scholes



21⁻¹⁴

AGE : 38 POS : CB

JOSÉ
FONTE

Given that he turned 37 years old a mere eight days before the beginning of 2021, it would have been forgivable to think José Fonte's time at the top of European football was done. Many outsiders didn't expect him to start last season as Lille's first-choice centre-back, and it would have been easy for Ligue 1's fifth oldest used player in 20/21 to pick up an injury.

Instead, from the 22nd of November 2020 onwards, Fonte waited 26 Ligue 1 matchdays for a day off. Ironically (or cruelly), that rest forcibly came on the last day of the Ligue 1 season. A yellow card suspension forced Lille's captain out of the game against Angers, which sealed Lille's title victory.

It cannot be understated what a titan José Fonte has been for Les Dogues in 2021. He's guided a young Sven Botman into being Europe's hottest defensive prospect. He led Christophe Galtier's iron-locked defensive unit to 21 league clean sheets in 20/21. He helped ease the transition for the new man in the dugout, Jocelyn Gourvennec. What Fonte has achieved goes far beyond expectation.

Despite turning 38 years old in December 2021, Fonte isn't going anywhere. He's started every league and Champions League game for Lille in 21/22. Who knows where he could have led Portugal at Euro 2020, had the former Southampton man not been left on the bench for this year's tournament.

It's hard to quantify Fonte's leadership and defensive intelligence through statistics. Nevertheless, according to FBRef no one in the 20/21 Ligue 1 season had a higher tackle success rate than the former West Ham man. Only five won more of their aerial duels. Numbers like this would be commendable for a defender in their physical prime, never mind one approaching 40 years old.

The only shame is that 21/22 is just the second season Fonte is experiencing UCL football in his career. It's tempting to ask what could have been, if Fonte had ever been picked up by a more dominant side than Southampton or Lille and earlier in his career. However, given the current trajectory of his performances, it's more tempting to ask what comes next for this titan of French football.

Alex Barker



20⁻⁴

AGE : 30 POS : ST

ANDY DELORT

Few in the GFFN 100 for 2021 are as under-appreciated as Andy Delort, especially in the upper reaches. A bullish, gifted, clinical goalscorer and creator, Delort's summer switch from Montpellier to an ambitious OGC Nice for £9m, a substantial amount in Ligue 1 despite the fact that his 30th birthday was just a few weeks away, underlines how pivotal an asset the Algerian striker can be in Ligue 1.

Delort is something of a late bloomer. An eclectic early career took in Corsica, Wigan and Mexico, all before his true talent and ability had really flourished. The first real sign that Delort could lead a Ligue 1 side with his physicality in attack and exacting finishing was back in 2015 during a season with Caen after leaving Wigan Athletic who has been encouraged to sign Delort in 2015 after 24 goals in 36 league games for Ligue 2 side Tours.

Delort lead a spirited Caen side by contributing 12 goals in 36 Ligue 1 outings in the 2015/16 campaign as SMC finished an impressive seventh. Delort's goals help Caen beat Marseille and both Saint-Étienne and Bordeaux twice - all of whom were European contenders at the start of the season before OM and FCGB faltered badly.

A bold adventure in Mexico with Tigres alongside André-Pierre Gignac came to very little the following year and Delort returned to Ligue 1 as Toulouse's record signing under similarly bullish Pascal Dupraz. Dupraz and Toulouse eventually failed to recapture the magic that saw Les Violettes overcome a 10 point deficit with 10 games to play to stay up in 2016 but Delort only grew in stature. A move to Montpellier in 2018 proved career-defining as Delort produced 47 goals and 22 assists across 106 games for MHSC, aided by his telepathic understanding with Gaëtan Laborde as Michel Der Zakarian's side became the league's entertainers. But with the club needing funds, both were moved on last summer for sizeable fees.

Although Delort has yet to hit the same heights at Nice, his 2021 has been impressive with 24 goal contributions across 65 games in all competitions. An innovative user of possession and a silky operator in any attacking role, Delort's powerful shot and variety of play makes him an elusive and consistently dangerous Ligue 1 striker and perhaps the most under-appreciated in France.

Adam White





Tchouaméni



19⁺⁴¹

POS : CM
AGE : 21

"We were in steamroller mode," recalled Aurélien Tchouaméni in L'Équipe. "We constantly had this desire to crush our opponents." In assessing his team's effervescent form in the second half of last season, Monaco's 21-year-old French international midfielder general did a good job of describing his own unstoppable year. However, as a powerful, striding, dynamic presence but graceful and supremely technically gifted too, Tchouaméni is far from just a steamroller.

Having emerged at Bordeaux as an 18-year-old, Tchouaméni's technical ability was obvious, but his ability to affect games wasn't. Nor was his best position. The young man was too slight and too easily shoved off the ball while he failed to truly excel as a ball winner, a creative move instigator or a dynamic box-to-box man. He was always assured in possession but developing the ability to apply his talent to matches effectively was a slow process.

Tchouaméni's move to Monaco in January 2020 was perfectly timed and pitched. Monaco recently switched back to the recruitment policy that helped win Ligue 1 in 2017. The club have returned to signing burgeoning talent with a meaningful experience that's ready to blossom complemented by experienced pros to guide those prospects and lead the side, such as Wissam Ben Yedder and Cesc Fàbregas. Tchouaméni took his opportunity, joining a club keen to give youth a chance after his development curve had started to plateau at a struggling and unstable Bordeaux.

The move coincided with significant physical growth too. Previously lightweight and lean, Tchouaméni was suddenly broad, powerful and striding confidently around midfield. His physicality and aggression now matched his technical ability. "In modern football," Tchouaméni told L'Équipe in March, "you have to get good very quickly. The train doesn't leave the station forty times... Our generation is in more of a hurry."

After Niko Kovač replaced Roberto Moreno in the summer of 2020, Tchouaméni quickly became Monaco's most important player. With Kovač's fluid set up moving between a Christophe Galtier-esque 4-4-2 and a three at the back set up as right-back Djibril Sidibé shuffles across, Monaco can lack numbers in deeper central areas. Tchouaméni and Youssouf Fofana, however, cover the ground and maintain possession with ease due to their combination of tenacity and vision. "I immediately said to myself that this guy was very good," Fàbregas told L'Équipe in August. "My favourite thing about him is his attitude, he asks questions all the time. We can see that he wants to progress." To motivate himself, Tchouaméni jots down inspirational quotes picked up while reading. "I read a book about Kobe Bryant and, before a game, when I need motivation, I will read some passages I've noted on my phone. I'm currently reading a book on the period when the All Blacks were on top

their coach talks about their mentality on a daily basis... I also read Michelle Obama's book because she's such an emblematic figure."

This season, Tchouaméni's role has shifted slightly. Nominally the midfielder to push on more often and join attacks last term, while Fofana sat like a sentinel, Tchouaméni is now the more defensive of the two. It's a role he's proven to be suited to. However, the graceful, ball-carrying Tchouaméni has suffered as a result, and that reduced freedom is partly responsible for Monaco's recent lack of intensity. With Fofana slower on the half-turn and relatively easily dispossessed – even if he can bulldoze through the lines when he gets running – Monaco miss Tchouaméni's consistency of power and vision when progressing play. With Kovač now sacked, Tchouaméni's exact role under the new coach will be an intriguing sub-plot. Tchouaméni's best position would be as the most dynamic and mobile central presence in a 4-3-3, or as the more expansive deeper midfielder of a two-man set up in a 4-2-3-1. Both systems would afford Tchouaméni a holding player to provide security for forays forward and a more creative teammate ahead, either next to him in a three or a number ten, to play off and allow his passing to flourish.

There's a low-key but commanding and unerring confidence to Tchouaméni's play and persona, as well as a strong sense that Monaco is merely a stepping stone. "I have goals, dreams, a desire to play for the best clubs, to win titles, to impact my sport and my position," Tchouaméni told L'Équipe. "I want to leave a mark. It's not just about playing football, earning money, titles here and there, and then doing something else with my life – I don't want to end my career like an average player, and to be forgotten." Using a personal video analyst, the studious Tchouaméni instead wants to become "a complete player" and it shows. "When there is a midfielder that excels in a certain area, I take inspiration from them to try and progress," he says.

Having broken into Didier Deschamps' France squad last year, notably excelling in the Nations League final, Tchouaméni is – aside from Kylian Mbappé and his impending free-agent status – Ligue 1's hottest property. Although concrete interest was thin this summer, it's growing with Juventus, Manchester United and Real Madrid all now linked.

Teammates joke about a seemingly imminent departure but, for now, Tchouaméni isn't being distracted, describing his appearance on the front of Spanish sports daily Marca, as "cool but worth nothing". As one of the most promising and effective talents to emerge from The League of Talents in recent years, the elegant but powerful Aurélien Tchouaméni is much more than just a midfield 'steamroller'. However, still just 21, the Frenchman's development as a professional, and his career in general is likely to be just as unstoppable.

Adam White



SVEN BOTMAN



18⁺⁹

POS : CB
AGE : 21

Even the keenest of football analysts will struggle to find a player whose stock has risen as rapidly as Sven Botman's in the past 12 months. Take his Transfermarkt value for example. In April 2020, the Ajax academy graduate's value stood at a measly €1.3m. By April 2021 that had reached €29m as Botman's Lille charged towards the Ligue 1 title. Botman eventually finished the 2020/21 season with 20 league clean sheets and, in his first season in a top five league, started 37 games for Lille in their most successful campaign since 2011. Looking at his underlying numbers, he was one of the best defenders in France, not bad considering some labelled him an Ajax academy reject.

Even for a 21-year-old, Sven Botman's sample size at senior level is small. A graduate of De Toekomst, Botman was promoted to Ajax's under 19s in 2017, aged 17. Though born on the outskirts of southern Amsterdam, Botman's career path greatly differs from other Ajax graduates. For one, he is the only member of that under 19 side to be playing outside the Netherlands.

Botman graduated to Jong Ajax, who play in the Dutch second tier, for the 2018/19 campaign, finishing 11th while conceding 67 goals in 38 games with Botman starting 27. The defender scored twice, though, and played seven times in the UEFA Youth league. Yet, for a club like Ajax who pride themselves on maintaining clear paths to their first team, Botman never played a senior minute under senior coach Erik Ten Hag.

Instead, he was loaned to Heerenveen for the 2019/20 season. The Eredivisie was unceremoniously cut short in a similar fashion to Ligue 1 due to COVID-19 but still Botman made his mark across all 26 available appearances. He came up clutch multiple times, notably heading in against AZ Alkmaar in a valuable 4-2 victory. But what really mattered were his mistakes.

In 2019/20, Botman made some poor errors, including an own goal, conceding two penalties and he was directly blamed for consecutive defeats to Fortuna Sittard and AZ Alkmaar. "I had to adapt," said Botman just before Lille secured his signature in Summer 2020 for €8m. "The pace is faster, so my speed of action had to go up. People might have thought: 'I don't know if he can handle it' – but it went well."

The then Dutch under 19s defender learned valuable lessons at Heerenveen. Across that Eredivisie season, Botman displayed great pace for a defender and, in the 2020/21 Ligue 1 campaign, he added strength and visionary passing to his growing repertoire. Perhaps these rapid improvements came from being paired up with 37-year-old Lille captain José Fonte, who later told La Voix du Nord "Sven is a calm player, he wants to learn and he learns very fast".

Botman was imperious last season, often looking unbeatable both on the ground or in a dogfight. He won 69.3% of his headers and 62% of his ground duels according to Sofascore, putting the Dutchman in the top 10% of Ligue 1 defenders for both metrics. Botman is not only a cultured passer but, crucially in today's hyper-modern game, left footed. The craving for a left footed centre-back is high amongst most top level clubs as having a left footed player on the left side of the pitch can open up passing angles that a right footer can't.

Passing statistics can be distorted by possession or playing style and it's often hard to combine the eye test with the numbers in this regard, however, Botman confirms his own quality. Only Benjamin André has completed more progressive passes since Botman joined Lille, showing that, even if Lille naturally move the ball down the left, Botman has been entrusted as a main passing outlet by two different coaches.

These numbers and observations outline one of the most desirable templates searched for by clubs right now. A young, talented defender who's strong in his own box, promising in ball progression, has a league title to his name and is left-footed. All he's missing is a cap for the Netherlands, which will surely arrive soon.

Valued at around €30m, plenty of clubs have been linked to Botman over the past six months, Wolves and Atalanta chief among them. The Italians make the most sense. Gian Piero Gasperini's side have an impressive recent history of developing young talent and, with Serie A defender of the year Christian Romero moving to Tottenham, there's also a Botman-sized hole that needs filling.

Wolves' bid depends largely on their success this season. Under former Benfica manager Bruno Lage, they started the campaign as one of the most shot-heavy teams in the Premier League. However, Botman is currently playing Champions League football with Lille and, as a Ligue 1 champion, he may have his eyes set higher than battling for the top eight in the Premier League.

Despite Botman's desirable qualities, most of Europe's elite are well stocked in defence right now. Chelsea seem set on signing a right-sided centre-back like Sevilla's Jules Koundé. Manchester City, Liverpool and Man United have recently strengthened too. PSG signed Sergio Ramos, Real Madrid acquired David Alaba and Bayern Munich brought in Dayot Upamecano. Nevertheless, Botman would still be a worthwhile signing for many. His speed and strength combined with his growing quality on the ball make the 21-year-old a poster boy for modern European centre-backs. Should the French champions fail to reach the top five this season, they could be more open to selling their prized defensive talent in 2022.

Alex Barker



ACHRAF
HAKIMI

ACCOR LIVE LM



17

POS : RB

AGE : 23

The Moroccan was the key driving force of Inter's attack for much of last season, dominating the entire right-hand corridor with his lung-bursting sprints and incisive attacking contributions. His seven goals and 10 assists for the season make for impressive reading, even when taking into consideration the importance of the wing-back role in Antonio Conte's set-up.

Although he had already impressed in his two-season loan spell at Borussia Dortmund, this was the year that Hakimi established himself as one of the world's premier right-sided players. His speed, inch-perfect crossing and ability to take players on has seen him excel at both of his club sides in this calendar year - from combining with mercurial strike duo Romelu Lukaku and Lautaro Martínez at Inter, to lining up alongside PSG's star front three.

The fact that the Moroccan international was Inter's 3rd top scorer is a testament to how crucial he was to the forward line, and how often he found himself in advanced positions. Hakimi is also a more than capable defender - especially considering he started his career further up the pitch - even if his task at Inter was facilitated by a rock solid three-man backline (Bastoni, De Vrij, Škriniar) which constituted the best defence in the league last season. Because of the sheer amount of ground he is able to cover, tracking back from high up the pitch is rarely an issue. Adept at last-ditch slide tackles and jockeys alike, Hakimi is no stranger to defending, even if modern football's wing-back position sees defensive nous valued less and less in favour of deployment as an all-out attacker.

He did struggle initially in his first couple of months with the Nerazzurri, with Matteo Darmian occasionally being the preferred option. A few moments of defensive fragility as well as inefficiency going forward appeared to suggest that his form from Borussia Dortmund would not be carried over to Serie A. When things did eventually click for Hakimi, it coincided with Inter's incredible run-in, losing only once from January 6 to May 15 as they sped to the title - including an 11-game winning streak to overtake previous frontrunners Milan. At his deadliest on the counter - the more space ahead of him, the better he is - the Madrid native benefitted from an improved set-up which saw Conte's men defend slightly deeper and hit their opponents on the break, to great effect.

What's clear is that nine months under Antonio Conte have taken Hakimi to the next level, rounding off his already-impressive skill set with some vastly improved defensive attributes. By the end of the season, he had progressed well past the status of a promising talent he arrived with, into a player who was not far off being the finished product - and Inter reaped the rewards.

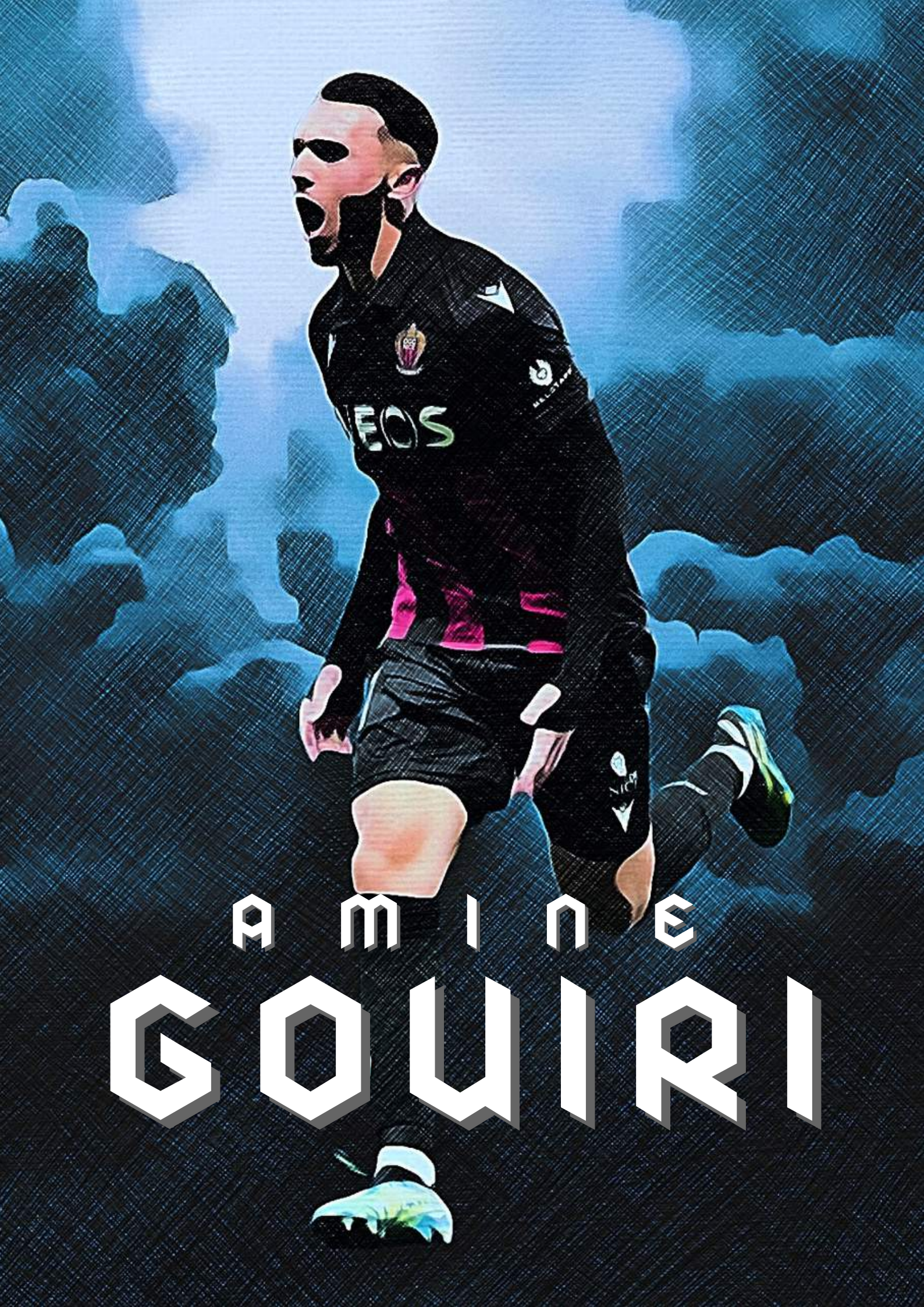
Nevertheless, the title celebrations were short-lived as Inter's internal chaos finally caught up with them. With owners Suning under financial difficulties, this summer saw an exodus of many of the key elements of the title winning-squad, from top scorer Romelu Lukaku to Conte himself. Hakimi was the first big name to leave, dismissing what had been strong interest from Chelsea in favour of a move to Ligue 1.

Having been PSG's sole summer signing to come with a transfer fee, the wide man picked up where he left off with a barnstorming start to his career in France. Mauricio Pochettino's lack of a clear attacking strategy made Hakimi's initiative-taking all the more apparent. Much of the team's early-season forward play depended on their 22-year-old new season, as the more high-profile arrivals settled in. His transfer may not have garnered the media attention of Lionel Messi or Sergio Ramos' arrivals, but it was abundantly clear that he would be a crucial piece of the team Les Parisiens were building, in his own right.

But even the Real Madrid youth product was unable to keep the pace up for long, and his red-hot form eventually cooled down as the winter months drew on. The team's oscillation between a three or four-man defence has visibly caused Hakimi some problems, with the latter system not as suited to his attack-oriented skillset. Playing in a less structured and well-defined defensive set-up than under his previous manager, Hakimi is even said to have commented in private on the lack of cover PSG's backline is afforded, according to L'Équipe. As the club's injury problems at the back limit the Argentine's options - Sergio Ramos has been sidelined for the vast majority of his Ligue 1 career so far and Presnel Kimpembe has also missed his fair share of games - a return to the wing-back position he is so accustomed to looks some way off.

The Serie A winner nevertheless remains a considerable upgrade over the club's past options at right-back, and in more open games on the European stage will prove a vital asset in their hunt for a Champions' League title. He had a forgettable continental campaign with Inter last season - finishing bottom of their group, albeit paving the way for their incredible form in the run-in - notably giving the ball away to Karim Benzema to score in a 3-2 defeat to Real Madrid. With his club decidedly set on winning the big prize this year, the 22-year-old will be expected to defend against some of the world's best all the while acting as a facilitator for the likes of Lionel Messi and Kylian Mbappé in the knockout rounds, the latter of whom he has struck up a very close bond with in a short space of time. A tough ask, but if anyone's capable of it, it's Achraf Hakimi.

Raphaël Jucobin



A m i n e

GOVIRI



16⁺²⁹

POS : FW
AGE : 21

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

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

Not only will Nice profit greatly from any future transfer fee, but they've also benefited enormously from the former Lyon striker's on-pitch presence. At the time of writing, Gouiri's scored an average of 0.47 goals per 90 minutes since his debut in August 2020. Goalscoring is one of the main facets of his very well-rounded skill set: with 15 goals in 2021, the marksman ranks as the tenth-highest scoring Frenchman in the world this year. It's an impressive record for someone playing just their second full senior season.

Gouiri's variety of goalscoring is a real problem for Ligue 1 defences. Whether it be free-kicks, cutting in from his favoured left-hand side, intelligent link-up play with teammates or penalties – the forward is often among the goals. Such variety and unpredictability in his game is one of the key reasons for his success.

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

In the 2021/22 season, Gouiri's impressive goalscoring form has continued, with eight goals so far, after 12 in 34 last season. His current xG of 0.56 per 90 minutes, according to FBRef, ranks him among the top forwards in Europe, showing the quality of the chances and positions he finds himself in.

However, an underperformance in his goals scored compared to his xG also shows there is room for improvement. The French under-21 international has also shown his quality on the European stage this year, netting four goals in five Europa League matches for Nice last season.

However, there's much more to the former Lyon forward's game than just being a handy finisher. Gouiri's passing is remarkable. Averaging 2.19 key passes and 1.06 passes per 90 into the penalty area, there aren't many forwards with better passing precision in the attacking third. With 12 assists to his name since arriving on the south coast of France, Gouiri has been a key creative spark for Patrick Vieira, Adrian Ursea and Christophe Galtier respectively.

Gouiri is crucial to Nice's set-up and their successes so far under Galtier. The reigning Ligue 1 winning coach's style owes much of its effectiveness to an emphasis on quick transition play from attack to defence – Gouiri is key to this. The speed and ease with which the versatile forward moves with the ball is an asset and has seen Gouiri take the lead when it comes to launching attacks and executing Galtier's game plan. His 6.75 progressive carries and almost two dribbles per 90 this season highlight that effectiveness in attacking transition and in moving the ball quickly. His 76 shot-creating actions, ranking him among Europe's elite, underlines Gouiri's creative threat, as does some audacious skill.

Amine Gouiri is a complete forward with high levels of technical ability and an eye for goal, as well as creative vision and silky feet. Despite his age, his impressive start to life at Nice has seen him become one of the most talked-about talents in Europe and one of the most promising forwards France has seen in recent years. His stellar 2021 unquestionably puts him among the best players in the country and, at just 21, there's no limit to how good he could still yet become.

Liam Wraith



Flavien

TAIT

S



15

POS : AM
AGE : 28

The summer of 2020 was a period of great upheaval in Stade Rennais' midfield. With the departures of Eduardo Camavinga, Steven Nzonzi, and Clement Grenier, Les Rouges et Noirs lost three important pieces in the spine of the team. Then without the three Frenchmen, there was significant pressure on Technical Director Florian Maurice to replace a midfield trio that had appeared in a combined 92 league matches the season prior.

Leaning on the financial muscle of club owner François Pinault, Rennes brought in a talented midfield duo in Lovro Majer and Baptiste Santamaria. Despite the new arrivals, however, the midfielder that has best filled the void is one that was already at the club: Flavien Tait.

Tait signed from Angers in July 2019, appearing at the time to be a shrewd signing by then manager Julien Stéphan and Rennes. The club shelled out €9m for the midfielder off the back of an impressive season for Les Angevins in which he netted five goals and provided seven assists. Tait did not hit the ground running in Brittany, however, as he saw red in the first match of the 2019/20 season and was suspended for an additional three.

From his arrival to the end of 2020, Tait was used primarily by Stephan on the left wing, a position he often excelled in while at Angers. Different from the modern winger, Tait does not possess blistering top speed, nor the flair and dribbling skills found in teammates Jérémy Doku and Kamaldeen Sulemana. Despite this, Tait is an excellent runner and ball carrier, two qualities that have shone in his transition into a freer, more central role over 2021.

If Tait struggled on the left flank under Stephan, then it is under the tutelage of Bruno Genesio that the 28-year-old has truly excelled and rediscovered the best version of himself. Alongside fellow midfielder Jonas Martin, Flavien Tait has emerged as a key cog in Genesio's 4-3-3 and 4-4-2 systems, seamlessly linking midfield and attack with his progressive play. Liberated by the solidity provided by a more disciplined holding midfielder, often Martin or Santamaria, Tait is allowed the freedom to patrol the left side of central midfield.

In an interview with France Bleu Armorique, Tait spoke to this repositioning and how it fits within Rennes' midfield system. "What is good is that with 'Jo' (Jonas Martin), or with 'Santa' (Baptiste Santamaria), I play with profiles that are a little more defensive than me, so they allow me to get forward. I know that the balance behind is guaranteed. The coach also asks me to guide play, to dictate play, to try to be technically sound, to not lose possession too much. Even if failure is part of football, he always tells us to try again, try again, try again, and to take risks because it's part of the game."

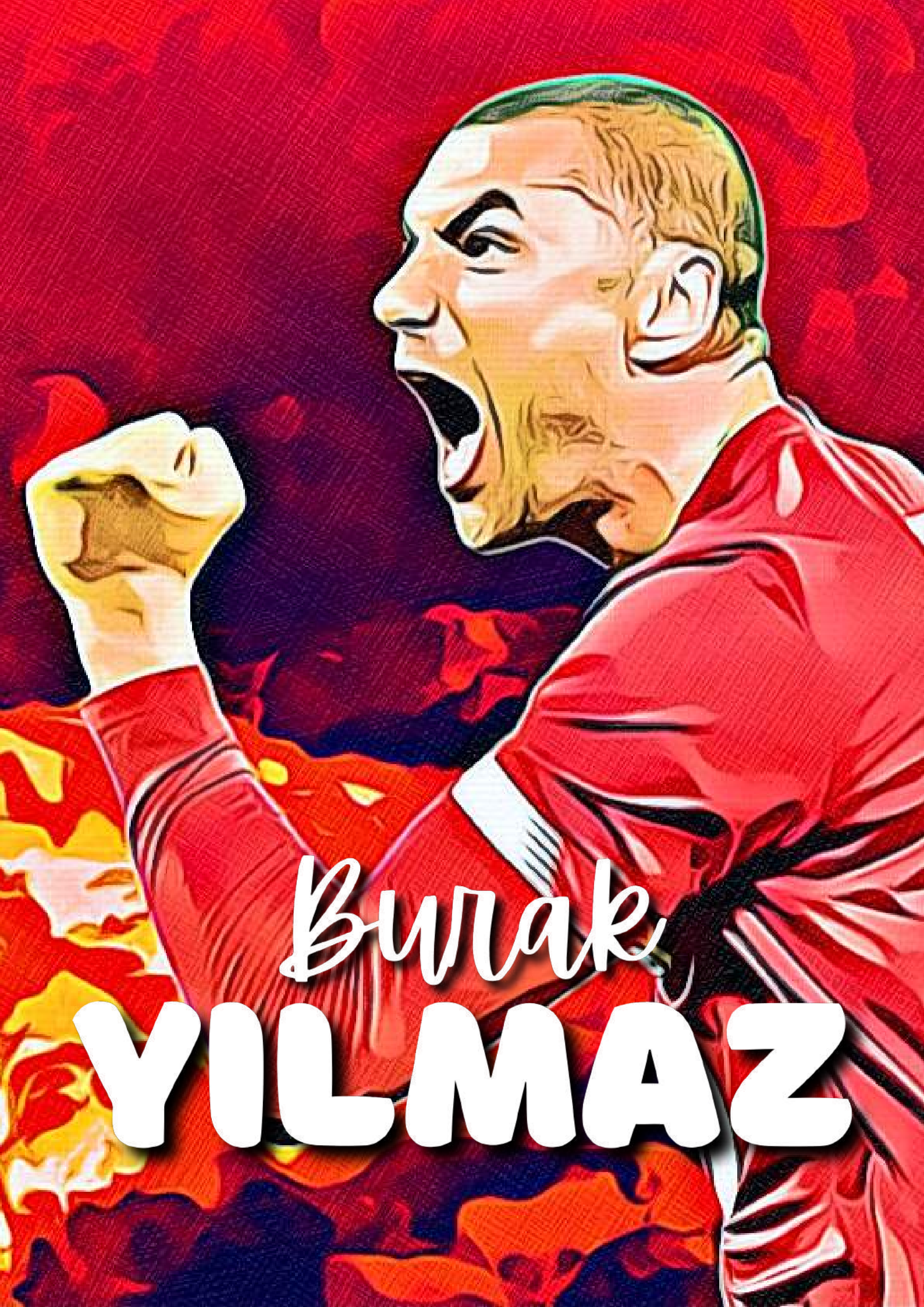
While Tait is quick to credit Rennes' system of play and his teammates' ability within it, he is equally heralded by these same teammates for his transformation under Genesio. Benjamin Bourigeaud, another key figure in Rennes senior team, praised "Flav" in an interview with Stade Rennais Online. "What he's doing now is just the merit of his work. His beginnings here were very difficult. When he arrived, he was suspended, he had a hard time adapting, and people immediately criticised him. When he was subbed out, he was whistled. It was a really difficult period for him. Today, with a bit more confidence, he's showing his talent and his qualities, and why he signed with us...When you see what he overcame, it's not easy...He was able to stay strong, and today, he's showing what he's capable of."

Alongside the recent praise, what has perhaps most vindicated Genesio and his confidence in Tait is the 28-year-old's consistent ability to shine in Rennes' biggest, most challenging matches. Tait's industrious, all-action performances against PSG, Lyon, and Tottenham have propelled Rennes onto the podium of Ligue 1 while finishing top of their UEFA Conference League group. Of these, the most impressive display came against PSG in October, when the Frenchman played a major part in Les Rouges et Noirs' 2-0 victory over a full-strength PSG side.

With just 34% possession, Rennes did not see much of the ball against the league leaders, but Tait's directness meant that the home side made the most of their opportunities. During his 84 minutes played, Tait rarely lost possession, completing nine progressive carries and 92% of his passes, and put the hosts up 2-0 just after halftime. The goal, a clean half volley from the penalty spot, encapsulated some of Tait's best qualities. Starting from the halfway line, the energetic midfielder followed play as Gaétan Laborde broke down the right wing. As he approached the box, Tait slowed his driving run to leave space between him and the goal. Laborde, often in Tait's position in these attacks, was able to find Tait with a bouncing cross, which the 28-year-old directed cleanly past Donnarumma and into the far corner. Tait's positional awareness, work rate, and vision all came into play in the goal that ensured Rennes two-goal upset.

Going forward, a busy fixture list and multiple first-team absences due to the African Cup of Nations await Rennes. If the Breton club is to navigate the next few months safely, Tait will undoubtedly be at the centre of it. For the 28-year-old, there have already been some injury concerns, as he missed four matches in December through a hip injury. If Tait can stay fit, however, then he will not just be challenging Lovro Majer and Jonas Martin for the title of best midfielder in Rennes, but also the likes of Téji Savanier and Séko Fofana for the title of best midfielder in France.

Grant Maitland



Burak
YILMAZ



14⁺¹

POS : ST
AGE : 36

Burak Yilmaz: going into the 2020/21 season, it was a name that was given zero limelight, with Lille's regional paper La Voix Du Nord calling him a replacement for outgoing Loïc Rémy. Not the biggest of tasks, given Rémy hadn't even reached 1000 minutes in the previous season. Coming in on a free, Yilmaz was very much seen as a back up man.

18 months later and the 'Kral', a Turkish word meaning 'king', can only be considered a monumentally successful signing. His Euro 2020 campaign may have been a career low point, and his form has admittedly stuttered since August. However, for a period of time, Burak Yilmaz was possibly the best player in France.

Up until January 2021, Yilmaz had been a modest success. Averaging a goal every 2.2 games (hitting 7 before New Year's day in Ligue 1), more attention was paid to the clear struggles of his striker partner Jonathan David. Two games and 9 days into the new year, Yilmaz had added two more goals. His consolation against Angers ended up being worthless, but a winner three days later against Nîmes proved more important. Disastrously though, Yilmaz picked up a calf injury which kept him out from January 10th all the way to the 14th of March.

After playing 12 minutes against Monaco, Lille were three points ahead of PSG. Yet following a shock 1-2 defeat in the return match against Nîmes, Les Dogues were sent back to second place. Too far behind on goal difference, Lille had to make sure every point counted with their talisman back. Yet he had only hit one of his six shots on target in 90 minutes against Les Crocos. Christophe Galtier's side then fought for a hard-earned win against PSG the following week, tipping Lille back ahead in the table. However, Yilmaz was limited to just 17 minutes off the bench. Galtier had previously said he was anxious about rushing Yilmaz back and causing a repeat to his calf injury. From then though, after defeating PSG and with seven games left of the season, Burak Yilmaz became red hot. He rolled the years back to the days of 2012, when he scored 32 goals in a season for Trabzonspor. Yilmaz made French Football his stage for the most dramatic of plays, one where he was the main protagonist.

Free-falling Metz were the first to face his wrath, as he belted in Renato Sanches' pass into the near post in a 0-2 victory for Lille. Another 90 minutes followed against Montpellier, where Yilmaz's attitude on the pitch helped galvanise Lille to a late equaliser. He constantly barked for the ball in shooting positions. If Benjamin André symbolised the unattractive good work of Les Dogues in 20/21, Yilmaz symbolised the pugnacious bark and bite. Ligue 1's public image has undoubtedly taken hits in the latter half of this year. The 20/21 season was a high point for the league though, and Lyon vs Lille on the 25th of April got the world talking. At 2-0 down and lurching towards half-time

with no fans in the stadium, Lille's title run looked done and dusted. It was a Sunday evening with all games played, with PSG winning theirs the previous day. Should Lille lose, they would have sat two points behind le Parisians with just four games left.

A free kick from 25 yards out held little threat to Lyon in the added minutes of the first half. It was only when Yilmaz pelted the dead ball into the top left hand corner, reducing the deficit to 2-1, that Rudi Garcia perhaps sensed what was coming. Just under 15 minutes into the second half, Yilmaz broke into the box before squaring to Jonathan David for Lille to equalise. It was his fifth and final assist of the season. Then, with five minutes left, a long ball forward from Sven Botman flicked off the head of Yusuf Yazıcı, in behind on to Yilmaz. One on one, he summoned the speed of a man a decade younger to charge away from Lyon's defenders, before cutely lobbing Anthony Lopes.

While the performances against Nice, Lens and Angers lacked the dramatics of the comeback in Lyon, they boosted the momentum of Yilmaz's incredible end to the season. His left-footed screamer against Lens left Jean-Louis Leca cemented to the ground, helplessly watching a shot awarded goal of the year by the UNFP sail into the top corner. His penalty against Angers ended up as the winner that decided the Ligue 1 season. Yet he still couldn't rest until the whistle was blown. After Angelo Fulgini scored to cut Lille's lead to 1-2 with minutes to spare, an anxious Yilmaz, draped in a Turkish flag, itched up and down the touchline. The ferocity and will to win lasted right up until the end of 20/21, making him all the more endearing to his adoring fanbase.

That same fanbase felt the frustrations of Yilmaz a little under a month later. He captained a buoyant, optimistic Turkey to Euro 2020, but sadly his national team career hit a new low as Turkey finished bottom of their group with three losses. After hitting 16 goals and six assists in his debut season, Yilmaz has since added just seven goal contributions in 16 Ligue 1 games. He's even been called into question by Lille fans, after he stormed down the tunnel following his substitution against Brest in mid-October. He's missed some gilt-edged chances too, quite unlike Yilmaz.

The name Yilmaz in Turkish is linked to the English word 'indomitable'; impossible to subdue or defeat. After the sky-highs of 2021, the more frustrating lows threatened to dampen the now-36-year-old Yilmaz's reputation. Living up to name though, he rose back up. With Lille needing a win to top their Champions' League group for the first time in history, the indomitable Turk popped up once more. A side-footed finish against Wolfsburg opened the scoring in Lille's 3-1 win on the final day of Group G, and once again cemented Burak Yilmaz's name into the Lille history books.

Alex Barker



G A Ë T A N
LABORDE



13⁺¹⁷

POS : ST
AGE : 27

After a hat-trick in the Europa Conference League, followed three days later by the opener in a chippy derby against Lorient in late November, Gaëtan Laborde had amassed fourteen goals in twenty appearances this season and looks worth every bit of his €15m move from Montpellier to Stade Rennais. He first evinced his talent in the 2016/17 season, at Bordeaux, where he slowly moved out from the shadow of Jérémy Ménez, scoring thirteen goals in all competitions. He had been a solid enough performer on loan spells to lower division clubs but, at 23, he was seemingly becoming less of an elite prospect and more of a player best suited to life in the lower leagues.

While it's true that André-Pierre Gignac and Olivier Giroud were also, if not late bloomers, very much not prodigious at a young age, Laborde's career would then take a major step back the following season. The exit of coach Jocelyn Gourvennec mid-season, combined with a metatarsal fracture that kept him out for more than three months, had hamstrung his season. Bordeaux had improved under Gus Poyet, but he was often an unused substitute come season's end, with Martin Braithwaite often preferred alongside Nicolas de Préville. The following summer saw him leave his first club for Montpellier, in a transfer that would ironically enrage Poyet and even hasten the Uruguayan's departure. It was there that Laborde began to really blossom. Playing alongside Andy Delort in a 3-4-1-2, Laborde used his running and aerial ability to burnish the former Caen striker's game and Montpellier were only kept out of the top five, and a putative European place, by a cruel defeat to Marseille on the season's final day. In the summer, the club invested heavily, making Delort's move from Toulouse permanent and breaking their club record to sign midfielder Téli Savanier from Nîmes. Despite that spending spree, and the additions of Swiss international goalkeeper Jonas Omlin and Dijon forward Stéphy Mavididi the following summer, Montpellier's financial state, like many clubs in France, was put under threat by the pandemic.

As a result, when the proverbial glass ceiling of European play couldn't be broken after three successive seasons, he and Delort were sent on their way this summer. Laborde joined a Rennes side who have shown ambition of late but were also in flux, having parted ways with once-promising young manager Julien Stéphan in March despite guiding the club to both their highest-ever finish and the 2019 Coupe de France title. Stéphan had been replaced by Bruno Genesio, formerly of Lyon, and it made for an interesting combination. Genesio was a man thoroughly steeped in the milieu of the Rhône club, but had been derided for his tactical irresolution, even as he helped guide the club to a Europa League semi-final and regular participation in the Champions League. That said, his impact in Rennes was immediate, as the team's only losses under his stewardship last season were to Bordeaux, PSG and Monaco.

This summer brought more heavy spending from chairman Nicolas Holveck, with Kamaldeen Sulemana, Lovro Majer, Loïc Badé, and Baptiste Santamaria arriving alongside Laborde. No club, save PSG, spent more than the nearly €80m that Rennes did, but things hardly had started smoothly. After a decent start, three successive losses in the league had left the team sixteenth. It was in Laborde's third match with the club, having arrived at the eleventh hour from Montpellier, that things shifted. In a midweek round against a promoted Clermont side, Rennes put six past the Auvergne side as Laborde scored his first league goal for the club. The former Bordeaux man was playing on the right side of a three, as he had through much of his time at his previous clubs. Usually paired with another striker, Martin Terrier as it was here, he has rarely been used as a proper central striker. This had always been a curious choice, as Laborde's work rate, aerial ability and overall physical presence make him a rather complete centre forward. That said, he's never seemed unhappy in this role while becoming an adept creative presence, averaging roughly an assist every fourth match.

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

With a deep squad and no European football of consequence again until mid-March, Rennes are well-positioned to solidify a top three spot domestically and, with the various absences that they've suffered, much of that is down to Laborde and his consistent scoring touch. A return to the Champions League for the club looks a distinct possibility, no small matter for a player who was scrapping for playing time at a middling Bordeaux team not so long ago. His ascent even has him tipped as a potential option for Didier Deschamps' national side. Whether it ends in a Champions League place, a title in the Conference League, or even on a plane to Qatar, Laborde's rise has been truly meteoric. His is hardly a traditional path to success and offers a reminder that just because a player doesn't evince their talents from the off, or play a certain role, that doesn't mean that a shift in tactics or philosophy can't wring the best from them.

Eric Devin



Marco Verratti



12⁺⁴⁶

POS : CM
AGE : 23

The old saying, “You don’t know what you’ve got until it’s gone”, is more than applicable in football, especially in an age where superstar players rule the game. We saw what happened to Liverpool in the 2020/2021 Premier League season when they lost Virgil Van Dijk, Jordan Henderson and others, whilst Barcelona are starting to realise just how integral Lionel Messi was to the club on and off the field. Sometimes, you can take these players for granted and fail to truly appreciate what it is they bring to your team until they aren’t there and you notice how important they are to any form of success. At the moment, there’s one player in Ligue 1 whose reputation seems to grow every game he doesn’t play.

Marco Verratti’s injury record is startling, annoying and somewhat depressing for admirers of the minute Italian conductor, but the record is also telling. It’s telling that when Marco Verratti does not play, Paris Saint-Germain are a significantly worse team. Is that a criticism of the rest of the PSG midfield and team? Not intentionally. Does that show just how good Marco Verratti is? Absolutely. If he was fully fit, he would probably be the undisputed best midfielder in Europe and in the world, but the injuries and the absences fuel the lore around Verratti, fuelling the mystique of his wonderful ability.

The Italian’s 2021 has been a mixture of spectacular and inconsistent, with the spectacular coming in sporadic moments for PSG and the Euro 2020 run for Italy and the inconsistency coming in his few and far between appearances at club level. We saw in the summer of 2021 just how influential he could be, with Italy boss Roberto Mancini desperate to bring Verratti back into an already impressive midfield, strapping up his fragile knee in as much blue tape as humanly possible. There was no coincidence that when he made his first start of Euro 2020 against Wales in Rome, he ran the show like the orchestral conductor that he is. In the last 16 game against Austria, there was a stark difference in how Italy played when Verratti was taken off. Against Belgium, he set up Nicolò Barella for the opener.

He only completed two games in the entire tournament: against Wales in Rome and the final against England at Wembley. It was clear to see just how much Verratti pulled the strings in that final, with Italy dragging England back after the Three Lions had raced into an early lead. Despite his late arrival at the tournament, no one created more chances in Euro 2020 than Verratti, and only Georginio Wijnaldum won possession in the final third more than the Italian did in the tournament. He was everywhere, and made his mark for the eventual champions of Europe.

But what was he like at club level in Ligue 1 and in the Champions League? Under Mauricio Pochettino, his role varied from time to time. Against Barcelona in the first leg of the Round of 16 tie, Verratti was deployed as an almost hybrid central midfielder/left-sided attacking midfielder, finding himself closer to the box than usual in a bid to create a stronger line to Kylian Mbappe and to close down the Barcelona defenders on the ball. It worked a treat, with Verratti instrumental to a big win in Spain, but then missing the Bayern Munich quarter final clash, indicative recent career in Paris. He follows up a fantastic performance by... missing a chunk of time with an injury.

It’s impossible to praise Verratti’s performances when he does play without acknowledging that he has a unique position in the PSG squad due to his constant injuries. If anyone else had as many issues as Verratti does, there’s a high possibility that the club would have sold them years ago. But such is Verratti’s talent - and perhaps PSG’s inability to build a cohesive midfield without him - that the Parisians simply cannot be successful without him. A recent example of this was in the 2021/2022 Champions League group stages against Manchester City. If you compare the two games in Paris and in Manchester, there wasn’t much difference in how PSG set up to play. Defend deep, invite City onto them and hit them on the counter attack. They lined up both games with the exact same game plan but in Paris they had Verratti, in Manchester they didn’t. PSG won in Paris but lost in Manchester. In the latter game, the defenders didn’t have anyone in front of them to hand the ball off to. Verratti brings a calmness and a level of midfield authority which essentially screams “just give me the ball, I’ll make something happen”.

That sort of influence is what PSG don’t have without him and are finding impossible to replace because, let’s be honest, he is nearly impossible to replace. No one in world football is quite like Marco Verratti. No one has the ability and temperament to dribble past four players, pass the ball on with ease yet somehow still find a way to argue himself into the referee’s notebook. His 2021 has been mixed but it’s one that Verratti himself may look back on with great fondness. Not particularly for anything that happened at Paris Saint-Germain but for the summer where, for a handful of games in June and July, Marco Verratti was unplayable and untouchable. Like the most elusive of boxers, no one could lay a glove on Verratti’s greatness. But in order to take Paris Saint-Germain to the next level, he needs to find a way to be involved on the pitch in big games more often. Do PSG’s entire hopes of winning a Champions League rest on the shoulders of Marco Verratti? No, but they stand a far better chance of winning it with him starting in the team than with him on the treatment table.

Tom Scholes



JONATHAN
CLAUSS



11

POS : RB
AGE : 29

Vauban Strasbourg, SV Linx, US Raon-l'Etape, US Avranches, Quevilly Rouen, Arminia Bielefeld and Lens. Those are the clubs that Jonathan Clauss has played senior football for. It's far from an impressive list and certainly not on the level of many of those players ranked below him on this list. Nevertheless, the flying right-back has finished higher than many more established and lauded stars in this year's GFFN 100, and for good reason.

Now 29, Clauss' first taste of top flight football only came when he made the switch from Bielefeld to Lens in summer 2020, but it certainly didn't look like it. For someone used to playing in the lower echelons of French football before joining Arminia, his adjustment to Ligue 1 action went as well as it could have.

Arriving after five goals and eight assists in the German second division, helping Bielefeld to promotion, Clauss' attacking intent was again evident last term. Constantly providing a threat in the final third, he was the outlet Lens most often looked to hit. His turn of pace allows him to overlap his winger and get to the by-line before delivering a cross. Clauss has variation to his game too, his wicked deliveries from deep are Lens' secret weapon and he's unerringly consistent in finding teammates.

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

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

Donning the number 11 shirt, you'd be forgiven for thinking Clauss is a right winger but, while he's often found inside the opponents' final third, he doesn't ignore his defensive responsibilities. Not only is he Lens' primary attacking outlet but Clauss is also their most aggressive and front-footed defender.

PSG's Achraf Hakimi is currently Ligue 1's superstar full-back but, in 2021/22, the Moroccan has been outshone by Clauss. Second in Ligue 1 for assists this season, the Lens man is having the season of a lifetime. With Didier Deschamps altering his France system to a 3-4-3 in recent games to accommodate Theo Hernández, Lucas Hernández and Jules Koundé in their favoured positions, while enabling a front three of Kylian Mbappé, Karim Benzema, and Antoine Griezmann, Clauss is a viable option for Deschamps as right wing-back. None of France's current squad really suit the role, yet it perfectly compliments Clauss' style. If his form continues, a first ever call-up should be on the cards.

Clauss genuinely has it all. He pairs defensive nous with 2.14 key passes per 90, more than Lens' creative midfielder Gaël Kakuta. Although he isn't much of a dribbler, he compensates with his vision and enticing deliveries. Lens' entire system is built almost exclusively around getting the ball wide to Clauss, as the final game before the November international break demonstrated. The Frenchman scored once and picked up two assists in a truly excellent individual display as Lens swept Troyes aside in a 4-0 victory.

2021 has truly been a breakout year for Clauss, starting as a relative nobody, to becoming one of Ligue 1's shining lights, he's taken great strides in all facets of his game. Lens have unearthed a true gem. Not particularly flashy, Clauss does plenty of his work in silence, yet he almost always stands out.

Lens as a whole have been one of the standout Ligue 1 teams of 2021 and Clauss has certainly helped. For a side only promoted after the initial outbreak of COVID-19 forced Ligue 2 to be halted early in 2020, they have thoroughly impressed. For a team punching above their weight, it's perhaps fitting that someone like that late-developing Clauss is shining brightest.

Cameron Smith



Jonathan

DAVID



10

POS : ST
AGE : 21

Problem-solving is what Jonathan David does best. Born in Brooklyn, New York, David's parents moved to Ottawa in Canada, via Haiti, when he was six before he eventually graduated as a footballer with Belgian club Gent, having joined in 2017. Scoring four in his first four senior games, David grew up fast in Belgium. "When I moved here I had to become a man because I was living on my own," David told the Guardian. "I know my family is only one phone call away but I have to find solutions to problems for myself." 83 games for Gent brought 37 goals, 15 assists and interest from abroad and David eventually joined Lille. However, after a glacial start to his Ligue 1 career, finding solutions to problems has again become a useful skill.

Ten appearances and 558 minutes into his French career, after moving to northern France in August 2020, the now 21-year-old David was without a goal or an assist. Although Lille won nine of those games, David's form had seen him move from a starter to an intermittent presence in a title-chasing side. November's 4-0 win over Lorient finally brought a goal.

Although his movement, speed and burgeoning interplay often hinted at quality, the Canadian striker's one-dimensional finishing produced just two goals across his first 25 games for Les Dogues. In 2021, however, David transformed. His final tally of 13 Ligue 1 goals, which included winners away at PSG and late against Marseille, plus the crucial opener on the final day at Angers, were crucial to Lille's title triumph. So far this season, that form has continued as David leads the league with 12 goals.

Slowly gathering momentum at Stade Pierre-Mauroy has been key to David's sedate but constant upward trajectory. "Anywhere you go in the beginning is always difficult," David explained, recalling his move to Canada. Initially nervy and unable to impact games, his finishing was often snappy but 2021's David was full of swagger and showed intelligent and innovative use of possession.

That burgeoning confidence brought Lille dynamism and energy to complement the veteran Yilmaz's unique brand of power and persistence. With Yilmaz turning 37 at the end of the season, the young Canadian takes much of the responsibility for pressing high when needed and is one of few Lille players to have maintained their intensity after Jocelyn Gourvennec replaced title-winning coach Christophe Galtier.

With his contract running to 2025, the substantial €27m transfer fee Lille paid Gent last year is an issue for potential suitors. With Lille keen to make a profit, it's likely successful bids would need to threaten €40m at least, meaning David's list of

destinations is, as it stands, short. However, his continued development and an eye-catching goal return could convince foreign clubs, especially upper mid-table Premier League sides, that he is worth the financial risk.

Despite his obvious ability, David's best position might give clubs pause. Regardless of his strength, a lack of height (5'9) and a keenness to work in tandem with those around him by dropping off as a second striker makes the Canadian international less suited to a lone forward role at this level, while he's proven notably less effective when used wide. Without the one-on-one skills of top-level wingers, elements of David's game could instead be compared to Wissam Ben Yedder or perhaps even Luis Suárez. Parallels can be drawn between Ben Yedder's futsal experience and a teenage David playing in freezing Ottawa's cramped indoor 'domes' as both boast sharp control and protect the ball well with their bodies.

Despite his clever interplay in tight spaces, perhaps also thanks to Ottawa's crowded domes, David's passing is rarely expansive, incisive or progressive enough to break lines, a fact underlined by a miserly five assists across his first 75 LOSC outings. Although eight assists in 27 league games during his final season with Gent suggests otherwise, his creative abilities are not to be relied upon at this stage. It's clear Lille's 4-4-2 fits his game neatly, but it's a system few others could offer.

Liverpool's reported interest does make some sense, however, assuming the player is used in a withdrawn central role, given his likely proximity to the wider forwards. However, the 21-year-old is far from ready for such responsibility at that level as a starter, while he should be looking to avoid time as an understudy. "I don't want to go somewhere and just stay on the bench," David told the Guardian before joining Lille. "It's about taking the right step."

Without Galtier, Lille have failed to match last season's vintage despite keeping the vast majority of their team together. David and Sven Botman are the only players to maintain obvious progression and, with making Europe again looking like a tricky task, they could soon lead a belated exodus.

"There's no one to tell you, don't do this, don't do that," David explained to SoccerBible in July, referencing his move to Belgium. "You have to figure it out." Although issues over his best position persist, David has considerable room for further growth and the talented Canadian forward has proven throughout his career that finding the right solution, both on and off the field, is an area in which he excels. Another season of problem-solving could yet see the much-travelled 21-year-old move on once more after a stellar 2021.

Adam White



MARQUINHOS





09⁻⁸

POS : CB
AGE : 27

Despite PSG sitting 13 points clear at the top of the Ligue 1 table, only the most one-eyed Parisian fan would claim that the quality of their football has merited that kind of lead. That their record this season looks so good – on paper at least – is arguably mainly down to two people: Kylian Mbappé up front and Marquinhos at the back. Although it is the French world champion who attracts most of the headlines, the Brazilian defender continues to quietly keep the defence – and at times the midfield – afloat, as well as finding the time to pop up with important goals at the other end of the pitch.

Clearly a true defensive player at heart – he originally played as a goalkeeper as a child – Marquinhos joined Corinthians as a defender as an eight-year-old and worked his way up to the first team, before playing a dozen top-flight matches for the club in 2012. That handful of appearances was enough to attract attention from Europe and the Brazil U17 international was quickly on his way to Roma. Although only 18 years old and far from home, Marquinhos quickly acclimatised to Italian football, playing 26 Serie A matches and helping Roma to the Coppa Italia final despite struggling with injuries. Despite the very close attention of Manchester United, it was newly-minted Paris Saint-Germain who won out, paying a fee of over €30m. He made his debut (and scored) against Olympiakos in the autumn of 2013 in the Champions League. Despite having first to compete with compatriots Alex and David Luiz to win his place alongside another Brazilian, Thiago Silva, he gradually became a safe bet on whom PSG's conveyor belt of coaches have been able to rely. That many of his early notable performances were filling in in an unfamiliar role of right-back only emphasised his pure footballing ability and importance to the squad.

In the eight years since his arrival, Marquinhos has outlasted all his centre-back – and right-back – partners and rivals, as he has amassed a full cabinet's worth of domestic trophies, while still managing to save his best performances for the Champions League as PSG continue to fall short of QSI's holy grail. Considering some of his standout performances in his first few seasons in the French capital, it is hard to think that he only established himself as an undisputed starting centre back as late as the 2016-2017 season, under Unai Emery and after having helped Brazil to Olympic glory that summer. More marquee(nhos) performances followed, although the season ended in disappointing fashion with PSG losing their Ligue 1 title to Monaco and suffering the infamous 6-1 defeat to Barcelona. This triggered PSG into Galáctico 2.0 mode with Mbappé and Neymar coming in, but in the four and a half seasons that have followed, Parisian performances and results have barely improved, with most domestic trophies hoovered up but overall perpetual disappointment in the European competition. So often, however, Marquinhos has saved PSG from further disappointment and fans are often left with the feeling that, had the whole team shown the same heart as the

man who now wears the captain's armband, perhaps they would by now have won the one trophy to elude them. This is all the more impressive considering that, while PSG's problem has often been that their ill-thought-out transfer policy has meant fitting square pegs into round holes in positions further up the pitch, Marquinhos has proven himself a peg that is able to fit into any hole. At times his performances have suggested that he is not only the club's best defender but also their best midfielder. When called upon, he can move into the centre and provide not only a defensive shield but also a platform from which to build attacks.

Such versatility and reliability saw Marquinhos place number 1 in 2020's GFFN 100, and despite a noticeable but slight drop in performances this year, his fall in this year's list is down largely to heroics elsewhere and a lack of playing identity for PSG under Mauricio Pochettino. In the second half of last season he played all but five Ligue 1 matches, PSG keeping only one clean sheet in those five matches, one of which was a costly defeat to lowly Lorient. As the season reached its climax he scored important goals against Lens and Reims as the team battled in vain to retain its title. PSG also fell short in the Champions League, ultimately outplayed by Manchester City in the semi final. But Marquinhos again played his part in the club's run, scoring in the crucial first leg win over Bayern in the quarter final and finding the net again for the opening goal of the City tie to give his team short-lived hope. After lifting the Coupe de France trophy, Marquinhos spent his summer at the Copa America, attempting to retain his and his country's trophy and leading a mean Brazilian defence which conceded only three goals with him on the pitch – unfortunately one of those coming from club teammate Angel di Maria as Argentina won the final.

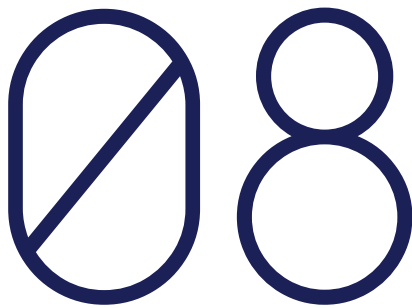
Normal service has since resumed this season, however. Although rarely impressive, PSG have won nine of the 13 Ligue 1 matches that he has started, their only clean sheets coming with him on the pitch. He has weighed in with a timely equaliser against reigning champions Lille in yet another come-from-behind win, and even notched a brace to help PSG to another sketchy victory against struggling Saint-Étienne. He has also been an ever-present as the club has moved into the knock-out stages of the Champions League. And, as always, he has maintained his excellent disciplinary record, with just two Ligue 1 yellow cards.

Clean and classy; strong in the air with great footwork; leadership and positioning; goalscorer and goal-blocker; motivated and motivator. Marquinhos has set a great example at the Parc de Princes which arguably too few have followed. But as long as he is in the team, covering for his fellow defenders, supporting his midfielders and even taking the pressure off his strikers, PSG always look stronger.

Jeremy Smith



DONNARUMMA



POS : GK
AGE : 22

Although his contract situation increasingly overshadowed it towards the end of the season, Gianluigi Donnarumma's contribution to Milan's second-place finish - their first time in the top four in 8 years - cannot be understated. Since making his debut for the Rossoneri aged just 16, immediately making the #1 spot his own for the successive six years, the Italian's dominating presence in goal has been one of the few constants of a hectic half a decade for the club.

He started all but one Serie A fixture in 2020/21 - a sixth consecutive season in which he made more than 30 league appearances - and starred in a Europa League campaign narrowly ended by Manchester United in the knockout stages. He kept 14 clean sheets domestically, including five consecutive shutouts to close out the season, and was duly named Serie A's goalkeeper of the year.

A very public falling out with the fans due to his contract situation made for a bitter end to the campaign, as the nickname Dollarumma in particular caught on. This was compounded by a second half to the season in which his team dropped off and allowed their city rivals to overtake them to win the title. Losses to Spezia and Sassuolo, and draws against Sampdoria and Udinese, particularly harmed their title credentials after going unbeaten for the first 15 games of the season.

With the shot-stopper's contract expiring in the summer, the Milan management had tried on numerous occasions to tie him down to a new deal, only for his and super-agent Mino Raiola's demands to scupper any chances of an extension. As the final weeks of the season drew on, it became apparent that neither party was willing to budge on their position, and talks had come to a standstill.

Eventually, the signing of Lille's title-winning goalkeeper Mike Maignan would be the final nail in the coffin for Donnarumma's time with the Rossoneri. The 22-year-old would leave his formative team having played a crucial role in their return to elite European football, but having seemingly soured his relationship with his home support beyond repair. The boos and whistles he was subjected to on his return to the San Siro for the Nations League attest to the fact that the wounds of his departure are yet to heal.

Clearly, though, the highlight of Donnarumma's year was an all-conquering EURO 2020 campaign. From consecutive group stage clean sheets to vital penalty shoot-out saves against both Spain and England, this was the summer the goalkeeping prodigy announced himself to the continent. His penalty save from Bukayo Saka to win the title - made all the more emphatic by his muted reaction, strutting away from the scene - was emblematic of the growing confidence and stature he gained at

just his first international tournament. Even if he later admitted that he was genuinely not aware that the shoot-out had ended there and then, it was an image that encapsulated the calming authority Donnarumma exuded throughout the summer.

Donnarumma was duly named player of the tournament by UEFA, and his status as the heir to Gianluigi Buffon was cemented. Although Milan's tifosi are yet to fully forgive him for the way he left, he was widely praised across the rest of the country and his money-grabbing image was largely shaken off, in favour of that of a national hero.

Life in Paris has not been as idyllic. Having signed a five-year contract on his return from the Euros, Donnarumma joined the cohort of internationals to sign for the club in a star-studded summer. Despite arriving as world football's premier goalkeeping prodigy, he has inevitably faced the competition of an equally impressive Keylor Navas. The Costa Rica international had established himself as the hitherto undisputed number one who extended his contract in April, after emerging as the answer to PSG's past goalkeeping problems.

Mauricio Pochettino has so far split this season's matches more or less equally between the two. The Italian has admitted that alternating between a starting spot and the bench has not been easy, but cited the competition with his colleague as a source of motivation. Arguably, the fact that Navas has been the first credible challenge to Donnarumma's starting position for a while will have had a positive effect for the long-term. With the objective of dethroning the former Real Madrid man, the Italian will have had no time to rest on his post-Euros laurels. Instead, he will have had to get his down and prove himself in a new club, and in a new country.

He notably featured in PSG's flagship result of the season so far, a 2-0 win over Manchester City in the Champions League group stage, and overall has kept five clean sheets. His commanding presence - standing at 1.96m - and deceptively agile reflex-saves have been on show throughout the first half of the campaign as he sought to stake his claim as Mauricio Pochettino's first choice.

The tide also seems to be beginning to turn in his favour, with Donnarumma being entrusted with a majority of the late-November and December matches. With Navas beginning to show a few weaknesses - his inability to stop Séko Fofana's shot in the draw against Lens or his needless sending off against Nantes spring to mind - it would come as no surprise were the Italian to take over full-time duties moving into the second half of the season. If all goes to plan, PSG have finally found a long-term solution to their perennial goalkeeping problems, in the form of Italy's likely number one choice for the next decade or two.

Raphaël Jacobin



DIMITRI
PAYET



07⁺⁷²

POS : AM
AGE : 34

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

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

For all his glorious talent, Payet has always drawn ire from opposition (and often his own) supporters. Most recently hit by a bottle thrown by a fan during Marseille's abandoned match against Lyon, Payet and his space buns have been a frequent target for opposition fans in 2021. Similar incidents occurred both on the opening day of the season against Montpellier and against Nice, where Payet was again struck by a projectile. On that occasion he reacted by returning the object back into the crowd with force. While there's obviously no defence for Payet's actions in that instance, he has been let down by the league, who have consistently failed to identify security risks in French stadia – a common theme so far this season.

The current commotion around Marseille, dangerous and unpleasant as it is, serves to drive Payet. He feeds on the chaos of it all. Having already tallied six goals and seven assists in Ligue 1 this season by the start of December, his form appears undeterred by outside forces. Of course, the man from Réunion has always had a chequered history within French football. Rejected by Le Havre at the age of 16, Payet admitted that he was not fully committed to the standards of professional football. "I don't blame Le Havre. Back then I wasn't an easy person to handle. I was always one of the first to mess around," he explained.

However, his consistency this late into a career often bellies his professionalism. Teammate at West Ham, goalkeeper Darren Randolph, admitted that eyebrows were raised when he first joined the club. "The first couple days of pre-season we had to do some running. He was in the back with me. But as soon as the footballs came out, we knew straight away we had a player." Payet wowed West Ham fans with his creativity and established himself as one of the elite players in the Premier League during the 2015/16 season. However, questions still remained as to why he joined a mid-tier Premier League club as opposed to one of Europe's elite.

After lighting up Euro 2016, and claiming a nomination for that year's Ballon d'Or award, Payet opted to re-join Marseille, taking a pay cut to do so. Something about the turbid seas of the Mediterranean seem to draw him back as his career often mirrors the glorious chaos of Marseille. Each manager that passes through OM also seems to entice Payet back to form just when he seems to be losing focus, whether that be through the faith he had in Marcelo Bielsa's dynamism or the trust shown in him by André Villas-Boas.

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

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

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

Ciarán Brennan



T É J I
SAVANIER





06⁺¹¹

POS : AM
AGE : 30

Given some of the 'big' names on this list, Téji Savanier's sixth place in the GFFN 100 may come as a surprise to many non-Ligue 1 viewers. However, Ligue 1 faithful have long known the quality of this jewel of a midfielder. For Savanier, this year was the culmination of the steady climb that the 29-year-old's career has been so far. From the start of his first Ligue 1 campaign with Nîmes in 2018, Savanier has shown he's a player to be recognized as one France's top products, and 2021 only solidified Savanier as one the best all-around players in France and, on certain levels, one of the best all-around players in the world.

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

This most recent calendar year would see Savanier achieve one his greatest accomplishments so far, even if it was symbolic in nature. As one of the most underrated players in the world, Savanier more than deserved his call up to the French team sent to the Olympic games this summer, where he scored the winner against South Africa in a 4-3 victory. That win proved to be the highlight of Les Bleus' tournament, however, exiting at the group stages.

France's poor performance may have had more to do with how the Olympic tournament was handled as a whole rather than any individual player's fault. Nevertheless, Savanier was recognised with the honour that he deserved, and even captained France at one stage.

Savanier is a one-man attack. One that makes everyone around him better. With one of the best right foots in Ligue 1, he's deadly from set pieces, the quality of his deliveries being comparable to anyone in French football right now, or for many years before.

A footballer's footballer, compared glowingly to Zinedine Zidane by both teammates and coaches, Savanier is a lethal attacking midfielder who has it all. Long balls, touch, speed, technical ability, dribbling and he can score from anywhere on the pitch, as was proved by his goal of the season contender from the halfway line against Dijon while with Nîmes. Savanier's range of passing mirrors Neymar's or Dimitri Payet's, and is equally effective in playmaking.

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

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

Savanier's 2021 highlights would compare to many players' career highlights, a better attacking midfielder couldn't be created in a video game. Despite his growing reputation, as Didier Deschamps' flirts with the idea of a full international call up for the midfielder, Savanier's name still may not be one that comes up in conversation when discussing the world's elite midfielders. But, as 2021 has again proven, it should.

Tony-Thomas DesRois



Benjamin
André



05⁺⁸

POS : CM
AGE : 31

Out of all the names in the GFFN 100 this year, Benjamin André's is, on the surface, one of the more obscure. He is mostly unknown outside of France, and he's often seen as an unfashionable defensive midfielder to others in the Hexagone. After all, he scored just a single goal in 2021. Make no mistake though, the 31-year-old fully deserves praise similar to that which Kylian Mbappé and N'Golo Kanté have received these past 12 months. Benjamin André has long been the heartbeat of Les Dogues and Lille's title success would not have been achieved without him.

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

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

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

Let's be clear, though, André's impact cannot be quantified purely with underlying statistics. His battling mentality is infectious, although perhaps less so to his opponents. His hounding and hustling of PSG in that clash drove Neymar to the point of laying a hand on André's face – the Brazilian received a booking that crucially led to the Brazilian being sent off later in the game.

That fighting spirit dates back to his childhood in Nice. After losing his father aged 10, André had to grow up quickly, and always showed a desire to win and fight. Beating PSG and heading into the final six games of the 2021/22 season, it was that spirit seen across the Lille squad which carried them to the title.

In 2021, André demonstrated a vast array of qualities. Against Montpellier, two weeks after the PSG win, the Frenchman attracted particular praise for regularly carrying the ball through the pitch like a box-to-box midfielder. Then, hosting Nice in May, with the away side down to ten men after an early red card, André helped calm Lille down and control the tempo of the game with his intelligent passing. With a place in the UNFP Team of the Year confirmed, a win against Angers was all that was needed to secure André's first major career honours, as well as Lille's first title since 2011. Yet there was a touch of uncertainty around Angers' Stade Raymond Kopa that evening.

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

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

Of course, Lille's form has dropped off in 2021/22. They picked up just 24 points from their first 17 Ligue 1 games, but André put in several dominant, bullying, tempo-controlling performances in the Champions' League as Jocelyn Gourvennec's charges qualified for the knockout rounds. André has once again been ever-present. He's missed just two games in all competitions. Perhaps if Lille had performed as strongly as they did at the beginning of the year at the end of it, André could rank even higher on this list.

Through sheer consistency and attitude, Benjamin André has been a role model to his fellow professionals. At 31, it is unlikely that a huge payday will arrive for André but no one in that Lille side deserves the acclaim and awards more than him. André became the heartbeat of a team that will go down in French football history, and his brilliant year will never be forgotten.

Alex Barker

Lionel
MESSI





04

POS : FW
AGE : 34

Normality is relative. For Lionel Messi, arguably the greatest player of all time and used to scoring 91 goals in a calendar year, as he did in 2012, expectations are inflated. For Messi, obscene output has become the norm. But at 34-years-old, and after leaving the relative comfort of the Nou Camp, Messi's glorious normality is under threat from a harsh reality.

Despite the fanfare after his transfer from La Liga in the summer, Messi hasn't proven as broadly decisive for PSG as might have been expected having moved from an allegedly stronger league in Spain to the French top flight. In Ligue 1, Messi has just one goal in 11 games so far. Although he has added five assists in that time, three of those came in one game away at bottom club Saint-Étienne. On the face of it, it's a poor return for any PSG forward, especially arguably the greatest player of all time.

However, Messi has quickly become PSG's Champions League talisman. In just five games in Europe for PSG, the 34-year-old has five goals, three of which might have been the difference between qualification for the last 16 and a humiliating early exit. A last-minute quintessential Messi curling effort, having exchanged passes with Kylian Mbappe - who provided his best Luis Suarez impression, added a crucial second to see off Manchester City 2-0 at the Parc des Princes back in September before a brace overcame PSG's second-half deficit at home to RB Leipzig for an eventually pivotal 3-2 win.

Messi's intensity, on the whole, hasn't been increased in Europe, although his teammates' intensity - who are perhaps more used to their domination of Ligue 1 - has been notably amped up for the bigger occasions. As a result, Messi has found more space and more willing support, also aided by more expansive opposition. In Ligue 1, despite L'Équipe's criticism of his displays via some harsh player ratings, he's proven far more influential than his numbers suggest.

The draw against Lorient at the end of December was a good example. Paris drifted through a game they expected to win and struggled to break down a stubborn and organised side. Messi, however, played conductor-in-chief by floating around the box, dropping deep to progress play and pick passes. Had Paul Nardi not got the slightest fingertip to his volley that hit the post, PSG might have won the game, with the goal being a non-Whabi Khazri goal of the season contender. There was a sense that Messi spent the game trying to cajole his team into life, not comprehending how they could be so disinterested.

Overall, Messi hasn't been helped by how poor PSG have been this season. Their lead atop Ligue 1 notwithstanding, Paris have not convinced in any of their league games, aside from perhaps the first half against Nantes. They regularly snatch late wins or

rely on moments of brilliance to rescue the result. As such, Messi is playing in a dysfunctional, disjointed team drawn from a fragmented squad, and, as it stands, this incarnation have little chance of achieving the feats expected of them following Messi's arrival by the rest of the continent.

Ligue 1's style has also been an issue for Messi. The average French defensively minded player is markedly different from those in La Liga. Powerful and aggressive, Ligue 1 defenders are, on average, more physical and agricultural in their play than their more technical, nippy and slight Spanish brothers. French teams, too, are generally more pragmatic and results orientated than La Liga's, especially in the bottom half of the table. Although Ligue 1 has become far more dynamic of late, PSG still face a weekly low block.

Teams often defended deep again Barcelona too but few were as well practised, organised or lacking in respect as those Messi has faced this season, especially away from home. As a result, Messi has struggled to wriggle through the tight spaces, play the intricate passes or manufacture the shooting lanes he did in La Liga.

That, of course, is not entirely the Argentine's fault. As Mauricio Pochettino has often mentioned, the solidifying of the burgeoning understanding between Messi, Mbappé and Neymar, not to mention Ángel Di María, is taking time. Frustratingly for all concerned, signs that Paris can find the expected fluidity have been sparse so far. With Mbappé likely to leave on a free this summer, time could yet elapse before the right formula is found. Messi has also suffered from the fact that Pochettino's game plan, as it was at Barcelona, isn't simply to give the ball to Messi and let him win the game.

Overall, however, Messi's year has been an undeniably productive one - and a monumental one by anyone else's standards. Capturing his seventh, and, any World Cup heroics later this year notwithstanding, probably his last Ballon d'Or was a real triumph as was Argentina's long-awaited Copa America triumph. Messi's first meaningful piece of international silverware. A not unimpressive Copa del Rey win at Barcelona, given their weakened state, also complemented a solid year overall in numbers. Messi's 34 goals and 14 assists across all club competitions came in 45 games, which equalled a goal contribution every 82 minutes in 2021. Despite his goal record, the truth is that, previous relative performances levels aside, based on sheer quality and influence, Lionel Messi has arguably been PSG's best player for much of this season so far - with him and Kylian Mbappe streets ahead of the rest. He may be starting to age and be subject to a variety of factors beyond his control at PSG but, regardless of Messi's new normal, the reality is: an average 2021 by his standards, still outstrips the rest.

Adam White



LUCAS PAQUETÁ



03

POS : AM
AGE : 24

At times in 2021, it was more than fair, perhaps even gospel, to say that Lucas Paquetá was the best player in France. He was initially derided as a player brought in by Juninho more for his being Brazilian than for anything he had displayed on the pitch, coming from AC Milan at a cost that was roughly half of what the Rossoneri had spent on him from Flamengo less than two years earlier. His arrival was a surprise, and given the now-former sporting director's record in signing his countrymen, there have been far more poor signings than brilliant ones. His place in the squad also seemed curious. The emergence of Maxence Caqueret had been a tonic for the team's play following the resumption of football in 2020, and with Bruno Guimarães, Houssem Aouar, Jean Lucas and Thiago Mendes also options in central midfield, he hardly seemed a need-based signing.

A late arrival to the club following a European transfer window that was extended owing to COVID-19, Paquetá didn't make his first start for Lyon until mid-October, in a scrappy 3-2 win over Strasbourg. Playing as part of a midfield three, he turned in a solid if unexceptional display, with Memphis Depay and Karl Toko Ekambi running the show in attack. With competition for places from the aforementioned quartet, and Rudi Garcia favouring a 4-3-3, it wasn't until later in the season that he began to make a real impact, playing as a number ten with more room for expression, despite the manager's noted proclivity for somewhat elemental football.

With eight goals and four assists in the second half of the season, Paquetá was the club's most influential attacker, allowing Lyon to remain in the title race despite dips in form from Toko Ekambi and Tino Kadewere. Moreover, while not the same sort of player as Depay, Paquetá looked to have the combination of star quality, creativity and ability to function as both a creative hub that the Dutchman had, with far more to offer in terms of his workrate and versatility. Knowing that Depay would be off in the summer, his displays were a massive balm for Gones fans, who may have been approaching the summer with no small amount of trepidation.

Indeed, in some ways, Paquetá may even be an upgrade on Depay, but for the amount of goals scored. His doggedness in tracking back and getting stuck in is remarkable. Despite his obvious technical gifts, he has always been ready to get stuck in and work for the good of the team, taking up positions that may be deeper in midfield than he would prefer, having stated that he feels he works best as a number ten. No player on the team last season save Maxence Caqueret made more tackles, and he also offered a surprisingly strong aerial presence, using a deceptive combination of wiry strength and his height to belie the stereotype of the technically gifted Brazilian midfielder.

For his country, too, Paquetá has been immense, as his form at Lyon has more than made up for his rather aimless spell in Italy in the eyes of Tite. Having impressed as a playmaker for Lyon, he was used most often this summer as an attacking midfielder, edging ahead of the likes of Gerson and Philippe Coutinho, and scored a pair of key goals in the knockout rounds as Brazil made the final, losing to Argentina. Building on his fine summer displays, he's continued to be a regular starter for the Seleção into the autumn, helping the team qualify comfortably for Qatar 2022 by topping the CONMEBOL table.

Clearly a player who is ready to give all for club and country, Paquetá's travel and exertions are myriad, but they didn't appear to be affecting his play. He may even have taken a step toward becoming a Lyon legend by coming off the bench against Monaco, despite having played 90 minutes for Brazil less than 48 hours prior. Once on the pitch, he took a scoreless match by the scruff of the neck, including an incredible "blind" pass in the build-up to the match's final goal in a 2-0 win. A truly heroic display, it only added to his reputation, and helped him to be named the Ligue 1 Player of the Month for October, building on his place in the prior campaign's Team of the Season.

However, a spate of injuries to Kadewere, Islam Slimani, and Moussa Dembélé would see him used as a false nine in some half a dozen matches. While he was surprisingly effective in this role, the physical toll of battling with Ligue 1's notoriously physical central defenders seems to have sapped him of some of his usual verve. Despite being rested in the Europa League, the team's qualification having been sealed, he has looked off the pace in the year's final six weeks.

The hope here, then, is that with Lyon's unseemly elimination from the Coupe de France owing to fan trouble against Paris FC, a full two-and-a-half weeks off before OL take on Paris Saint-Germain in the new year will leave him reinvigorated and fresh. Given Lyon's poor form in the league, a return to form from the player the team's fans have dubbed "Craqueta" can't come soon enough. While the Ligue 1 table remains tightly packed below Paris Saint-Germain, and OL are only nine points off second, with a game in hand, time will soon become of the essence. If Paquetá can be back to the dynamic, consistently all-action presence that marked the vast majority of 2021, Lyon can be back in the race for the top three, allowing his brilliance to flourish in next year's Champions League.

Eric Devin



Mbappe



02⁺¹

POS : FW
AGE : 22

To not see Kylian Mbappé topping this list will come as no small surprise to many casual observers of French football. However, there's no denying that his brilliance has been frustrated to some degree this calendar year, even if some of that was through makings not of his own doing. With two matches to play at the time of writing, he is clear and away the league's top scorer in the calendar year, with 24 goals to his name, ranking ahead of Jonathan David and Wissam Ben Yedder. However, as talented as Ben Yedder and David are, (or in the Canadian's case, might become), they are also several cuts below the Paris Saint-Germain forward.

Some may be quick to jump to conclusions, and infer that for our panel, his pivotal role in France's elimination from the summer's European Championships, via his penalty being saved by Yann Sommer, hangs unfairly over his head. But, one might argue, is it his fault that he had to get to grips with a new system (Didier Deschamps' 3-4-1-2) and a new teammate, in Karim Benzema, so quickly, and on the heels of a season bizarrely compressed and interrupted by COVID-19? Perhaps not, and he did offer a rebuttal in the firmest terms in being the key man as France strolled to the Nations League title this autumn, finding the net twice and adding a pair of assists in the finals.

But, the case can also be made that a disconnect between his role at club level, where he has, even with the arrival of Lionel Messi, become the focal point of the attack, and the national team, where Benzema was allowed a privileged position in the attacking hierarchy, caused a sort of internal crisis for the player. For France, Mbappé was, if not forced to feed on scraps, at least approach the way that attacks were knitted together, differently. He had played the role of a seeming wildcard with aplomb in 2018 at the World Cup, using his searing pace to make good on the dogged running of N'Golo Kanté and Blaise Matuidi.

His initial failure to absorb the nuances of playing alongside Benzema (who, as has been well-documented, is a more than capable foil for any number of star players) speaks perhaps to a level of naiveté that is a reminder of his age, 23 at the time of publication. Not being asked to do much of what is complex works fine at club level, where defences wear down more easily, and are less skilled than at international level (at least in Ligue 1). This is not to say that Mbappé is lacking tactically, but rather than he struggled at first in an unfamiliar role before coming to grips with it come the autumn — it was circumstance, or, rather, bad luck that this disconnect came during a major tournament, but at this end of the GFFN 100, players must simply be judged by the highest standards.

But to the positives, then. At Paris Saint-Germain, while there was always likely to be some hand-wringing as to how Mauricio Pochettino would crowbar all of Messi, Mbappé, Neymar, and Ángel Di María into the team, Mbappé has been a consistent presence, coming up with not only vital goals, but also building his influence as a creative hub where that more experienced trio has been lacking. Neymar by contrast has struggled with injury and the two Argentines have more frequently looked their age following a lengthy summer at the Copá America.

Indeed, Mbappé's game has evolved, as evidenced by his increasingly impressive assist numbers, despite a lack of an obvious outlet for this sort of thing, with Mauro Icardi a peripheral figure and players who might have filled this sort of role in the past (think Moise Kean or Edinson Cavani) in short supply. No other player has scored more than three goals. Mbappé has thus become not only the tip of the proverbial attacking spear, but also what drives it, both in Europe and domestically.

It is easy, of course, to swat aside Mbappé's numbers with a claim that the quality of Ligue 1 inflates them, but a counter-argument can also be made that the results of French sides in Europe this season are evidence of an increased level of play. Thus, Mbappé's numbers may not be quite as gaudy as he adjusts to a new role, but they are also part and parcel of an increased level of competition in the league — the gross spends of the likes of Marseille, Rennes, and Nice this summer are nothing to sneeze at — but that the Parisians still sit so comfortably ahead of the pack despite some growing pains is also evidence that he is continuing to grow and improve, even if he has gone missing in the odd match.

To wit, he has scored or assisted in nearly every match this season, all while the team has weathered injuries to its attacking lineup (Julian Draxler, Icardi, Neymar) that have seen him not only play more minutes than any other player in the side but cope with a constant flux in terms of both his teammates and the team's tactical setup. Obviously Mbappé is a hungry player in wanting this to be the case (at least in terms of being on the pitch as much as possible), but one has to wonder what the stress of this sort of workload may do to his play in the second half of the campaign.

That is, simply having to bear the load of so many minutes while a coherent style of play from Mauricio Pochettino seems to remain far off and the lack of consistency alongside him may yet hinder his level — his achievements are coming despite the club for which he plays and not because of it. It may seem a harsh, or even arbitrary criticism, but for a player who should rightly have designs on being the world's best within the next 2-3 seasons, this is the sort of standard to which he must be held.

Eric Devin



Uchan

Seko Fofana



01⁺⁹⁷

POS : CM
AGE : 26

No player embodies the adventurous and stout-hearted nature of Franck Haise's Lens side more than the mercurial Seko Fofana. In a neutrals' favourite of a team filled to the brim with cult heroes, the 26-year-old's consistently brilliant performances put him a cut above, and have seen him outclass every other midfielder in Ligue 1 this year.

The Ivorian international joined from Udinese in the summer of 2020, turning down high-profile offers from England and Italy in favour of the newly-promoted Sang et Or. Having seen his debut delayed until November by injury, Fofana more than made up for lost time and by the turn of the year was a pivotal piece of Lens' unexpected push for Europe. Their swashbuckling, all-action approach to games was epitomised by the midfielder's tireless work on and off the ball, breezing past opposition lines to make up the vital cog in their lightning-quick transitions.

Although the team would falter agonisingly short of the finish line, the foundations for a European challenger were clear for all to see. Lens picked up momentum again at the start of the new season, with Fofana once again shining, notably winning September's player of the month award.

He even has five goals so far this season, one of which coming in a masterpiece of a performance against PSG. Aside from beating Keylor Navas from distance, Fofana laid bare the frailties of the Parisian midfield with his range of passing and ability to comfortably beat his man on the break. Standout games against Marseille at the Vélodrome and in a tumultuous Derby du Nord against reigning champions Lille have further cemented his status as this year's in-form player.

Under his captaincy, Lens are mounting a more than credible challenge for a place in European competition next season. Franck Haise's team have continued to grow from strength to strength, and despite the stiff competition, a repeat of last May's heartbreak will surely be avoided. In any case, one way or another, we'll inevitably be seeing Fofana on bigger stages in 2022.

As he became the first non-Paris Saint-Germain player to top our yearly rankings, Fofana spoke exclusively to Get French Football News about his outstanding calendar year.

GFFN: First of all Seko, congratulations on being named number one in our ranking of Ligue 1 players over the course of 2021. You are the very first player from outside of PSG to win. How does it feel to be considered among the very best in a league that features the likes of Kylian Mbappé and Lionel Messi?

SF: It's an absolute pleasure for me. They are incredible players,

we could see that when we played against them. Mbappé can make a big difference in just 10 minutes, and it's not just that. I am very proud, it is also thanks to the rest of the team. Today it is me, but it could have been another member of our team. I am delighted. And it gives me a lot of motivation to work even harder to be at the top of your list again next year.

You seem to be a bit shocked!

Yes, I get to see that my work is being recognised, which is just such a pleasure. It is a pleasure to even be considered.

How would you judge your year from a personal standpoint?

I think I got better throughout the year. Initially I was a little injured, then I was able to adapt to the team, who were already doing a great job, so I am proud, I am happy. I have been able to play matches consistently without injuries. I think I have missed just 13 minutes this season. It is a source of pride to be on the pitch and performing well.

What part has your manager Franck Haise had to play in your progression as a player?

I would say that the period when I was not fit [when he first joined the club] actually gave me a big opportunity to analyse, to try to see how I was going to make an impact, to get my bearings. When I arrived, I was able to bring a bit more power to progress the ball in order to counter-attack teams, and to defend well. With the coach, we do this kind of work daily, to try to figure out how space can be created for me, or how I can create space myself and hurt the opponents. I'm not the only one in the team. We're all enjoying ourselves a lot, as a squad.

Your decision to join Lens amid interest from other clubs was questioned at the time. In the end, it was the right choice, no?

I make my own decisions, I'm not going to be influenced by people who want to see me in another club, for example. I take my decisions on my own. As I have said, a lot of factors were at play, a desire to return to France, and there was Covid, I wanted to be closer to my friends and family. The club's project was another reason. Honestly, the Italian season hadn't even finished yet and I already saw myself here. The Sporting Director convinced me, and I said OK straight away.

My decision was Lens, I knew that I wasn't making an error and that I was going to come here and make a difference. I showed that all the people who didn't believe in my decision were wrong. That's what is good: when you come here, people are curious to see what you are going to do, they want to see if you mess up a bit, to be able to say: "Oh look, it's the choices he

made..."

The easiest choice for me was probably to go to Atalanta, who wanted me. It was the tougher decision to come here, to bring the club back up to the top, to try to bring it back to its true level. I am delighted, but we're seeing today that it's not easy either, that there are a lot of sacrifices, there are a lot of good teams. Nowadays, opposition teams know us better. Each weekend there is a new challenge, and I'm very happy about it. And if you think that I made the right decision and are happy to see how Lens is performing, that makes me happy too.

Many of our readers will be familiar with you from your time at Manchester City. How formative was this experience for the rest of your career? Were there any players in particular that inspired you?

I think I was lucky to be able to play at Manchester City, because it allowed me to see the top level to understand what it means to be a champion. There are players who think that they sometimes do things that put them at the top, but in actual fact this is wrong. Going there, I saw the mentality of a lot of players, David Silva, Yaya Touré, Samir Nasri, Vincent Kompany. I can give you a lot of examples.

That allowed me to gain more experience and to speak with them, to be able to get their opinions on certain match situations, to see them train, see them in games. Nowadays, all of that is helping me enormously, I'm able to reflect now and realise just how valuable that was. I think it has given me the skill of rising to the occasion when required.

This season, you impressed with performances at the Vélodrome and against PSG a few weeks ago. Do you relish the prospect of playing in these kinds of big games?

It's true that there is expectation when it comes to those sorts of matches, there is a lot of tension, you get a lot of messages, and lots of pressure too. Personally, I don't really feel the pressure, so I try to take a mature approach, to try to do well. I don't know, what's going through my head is that the opposition are a big team, they are coming and thinking that it will be easy, but in fact it won't be.

So then we try to beat them. But those matches are difficult, because we're playing against teams that are really going to try and impose their style of play and open up, so they're matches which are full of intensity, enjoyable, with quite a show. In contrast, there are teams that we play who really sit back, who wait, wait for us to make a mistake, to then play. That is part of their strategy, that's how it is. But on the big occasions, I try to be myself. I'm not scared of them.

So has it become more complicated in Ligue 1 this season, because teams have had more exposure to Franck Haise's famous 3-4-3/3-4-1-2?

Yes, absolutely. It is difficult. Teams are really trying to counter us and prevent us from playing our game. But we are lucky to have a coach who is creative who tries to find solutions against those teams. It is hard, but that is part of the game.

Talk to us about your chemistry with Cheick Doucouré – how important has that been in the club's results this year? Because it's clear, especially in transition, that the understanding between the two of you is vital.

Cheick is someone who I knew a little bit before coming to Lens, I had watched him. Even when I was not yet fit, I analysed him, I analysed all the players, to know how we were going to be able to compliment each other. I'm delighted that you ask about him, about the Cheick – Seko pairing, because often you just hear about "Seko, Seko, Seko," but he works in the shadows and for me he is more important. He is incredibly complete in what he does, for me he is one of the best players I have ever played with. He's kind of my partner here, that is why we are able to perform well together, whether it is on or off the pitch, we are together all of the time, talking, having fun.

From a sporting or personal perspective, if you could borrow one of his qualities, what would it be?

From both, everything [laughs]. I would take it all, as I said he is a complete player. He knows how to shoot from long-range, he knows how to make the final pass, he knows how to break the lines, he knows how to dribble. He doesn't feel pressure zonally when maybe you should clear the ball or dribble. He's strong defensively, and for me he has all the qualities to be at the highest level – I would even say that he is more complete than me sometimes. It's a pleasure to play alongside him.

If you had to choose a player in Ligue 1 to watch for 2022 who could top the GFFN 100 next year, who would you pick?

At Lens, I would say Cheick Doucouré. If not at Lens... I can't say Mbappé, too easy.

Yeah, that's not allowed!

I would say [Kamaldeen] Sulemana, from Rennes. I think I would go for him. And if I had to pick a player right now, I would honestly say Téji Savanier. The man is like red wine. But it's honestly hard to say, because we have a league of talents with players doing great things in all the clubs. There's quality, and there's talent.

And finally, what do you want to achieve personally in 2022?

To be honest, I take a more collective approach. Because as a collective, if we do well, the personal achievements will come. I am more focused on our team. My aim is for the club to finish as high as possible.

A little Conference League, Europa League, maybe more?

It's hard to say, because it's so tight at the moment. There are very good teams, we were 2nd for a little while, now we are 5th or 6th. The league has tightened a lot, we have lost matches we probably shouldn't have lost, but that is part of football. We need to reflect, get inspired, and underline everything we have gone through to move forward in the best way possible. To be completely honest, my goal is for the team to finish as high as possible.

GFFN

10 TO WATCH IN 2022

Warmed Omari (Rennes) - 21, CB: The 21-year-old has often kept out €20m summer signing Loïc Badé out of the Brittany side's starting XI. Bruno Genesio's faith in the youth academy product, who has been at the club for six years, is not unfounded. The poise applied to his passing and unteachable ability to read the game are impeccable. He also has a unique, nascent understanding of how to use the limited physicality that he does currently possess to great effect through shielding in set piece scenarios.

Hugo Ekitike (Reims) - 19, ST: With 8 goals in the first half of the Ligue 1 campaign, no teenager in Europe's top 5 leagues is more proficient in front of goal this season. After an unlikely short loan-spell at Danish side Vejle Boldklub last season gave him the perfect springboard to carve out a spot in the Reims starting XI under Oscar Garcia. With a physique and running style that reminds many of Kylian Mbappé, Ekitike will be critical to SDR's attempts to avoid relegation. If he can take advantage of his height more and add heading to his arsenal, Ekitike will be frighteningly well-rounded for his age.

Malo Gusto (Lyon), 18 - RB: Gusto's physique, attacking verve, all-action defending and focused attitude, as well as the fact that all those attributes have a long way to develop, make the teenager a rare talent. Gusto began his youth career as an attacking midfielder, explaining his sangfroid on the ball and inventiveness going forward which full-backs formed from the start of youth level tend not to have. Peter Bosz has taken a liking to the teenager, who in 2022 will surely earn more first team chances as French international Léo Dubois continues to face fitness issues and generally waning of form.

Batista Mendy (Angers), 21 - DM: After years of his progression being hampered by not being given opportunities at Nantes but not achieving a move away, it was only this summer when his contract with Les Canaris ran down that the 21-year-old has been able to put a stamp on Ligue 1 in a defensive midfield role under Gérard Baticle at Angers. A centre-back at youth level, his considerable height has not prevented him being retooled as a #6 to great effect. With an eclectic mixture of verve and energy, Mendy has improved drastically in his reading of the game and kickstarting moves from the base of the midfield.

Christopher Wooh (Lens), 20 - CB: A free transfer in summer from Nancy, Lens have found the long-term replacement for Loïc Badé expertly well, with Wooh starting to install himself at the centre of the back three in Franck Haise's 3-4-1-2 shape. Haise, who is an expert at slowly integrating new signings into his system so that they can explode with great effect, see Séko Fofana, is the best manager in the division to enable Wooh to become the next Ligue 1 stalwart defensive talent.

Elie Wahi (Montpellier), 19 - ST: Wahi's livewire running style, paired with an uncannily premature ability to make sensational late darts into the box, make him one of the most exciting attacking talents in Ligue 1 as we head into 2022. Pacey and with an excellent change of direction, a first look at Wahi and

you would think he is a winger. However, combine these attributes with an impressive heading ability and him working diligently to put an arsenal of different shot types in his locker, the teenager must aim for 15 goals in French football for the calendar year. To achieve this goal, he must improve his composure and lean back less when taking shots.

Flavius Daniliuc (OGC Nice), 20 - CB: The Austrian youth international central defender's swashbuckling style is unique and must be further nurtured into 2022. One of the best young interception-focused defenders in the division, his standout performance in March during a 3-0 win over Marseille encapsulated all of his best qualities. Versatile and able to fill in at right-back because of his speed, his intelligence in stopping opposition attacks is paired with real improvements in his distribution which have occurred this year when he has been given the chance to play alongside Jean-Clair Todibo over elder statesman Dante.

Adrien Truffert (Rennes), 20 - LB: So complete and effective in both boxes is Truffert, that the 20-year-old convinced the Rennes board that they could dispose of the more senior French youth international Faitout Maouassa in the left-back position because Truffert was totally ready to take on the starting berth himself. In 2021, Truffert learned to over-extend himself a little less in attacking phases to compensate for the fact that his defensive partner at left-sided centre-back in this Rennes team has changed hands a number of times over the course of the year. In 2022, he will want to focus on improving the accuracy of his crosses from the by-line, to ensure that they are as consistently potent as his crosses from deep.

Bamba Dieng (Marseille), 21 - ST: The emergence of Dieng is a major vindication of Marseille's strategy of striking up an exclusive partnership with the prestigious Senegalese football academy, Diambars, which is where the 2000-born forward hails from. Dieng's eye for goal is natural and unquestionable, what has been more pleasing and surprising in his first months of French senior football is his tenacity in counter-pressing, a major requirement of attackers under Jorge Sampaoli's reign. He has built some strong early chemistry with Dimitri Payet, a fact that will not be lost on Arkadiusz Milik as the Polish international looks over his shoulder in his battle to keep Dieng out of the starting XI.

Tiago Djalo (Lille) - 21, CB: The Portuguese defender announced himself to the world of French football at the start of 2021, deputising in right-back and centre-back positions for Lille as Christophe Galtier was able to ensure that absentees through injury did not derail the club's journey an historic Ligue 1 title. Djalo's power and physicality is frightening and a major asset, going toe to toe with Kylian Mbappé and Neymar and coming out on top this year because of those qualities. With Sven Botman leaving in summer, Djalo will become the defensive centrepiece for LOSC going forward. In the meantime, he will want to work on his discipline when it comes to keeping a straight line in the rare offside traps that LOSC set up as they continue to be a largely sit deep, counter-attack side.



MALO CUSTO



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