

The GFFN 100

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Note From the Editor:

Welcome to the Get French Football News 100, a publication that celebrates the enactments of footballers associated with French football over the course of 2013.

The Get French Football News team got together last December to bounce ideas about a way in which we could mark the end of an explosive year in French football and we invite you to indulge in the final product.

After all, it has been quite some year. Qatari-backed Paris Saint Germain lifted their first Ligue 1 title for 19 years and were unlucky to be edged out in their Champions League Quarter Final duel with one of Europe's greatest clubs in FC Barcelona, only on the away goal rule.

French football history was made on many fronts in 2013 with a Claude Puel-inspired OGC Nice team qualifying for their first European campaign for 15 years, St Étienne winning their first ever Coupe de la Ligue and the French national team becoming the first side in history to turnaround a 1st leg two goal deficit in a European World Cup Qualifying Playoff to book their place in Brazil for 2014.

Invariably in football, where there are highs there are also lows. One of the former mainstay clubs Le Mans FC went into liquidation and were subsequently relegated to the 6th tier of French football (DH). The French football world was rocked by the loss of former manager and player Bruno Metsu who famously took Senegal to the quarter finals of the 2002 World Cup, tragically losing his battle with cancer at the age of just 59.

Tax-exempt AS Monaco ruffled feathers with regards to equality as French football clubs continue to be threatened by the possibility of a 75% tax on individuals earning more than €1m a year, while their Monegasque counterparts would be comparatively less affected (only French nationals that are employed by Monaco would be subject to Hollande's proposal).

Great footballing occasions were often tarnished by violence this year, including the scuffles at the Trocadero during PSG's title celebrations, St Étienne fans' attempted destruction of the away end of OGC Nice's brand new stadium the Allianz Riviera and the attack on the Marseille team bus by Napoli ultras before their Champions League group stage encounter. The following evidence forces one to realise just how much work there is still left to do to ameliorate the French footballing experience.

Still, Ligue 1 had one of the most progressive years in recent times in terms of becoming a recognised and respected league across the globe. We saw the arrivals of Edinson Cavani, Falcao and David Beckham (albeit briefly) onto the French footballing stage; with Diego Maradona ever so nearly (not really) becoming the manager of Montpellier HSC.

This publication is of course published exactly five months after the end of 2013, so it is only fitting that I say a few words on the conclusion of the 2013/2014 campaign in addition, even if events of 2014 will not be included in any of the profiles you will read below.

Paris Saint Germain undeniably achieved a season of progression, winning Ligue 1 again but also adding the Coupe de la Ligue to their seemingly ever-growing trophy cabinet, after Laurent Blanc brought with him a more direct, attacking style of play to the capital, which deservedly earned him a contract extension.

EA Guingamp sparkled as they won the Coupe de France and staved off the distinct threat of relegation to Ligue 2, which many had doomed them too in August of 2013. The town of 6,500 inhabitants will have the opportunity to rub shoulders with some of Europe's most established teams in the Europa League next season. Meanwhile, Lille surprised everyone with their qualification for the Champions League and Claudio Ranieri was sacked despite guiding Monaco to a 2nd placed finish and their highest points total ever in their Ligue 1 history. With a serious managerial shakeup expected this summer, Ligue 1 will return with an exciting host of new faces come August. Before that, we await with baited breath to see what Didier Deschamps' troops can muster up in Brazil this month, with the supposed underdog tag likely to favour one of the World Cup's probable surprise packages.

Now, please enjoy the GFFN 100, a unique celebration of the immense talent that French football has to offer.

Christian Nourry, Get French Football News

What is the GFFN 100?

The Get French Football News 100 comprises of our selection of the top one hundred talents that French football has to offer, judged solely on their performances in 2013.

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 2013.

For example, Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang is ineligible despite playing half of the calendar year at St Étienne because on the 31st December 2013 he was plying his trade at Borussia Dortmund.

However, João Moutinho is eligible for the GFFN 100 despite having joined Monaco in the summer of 2013 because on the aforementioned date he was a registered squad member of theirs.

Players that are eligible are however judged on all their professional appearances in 2013, regardless of whether or not they were playing abroad for a part of the calendar year.

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

All of the profiles in the GFFN 100 speak solely of each player's 2013, as a calendar year.

As the profiles were written solely as a reflection of the players' performances in 2013, the statistical data used is only valid as of the 31st December 2013.

100. Emmanuel Rivière

Club: AS Monaco FC

Date of Birth: 3rd March 1990

Position: Attacker



After a frustrating 2012 at Toulouse, Emmanuel Rivière appears to have turned a corner in 2013 with newly-promoted big spenders Monaco. The 23 year old Frenchman has been labelled in the past as one of France's most exciting attacking prospects, 'the new Thierry Henry,' and is now giving some credence to this bold comparison. The Frenchman started his career at Coupe de la Ligue holders St Étienne, before moving to Toulouse in July of 2011. Rivière then made the trip to the South East coast of France to join Monaco for €4m at the start of the calendar year, the amount being €2m less than what he joined Toulouse for two years previously, which perhaps shows his apparent recent decline as a footballer.

Rivière was forced to accept that his situation may yet worsen before it ameliorates, after spending the first 6 months of 2013 struggling to get into the then Ligue 2 side Monaco's team; playing second fiddle to the likes of Valère Germain and Ibrahima Touré, who got 32 goals between them in the whole of last season's 2nd tier-winning campaign. Nevertheless, when Rivière got his chance, he grabbed it with both hands. Despite featuring in 14 Ligue 2 games at the back end of last season, he managed to contribute 4 goals to the title winning team, when only actually featuring from the start in 4 games.

Since the beginning of the 2013-2014 season, Rivière seems to have grown in confidence and fearlessness. The sale of Touré and the waning favour of Germain has put Rivière second in the striking pecking order, the Frenchman is second choice only to Falcao and has on occasions this season started up front alongside the Colombian. One notable occasion where this was effective, was during a 4-1 thumping of Bordeaux, where the two combined brilliantly, with Falcao acting as a target man and Rivière running onto the ball in behind the back four. Rivière went on to notch up a hat-trick and with that proved he has the chance to fulfil the potential he has been earmarked to have.

It is true that the attacker's playing time in 2013 has been somewhat limited, but Rivière has been consistently impactful when given the chance in Monaco's starting XI and gives manager Claudio Ranieri a 'wildcard' option that he has used to some effect at points during this calendar year.

Rivière has tended to perform best positionally just in behind the striker as a sort of attacking midfielder.

Whether this is the position where Rivière wants to establish himself is unknown, but the player has shown great vision for the pass here and, as mentioned, can work off the main striker, running intelligent lines across the opposition back four.

There are however areas of his game which the Frenchman must improve upon if he is to play a part in Monaco's future. Rivière is light on his feet and is developing a marksman-like approach to shooting but he needs to perhaps start spending some time in the gym due to his apparent lack of strength when attempting to hold the ball up.

The 23 year old also must improve his tactical awareness, as he is flagged offside all too often, much to the annoyance of his teammates. There are clearly substantial areas of Rivière's game that need improving, but his impact at Monaco has earned him a spot in the GFFN 100. However, at the age of 23, Rivière must be playing games if he is to make a lasting impact in Ligue 1, or even have a chance of playing for the French national team. For Rivière's sake, one would hope that Monaco did not look for any more attacking reinforcements in the near future.

Internationally-speaking, Rivière has, in the past, represented France at all youth levels, but it remains to be seen whether he will be able to take it to the next level and represent his full country in the future. 2013 has been his 2nd year out of the international circuit, as he is now too old to play for the Under 21 side. It is probably unrealistic to think that Rivière has a chance of playing for France in Brazil next year, but Rivière must begin to harbour these sorts of aspirations if he can build on the rapid progress he has made in 2013.

'I am here to fight for my place. Nothing is taken for granted, I must play like I did before my injury.'

Emmanuel Rivière

2nd November 2013

#GFFN recommends: @PSGTourist (<http://www.psgtourist.com>)

This hilarious PSG blogger is forever providing the banter through his sarcastic tweets, insightful comparisons and rather uncanny love for one Jérémy Ménez.

99. Ronald Zubar

Club: AC Ajaccio

Date of Birth: 20th September 1985

Position: Defender



Since his January 2013 move from English side Wolverhampton Wanderers, Zubar's form has been impressive at his new club, and is slowly succeeding in removing any lingering memories of his ill-fated time at Marseille. He is a leading figure in the Ajaccio dressing room, which is just as well as they will need all of his experience and qualities to get out of trouble in the New Year.

Standing at a tall 6ft1 and with a stocky build, Zubar's main assets are his strength and his aerial prowess. In 2013, he won over 65% of his aerial duels which means he is not only solid defensively but is also a threat going forward from set pieces. This generally compensates for his lack of agility and sometimes clumsy footing. You will often see him getting his body in the way of strikers to prevent them from getting past him, rather than letting them knock the ball past him and hoping to beat them in a footrace. At the age of 28, Zubar is becoming increasingly reliant on his varied experiences in the game to decide how best to approach each situation. A quality that Ajaccio hold dear, with a squad largely devoid of experience.

What has been particularly impressive about Zubar in this campaign is how he has managed to forget about his past difficulties in his career to start afresh in Ligue 1 and cement his place as a key player in Ajaccio's ongoing bid to hold onto their top flight status. During his time at Marseille, Zubar's main weakness was brutally highlighted, both by the media and by the fans themselves. He had a tendency to commit a series of stupid errors, which would often lead directly to goals, and soon enough he left the club because he could no longer take the constant criticism. His move to Wolverhampton Wanderers in the English Premier League turned out to be ideal for his career.

In England, he had to face up to the physicality and brutal nature of the English game. This hardened Zubar's character, and helped eradicate the errors that had previously plagued his game. At Ajaccio, he has returned to the high level of performance that was evident at Caen before he joined Marseille in 2006.

Unfortunately, in the weeks leading up to the New Year, Zubar has been out injured from the Ajaccio team because of a thigh strain. When we look at the statistics, we can see that Zubar has indeed made a difference to Ajaccio's defence. In the games that Zubar played early in the season, Ajaccio conceded on average less than 1.5 goals per game. In the games for which he was injured, Ajaccio conceded comfortably over 2 goals per game, and only picked up 1 point from a possible 4 games. This shows how important Zubar is to the team defensively, and that his leadership skills are missed when he is not in the squad.

Ajaccio are currently in the bottom three in Ligue 1, and have been there since early October, so they will be in desperate need of some stability in the New Year, particularly along the back four to clean up their defensive record, which is one of the worst in the league. The fitness of Ronald Zubar, a seasoned defender who has experienced the trials of a relegation battle before in England, will be a major factor in determining whether Ajaccio survive this season or not.

In 2013, but particularly in the 2012/13 season, Ronald Zubar has demonstrated that he can still play at the highest level of French football. He has put his previous Ligue 1 troubles behind him, and is producing solid performances for Ajaccio in their quest to avoid relegation to Ligue 2. It is testament to the mental toughness of the man that he has been able to achieve such success during this calendar year.

'I was not lost in England! This club [Ajaccio] has made great progress. We must be ambitious.'

Ronald Zubar

22nd June 2013

Quotes of the Year: Zlatan Ibrahimovic: "Some say that I'm cocky, arrogant and have a bad character. If they meet me they will change their view. Don't judge me when you don't know me."

98. Mustapha Yatabaré

Club: EA Guingamp

Date of Birth: 26th January 1986

Position: Attacker



The French born Malian striker has had a wonderful 2013, beginning in Ligue 2, where he was top scorer in the 2012/13 season, then continuing to play an important role Guingamp's Ligue 1 survival campaign from August onwards following the club's promotion to the top flight.

Yatabaré has a style of play that has allowed him to make the transition from Ligue 2 to Ligue 1 successfully, unlike many strikers who light up the second tier, only to lose their touch when it comes to the big boys.

Standing at 6ft, Yatabaré's height for a striker is not remarkable, but he is still able carry out the role of the 'goal poacher' effectively. This can be put down to his positioning inside the box; his energetic yet crafty style of placing himself in between defenders to make diagonal runs when a cross comes into the box. This was evidenced in October against Rennes when his sudden, surging run allowed him to take advantage of a bobbling ball in the opposition penalty area, resulting in a goal for his side.

Arguably, Yatabaré's greatest asset is in fact his ease of sudden acceleration. This enables him to effectively run off the last man. He has a tendency to cut the offside line very finely and while this can often lead to a 1 on 1 chance against the opposition goalkeeper, Yatabaré has a growing reputation of constantly being found by a teammate in an offside position; often to the frustration of the Guingamp faithful. As you can imagine, this style of play can be effective in Ligue 1 just as it was in France's second tier, and is the main reason why Yatabaré managed to bag 5 goals and 2 assists in his first 9 games of the 2013/2014 campaign.

The statistics also suggest that when Yatabaré played in Ligue 1 in 2013, Guingamp tended perform better, both offensively and overall. If we only counted the games in which Yatabaré has played, Guingamp would have been in an impressive 8th position. However, counting the games where Yatabaré had not featured only, Guingamp would be a lowly 13th, just 3 points above the relegation places.

Guingamp would have stood 7th looking purely at Ligue 1 goals scored with Yatabaré in the team, but a poor 16th without him. It is on this basis that the suggestion that EAG are currently holding the Malian back becomes apparent.

Led by their talismanic striker, Guingamp have had a brilliant 2013. To the surprise of many, they were promoted from Ligue 2 in the 2012/13 season finishing 2nd behind Monaco, with Yatabaré finishing top scorer. In spite of this achievement, almost everyone tipped Guingamp to go straight back down from where they came, to be destined for relegation back to Ligue 2 in the 2013/14 season. At the close of 2013, Guingamp were proving their doubters wrong. They finished the year in 12th in Ligue 1, a comfortable 10 points above the relegation zone, having never been beaten by more than 2 goals, even in games against the likes of PSG, Monaco and Lille (who they held to a 0-0 draw).

There are however reasons why Yatabaré has yet to hit the big time. Due to the nature of his game, a striker who thrives off of accurate balls behind the defence and quality crosses from out wide, if he fails to receive competent deliveries from teammates he will tend to vanish during the match and make little impact. If he is to reach the highest level, which I believe he can with the right guidance, he needs to learn to drop into midfield more to find an alternative way of having an influence on the game. 'If you want it come and get it' is a phrase that can be very much attributed to Yatabaré at this stage of his career.

Having said that, Mustapha Yatabaré has had a wonderful year. After leading Guingamp to promotion last season, his goals in Ligue 1 have ensured that they now are in a relatively comfortable mid-table position, and should avoid relegation if everything goes to plan. 2013 was without doubt Yatabaré's most successful year as a professional and the Malian has every chance of making 2014 equally as memorable.

'I feel good at Guingamp. It is a healthy club with an interesting project. Somewhere I can progress.'

Mustapha Yatabaré

13th June 2013

DID YOU KNOW? In October, Mustapha Yatabaré was fined €2000 and given a one month suspended jail sentence after being caught speeding at 200km/h in a Mini Cooper...

97. Lucas Mendes

Club: Olympique de Marseille

Date of Birth: 3rd July 1990

Position: Defender



Competition for places at Marseille has meant that recent game-time for Lucas Mendes has been limited. The defender appears to have generally lost out to Souleymane Diawara for the centre back spot alongside Nicolas N'Koulou. Nevertheless, Mendes has still appeared in almost half of Marseille's matches this season and in terms of the whole year, has been one of the club's most consistent performers. Despite a flurry of poorer showings in the Champions League in the last 4 months, the player has been a rock at the back in Ligue 1 over the last year and has even provided a few goals to help his team's cause recently.

One might think that due to Mendes' lack of appearances in Ligue 1 in these last six months, he is not an important player for Marseille. Elie Baup's strategy of saving Mendes up for key encounters, featuring against the likes of PSG, Monaco, St Etienne, Arsenal and Borussia Dortmund so far this season among others, has proven effective. Mendes has performed well in the majority of these encounters and even provided the opening goal in a 2-1 loss against Monaco with a belting header from a corner. Mendes also put in a man of the match performance fairly recently in a draw with Toulouse, where he looked unbeatable at the back; constantly halting opposition striker Eden Ben Basat's attempts to go past him. He capped off the game with a goal and this particular performance really highlighted the wonders of high level, constant game-time at a young age. Mendes, at only 23 years of age, has shown a consistency in match concentration and this allows him to track runs and not make any foolish mistakes. Out of the 3 centre backs available in the Marseille first team, Lucas Mendes has shown he is the least susceptible to lapses in concentration. However, current interim manager José Anigo has preferred Souleymane Diawara's experience over the arguably sharper Mendes. However, it has not all been perfect on the pitch this past year for Lucas Mendes. The first six months of the year were very comfortable for the Brazilian, as he put in a number of solid displays in order to propel Marseille to a second place finish and keep their excellent defensive record intact at the back end of last campaign.

Mendes has made a few poor performances of late, despite mainly good ones, and it does appear that there are many areas of his game that still need to be developed. A game against PSG in the early months of this season highlighted a few weaknesses and Mendes seemed incapable of defending against the likes of Cavani and Ibrahimovic. The player appears to struggle with stronger attackers and perhaps an alteration to the player's training schedule, dedicating more time to weights work would improve his ability to tussle with Ligue 1's most imposing strikers. The Brazilian also appears a little weak in the tackle; Mendes is often reluctant to dive into tackles and prefers to stay on his feet. While this could be seen as a positive, as he is less likely to give away free kicks in dangerous positions and penalties as often as other defenders this way, it leaves him susceptible to quick strikers who have the ability to run past him and leave him for dead. Mendes himself is not the quickest either and this does not help his cause. In the future, he needs to be more committed to challenge his opponent or simply drop deeper to stop players running past him.

Internationally speaking, the situation looks bleak for Lucas Mendes. At the age of 23, he is still young enough to force his way into the Brazil squad in the future, but one doubts whether that will ever be the case due to the abundance of defensive talent that the country holds. He is consistent and very mature for someone in their early twenties and his consistency will only improve. He was vital for Marseille at the start of the year and one must not forget that the player has only been in France for just over a year, arriving from Brazilian outfit Coritiba in the summer of 2012. In Mendes, Marseille have a centre back they will hope to be able to rely on for the long-term.

'My French is improving, I speak better than Barton!'

Lucas Mendes

14th March 2013

STATS CENTRAL: Lucas Mendes kept 10 Ligue 1 clean sheets in 25 appearances in 2013.

96. Claudiu Keserü

Club: SC Bastia

Date of Birth: 2nd December 1986

Position: Attacker

Claudiu Keserü is a man who had an impressive start to the year and indeed a wonderful 2012/13 campaign with Angers, but somebody who is now struggling to cope with the pressures of Ligue 1 on a goal scoring front at least. It is definitely fair to say that Keserü's performances in Ligue 2 at the beginning of the year were outstanding and the Romanian international was rightly rewarded for them. He won the UNPF Ligue 2 player of the month award on two occasions at the beginning of this year, in January and March, as well as being named in the Ligue 2 Team of the Year during the last campaign. Keserü was also nominated for the UNPF Ligue 2 Player of the Year Award, but was eventually beaten to it by the now Marseille man Gianelli Imbula. Keserü added seven goals to his overall tally of 17 in the first six months of this year for Angers, with two of those coming in a Man of the Match performance against Dijon where the game eventually finished 3-3. The 27 year old finished last season with 63% of all of his team's goals for the 2012/2013 campaign.

It is not just the player's impressive goal scoring start to the calendar year that puts him in this year's 'GFFN 100', however. The former Nantes man showcased a fantastic ability to hold the ball up at Angers, always acting as the furthest man forward. Keserü thus poses a real counter-attacking threat as he is able to bring teammates into attacking moves- a catalyst if you like. Keserü also has a frightening left foot and has been known to shoot from range with wonderful results. Thus, despite a lack of pace, the Romanian does not necessarily need to beat people in order to create chances and score goals.

His 2012/2013 season culminated in securing a move to the top flight of French football in the form of the fiery Corsican outfit SC Bastia for an undisclosed fee on a 2 year deal. Returning to Ligue 1 after a 5 year absence, the Romanian was determined to leave his mark this time around.

As mentioned, since his move to Bastia in the summer, the forward does appear to have struggled. Although he started the season as a first team regular, in the last few months, Keserü has been used mainly as a substitute and has been played out of position on a couple of occasions; out on the wing or in an attacking midfield role.



The 27 year old's single Ligue 1 goal in 2013/2014 is evidence of the player's drying up in form during the second half of the year. This goal was an impressive strike, however, as the player cut in from the right against Toulouse and jammed a ball into the bottom corner with his left foot from the edge of the area.

Perhaps Keserü is compensating for his lack of goals with the chances he creates for his teammates. According to Squawka, Keserü has created 8 chances for his new side- making him the 5th most creative player in the squad in terms of carving out opportunities.

Having said this, Keserü's form has not been very impressive and this may be down to a lack of focus. The Romanian doesn't look particularly composed on the ball in his new colours and appears to be unable to pass consistently accurately to his teammates. As it stands, the player has a pass accuracy rate of 70% and this is something which needs to change if he wants to force himself back into the team.

There are a few other points to Keserü's game which lack polish. The player's defensive contribution from opposition set plays is substandard. One would expect a Ligue 1 out and out forward to provide aerial protection, something Keserü does not seem all that motivated to offer. Another slight criticism of the player is that he gets caught offside too often, and it is possibly this positional awareness that is not helping him in Ligue 1. Bastia are a side who typically struggle to create many clear cut chances and Keserü's attitude is contributing to that.

The player won his first international cap against Andorra in October and this was a game in which he went on to score.

Overall, a lighting start to the year slowed as the Romanian tries to find his feet in Ligue 1 once again. We are certain that Keserü can turn his performances around in 2014 and play a more integral role at SC Bastia if given the time.

*'Bastia was my straight choice.
When I had the manager on the
phone, I knew this was for me.'*

Claudiu Keserü

2nd July 2013

#GFFN recommends: Keep up to date with the following excellent English-speaking Twitter fan pages for various Ligue 1 clubs: @1970_PSG, @OLNews_eng, @MarseilleUK, @FCLorientUK, @StadeRennaisUK, @LOSCUK, @SochiauxUSA, @SochiauxUK and @ToulouseFCUK.

95. Lucas Déaux

Club: FC Nantes

Date of Birth: 26th December 1988

Position: Midfielder



It happened at about quarter past ten on the evening of the seventeenth of May 2013. It being FC Nantes' promotion back to Ligue 1 after four long years of knocking around in France's second tier. Rewind to shortly after kick-off that night when something happened that might have put the celebrations on hold and for Nantes midfielder Lucas Déaux it was a moment of shame.

FCN knew a point against the already relegated Sedan at home would seal their return to France's elite. Things would not get off to an auspicious start for Les *Canaris*, as Déaux was sent off after three minutes for head-butting a Sedan player. This plunged the team and the crowd into uncertainty and it took an own-goal in the second half to give FC Nantes the one-nil victory; promotion assured, albeit not in the fashion they would have desired. Nevertheless, cue scenes of delirium with a large-scale pitch invasion. The camera cut to the figure of Lucas Déaux on the sidelines, in tears.

When reflecting on the events of that night in May, Déaux accepts that his behaviour was idiotic and it was fairly obvious that Déaux was ever so slightly overly pumped-up for this game. A quick glance at his Twitter feed showed him retweeting large amounts of Nantes fans' messages of encouragement in the run-up to the game. Even his manager, Michel Der Zakarian remarked how Déaux appeared to be "over-excited" in training ahead of the match.

Lucas Déaux began his career at Stade de Reims, the town being his birthplace, and was a part of the side that was promoted in 2011/12, when he played 31 league games. He claims that this experience of being promoted out of Ligue 2 with Reims yet not getting to experience Ligue 1 with his home-town club was a contributing factor to his pre-match state of mind on that fated night in May. The fact that he was made to start anew with another club; he just could not entertain the idea of coming so close again without the rewards. Also Reims-Sedan are rivals something a *rémois* like Déaux was well aware of.

Fast-forward to the end of 2013 and FC Nantes are in the upper echelons of Ligue 1, much to the surprise of many. Déaux himself is a regular starter having only missed two league games, one due to a suspension for a red card- he is very much an integral part of the Nantes midfield. Often partnered with fellow defensive midfielder Birama Touré he is charged with breaking up the play in the middle of the park and feeding the ball to one of Nantes' attacking quartet- made up of two wide-men, a number 10 and the lone striker.

Déaux is adept at winning the ball back and while he has committed, on average, two fouls per match he has picked up just one yellow card. He is averaging at an impressive 2.4 interceptions a game in Ligue 1 this season. This is good going for a player in his position, especially given his inexperience at the highest level and the fact Déaux only turns 25 on Boxing Day 2013. He is a hard-working midfielder who does not shirk a challenge and likes to get stuck in, but his judgement and ability to analyse situations at pace before making the decision of whether or not to dive in to a challenge puts him a cut above the rest.

Lucas Déaux has become a fan favourite with the Nantes faithful and he maintains an active profile on Twitter. He comes across as a straight-talking and down to earth kind of guy. Yet there remains a sort of energy that veers towards eccentricity. Der Zakarian has allegedly nicknamed him '*Le barjot*' this roughly translates as '*nutcase*'. Thankfully this sense of idiosyncrasy has been well channelled on the pitch as he has become an important member of Nantes' first XI. He reads the game well and brings a great level of on-field focus.

Off the pitch he seems to have developed a friendship with American summer recruit Alejandro Bedoya, if Twitter is anything to go by. Déaux is a self-confessed Americophile, he has spent his last three holidays stateside. This bromance will undoubtedly help the American to settle into a new country and league.

At the beginning of December, Nantes beat Valenciennes at home with a late winner. At the end of the match, Déaux remained on the pitch and ran over to the Tribune Loire- 'the Kop'. He took the microphone off the ultra in charge of leading the chants and led a full stand in a call and response chant. The reaction was incredible, the response from the crowd deafening. He seems well taken with the club and its fans. After the dark days at Reims, Lucas Déaux is enjoying being an integral part of arguably France's most exciting club of 2013.

'There are too many roundabouts, too much construction and too much traffic here.'

Lucas Déaux

On Nantes

Quotes of the Year: Patrice Evra: "And what's the other one called, Screwdriver? Rolland Screwdriver. All he does is talk."

Patrice Evra lashes back at pundit Rolland Courbis in an extraordinary interview with Téléfoot.

94. Fethi Harek

Club: SC Bastia

Date of Birth: 21st October 1981

Position: Defender



As the 2011/12 season drew to a close, Fethi Harek looked back with pride. His Bastia side had managed to gain a historic promotion to Ligue 1, and Harek had played 36 of their 38 league games. However, the nippy Algerian was more interested in looking ahead, rather than dwelling on the past. Harek had yet to play at Ligue 1 level, and he knew he had to prepare himself for the challenge ahead. Many thought he simply wasn't good enough to succeed at Ligue 1 level, but Harek, as ever, managed to prove his critics wrong.

At 32 years of age and standing at around 5ft 7, Harek has had to be disciplined in his physical conditioning without having a towering frame; a trait that is becoming more and more necessary for a Ligue 1 defender, be it as a full back or otherwise, to possess. There are however certain benefits that come with the extended football experience that Harek has gathered as well as remaining at the same club for 6 straight seasons.

Harek has a wealth of football know-how at his disposal, which is set to play a key part in his game as he ages and nears the latter stages of his career. Harek is best compared with one of those yapping dogs that refuses to cease until the 90 minutes are up. The player's relentlessness and alertness match after match provide Bastia with an attacking spark as well as a committed full back.

His reflexes encourage Harek to attempt ambitious interceptions which, when they come off, look indeed impressive but at other times, he can look exposed. Despite his vast experience the player is not appear terribly authoritative or interested in instructing his teammates on the pitch. On a personal level however, Harek's proficiency enables him to remain solid down that left hand side throughout the 90 minutes. In fact, last season 9 out of 13 of Bastia's wins last season were by a solitary goal, and it is in these situations where Harek has excelled.

Another strength of Harek's game is that he is a very versatile player. In 2013, he was used as a left back as well as a centre back, and he is relatively comfortable in both positions. This makes him a very useful member of any squad for a manager, because he can cover for injuries by simply shifting Harek into the required position, and is one of the reasons why he continues to be a success at Ligue 1 level well into his 30s. It is quite clear, though, that Harek is more comfortable at left back than centre back. As a left back, being 5ft 7 tall is not so much of a problem. However, as a centre back, a position in which dealing with crosses is one of your main priorities, it can be a serious disadvantage to be so small, and occasionally Harek can struggle in this position.

Although his experience and positioning does save him to some extent, the combination of his age and lack of height makes it difficult for Harek to truly succeed in the position. In fact, in the 6 games that Harek has stated at centre back this season, Bastia have won only 1 game, keeping just 1 clean sheet.

Stability is achieved in the top leagues with players who have been there and done it all before, and one major reason why Bastia are starting to stabilise is because they have a handful of these players Landreau, Squillaci and Harek himself to name but a few. With this strong base of experienced defensive players, Bastia are looking to become a mainstay Ligue 1 side for years to come.

In 2013, Fethi Harek has showed us that, although time is passing by and he is growing older, he still has a part to play in his football career at the highest level, and there is no reason to suggest that 2014 cannot be just as successful a year for the Algerian.

'I am not surprised, but I am delighted and proud to be wearing the national shirt again.'

Fethi Harek

On being selected for Algeria again-
9th September 2013

DID YOU KNOW? Fethi Harek was a keen basketball player but switched to football because the local pitch was closer to his house than the basketball court! Talk about being lazy...

93. Florian Raspentino

Club: Olympique de Marseille, SC Bastia (loan)

Date of Birth: 6th June 1989

Position: Attacker



Despite being a Marseille player, Florian Raspentino hasn't actually spent any of 2013 playing for OM. The attacker had made two loan spells, one at Brest, the other at SC Bastia, and has impressed on both outings this year. The 24 year old has spent numerous interviews detailing his desire to play an active role in the Marseille set up and despite promising performances in 2013, OM's decision to sign a number of attackers in the summer has severely tainted Raspentino's chances of achieving that goal.

As a Brestois, Raspentino added four goals to his tally whilst on loan. Here, Raspentino demonstrated his slick finishing and formed a strong partnership with Magaye Gueye, who was on loan from Everton at the time. The pair set each other up on a few occasions and twice, Raspentino was there to meet two of Gueye's crisp through balls and slot home. The 24 year old's final goal for the club showed a bit more individual class. The player used his pace to break away after a corner was headed out against Montpellier. Raspentino ran the length of the pitch and whizzed the ball home from just outside of the opposition penalty area. Such goals demonstrate what the player is truly capable of. Unfortunately, be it for a lack of service or otherwise, there were too many matches where Raspentino simply went missing which effectively made the then Marseille manager Elie Baup's decision for him with regards to integrating the player into the OM first team squad or not. Brest played Raspentino in a variety of positions, but mainly on the wing where his impressive pace and close control allowed him to freely dribble across and past the opposition back four.

As hinted at, Raspentino's versatility is clearly one of his major strengths. The player can play on the right, the left or upfront and therefore gives his manager many options on an attacking front. Raspentino has been used mainly as a sub at SC Bastia, performing especially well when playing up front.

The player has scored two in two in December playing in this role, and it is likely that Bastia coach Frédéric Hantz sees this position as the way forward for the 24 year old during the remainder of the campaign.

Both of these goals were slick finishes, with his first of the season against Lyon coming after a great ball in from Julian Palmieri.

If Florian Raspentino ever harboured any ambitions of making it into the French international set up these have been well and truly shelved in 2013. The player is of Algerian descent, and was contacted by Nourredine Kourichi recently, who is the assistant manager of the national team, in order to see if he would be interested in playing for the North African side at some point in the future. Raspentino has said he would be interested, but the World Cup does seem too early, considering that the player is yet to play for the Desert Foxes. However, in football, situations can change so quickly and if the player picks up his form and goal-scoring in the opening months of 2014, then we could indeed see him in Rio.

So despite promising performances when playing up front, Florian Raspentino needs to add more goals to his game in 2014. He has got good pace combined with nifty tricks and is therefore a danger to the opposition on the break, as well as being cool and composed when finishing. Raspentino needs however to learn to read the game better, so that he can create more space for himself off defenders and put himself in better positions in order to score goals. Marseille's reject has been trying ever so hard to shake that unfortunate title off of himself and 2014 promises to be a year full of opportunity for vindication, maybe even by playing for Algeria at the World Cup.

'Right now I am a bit disappointed. The point of a loan is to get game time...'

Florian Raspentino

On SC Bastia- 15th October 2013

#GFFN recommends: @Jon_LeGossip: The ever-present French football journalist Jonathan Johnson churns out consistently interesting articles providing insight on his beloved PSG as well as the rest of Ligue 1 in English. Well worth it.

92. Papy Dijlobodji

Club: FC Nantes

Date of Birth: 12th January 1988

Position: Defender

One of the secrets to FC Nantes' formidable start to the season is the fact that the majority of the team have been with the club for a number of years. There was no splurging on lots of new players or vast overhaul of the squad, just a couple of carefully targeted recruits brought into reinforce the squad to contend with the rigours of Ligue 1. This could be because the club was trying to be financially prudent and not wanting to repeat the folly of the 2008/2009 season.

One such player who has spent much of the four previous seasons schlepping around France's less salubrious outposts wearing the yellow and green is Senegalese defender Papy Dijlobodji. Dijlobodji is an all-action central defender who has been attracting a serious amount of interest from other clubs who are looking to poach him away from Les Canaris. He recently turned 25 and, as such, would be expected to shortly enter the traditional prime of his career. He has also been recently capped for the first time by the Senegal national team, a personal achievement the player admitted to be immensely proud of.

It is safe to say that Dijlobodji has formed an integral part of the way that FC Nantes play. The spine of the team of Rémy Riou, Dijlobodji, Lucas Deaux and Filip Djordjevic is rarely tampered with by coach Der Zakarian and this is testament to the Senegalese international's wonderful consistency.

This season he has more often than not been partnered in central defence with a new recruit, the Venezuelan Oswaldo Vizcarondo. This partnership has rapidly blossomed, FC Nantes currently have the fourth best defensive record in Ligue 1 (2013/2014). They have notched up eight clean sheets and seem to complement each other well. With the ease at which the partnership was formed, Vizcarondo an improvement on his Venezuelan compatriot Gabriel Cichero, who Dijlobodji played alongside in Ligue 2 last season, has given Nantes an assured basis on which to rely on. A solid defence being imperative as Ligue 1 new-boys.

Dijlobodji is no stranger to the tackle and has made on average two per match this season. However, these tackles have led to the award of one foul per game against the Senegalese defender.



Naturally, with statistics like that, discipline may be considered an issue in Dijlobodji's game. He has picked up 4 yellow cards and 1 red card so far this season. Last season in Ligue 2 he picked up two yellows and one red, but this is probably more indicative of Nantes' differing game-plan in the respective leagues. In Ligue 2, opposition teams tended not to attack Nantes as much, thus Dijlobodji was not called upon to make as many tackles. Whereas, in Ligue 1 FC Nantes have tended to cede possession to their opposition and rely on their efficiency in front of goal. Thus there has been an increased onus on Dijlobodji and the Nantes defence to keep attackers at bay. There is, of course, the occasionally eyebrow-raising nature of Ligue 1 refereeing to consider as well.

Dijlobodji is particularly strong in the air: he has won 82% of his aerial duels this season; hardly surprising given his physical stature: Dijlobodji stands at 193cm (6 ft 3) tall. He is certainly physically imposing and one of the improvements that he has made in the last eighteen months is using this physicality more wisely.

He is certainly no longer quite as octopus-like, before he tended to be all arms and legs. One incident in particular stands out, when, in a game with Boulogne-sur-Mer in early 2012 when he committed something akin to a rugby tackle gifting a penalty and an opportunity to get back into the game. These rather unsavoury characteristics have been eradicated from the player's game. The Dijlobodji of 2013 is a much-changed defender.

Another pleasant surprise this season has been the three goals that Dijlobodji has to his name in nineteen league games. He possesses a fearsome shot, evidenced by his pile-driver that gave FC Nantes a glimmer of hope of 3 points in a recent home game against Toulouse. He was also the player that caused Alex to put the ball past his own keeper in the Nantes/PSG game in August.

Dijlobodji has perhaps come of age in 2013 as he looks increasingly at home in France's top flight, his performances throughout 2013 will have unsurprisingly attracted suitors within France and abroad. It's fair to say that Papy may well have decisions to make come the summer; if not sooner.

'I have seldom seen a defender with this good a left and right foot.'

Yaya Touré

On Papy Dijlobodji - 27th December 2013

Quotes of the Year: Salomon Kalou: "Nowadays, all I need is one chance and I will score."
The Lille forward was not short of confidence upon his return from the 2013 African Cup of Nations.

91. Danijel Subašić

Club: AS Monaco

Date of Birth: 27th October 1984

Position: Goalkeeper



It's been a huge year for Monaco, who finally came back into Ligue 1 and made a big splash in the transfer market, but one plus this year has been the form of a player who survived the summer squad overhaul, a goalkeeper they bought back in January 2012: Danijel Subašić.

The 29-year-old Croatian has been ever-present in the Monaco side since his transfer from Hadjuk Split and helped the principality team surge back into the top flight of French football with relative ease. This good form continued into the 2013/14 season, helping Monaco sit comfortably in second place in Ligue 1 and three points off leaders Paris St-Germain at the close of the calendar year.

Rewind to Ligue 2 at the beginning of 2013 where Subašić made 18 appearances for ASM, keeping seven clean sheets in the process as Monaco lost just one game and lifted the title. He conceded just 13 goals and played an instrumental part not only to the club's promotion but also in marshalling what went on to be Ligue 2's 3rd best defence of that campaign. After promotion to Ligue 1 for the 2013/14 season, both Subašić and Monaco have continued in the same vein of form to propel themselves up whatever league table stands in their way. The side have only managed to lose twice before the winter break, letting in just 13 goals in 19 games with nine clean sheets. This included a run of five without conceding a goal, an outstanding achievement from Subašić and his defence, which also contributed to a maximum points haul from those games.

Subašić's most treasured trait is his shot-stopping ability. He is an incredible athlete, with a strong leap which propels him across his goal, making saves that others just do not have the reflexes to pull off. On top of this, when he does make a save, he is assured enough to make certain the ball is pushed wide or over to prevent an opportunity on the rebound for the opposition, a quality sometimes overlooked as an integral part of a modern goalkeeper's game.

As is becoming evermore necessary for a modern goalkeeper, Subašić has shown good technical ability with his feet as well as his hands. This was actually best showcased last year when he scored a free-kick for Monaco back in 2012, curling it into the bottom corner. Subašić has had to adapt, playing for a team with Champions League aspirations. He has learnt that for vast periods of the game he will not be called upon at all and has worked to ensure 100% mental focus over 90 minutes, regularly coming up with a save in a game where he might only have that shot to deal with due to his side's dominance.

Subašić is not perfect. He is a little tentative when coming for crosses and has a tendency to stay on his line with balls coming across his six-yard box, a dangerous tactic that cost his side a goal against Marseille, for example. He too has contributed to several horror mishaps in recent times, shown against Valenciennes recently where he didn't get a full hand to a cross that Abidal inadvertently slid into the open net.

What should be recognised though is the self-belief he possesses in the face of the ever-looming threat that ASM flex their financial muscles again to replace Subašić. Endless speculation ran through the summer and it will raise its ugly head once more in January with Victor Valdes being touted as a Monagesque already. To keep up a level of performance for his side in spite of that should be applauded, as it cannot be easy to ignore; with management constantly questioning your ability.

With that in mind, 2014 could be a different year entirely for the Croatian goalkeeper. He might make the World Cup squad but is unlikely to start and he could well be pushed out of the Monaco side by the start of next season at the latest, despite signing a new contract until 2017. Regardless of both, Subasic can look back on a pretty successful 2013 and probably the best of his career, maybe the best he will ever have.

'The 1st choice goalkeeper is 35. I am waiting...'

Danijel Subašić

On playing for Croatia- 7th November 2013

#GFFN recommends: @Nicomentarista: The French and Spanish football commentator for Perform Group and talkSPORT is an avid tweeter, staying on top of all things Marseille and South American links with Ligue 1.

90. Gaël Danic

Club: Olympique Lyonnais

Date of Birth: 19th November 1981

Position: Attacker



2013 has very much been a year of two halves for 32 year old Gael Danic. The Frenchman began the year playing for Ligue 1 outfit Valenciennes, where he excelled above all expectation last season. These last five months have been difficult for the player; however, as despite signing for Lyon for just over €750k euros, the player has received limited game-time at his new club and has only made one start in the first half of the season.

Thus, we can mainly judge Danic on his time at Valenciennes, and probably the biggest testament to him is that the club are struggling without his creativity and find themselves in trouble at the close of 2013. Danic entered the calendar year in explosive form and added a further five assists to his count in the closing months of the season. This left him with 11 overall for last season, which is a highly impressive figure. Danic is a bit of a dead ball specialist and three of these five assists came from corners and free-kicks, where the winger was able to accurately guide the ball onto one of his team-mates' heads. On top of that, Danic scored three league goals for his club in 2013. Two of these did come from the spot with well taken penalties, but Danic scored in a 1-1 draw away at PSG where he tucked in a rebound after Douchez had parried an impressive shot.

Danic also added experience to the Valenciennes team and led by example on the pitch and in training alike. Another great strength which the Frenchman displayed at Valenciennes was his passing. Danic has the ability to turn his team's attack on its head in one ball with a cross-field pass, something that was typical of his game in 2013. He makes up for his lack of pace by playing killer through balls in order to get the quicker players in the team running on the ball. In such a way he demonstrated that he had a great understanding of the game and thus a strong footballing brain. From this point of view, Lyon's signing of the player seemed logical. Although he may not be playing, they might have hoped his experience would rub off on the OL youngsters at the training ground.

Danic has not been able to repeat the majority of the heroics that he produced at Valenciennes for Les Gones in 2013. Although he has a handful of Europa League appearances under his belt, Danic has been virtually non-existent in Ligue 1. Danic's passing radar appears to have taken a turn for the worse and this may be one reason why Garde has felt justified in keeping him out in the cold.

Danic has a passing accuracy rate of just over 60% this season, which is way down on where it should realistically be. The batch of young talent at Lyon is also ruining the 32 year old's cause, as youngsters with more pace and arguably desire are getting games ahead of him. Danic is yet to provide a goal or an assist for his new club and frankly, has been consistently poor. The player came on in the 5-1 defeat by Montpellier and the 4-0 loss to PSG and hardly touched the ball. Danic's composure appears to have gone walkabout and the player seems unable to successfully dribble past opposition in the manner in which he did for Valenciennes. It is clear that Danic has struggled to make the step up.

Overall, a great start to the year with Valenciennes has been overshadowed by a turbulent time thus far at Lyon. Whether the side are looking to offload him at Christmas remains to be seen, but it could be the best option for Gael Danic in order to get the remaining few years of his career back on track. Lyon President Aulas may have thought the signing of Danic was coy business at the time, but now it seems Les Gones have bought a player in decline. Danic takes 90th place in this year's GFFN 100; although if he had stayed at Valenciennes for the whole year, who knows how high up he could be.

'I'm a Breton. I have an idiot character. I can talk a lot of crap...but I'm easygoing. Generally people like me.'

Gaël Danic

7th July 2013

A little different... In November 2013, RMC Sport's radio programme 'Kazaroké' produced a comical song about Gaël Danic: http://www.wat.tv/video/kazaroke-gael-danic-04-11-6icin_5hatr_.html

89. Mickaël Tacalfred

Club: Stade de Reims

Date of Birth: 23rd April 1981

Position: Defender



Coming in at number 89 in this year's GFFN 100 is one of the Trojans of French football who has finally made it in the big time: Stade de Reims' centre back Mickaël Tacalfred. The 32 year old spent 2013 affirming himself as a regular at the heart of the Reims back four, and ensuring that his club go into the winter break an impressive 8th place in Ligue 1, just 2 points off the top 4.

Tacalfred is not your average central defender. Most centre backs are tall, and use their physical presence to dominate their opposing strikers. Tacalfred makes up for his shorter-than-average height of 5ft8 by being mobile and crafty. He is able to track the runs of the strikers with more ease than most and although he is at a disadvantage with his height, he has a decent leap, which means that he will be able to beat the majority of Ligue 1 strikers in the air. Tacalfred has been able to compensate for his lack of height and for this reason has been a success at the highest level for the last few years.

One of the reasons why the Reims' management have made Tacalfred such an integral part of the setup is his ability to perform well alongside numerous centre back partners. It should be noted that his partnership with Anthony Weber is especially impregnable. Weber deals with the aerial threat whilst Tacalfred tracks runs. Much like the Ligue 1 Koscielny-Mertesacker equivalent.

The answers lie in the statistics for Reims' successes in 2013. Last season, although Reims finished 14th in Ligue 1, they were a very impressive 7th in terms of defensive record. They were second last in terms of goals scored. This highlights the importance of the back line for Reims, without its strength, they could have been very close to relegation last year, judging by their offensive record. This season though, they have pushed on. With Tacalfred and co. maintaining their good defensive work, Reims have managed to up the scoring rate, and consequently they are, as previously mentioned, 2 points off the top 4, having lost just 4 games all season.

In terms of Tacalfred's own personal statistics, it is clear that he is one of the first names on the team sheet for his club. Of the 19 games this season, he has started 17 at centre back, missing 2 games only because of a tendon inflammation. Only fellow defender Weber and midfielder Oniangue have played more matches as an outfield player. Tacalfred has also helped Reims keep 7 clean sheets in the league this season, a figure only bettered by 4 other teams in Ligue 1.

It is difficult not to admire how far Tacalfred has come. Currently captain of a side now gunning for a top 10 finish in Ligue 1, the Guadeloupe international was only introduced to top flight football at the age of 31, in 2012. Perhaps this is why he seems to perform exceptionally well against the 'big' teams, because he still treasures each occasion to be able to do so.

He is an example of loyalty and determination to a cause which began with a Reims side that was relegated to the National (3rd division) in his first season with the team from the Champagne region of France. Manager Hubert Fournier's decision to award Tacalfred the captaincy in 2011 was an appropriate reward for the player's efforts as they began to claw their way back to where they belong- Ligue 1. All too often we see players jumping ship when a club wades through a difficult period, but not Tacalfred.

Tacalfred is 32 years old, suggesting that he is entering the final phase of his humbling footballing career. Certainly for now, all is well for the Guadeloupe international; Reims are performing above expectations (again) and he is playing almost every game for them. 2013 has been perhaps the most successful year in Tacalfred's career, and he is a worthy member of the GFFN 100.

'I hope that in the future we can go for European football. It demands work, but still.'
Mickaël Tacalfred

On Reims playing continental football- 3rd November 2013

Quotes of the Year: Samir Nasri: "If you judge me on the past year, you can say I have been a little idiot. I was stupid."

Manchester City's attacker Samir Nasri reflects back on Euro 2012 in May of 2013.

88. Cheick Diabaté

Club: Girondins de Bordeaux

Date of Birth: 25th April 1988

Position: Attacker

It is fair to say that the unorthodox 6ft5 Malian striker has had a rewarding 2013. Despite being criticised at times for missing easy chances and failing in front of goal, the 25 year old has scored some vital goals, including a few which will be remembered for a long, long time.

The high point of Diabaté's season must be winning the 2013 Coupe de France with Bordeaux. It was a competition in which he played a huge part in, scoring four goals in three starts, and his two goals in the Final showed the nation that Diabaté deals with pressure. The Malian international therefore helped Bordeaux to their first Coupe de France since 1987 and has become a firm favourite for those associated with the Stade Chaban-Delmas.

The improvement that the gangly and amiable striker has shown over the last 12 months has been astounding. Diabaté was struggling for goals even at the back end of last season, and although he did score 8 goals over the course of that campaign, he was unable to take his Coupe de la Ligue form into the league. Now, however, with only half of the season gone, Diabaté has equalled his tally from last year and is becoming a real handful for opposition teams. The goal-scavenging giant can look a little awkward when trying to balance his frame to get a shot away in dangerous positions; but he is now snatching less at his chances and has improved in terms of total focus this calendar year.

It is unsurprising perhaps, that with such height, Diabaté is a real threat in the air. He is apt at bringing the ball down after receiving a long ball forward and starting attacks for his team. Nevertheless, the majority of Diabaté's goals of late have been taken on the ground, proving doubters wrong that his height does not hinder his ability to control the ball.

This could not have been displayed better than in November against Stade Rennais, where he brought down a raking forty yard pass from Landry N'Guemo, beat two defenders and slotted the ball home.

As a character, Diabaté is a bit of a nutcase and has often been compared with El Hadji Diouf by the African media. Bordeaux boss Francis Gillot will hope the Malian limits his antics, however entertaining they are for the footballing public.



Diabaté had always shown potential. In the 2008-2009 season he averaged at just under a goal every two games at AC Ajaccio, but since then a lack of faith in the player had halted his progress.

Nevertheless, his form in the first six months of 2013, which included those goals in the Coupe de France, earned supposed interest from clubs in England such as Newcastle, who were desperately looking for a new striker. The Malian silenced the interested parties in August, however, when he signed a contract extension until 2016 and Bordeaux were delighted to have prolonged a player who at that time had 32 goals in just over 70 games. The official statement read: "It is good news for Les Girondins, who can now count on their centre-forward for several more years."

This season, Diabaté has appeared to perform best when partnered with young Uruguayan striker Diego Rolan. This was evidenced during an exhilarating performance by the pair in a 4-1 win against Sochaux, where Diabaté scored twice with Rolan providing both assists.

Diabaté had mixed emotions in his Mali shirt in 2013. His side were unable to qualify for the World Cup, but managed to reach a respectable third place in the year's African Cup of Nations. Diabaté hardly turned up for his country, only firing home once (a penalty against South Africa in the Quarter Finals). Nevertheless, he is ever-present in the Mali squad, something that is certainly set to continue.

Overall, Diabaté has had a year to remember. From two goals in the Coupe de France final to being a hit in Ligue 1, the Malian has triumphed on almost all fronts. Whether Bordeaux will be able to keep him at the club by the end of 2014 will have to be seen, as due to his current form, there are surely many suitors out their vying for Diabaté's signature.

He is a player who, under the right guidance and keeping him away from other unwarranted distractions, can maximise his potential and repay the faith that Bordeaux have had in him since he was a boy.

'Cheick Diabaté does not know pressure. You don't believe me? This is a message to the world. Cheick is here!'

Cheick Diabaté

Talking about himself- 9th August 2013

#GFFN recommends: @F8Piroux: The former Presse-Ocean journalist remains a connected individual in the world of French football, often providing accurate news first, especially when it comes to FC Nantes.

87. Lamine Sané

Club: Girondins de Bordeaux

Date of Birth: 22nd March 1987

Position: Defender



Ludovic Sane, known as Lamine, has, on the face of it, had a very comfortable year at the Stade Chaban-Delmas. The player has started in almost all of Bordeaux's games this season and has impressed throughout. The Senegalese international received interest from West Ham in the summer and even went to visit their training facilities. No move was agreed in the end, however, and whether the Hammers are looking to come back in for the player is currently unknown.

Yet in truth it has been a far from easy-going 2013 for Sané, who has been battling to keep his place in the side after being told by manager Francis Gillot that he will drop him should he fail to shake out the consistently frustrating howlers he commits, often leading to cheap goals for the opposition. It is no secret that the player is waiting for the right club to come along to scoop him up.

His clumsiness was evident during his attempts to take his country Senegal to the World Cup this year. Having won their original group comfortably, they lost 4-2 on aggregate in the final knock-out round to the Ivory Coast. What will be particularly upsetting for the player is that fact that he scored an own goal in a 3-1 away loss in the first leg. On the other hand, Sané has now managed to nail down a place in the national side, and earned some valuable international experience over the course of the calendar year which will only help him improve.

Conversely, not a single player makes the GFFN 100 lightly. One thing that is impressive about Lamine Sané is his versatility. The 26 year old started his career as a midfielder, but has become a key player at the heart of the defence for Bordeaux. When needed, Sané turns back time to occupy that defensive midfield role, generally having success when doing so. It is clear, however, that the player is settled at centre back now and this is where he would like to play. The Senegalese international was a key member of Bordeaux's defence last season, and partly thanks to him, Bordeaux came away with the third best defensive record in Ligue 1.

The player is fairly quick for a defender and is therefore lively and effective at tracking opponent's runs and making interceptions. Sané is a fan of the long ball, something that Francis Gillot is actually trying to deter as he imposes a shorter passing mentality upon his squad Sané is nonetheless surprisingly accurate with these heat-seeking missile like passes of his, coming away with a passing accuracy rate of almost 90% in 2013.

The 26 year old should be aiming to add more goals to his game. Standing at 6ft3, Sané should be a real presence in the opposition box, but has only actually scored one league goal this year. This came against Montpellier in a 4-2 win in the early months of this year. Sané rose unmarked in the box to nod home into a fairly open net. The player also added 2 goals to his tally in the Europa League in 2013-2014, although neither were particularly noteworthy finishes.

Sané played a rather underrated role in Bordeaux's lifting of the Coupe de la Ligue trophy. The Senegalese defender produced a string of clinical and solid performances which provided a solid basis for Les Girondins to get the goals necessary to progress from round to round.

If Sané can cut the jitters out of his football then this bouncy character can make real inroads into sealing a move away from Ligue 1. Another example of the modern centre-back: tall, robust, agile and with a clinical passing ability; all the ingredients are there for Sané to become a top player. He must overcome his often apparent lack of focus to go to the next level in 2014.

'Personally I am trying to be focused, to be responsible but sometimes we don't have time to defend well.'

Lamine Sané

1st December 2013

STATS CENTRAL: Out of the 36 Ligue 1 games that Lamine Sané played in during 2013, 12 clean sheets were kept.

86. Adrien Rabiot

Club: Paris Saint Germain

Date of Birth: 3rd April 1995

Position: Midfielder

At just 18 years of age and barely being an adult, PSG's Adrien Rabiot is the youngest player to make this year's GFFN 100. The Frenchman started 2013 by going on loan to Toulouse, a successful spell which then propelled him into PSG's first team for the 2013/2014 season.

Rabiot will tend to play positionally as the furthest forward central midfielder in a PSG trio, but has shown immense desire to track back and do the defensive midfield dog work as well. He has looked impressively composed this year despite playing alongside some of the greatest players in Ligue 1 as well as against Champions League opposition. There is something serene about the way Rabiot operates on the pitch, a quality similar to that of Mesut Özil. Never rising to the provocations of the opposition, never upset with his teammates for making a mistake and never lambasting the referee when a decision does not go his team's way (a rarity for a PSG player these days). It is astounding to showcase that touch of class at the age of 18. One could however argue that Rabiot is merely shy.

He is of course technically gifted, but at 6ft2 his power and stamina are probably his most desirable characteristics. There is something of a Yaya Touré quality about Rabiot which is partly why he is speculated to be the star of PSG for years to come, although the midfielder has recently announced that he needs more playing time to convince him to stay at the club, despite being only the age of 18. Rabiot sat down for urgent talks with the PSG staff this summer amid interest from the likes of Arsenal and Chelsea, in order to discuss his future with the Champions. Rabiot has also made a number of open comments about staying at PSG, such as claiming he would do 'everything' for first team football and announcing that 'for now I am Parisien'. Thus, it remains to be seen whether Rabiot will still be at PSG by the end of 2014, but putting off field issues aside, Rabiot has made major headway in 2013, be it in the purple colours of Toulouse or the blue of PSG.



Rabiot's time at Toulouse saw him complete a fine loan spell in which he fitted in like a glove, both on and off the field, was rounded off by a brilliant strike towards the end of last season against Brest, where he cut inside from the right hand side and hit the ball with his left foot into the top corner from the best part of 35 yards. Such a goal showed what Rabiot is capable of and this was not his only contribution; silky midfield displays helped to propel Toulouse up towards a higher mid-table finish. He played 12 games for Toulouse, which were mostly from the starting XI and contributed one goal and a few assists. Rabiot's dribbling is what largely sets him aside from other Ligue 1 players in his position. Very few players are able to glide on the ball, especially at 6ft2 but this allows Rabiot to gain vast amounts of territory before passing the ball off to a teammate who will then be in a dangerous position. The 18 year old is also very strong at moving the ball about the field, with a passing success rate of close to 90% for the calendar year.

His character won him friends at the Toulouse setup, despite being there for a relatively short period of time. Quiet, polite but determined, Rabiot seems to win over the vast majority of coaches he deals with, forcing as much game time out of them as possible.

Rabiot also made his mark on an international level this calendar year; the Frenchman played a key role in the U19 European Championships this summer and helped France to reach the final of the tournament, where unfortunately, they lost 1-0 to Serbia. Rabiot has also recently featured in Willy Sagnol's U21 side, putting in a good performance against Armenia.

At 18, Rabiot it is not outlandish to suggest that the PSG man can become one of the best midfielders in the world. There are of course areas of his game that suggest weakness, including the sometimes wayward nature of his shooting, but the faith Laurent Blanc has shown in him now suggests that we are looking at one of France's future greats, and that is no understatement.

'Honestly I didn't expect it. I just back myself but I'm playing more and more it is great.'

Adrien Rabiot

On playing for PSG- 12th November 2013

#GFFN recommends: @simonscutt: In charge of forming the Get French Football News Ligue 2 Team of the Week, this talented football writer's tweets may often be sarcastic, but they are certainly amusing. Born and bred Nantais as well.

85. Brandão

Club: AS Saint Étienne

Date of Birth: 16th June 1980

Position: Attacker

Not many clubs in France had as successful a 2013 as Saint-Etienne and one major contributing factor to their success has been the form of Brazilian forward Brandão.

The 33-year-old joined Les Verts in the summer of 2012 on a free from fellow Ligue 1 side Marseille and since then he hasn't looked back. In 2013 alone, he made 24 appearances scoring on 9 occasions as he helped ASSE capture their first piece of silverware since 1981.

The latter half of the 2012/13 season played out beyond belief for both the man and his club, with Brandão's 8 league goals helping his side finish fifth, perhaps only a disappointment due to the fact they challenged for a Champions League place all season long before that.

They did win a spot in the Europa League though thanks to their 1-0 Coupe de la Ligue victory over Stade Rennais, courtesy of a Brandão winner after 18 minutes. Their first cup win in over three decades thanks to the Brazilian capped off what was an excellent 2013 for ASSE. Brandão proved his worth as a big game player again, as he has done throughout his career.

The start to the 2013/14 season has been a little harder for the Brazilian, impacted by the loss of Brandão's striking partner Pierre Emerick Aubameyang leaving for Borussia Dortmund and his own injury woes. He's only managed to play nine times so far and has found the net just once, on the opening day of the season against Ajaccio.

The addition of Melvut Erdinç in the summer has helped alleviate some of the pressure off Brandão but the two are yet to form a true partnership up front. However, he has helped Saint-Etienne enter the winter break in fifth and just a point off fourth-placed Bordeaux, so they are in a prime spot for him when he returns to the form we are more accustomed to.

Brandão as a footballer is a prime example of a predator inside the penalty area. When the ball is in the final third of the pitch, expect the Brazilian to be lurking in and around the penalty spot looking for a position to attack an incoming cross or through ball.



This fits perfectly with his style of play and in particular is aerial ability, as he regularly scores with his head. Tall and with a good leap, he rises above defenders with ease and then has the skill to plant the ball into the corners and out of the reach of the goalkeeper.

Much like other poachers before him, he's also an expert in finding that extra yard of space to gain an advantage. Whether that's making a small run and then pulling out to slot a ball home from a few yards or a short burst in front of a defender to nudge it goalwards, he's an incisive forward that tends to make the right decision when closing in on goal.

Despite making two assists this calendar year, Brandão isn't necessarily seen as a workhorse in the side. He can hold up play but prefers to distribute it to more creative forces before making runs into the box to get on the end of plays rather than begin them himself. You can argue that the Brazilian is often lazy and is not easily motivated, evidenced by the frequent offside calls against him in each appearance he makes.

There is also a reason to why he's not at a top club or in the national set-up and that's because he's not always consistently good. He can be a little wayward even with easy chances, which is disappointing when it's his good movement that allows him the opportunities in the first place. He's also not particularly willing to make a chance for himself, he doesn't tend to run with the ball unless through on goal and rarely shoot from distance.

Looking ahead, Brandão seems to be in the right team, abundant with talented playmakers that like to put balls in the box and it works well with the striker's style. Hopefully he's a little more injury-free in 2014 and can return to the early form of 2013 that saw him really contribute to his club's success.

'Brandão isn't someone who talks much, but his performances do the talking instead.'

Loïc Perrin

15th February 2013

DID YOU KNOW? In July 2013, Brandão had a bust-up with his club St Étienne which nearly saw him being sold. The player refused to return to training after holidays and was heavily fined by President Romeyer.

84. Nemanja Pejčinović

Club: OGC Nice

Date of Birth: 4th November 1987

Position: Defender

You will not find many defenders in Europe, never mind just in Ligue 1, who have had a more successful 2013 than Nice's Nemanja Pejčinović.

In this calendar year, the Serbian has played 24 times in Ligue 1, scoring twice and helping his side keep 12 clean sheets in a historical 12 months for Les Aiglons, where they qualified for the Europa League and opened their new stadium, the Allianz Riviera.

In the 2012/13 season, Nice had been in reasonably good form coming back from the winter break and in their last 19 games of the season they only lost on six occasions finishing in fourth, only three points away from Champions League qualification. The team may have outperformed all expectations, but sadly did not have that extra bit of quality to knock Lyon off 3rd spot to qualify for Europe's top tier competition for the first time in their history.

Their second half to 2013 has been rocky, lacklustre and at times abysmal. Their failure to overcome Greek side Limassol over two legs to qualify for the Europa League somewhat set the tone for the 2013/2014 campaign thus far. They have yet to find their groove in the league, sitting mediocly 15th in a tightly-packed mid-table. A run of seven games without a point was halted with a much-needed win against Sochaux and the club will look to Pejčinović to ameliorate his performances and become a key figure again in their climbing back up the table.

Since his move from FK Rad Belgrade was made permanent in 2010, Pejčinović has become habituated with Ligue 1 but recently a change occurred which has affected him. Nice's poor performances are in no small part down to the departure of former captain Renato Civelli in the summer. 'Pej' as he is affectionately known by the Nice faithful must do his best to form a partnership with Mathieu Bodmer, who currently partners the Serb at the core of the defence. One of his weaknesses is his inability to adapt to situations on and off the pitch, at times this season he has looked lost without the authoritative Civelli at his side.



A fighter on the pitch, 2013 was the year in which Pejčinović agreed to discuss his struggles living amidst the extreme violence in Kosovo as a teenager. Strong in the air, with good pace and positional awareness, he has won 75% of duels this year alone, second behind Lille's Marko Basa, which is a real key attribute to a consistent, reliable centre-back.

This is also evident in how Nice have managed to keep a clean sheet in half of the games that Pejčinović has been involved in, he's an integral part to a squad that has no other adequate centre back cover to realistically replace him with. In the 13 games where he wasn't involved in 2013, they only won on four occasions and conceded 26 goals, exactly two a game. Again, the statistics tell the story.

With Pejčinović, the side are a little more confident in that they can hold their opposition to a limited amount of clear-cut chances and without him they can sometimes capitulate before having a chance to put up a fight back.

He's also a threat from set pieces but recently not in the way many would expect. Both his goals in 2013 have come from his feet rather than his head, with him almost having a striker's instinct to react to play and gamble on a chance close to goal. It's also a factor in how he defends, his reading of the game allows him to keep up with play and react to the situation that's presented by the opposition.

Pejčinović's 2013 was good on the pitch but his decision to represent a "Serbia B" side in a friendly in November earned him a fine from his club. OGC Nice could not afford to freeze such an integral part of the team out and he returned going straight back into the team.

Going into 2014, Nice will want to stop publications like the GFFN 100 from shouting Pejčinović's praises too loudly so as to not get clubs interested. The South of France club are in the process of offering 'Pej' a new contract, because if he does not sign he will leave for free in June. If they want to move back up the table and fight for another European spot, the Serbian will be an important cog to keep Les Aiglons ticking.

'When I came here I was nobody. Now, little by little, I have made something of myself.'

Nemanja Pejčinović

28th February 2013

Quotes of the Year: Mario Licka: "We are missing a lot of things. Defensively we are insufficient, offensively too."

Brest's central midfielder took a grim look on his team's ability to remain in Ligue 1 in March 2013.

83. Timothée Kolodziejczak

Club: OGC Nice

Date of Birth: 1st October 1991

Position: Defender

Ex-Lyon man Timothée Kolodziejczak has played an important part in Nice's successes in 2013 and has played in almost every league game for Les Aiglons over the last year. The 22 year old's performances have in Claude Puel's eyes merited him a regular first team place and truly Kolodziejczak has by no means failed his boss; both offensively and defensively speaking.

As a left back, one would perhaps not expect the player to be a goal threat of any nature. Nevertheless, Kolodziejczak got his first goal for Nice in the league against Montpellier in September. The player comes up for corners and is an aerial presence with his height (6ft). The player headed home from midway inside the box, which marked a great milestone for himself in 2013. However, as much as defenders nowadays fancy themselves to score from anywhere and anyhow their main priority has and always will be to defend. Kolodziejczak has carried out these duties with diligence and intelligence. His 'heads down' attitude to work has allowed him to reap the rewards. Rarely in 2013 did we see Kolodziejczak struggle to deal with an opposition winger.

A subtle skill which Kolodziejczak has already been able to hone in on, despite his tender age, is the balance between aggression and caution when going in to make a tackle. He keeps a cool head but is alert enough to recognise real danger and to deal appropriately with it; stopping movements down the flanks by putting his foot in at the right moment. The player's concentration appears to be constant and he rarely makes any mistakes. The great thing about Kolodziejczak is that if he does lose the ball, he will often fight in order to win it back for his team and recover his error.

At the age of just 22, the left-back does appear very calm and composed on the ball despite his youth and this sparks good omens for the future. This has been demonstrated often in 2013, as Kolodziejczak does not panic under pressure and indeed appears to look for the simple pass out of danger. However, if there is no such option available he will not hesitate to concede a throw-in or a corner going against the trend of the 21st century full-back who seems intent on playing their way out of trouble.



Kolodziejczak loves to bomb forward, and manager Puel has encouraged this; especially with his team's inability to find goals of late. Kolodziejczak does create an overlap for his team, opening up options for the midfielders. He does however limit himself. One rarely sees Kolodziejczak venture further than halfway through the opposition half; only coming away with two league assists this year, which demonstrates how reluctant he is to overcommit.

Kolodziejczak has averaged less than a cross a game so far this season, highlighting this. Either way, at just 22, this is something which he can definitely improve upon.

A strength that Kolodziejczak possesses is his versatility. The player is of course a left back and plays here most of the time, but has played for Nice in centre back this season as well, and arguably, this is where he has actually performed best. Kolodziejczak has also started one game for the Ligue 1 side in the middle of the park, just in front of the back four.

Internationally, it has been a year out for Kolodziejczak. The player has represented France at almost every youth level, but has now outgrown the under-21s and it could be a substantial period of time before he could get a full French international call up. Kolodziejczak faces strong competition in the left back area for France in the future, with the likes of young Lucas Digne also occupying this position. It is therefore vitally important that Kolodziejczak plays as many games for Nice at left back as possible. Nevertheless, there is a way out should the player want it. The 22 year old is also able to play for Poland, but has not yet made a decision about whether he wants to represent them.

'I'm not sure what he is doing. I said to him I hope we don't lose, otherwise you look silly...'

Eric Bauthéac

On "Kolo's" dodgy haircut -14th December 2013

#GFFN recommends: @davidmcrossan: The Ligue 1 official commentator is a must-follow for the latest from the French papers as well as some of the best Ligue 1 analysis around.

82. Clément Chantôme

Club: Paris Saint Germain, Toulouse FC (loan)

Date of Birth: 11th September 1987

Position: Midfielder

26 year old French midfielder Clément Chantôme has had a fantastic season on the pitch, but a very frustrating season off of it. After remaining with PSG for the first five months of the year, being one of the few of the club's youth academy players not to have been wiped away by the influx of foreign talent thanks to the Qataris, the midfielder was in the summer shipped off to Toulouse; the Ligue 1 club at which he remains on loan at. Despite wonderful performances, which we will come on to, Chantôme will maybe be disappointed to not to feature for the Champions this season, having made 26 Ligue 1 appearances for them in 2012/13. The likes of Adrien Rabiot now appear to be preferred to the midfielder, who does seem unlikely to play for his parent club ever again.

The start of 2013 was frustrating for Chantôme. Despite an impressive beginning to the 2012/2013 campaign in the midfield, a combination of the great form of Blaise Matuidi and the arrival of David Beckham meant that game time became limited for the 26 year old, who became a more and more aggravated figure on the PSG bench.

Nevertheless, his performances in 2012 allowed him to attract interest from many clubs across Europe. As we told you, Everton were highly interested in the player, and this was confirmed by Chantôme's agent. There was also interest from French clubs and when Chantôme was left out of the PSG squad for the 'Trophée des Champions', the Frenchman was given no choice but to leave the club: *"Clément Chantôme has never said 'I want to leave'. When you are a Parisian, and you support the club then why would you? He loves PSG. However, when you send him a sign at the beginning of the season like leaving him out of the squad, does he have a choice?"*

Chantôme's role in PSG's winning of the Ligue 1 title is criminally underrated. His performances reassured the likes of Verratti and Matuidi who were given more freedom for error with the 26 year old's ability to sweep up after his teammates by rectifying their mistakes and winning the ball back.



However, one thing that a move to Toulouse has done is given Chantôme confidence. With Téfécé he goes from having been a squad player, crowded out by some of the world's biggest football names, to a key player for the Ligue 1 mid-table side. This has worked wonders on the performance front for Chantôme and the 26 year old has probably been their most consistent player so far this season, occupying the holding midfield role.

Chantôme's distribution has been first class yet again, with a near 90 per-cent passing success rate in Ligue 1 so far this season. It has to be said in fact that Chantôme has yet to have a poor game for Toulouse all season. The 26 year old has been a constant presence in the middle of the park and in a 2-1 win away at St Étienne he was the stand out performer, looking calm and collected in the centre of the park. Toulouse have not been exceptional in defence this season, with one of the poorer records in the league, but Chantôme's defensive ability is clear for all to see. He has made a number of crucial interceptions this season and one of his main strengths is holding the ball up and bringing it out of danger. Toulouse must invest in some centre-backs during the January window to ensure that Chantôme's hard work is not in vain.

2013 has been a year out for Chantôme of the French National side, with vicious competition for places, especially for the holding midfield role he currently operates in. The midfielder has only ever made one appearance for Les Bleus, towards the end of 2012, but may never wear the Les Bleus shirt again. At best Chantôme has an outside chance of nabbing a spot on the plane to Brazil. Whether Chantôme will make his Toulouse move permanent at the end of the season, or indeed before, remains unseen, but it is definitely a club at where he has been able to express himself more. At PSG for the first six months of the season Chantôme played well when called upon, but opportunities were rare. At Toulouse, he has been consistently impregnable and has really laid down his marker. He is surely an early contender for Toulouse's player of the season.

'I really hope so. It is always beautiful to be at PSG.'

Clément Chantôme

On returning to PSG after Toulouse- 18th September 2013

STATS CENTRAL: Clément Chantôme boasted the highest pass completion rate out of any player in Ligue 1 throughout the whole of the 2012/2013 campaign: 93%

81. Christian Brüls

Club: OGC Nice

Date of Birth: 30th September 1988

Position: Attacker

After arriving on loan from Gent in Belgium in the summer transfer window, Brüls has been one of the bright sparks in a Nice team who have somewhat under-performed during the current campaign.

Brüls plays mostly on the left wing, but is also able to play as an attacking midfielder behind the striker and on the right wing. His play style revolves around two key aspects of his game: his speed and his technique. Brüls is a very pacey customer, and clearly this will give a lot of problems to Ligue 1 defences, with runs either down the wing or right in behind the defence and towards goal. There is a sense of anticipation that emanates whenever the Belgian has the ball at his feet in a potentially dangerous position for Les Aiglons. Either this is because Nice have little other than Brüls in the way of attacking creativity, or it is because the Gent man frightens Ligue 1 defences with his trickery and inventive passing nature. If the opposition defence loses concentration and Brüls beats the offside trap, it can be very hard to catch him.

This combined with his reliable technique, makes him a very accomplished winger. His first touch is almost always on song, and he has a variety of tricks in his locker with which to beat opponents. This allows him to trick the opposing full back, bomb down the wing and deliver crosses from out wide into his strikers. This makes Brüls a dream to play alongside for strikers; when he is running down the wing, you know that there will be a quality delivery coming into the box. Dario Cvitanich has echoed these assumptions saying he has a better footballing understanding on the pitch with Brüls than with any of his other teammates.

Something that comes across in previous interviews that Brüls has given is that he craves a sense of belonging, and thrives, as most players do, when their achievements are recognised. Indeed, OGC Nice is Brüls sixth club in the space of eight full seasons.

There is no reason why Brüls cannot hope that he has finally found a home on the Côte D'Azur, if Nice can afford the buy-out clause in the player's loan contract at the end of the season.



At 25 years old, Brüls is coming to a point in his career where we stop talking about potential and start expecting results. Brüls has not disappointed, showing his quality in Ligue 1 this season for Nice. You would expect Brüls to take time to adapt to the playing style in France after moving from AA Gent on loan, but he had no such troubles. Within the first 8 games of the season, Brüls had already picked up a goal and 3 assists, and in each of the games in which Brüls had a part to play in a goal, Nice ended up winning. He has now become a key fixture in OGC Nice's lineup, having started all 19 of their league games before the Christmas break. Only fellow midfielder Didier Digard has played as many games for Nice, so it is clear that Brüls has immediately established a first team place at his new club. A statistic that emphasises Brüls' importance to Nice is that if we combine all of the assists of Nice's midfielder's apart from Brüls, we have 4 assists, which is the same figure that Brüls has managed just by himself.

One ingredient that currently fails Brüls is consistency. At times, when he is in good form, it is very difficult to defend against him. However, he can often have series of games during which he goes missing in games. Last season, he had a run of 14 games in a row in which he neither scored nor made an assist for Gent. This season, he had a run of 10 such games, coinciding with Nice's horrible run of 7 straight defeats. If Brüls can improve this aspect of his game, he can move onto the next level in his career and really become a top player. If he can consistently manage to produce the performances which keep defenders guessing for the whole 90 minutes with his skill and speed, his goals and assists tally will shoot up and I am sure he will be on the radar of some very serious European clubs.

This highly creative player has added a more exotic flavour and refined taste to Nice's attacking setup, adding a new offensive dimension whilst alleviating the pressure off of Dario Cvitanich, last season's talisman. While Brüls' 2014 is not assured because of the club situation, you never know, he may have finally found his footballing home.

'If I didn't have football I would have been a carpenter.'

Christian Brüls

20th December 2013

DID YOU KNOW? Christian Brüls' nickname is 'Tintin'. He was given it during his time at Maastricht in the Netherlands when he was the only Belgian player in their squad.

GFFN 100: 100-81 RECAP:

| | | |
|------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| #100 | Emmanuel Rivière | (AS Monaco) |
| #99 | Ronald Zubar | (AC Ajaccio) |
| #98 | Mustapha Yatabaré | (EA Guingamp) |
| #97 | Lucas Mendes | (Olympique de Marseille) |
| #96 | Claudiu Keserü | (SC Bastia) |
| #95 | Lucas Déaux | (FC Nantes) |
| #94 | Fethi Harek | (SC Bastia) |
| #93 | Florian Raspentino | (SC Bastia) |
| #92 | Papy Djilobodji | (FC Nantes) |
| #91 | Danijel Subasić | (AS Monaco) |
| #90 | Gaël Danic | (Olympique Lyonnais) |
| #89 | Mickaël Tacalfred | (Stade de Reims) |
| #88 | Cheick Diabaté | (Girondins de Bordeaux) |
| #87 | Lamine Sané | (Girondins de Bordeaux) |
| #86 | Adrien Rabiot | (Paris Saint Germain) |
| #85 | Brandão | (AS Saint Étienne) |
| #84 | Nemanja Pejčinović | (OGC Nice) |
| #83 | Timothée Kolodziejczak | (OGC Nice) |
| #82 | Clement Chantôme | (Toulouse FC) |
| #81 | Christian Brüls | (OGC Nice) |

80. Mathieu Dossevi

Club: Valenciennes FC

Date of Birth: 12th February 1988

Position: Attacker

Mathieu Dossevi is terribly alone. 2013 was another year in which the Frenchman dazzled the opposition with tricks, flicks and pinpoint crosses but also one where this talent has become deserted as most of the key players around him have sought for football elsewhere. The question now is whether Valenciennes can keep their man in the January window, as they are currently relegation-threatened and Dossevi is too good to play in Ligue 2 on the evidence he presented us all with in 2013.

One of Dossevi's greatest strengths is his adaptability. The player has played in a number of different positions this year, including up-front, on the right of a front three, right attacking midfield, attacking midfield and a deeper, more orthodox right midfield. Despite these changes, Dossevi is a regular in the Valenciennes team and can terrorise defences with his dangerous runs down the right hand side. The player is often perilously quick and can cause defences problems with his direct running style. Dossevi is therefore good on the break and is an instrumental piece of the Valenciennes attack.

Dossevi is also a goal threat for his team, something that the vast majority of the other attackers on Valenciennes' books currently are not. With only 2 Ligue 1 goals in 2013, we can ascertain that Dossevi often snatches at his chances when he cuts in from the right-hand flank, with the final product to a dribble often being meek. However, Dossevi's goal against Brest in February was very impressive as the player hit a controlled effort from outside the penalty area into the bottom corner of the net on the half volley. This is evidence that the player has the ability to become a more assured marksman in the future; with a little more concentration and attention to detail needed.

In terms of assists, the player has provided four for his team this year. Dossevi takes some free-kicks and corners and half of his assists have come from here. Dossevi may be expected to cross the ball more in an attempt to elevate this figure for 2014, but the lack of quality at VAFC means there are few players to cap the move off.



There are areas of Dossevi's game that need improving before he can make the step up to a bigger club. Manager Ariel Jacobs has introduced the philosophy of collective responsibility at Valenciennes and Dossevi has failed to really adhere to this. There is a lack of desire from the player to track back and help out an already weak defence.

However, another thing which has improved for the 25 year old throughout the year is his passing. Dossevi looks more composed on the ball than ever before and his distribution is certainly improving. He has a passing accuracy of just over 80% in recent months and this is a step up compared with the earlier weeks of 2013.

The player's true ability has clearly been somewhat masked by the lack of quality of players surrounding him in VAFC's current squad. The mass exodus of some of Valenciennes' stars over the last year correlates with the player's drop in form. For example, Dossevi had a great relationship and understanding with defensive midfielder Remi Gomis and the players linked well last season. Since his summer departure to Levante, Dossevi has struggled to find himself in as many dangerous positions as beforehand with Gomis' defence-splitting balls over the top.

Dossevi has the potential to become one of the better players in Ligue 1 and perhaps he has been mentally affected by his side's continuous poor results over the last few months.

His 2014 will very much be shaped by whether or not Valenciennes are relegated from Ligue 1. Either way, Dossevi is far too dangerous a talent to be battling in France's second tier.

'We must stop playing from the back. We can't do it. We need to look forward.'

Mathieu Dossevi

24th September 2013

DID YOU KNOW? Mathieu Dossevi's older brother Thomas also played for Valenciennes between 2005 and 2007.

79. Lucas Ocampos

Club: AS Monaco

Date of Birth: 11th July 1994

Position: Attacker

It could be argued that for a player with such widely-recognised talent as Lucas Ocampos, 79th is a fairly low position for the Argentinian to be finding himself in.

Despite a good start to 2013 playing a key offensive role in Monaco's promotion from Ligue 2, Ocampos has been over-shadowed by several of his new team-mates since they were promoted to the top division. Ocampos has been resigned to the bench for almost half of ASM's games so far in the 2013/2014 season, but at the age of just 19, the winger has plenty of time to make the desired impact in France and go on to even greater things, as has been predicted of him.

Having signed for Monaco in June 2012 for around sixteen million euros, Ocampos began to impress with his direct running style, exciting the albeit minimal home support at the Stade Louis II by taking opposition players on and beating them with superior skill and anticipation. Ocampos' performances are generally pleasing on the eye, undoubtedly a reason for the player's rise in fame throughout European football.

Ligue 2 defences were simply no match for him, with the player's raw ability proving too much for the vast majority of the technically limited second tier defences. Despite the ease in which Ocampos navigated his way around Ligue 2 opposition, he was never once complacent. According to various staff members who have worked with the 19 year old, Ocampos is strictly committed to his career and dedicates more hours than the majority of players to the training field. The attacking midfielder was likened to Cristiano Ronaldo by his team-mates during his days at River because of his superior dribbling abilities. The player is a workhorse and this is best evidenced by the amount of tracking back he endures game after game. In the first half of the year in Ligue 2, he often formed a watertight partnership with Layvin Kurzawa the left back, by double-teaming to prevent opposition attacks down Monaco's left hand side.



One criticism of Ocampos during his time at Monaco thus far is that he has been wasteful in the final third and in fact in front of the goal itself. Ocampos' delivery from out wide tends to be too deep and behind his striking teammates. The winger completes all the hard work effectively by running at the defence and beating people, but his decision making in terms of when to cross and when to cut inside and shoot lets him down at times. Ocampos, though, is not short of confidence and makes audacious attempts to score from any angle and any distance.

The 19 year old will surely learn to be less selfish in the future, but his assists count of zero for the season so far sums up his performance on a creative front these last six months. It appears that Ocampos's exhilarating form from Ligue 2 has not been carried into this season and the 19 year old has not adjusted to life in the top league quite as well as hoped. Then again, the arrival of James Rodriguez and the emergence of Anthony Martial has created severe competition for the Argentinian in the wide positions. A January loan move may be a shrewd decision for both club and player in a bid to more actively exploit the potential Ocampos has for future seasons.

However, it has not all been doom and gloom for the Argentinian in the second half of this year, although admittedly, it is the first part of the year which has propelled Ocampos into the GFFN 100. The 19 year old has specifically mastered the killer through ball and has managed to set up waves of attack this way. Ocampos came off the bench recently in a 3-0 win against Nice and provided a threat throughout his twenty two minutes on the pitch, including a few mazy runs on the right hand side and he was gifted a goal towards the end, which was aided by his pressing of the opposition defence.

Ocampos played his last game for an Argentinian under 17 side in 2011, but has not been selected for an under 20 or 21 side as yet and he needs to improve his consistency before this can happen. Overall, 2013 has been a year of two halves for the midfielder, as despite a brilliant start whilst playing in Ligue 2, the player is yet to fully adjust in the top division and is not starting week in week out due to competition. However, at the age of 19 and with such obvious talent, the player has plenty of time to make that step up and beyond and we are sure he will do so.

'As soon as we reach Ligue 1, we will do everything we can to do better than PSG.'

Lucas Ocampos

22nd April 2013

#GFFN recommends: @mohammedali_93: This self-professed Marseille supporter and goal.com text commentator is an excellent source of French football news in English. Informative and sensible, as well as a writer on occasion for Get French Football News.

78. Kossi Agassa

Club: Stade de Reims

Date of Birth: 2nd July 1978

Position: Goalkeeper



A crucial part of one of the most surprising French teams of 2013, Kossi Agassa has been a mainstay in the Stade de Reims goal helping the side sit in eighth over the winter break.

Nicknamed "Magic Hands" in his native Togo, Agassa has made over 100 appearances for the Champagne region club since joining from Spanish side Hercules CF in 2008.

In the second half of the 2012/13 season, Reims began producing results after having a very poor mid-section of the campaign by failing to win for 15 games. That run included wins against Lyon and Paris-St Germain and every single victory was complimented by a clean sheet, showing the importance of the then-newly-promoted side's goalkeeper to their success.

Strong defensive characters like Anthony Weber, Franck Signorino and Mickaël Tacalfred were vital in keeping Reims in Ligue 1 in 2013, with Reims finishing with the second worst goals tally with 33, one more than the side that eventually finished dead last: Troyes. In the final 18 games of the 2012/2013 season, Agassa conceded just 16 goals which really helped SDR stay in games and pick up crucial points, especially with their cursed scoring issues limiting them upfront.

Agassa's individual input is highlighted by the fact the side conceded six times in four games which the Togolese international missed, picking up four points, which was boosted by a win against a struggling Nancy. It showed just how much they needed him to keep other sides out as they failed to keep teams out without him.

At the close of 2013, Reims have gone from strength to strength in their climb up the table, buoyed by the fact they have only lost four of their 19 games so far. Agassa conceded 21 in 18 games, which is a good return for a mid-table side. With a +2 goal difference, Reims are proving that after a lot of work over the summer, they are being more efficient in exploiting their goalscoring opportunities.

That is not to say that Kossi Agassa has not been a busy. In the first half of the 2013/2014 campaign he has made 33 saves and 41 blocks with an average of just over 4 interceptions a game showing how actively involved he is in the club's success.

Much like a fine wine, it seems like Agassa has improved with age and is now one of the central figures at the Stade Auguste Delaune. In the calendar year, the stopper had 14 clean sheets in his 37 appearances for the club. Statistics do not lie, and such an impressive figure suggests that we are talking about one of the most underrated goalkeepers in European football. Agassa is a calm and collected man with several seasons of experience with Reims. A perhaps underrated quality, considering the squad has undergone major changes in the last 3 years. At 35 and having been to a World Cup with Togo, he has that added know-how at the very top level which alone commands respect.

It's visible on the field of play, too. He's regularly barking orders at his defence and with every shot that he stops, he makes sure he takes the time to tell his defenders what they did wrong. It might irritate those in front of him on occasion, but it's contributing to the robust nature of their defending as a whole and they make less mistakes because of it. That's not to say he's not talented between the sticks because he certainly provides an extra wall of protection for the Reims goal. He is an excellent shot-stopper with good athleticism, which can sometimes bail him out of a bad situation or make up for initial poor positioning.

He has some flaws, he has a tendency to punch more often than bring crosses to his chest which can cause a free-for-all in the box. He also tends to push some saves back into a dangerous area rather than palm the ball out of play or clear. At Agassa's age, mistakes like those are not acceptable.

Overall, Agassa heads into 2014 full of confidence in his side's ability to stay well clear of any relegation battle and continue to upset the apple cart in France. He knows full well that he is at the latter end of his career. Hopefully Agassa can gain more recognition before he calls it quits. He merits that much.

'If we finish 17th we have done our job.'

Kossi Agassa

On Reims' 2012/2013 season- March 2013

DID YOU KNOW? Kossi Agassa boycotted a Togo World Cup Qualifying fixture against Cameroon in March 2013 because of tactical disagreements with manager Didier Six.

77. Florent Balmont

Club: LOSC Lille

Date of Birth: 2nd February 1980

Position: Midfielder

In every profession, somebody has the least glamorous job. The work that nobody wants to do because it is tedious and difficult, but usually vital. For Lille, Florent Balmont is that man.

The year of 2013 as a whole has seen Lille really return to form and Balmont has been a central part of that, much like he has been in Les Dogues' squad since he was acquired from OGC Nice in 2008. Through all the changes in the past few years at the club, Balmont has been an unremitting presence that has led Lille forward despite the extremely contrasting fortunes of the Stade Pierre-Mauroy club in previous years.

Whilst the first half of the 2012/13 season was mediocre for LOSC, with an embarrassing Champions League campaign and pitiful league outings, the second half saw Lille lose just four of their last 19 games, with Balmont being involved in all but one. They finished in sixth, just two points away from qualifying for the Europa League which ironically has certainly helped them have a better league campaign in 2013/2014 despite their then continental aspirations.

Cue an astonishing start to life under new manager Rene Girard who has succeeded in propelling Lille up to third with 19 games played. What is more impressive is that the side managed a run where they went 11 games without conceding a goal, a magnificent feat that included a win against much-fancied Monaco. Balmont, along with the impressive back four and the sublime Vincent Enyeama, all deserve huge credit for creating the league's best defence, having conceded just six times so far this season.

Balmont is a fiery character, looking to enrage the opposition with subtle fouls to provoke a reaction without being reprimanded for it by an official. Alongside this however, Balmont is surprisingly apt at regaining possession for his team despite his small height. He is very alert and is always looking for the opposition to make one slightly heavy touch to allow him to nip in and make the interception.



He adds to this by also being productive in not conceding fouls to disrupt play. Some defensive midfielders pile up fouls and yellow cards over a season but Balmont is actually fouled almost twice as much as he concedes a foul, which shows his knack of having immaculate timing, whilst also being seen as the centre-piece to starting any kind of counter attack.

In addition to this, unlike others in his position, he has an excellent delivery from wide positions which is more regularly seen in his corner or free-kick taking. His corner for Pape Souaré to score against Montpellier earlier this season displayed that he can loft a wonderful curved ball into the box that is begging to be buried by an on-rushing attacker.

An attribute which is however more widely associated with defensive midfielders, a low goal-scoring tally, is one that Balmont does possess, with just one goal to his name over the calendar year. A tidy finish against Lyon early in the year saw Balmont partake in some neat build-up play before being played in behind and having the composure to slot the ball home.

Whilst he is rarely a threat in front of goal, Balmont has produced four assists in 2013 showing how far he has come in being able to be creative and defensively solid at the same time. At 33, he may not have too many years of quality like his 2013 left and Lille will want to start looking for a replacement. However, whilst he is still knocking around Les Dogues will be aware of his vital importance. This fighting creative-defensive hybrid type of player is a rarity in France, but also in Europe; making Balmont a bit of an antique.

'Today our aim remains finishing 6th. We make our merry way without worrying about the rest.'

Florent Balmont

25th November 2013

#GFFN recommends: @Gibney_A: Editor at French Football Weekly, this LOSC fan has pursued his dream of French football journalism by moving in 2013 to Lille. With valuable insight and sharp, to-the-point views his writing is most entertaining. His commitment is almost unparalleled.

76. Cheikh M'Bengue

Club: Stade Rennais

Date of Birth: 23rd July 1988

Position: Defender

2013 marked the end of Cheikh M'Bengue's six season-long spell at Toulouse FC. The sheer length of that stint suggests it may have been an appropriate time to move on. Toulouse was in fact all M'Bengue had known since the age of 8 and it is perhaps this bi-lateral attachment to one another that had seen bids in years gone by rejected for the player. Toulouse gave him a professional contract at the age of just 19, again showing that this continued faith in the player to succeed was no recent development. Cheick M'Bengue was always going to eventually need to breathe new life into his career and was seduced in the summer of 2013 by Philippe Montanier and his proposed project at Rennes.

His performances in 2013 were reflective of the extraordinary faith Toulouse placed on the Senegalese international in 2007. M'Bengue very much typifies the generic, athletic Ligue 1 left-back: he is quick, a solid defender and is never afraid to join in with the attack. He has an additional bonus of being around 6ft tall, so when necessary, such as during set pieces, he can help out his centre backs by dealing with any aerial threat that comes their way. What sets M'Bengue apart from most of the other left-backs currently plying their trade in France is his consistent level of high performance which is why he is so admired by many of his contemporaries in Ligue 1.

One forte to M'Bengue's game is that, although he is relatively young at 25 years of age, he has been exposed to 6 complete seasons of Ligue 1 football (already making 150 appearances). This is a rarity and undoubtedly the key to his consistency. This means that not only is M'Bengue at his physical peak, but he also knows the ins and outs of French football, which gives the Senegalese defender an advantage over many opponents he faces in Ligue 1.



At 25, M'Bengue has a lot of time left in his career to improve on his already primed game. One area he could perhaps develop is the quality of his play when he goes forward. Although M'Bengue is not afraid to bomb forward down the left wing, often his final delivery lets him down. This is summed up by the fact that in his last 3 seasons of Ligue 1 football, in which he has played well over 60 games, he has only 2 assists to his name and not a single goal. This criticism is perhaps harsh on a player whose role is to defend, but if M'Bengue wants to move his game to the next level, which no doubt he can, he should work on his attacking play and, in particular, his crossing. Aside from this, M'Bengue has every other vital ability to evolve that bit further into a top left back.

M'Bengue's new team for the 2013/2014 campaign, Rennes, lay in 15th place in Ligue 1 at the end of 2013. Certainly a disappointing reality for a side that had hoped for greater instant return on the appointment of Philippe Montanier. Being a considerable 7 points clear of the relegation zone, and just 4 points short of 10th place and mid-table, Rennes have certainly had an unremarkable second half of the calendar year.

Rennes' low position though is however not due to their defence, of which M'Bengue is an important part. In terms of goals conceded, Rennes finished the year a much higher joint 10th in the league. If M'Bengue is given a little more time to acclimatise to life in Brittany, we can certainly an even more secure SRFC back line in 2014.

2013 was a year of transition for Cheick M'Bengue, partaking in an impressive second half of the 2012/2013 campaign with Toulouse, and finishing the year with his new club Rennes, where he took no time at all to adjust to his surroundings. With a few small adjustments to his offensive game, and maintaining his impressive consistency in terms of defence, I have no doubt that M'Bengue can raise his game to the next level and have an even more impressive 2014.

'There is little difference between Toulouse and Rennes.'

Cheikh M'Bengue

24th October 2013

DID YOU KNOW? Rennes manager Philippe Montanier turned down the chance to continue managing Champions League side Real Sociedad to return to Ligue 1 instead.

75. Jordan Ayew

Club: Olympique de Marseille

Date of Birth: 11th September 1991

Position: Attacker

2013 have been a year of ups and downs for Marseille forward Jordan Ayew. The attacker started the year in good form for Marseille, but after a distracting transfer window in the summer, his performances have not been of the same level in the last six months of the calendar year and his goalscoring has dried up.

As the 2013/2014 season commenced Jordan Ayew scored with three goals in three games. This included a cracker from the right hand side of the box in a 3-1 defeat to Sochaux. In the other two, against Stade Rennais and Montpellier, J.Ayew's movement in the box was first class as he darted away from his marker to create space, receive the ball and slot home. Such form showed what the Ghanaian is capable of, but the truth is that he is very inconsistent, as it took him until November to find the net again.

Ayew appears to have lost some confidence in the box in the later part of the year and his finishing has suffered as a result. The player looks nervy on the ball and seems unable to hold the ball up and put others into play. Thus, despite not ever being a particularly creative player, the 22 year old's assist count appears to have suffered as well. At a height of around five foot ten inches, Ayew is not small, but, despite his best efforts to nip in front of balls as they fly into the area before languishing defenders, he fails to appear particularly strong in the air either. Thus the majority of his goals come from on the ground.

The Ghanaian is still young and his positioning will only improve when he is able to play consistently. This, in the future, should give him a greater head-start over defenders.

Another weakness that Ayew has displayed throughout the course of 2013 is his lack of discipline. Ayew is a very hot-blooded creature and is often too forceful when he comes off the bench. He famously picked up a red card within two minutes of coming on the pitch in February 2013 against Evian after earning two yellows in 120 seconds!



It was not all doom and gloom for Ayew in 2013 however. Despite being mainly used as a substitute, his defensive contributions were often evident because as mentioned, Ayew likes to press from the front, win the ball back and start attacks. Thus he works hard for his team and probably deserves more plaudits than he actually received during the latter part of 2013. Jordan's passing has also been excellent and this is something which has improved throughout the calendar year. Ayew had a passing accuracy rate of around 90% in the Champions League this season when he featured, which is fantastic for a striker.

Internationally, Ayew has probably reached his greatest low this year. Despite playing in the 2012 African Cup of Nations, Ayew was dropped for the 2013 competition and his current poor form leaves his participation in the World Cup in some doubt. Ayew has only played two games for his country over the year and has failed to hit the net. There is also an increase in competition for places in the attacking areas of the pitch from younger players after Ghana's strong performance in the Under 20 World Cup. We shall have to see if Ayew makes Brazil 2014, but he certainly needs to perform well in the coming months in order to do so.

Over the summer, the likes of West Brom and other English clubs were interested in bringing Ayew in on a loan deal, but no agreement was reached. Due to his lack of starts this season, this could once again be a possibility and so we shall have to see if Ayew ends January in a Marseille shirt. Whether this uncertainty about his future has knocked his form is unknown.

The cracker-jacker striker has a promising career ahead of him and can have a real future at Marseille, provided he reins in some of his childish tendencies.

'You know my temperament on the pitch. I am a bit too impulsive but I'm working on it.'

Jordan Ayew

22nd September 2013

#GFFN recommends: @FrenchFtWeekly: A band of francophiles who analyse French football in English intelligently and poignantly. All wonderful people too.

74. François Clerc

Club: AS Saint-Étienne

Date of Birth: 18th April 1983

Position: Defender



Leaving Lyon in the summer of 2010 as his contract expired, you may have been forgiven for thinking that François Clerc had had his day at the top level. National team caps had long since dried up and, after a poor few seasons that saw him rack up just 19 appearances, the right-back seemed to be struggling. However, his struggles now seem a distant memory as, following a brief trial with Nice that led to a two-year stay at the club, he signed a three-year contract with Saint Etienne in July 2012 and has never looked back.

Very much a traditional right-back, Clerc possesses the versatility to be deployed on the left flank and has even played on the right of midfield earlier in his career. Surprisingly good in the air for a full-back, standing at 1.87m, Clerc also has a good eye for a pass and has maintained the necessary physical condition throughout his career to remain alert and mobile for all. He boasts an excellent disciplinary record - committing just 24 fouls in 31 starts last term - and seems to have sharpened his technical skills over the last year, alongside keeping himself in peak condition as he enjoys some of the best form of his career.

And while his attacking output has never been particularly noteworthy - with his best return coming in the 2011/12 season when he scored 4 goals - his consistently strong displays, high work-rate and considerable experience at the top level make him a key member of this over-achieving Saint Etienne side.

One contributing factor to Clerc's incredible run of form over the last 12 months is the fact that he has been injury-free since a minor knee injury kept him out for a month in late 2012. Aside from missing one match due to suspension, this prolonged run of form and fitness saw him play every minute of his team's league run-in in 2013 and it is certainly no coincidence that Saint Etienne's results were excellent throughout this period - losing just twice, to Lorient on both occasions.

His only goal that season came as the equaliser in the 2-2 draw at home against PSG. He ensured that his sole strike was a memorable one, however, as he fired an 18-yard rocket into the top corner with the outside of his right boot, sending the fans into raptures.

In the Europa League, meanwhile, Clerc played in both of *Les Verts'* third round qualifying matches as they cruised to a 6-0 aggregate win over Milsami of Moldova. With 3-0 victories both home and away, he even captained his side in the away leg. Disappointment came in the playoffs, however, as they fell to Denmark's Esbjerg in what was the final hurdle before the tournament proper. Clerc played every minute yet again - filling in at left back in the return match - but was unable to prevent his side from suffering one of the shocks of the round as Saint Etienne's European dream came to a premature end.

A vital cog in his side's Coupe de la Ligue triumph in the 2013 season, he remained on-pitch throughout their epic semi-final tie with Lille before going on to score what proved to be the winning penalty in the shootout as he calmly slotted his strike into the corner, sending the keeper the wrong way. In the final, meanwhile, he played the full 90 minutes and went close to scoring with a header and a volley, showcasing his technical and physical prowess, as Saint Etienne sealed a 1-0 victory over Rennes to end a three-decade long wait for a domestic trophy.

Since then, Clerc has brought this form and fitness into the current season, playing every minute of his team's league campaign so far and picking up right where he left off. In another rare goal-scoring display, he grabbed the opener in the 3-2 win over FC Lorient in October and also got himself an assist in that encounter, something he will undoubtedly hope to do on more occasions before the season ends.

Off the field, Clerc was subjected to controversy in late April this year when he became the target of a bizarre outburst from Montpellier owner Louis Nicollin. Well known for his inflammatory public statements, Lyon-native Nicollin branded Clerc a "gobshite" in response to the full-back's assertion that his trophy win with Saint Etienne meant more to him than his three previous Ligue 1 titles with Lyon.

While the chief was roundly condemned for his comments, Clerc's professionalism shone through. When speaking to the press about the matter Clerc said: *"Ultimately, I'm not overly surprised as he insults his players and coaches at Montpellier and, between us, he may have labelled me as a gobshite, but he's clearly the one who is full of it and it shows."*

This sense of maturity certainly benefits a player who has blossomed into one of the league's most consistent performers at full-back after something of a personal renaissance in recent years. While his focus will undoubtedly remain with Saint Etienne in the coming months, with a World Cup on the horizon he may still harbour dreams of pressing forward his case for a first international cap since 2008, however unlikely that may seem.

'I talked to him about the captaincy. We laughed but friendship subsides on that pitch.'

Maxime Gonalons

On rivalry and friendship with François Clerc -10th November 2013

Quotes of the Year: Francois Clerc: "I don't know who he thinks he is. When you're a club president you should be a bit more reserved. I've never spoken to him and I'm not going to insult him like that." Clerc was responding to criticism from Montpellier President Louis Nicollin.

73. Yannick Ferreira-Carrasco

Club: AS Monaco

Date of Birth: 4th September 1993

Position: Attacker



'He has never played in Ligue 1,' they said. 'Surely a man who has only ever played 20-odd Ligue 2 games cannot be a starter for a title-challenging side?' 'He's only 19 years old, and not strong enough for the top league.' These were the voices of Yannick Ferreira-Carrasco's doubters when the 2013/14 season loomed ahead. The young Belgian only became a professional footballer in 2012, but has taken no time at all to deliver.

2013 has been the breakthrough year in Ferreira-Carrasco's career. After joining Monaco, he became the heart of their team as they began their mission to qualify for Ligue 1. He began the season as a very inexperienced 18 year old and finished the season as a very accomplished player at Ligue 2 standard, having led his team to promotion. Then, one year on, Ferreira-Carrasco could have been forgiven for being intimidated by all of the big name signings that Monaco brought in, most of whom were attack-minded players, but the young Belgian managed to keep his first team place and, apart from a 5 game spell in which he was injured, he has played in all of Monaco's Ligue 1 games in 2013.

Ferreira-Carrasco has a very refreshing style of play. Predominantly a left-winger, he is extremely technically gifted, with a hat full of tricks to beat his opposing full back. He is never afraid to take players on, something that other wingers sometimes shy away from, as they often prefer to cut inside or pass the ball on and thus the responsibility onto a teammate.

He is also a rapid customer, and once he gets past his opposing full back, there is often no catching him. His speed also allows him to make runs behind the defence and straight through on goal, as he did against Saint-Etienne to score his first ever Ligue 1 goal earlier this season. Another thing that stands out about this young man is that he is very competent from set pieces. He took most of Monaco's penalties last season, which he duly dispatched, and also scored a couple of brilliant free-kicks.

The statistics also back up the fact that Ferreira-Carrasco has developed hugely over the past few years. During his 2012/2013 Ligue 2 campaign he managed 6 goals and 6 assists along with 2 goals and an assist in their Coupe de la Ligue run. Going into the Christmas break in Ligue 1, it is still true that Monaco have never lost a league game (both Ligue 1 and Ligue 2) when Ferreira-Carrasco has scored or assisted a goal. Ferreira-Carrasco was also a regular in the Belgium under-21 team over the course of 2013, playing in all 5 qualifying games, winning 4 and drawing the other. For a young 20 year old, he is already building up an impressive CV, and it seems that he is very comfortable in his current environment in Monaco and has a strong relationship with the manager Claudio Ranieri.

As with most young wingers, one part of his game the promising Belgian can work on is his strength. At the moment, he can get bullied off the ball by the opposition but, if he is able to bulk up then he will become a tremendously difficult player to defend against. As it is, some of Ligue 1's more robust defenders look to throw the player off his game with some heavy challenges in the opening exchanges of their duels with Ferreira-Carrasco and occasionally this can make the Belgian a little more cautious and therefore offensively invisible during some encounters. However, with an improved physical stature this tactic will be near impossible to implement against him, allowing him to play to his full potential.

Overall, 2013 has been an unbelievable year for Yannick Ferreira-Carrasco. After bursting onto the scene in Ligue 2 last season and helping Monaco to a promotion that was paramount for the Russian-led Monegasque boardroom, he has continued his impressive form into the top tier of French football, now creating havoc for defences at some of the country's most iconic grounds. As it stands, there is no reason why Ferreira-Carrasco cannot continue to improve at the same startling rate of 2013 so long as he receives continued backing from Ranieri in the form of game-time. Don't forget the name Yannick Ferreira-Carrasco- you could become very familiar with him in the years to come.

'Monaco is a place with many vices. Life is beautiful, the opportunities are as frequent as the women.'

Yannick Ferreira-Carrasco

15th November 2013

DID YOU KNOW? Yannick Ferreira-Carrasco has admitted that without his friends he could not go on in Monaco.

72. Eric Abidal

Club: AS Monaco

Date of Birth: 11th September 1979

Position: Defender



Despite serious health issues at the start of the year, Eric Abidal is back in many senses of the word. Not only is the Lyon-born defender now playing the beautiful game again having made a most unlikely and incredible return from a liver transplant, but Abidal is also back in France with AS Monaco, where he started his career, and is playing once again for the French national team.

Abidal showed enormous strength to make a return to football for the second time in April of 2013. Abidal only ended up playing 5 games for Barcelona at the end of last season due to the timing of his return, but to be able to fit straight back into the highest level after such a long time out from the game shows the brilliance of a man who can be a role model for all. For this reason alone, the 34 year old pretty much qualifies for the GFFN 100, but he has of course made the cut because of his performances this year since his recovery.

Abidal reacted to not being given a new contract by Barcelona tearfully, but he soon picked himself up and despite suitors in the form of Lyon, Nice and New York Red Bulls, Abidal chose a move to Monaco, where he has quickly become a key player at the heart of the back four. At the age of 34, the Frenchman is able to provide vital experience of playing at the highest level that the side needs. Indeed the Frenchman ended 2013 at centre back for both club and country despite being a traditional left back, but due to a slight loss of pace it appears that this is the place for him. Abidal's experience proved invaluable for AS Monaco at the heart of the back four as they look to put their stamp on Ligue 1. His ability to calmly pass his way out of danger and generally appearing composed on the ball allows him to make some vital clearances and interceptions in the process with relative ease.

One weakness, perhaps, of Abidal playing in this position, is his lack of height and his shortcomings when it comes to the aerial battles. With the physicality of the Ligue 1 game increasing this season he has found himself exposed, and indeed in his few international games in 2013, he has maybe performed below expectations. It does indeed seem that Abidal should not be included in Didier Deschamps' French World Cup squad, as the Frenchman simply no longer stands out amongst a set of highly talented young defenders that the country is now producing. In our opinion anyway, Abidal should have played his last game for the national team, and at least this way, he can focus on playing club football at the highest level with Monaco for as long as possible.

It could be argued, that despite impressive performances, Abidal has not been so terrific for Monaco either. His centre back partnership with Ricardo Carvalho, while only 6 months young at the end of 2013, is far from perfect and they often leave each other uneasy with their lack of pace. Another theory for their strange lack of communication on the pitch could be their inherent former rivalry, with the two footballers arriving from such great rivals in Spain. However, although they do not offer speed in abundance, they can provide vital experience, and Monaco's defensive statistics continue to be impressive during this campaign.

Despite the almost natural downturn in Abidal's footballing abilities, we can only judge him on the majority of his performances in Ligue 1 in 2013 and for the most part he has been a great presence for AS Monaco. Abidal's international career might be nearing the end, but the player has enjoyed great successes during his time with France and will surely go down as one of the great French sportsmen of all time, a role model for all. His fighting attitude seems to inspire teammates and that is one of the main reasons why the newly promoted side are highflying.

'Playing in the World Cup and winning it, that would be some ending...'

Eric Abidal

On the Brazil 2014 World Cup- 20th September 2013

DID YOU KNOW? Eric Abidal's former teammate at Barcelona Dani Alves offered the Frenchman his liver when found out that his friend was in need of a transplant.

71. Simon Kjaer

Club: LOSC Lille

Date of Birth: 26th March 1989

Position: Defender

It was the 16th October 2011, and Kjaer's Roma side made the short trip to face fierce rivals Lazio in one of the most hotly contested derby's in Europe. Within a few minutes, Roma were ahead. Delirium for the away fans. But then something happened that changed the game: Kjaer was sent off. Two minutes later, Lazio equalised and, in injury time with the last kick of the game, they scored the winner through Miroslav Klose. It must have been hard for Kjaer, 22 at the time, to take. Kjaer's AS Roma career never really got going again. In fact, he left when his loan spell terminated at the end of the season. However, following a move back to Wolfsburg and then on to Lille, Kjaer has managed to recover, and, in 2013, has shown himself as one of the most consistently promising centre backs to play in Ligue 1.

Kjaer is a very well-travelled footballer, having played in the Danish league, Serie A and Bundesliga before he arrived at Lille to tackle Ligue 1 football. This is impressive for a man who is only 24 years old, very young in centre back terms. It may also suggest that Kjaer has struggled to find consistency elsewhere, pointing to a pattern that perhaps emerges when you look at his inability to settle at any of his previous four clubs before arriving in the Northern half of France to sign for Lille in the summer of 2013. Having said this, there is certainly a convincing argument that Kjaer has more experience at the highest level than virtually any 24 year old centre back in Europe. In fact, when he secured his first team place in Serie A with Palermo, he was only 19 years old. This evidence suggests that Lille now have on their hands not only a young player who is still improving, but they have a vastly qualified defender in European football. It was therefore unsurprising that Kjaer steadied himself well in his opening Ligue 1 matches at the start of the 2013/2014 campaign.

Standing at 6 ft 2 inches tall, Kjaer has the classic centre back build. He is tall enough to deal with the aerial examination that comes with playing in the heart of the defence, but is also suitably mobile to deal with runs in behind him from opposing strikers. In the early years of his career, he used to be one of those centre backs who would do all of the hard things brilliantly, but then make a silly mistake that would cost his side a goal, or indeed, as we saw, cost his side the whole match. In 2013 though, it appears that he has amended this fault, certainly in the matches he has played for Lille in the first half of the season.



Defensive consistency. It is something that every defender wishes to master and there are already examples during Kjaer's career which suggest that he has been able to obtain this quality, but only when he is playing during a period of confidence on the pitch. This was evident firstly during his last season with Wolfsburg, who went 10 games unbeaten last season with Kjaer in the team. It is even more evident when we look at Lille's astounding run of 11 clean sheets in a row, of which Kjaer started 10 of the games. As we can see, Kjaer goes through prolonged phases of defensive excellence, and once he has the necessary momentum, they can last for a long time, and his team sees the benefits.

Kjaer is also quite competent going forward. Although he had yet to score for Lille at the end of the calendar year, he has 9 goals and 2 assists in his career. With his height, he is logically an asset from offensive set pieces. In fact, of his 9 goals 7 of them were headers.

Kjaer's current club, Lille, have, at the time of writing, the best defensive record in the league, having conceded only 8 goals all season so far and kept 14 clean sheets in total as the year closes. Kjaer has been a vital part of this record, as he has played in 17 of the 19 games Lille have had so far. Before Kjaer arrived, in the first 19 games of last season, Lille conceded 18 goals, only the 5th best record in the league. Although this is clearly not all down to Kjaer, he must at least take some of the credit.

As well as being vastly experienced at club level, Kjaer has also been capped 35 times by the Danish national team, and was a regular in the Danish world cup qualification bid in 2013. The Danish team finished behind Italy in second place, but unfortunately missed out a play-off spot as they had the worst record of the 9 runners up.

2013 may well have been the year that Simon Kjaer started to discover his true home. Home in the form of Lille. After fulfilling his time at Wolfsburg and wanting to move on, he has formed a quite brilliant partnership with 30 year old Marko Baša, which culminated in the spectacular run of 11 consecutive clean sheets in the league. While Lille's over-performing is likely to come to an end at some point, Kjaer is certainly one of Ligue 1's greatest signings of the season.

'Marko speaks English, we have no problem communicating.'

Simon Kjaer

On defensive partnerships- 27th August 2013

STATS CENTRAL: Lille only conceded 8 Ligue 1 goals in the first half of the 2013/2014 campaign.

70. Issa Cissokho

Club: FC Nantes

Date of Birth: 23rd February 1985

Position: Defender



One of the most heart-warming yet still surprising stories to appear in French football in 2013 has been the rise to prominence of Issa Cissokho. He made his Ligue 1 debut in August 2013 at the grand old age of 28, having previously spent his playing days hanging about the French lower leagues donning the shirt of the likes of Orleans, Blois and Carquefou. Given his impressive performances for the latter and the geographical proximity to the city of Nantes it was not surprising when he joined FC Nantes' reserve side in 2010, where he was eventually given a run in the first team at the back end of the 2010-11 season, playing nine games. Then he went on to make 23 appearances in the first team the following season also.

Things changed for Issa when Michel Der Zakarian was reappointed in 2012, this is a common theme for many at FCN. Der Zakarian changed a lot at La Beaujoire and instilled a belief in his team that was often lacking in previous campaigns.

None more so than for Senegalese right-back Cissokho, one is duty-bound to point out at this juncture that he is the older brother of Aly Cissokho – the former Porto, Lyon and Valencia defender who is currently on loan at Liverpool. The two brothers career trajectories have been fairly different up until recently. Issa has not enjoyed the same ride around Europe the way his brother has. It is a testament to Issa's determination and work ethic that he is now enjoying life in Ligue 1.

Cissokho has spoken about how he now finally has a coach that believes in him fully. That belief translates into game time. He has been in the starting XI for Nantes in 2013 all bar three times. Moreover, he has played the full 90 minutes eighteen out of nineteen times this season, only missing out when Der Zakarian changed the system for the game against PSG in August 2013. FC Nantes' style of play often exploits their wide players and Cissokho fits this role. He is often seen marauding down the flank and trying to get a cross in.

He seems to have improved this element of his game, having at the time of writing already doubled his number of assists from last season to four after only half of this season. His crossing is constantly improving, this was previously something of a weakness for Cissokho. So much so that this was a source of a joke between him and his brother, when Aly observed the improvement in his centres and suggested that his older brother had been the recipient of a foot transplant.

Overall, he has been one of Nantes' standout performers this season. He was rewarded for his good performances with a call-up to the Senegal nation side in August and he was an unused substitute as Senegal lost to Cote D'Ivoire in the 2014 World Cup play-offs in November.

He is lightning quick down the right hand side and fits in perfectly to Nantes' tactical approach this season. They play on the counter a lot, thus having players of Cissokho's pace in the line-up is very useful for *Les Canaris*. He has also formed a good understanding with a much maligned player who is enjoying a decent season, Serge Gakpé, down the right hand side.

A former coach of his remarked how Issa in his younger days was a much more of an attacking player. The coach felt he had significant technical short-comings when it came to the defensive side of the game. This is no longer the case, while Cissokho will seize any chance to bomb forward he does not neglect his defensive duties. He is averaging over 2 tackles and interceptions per game as 2013 reaches a close. However, if we look at the same statistic for his counterparts in the left back role, Olivier Veigneau and Chakur Allhadur, who have pretty much equally shared the role this season, we find that they were both individually bettering Cissokho's efforts in this department. This is to be attributed to the fact that Cissokho forces his adversaries onto the back foot in defence and it is near impossible for a modern day wing back to be able to protect his flank fully.

As one might expect with someone who is something of a late bloomer he is really taking his chance with both hands. He continues to surprise people and challenge the received wisdom. In many ways Cissokho's success has been much like that of Nantes'. Both had been written off and both have thus far upset the odds in achieving what they have. Cissokho also typifies the spirit that has marked FC Nantes' return to the big time. He has been a true revelation in this Nantes team full of positive surprises.

2013 has most definitely been his year, a promotion achieved with a game to spare followed by a smooth transition into Ligue 1 with victories at rivals Rennes and Bordeaux the stand-out results. Cissokho and Nantes find themselves sitting on 29 points after half the season gone making the pre-season predictions of an immediate return to Ligue 2 seem ill-thought out.

'I have had quite a few setbacks in my career. Now I am so happy.'

Issa Cissokho

6th August 2013

DID YOU KNOW? At the age of 17/18, Issa Cissokho was considering joining a friend of his in the French army but did not like the sound of waking up early in the morning!

69. Jérémy Ménez

Club: Paris Saint Germain

Date of Birth: 7th May 1987

Position: Attacker



A new manager arrived in the form of Laurent Blanc at the beginning of the 2013/2014 campaign and, as often happens, some of the squad members were more fortunate than others as the new regime took shape. Jérémy Ménez was a player who was less fortunate than others in the mini summer squad shake up that ensued, and the extent of his playing time was dealt a serious blow, so much so that his future became uncertain. Although 2013 has been a mixed year in terms of game time for the Frenchman, when he has been given minutes on the pitch he has more often than not delivered an end product, especially early in the calendar year, and that is why he has made the GFFN 100.

Currently 26 years old and with many years ahead of him, Ménez is an extremely experienced player in terms of French football, having made his first Ligue 1 appearances in the 2004/5 season at the age of just 17. He has since developed into a very accomplished forward man, playing in a variety of attacking positions, most commonly centre forward or on the left wing. This versatility has proved very useful to his managers at PSG in 2013, be it Carlo Ancelotti or Laurent Blanc. In between spells with Monaco and his current team PSG, Ménez also played in Serie A with AS Roma, scoring 7 goals and assisting 15 times in Italy's top league over 3 seasons. In Ligue 1 overall, Ménez has 35 goals and 37 assists in 184 games as 2013 comes to a close. Clearly therefore, Ménez is already an experienced goal scorer at Ligue 1 level.

Ménez's main assets are his blistering pace and his superior dribbling and technique on the ball compared with most other Ligue 1 wingers. These two skills combined are one of the reasons why he is more suited to providing more consistent assists than he does in terms of goals; when he is on the wing he can use trickery to outfox the opposing full back, sprint down the wing and deliver a pin point cross to the striker to finish the move. However, Ménez is also a very handy goal scorer, and this is attributed to two principal features: his runs and his finishing. When he plays in either of his primary attacking roles, Ménez is normally on the back foot of the defensive line, always looking to make a run in behind. When he does and is through on goal, more often than not he has the composure and finishing ability to score, and this is what sets him apart from other players. The frequency of which he attempts these runs depends on the player's motivation at that particular period and that is something he has generally lacked in 2013.

During the 2012/2013 campaign under Carlo Ancelotti, it can be argued that Ménez had a successful time at PSG. He made 30 Ligue 1 appearances, scoring 5 times and assisting 7 goals, and managed to score the goal that finally secured the title for PSG, the winner in a 1-0 away win at Lyon. He had even more success in the Champions League, where in the 5 group stage matches that he played, he managed 2 goals and 3 assists to help send PSG through as group winners. It was in this competition in particular where he managed to build a strong relationship with talismanic frontman Zlatan Ibrahimovic. The statistics therefore suggest that Ménez was just as successful as any PSG attacking midfielder in 2013.

This season, though, has been less of a success for the Frenchman. As Ancelotti left for Real Madrid and Blanc came in, clearly Ménez was not as big a part of the Frenchman's plans as Ménez might have hoped. Of the 19 games in Ligue 1 that PSG have played, Ménez has started just 5 matches, scoring just twice and assisting once. In fact, in the whole of 2013 Ménez has only played the full 90 minutes twice, which is a very telling statistic. Whether this is down to the depth of the PSG squad or just Ménez's fitness in not being able to last the full 90 minutes is still not fully clear, but clearly the Frenchman would have hoped for more playing time, especially after last season. This has inevitably led to speculation about Ménez's future, with many suggesting that he is going to move on in the January transfer window in search of more playing time with the 2014 World Cup in Brazil looming in the horizon. At this moment in time, it would be understandable given his lack of playing time to think that Ménez may move on.

Overall, in 2013 Ménez was the latest player to fall victim to PSG's evolution into a more international attacking force. There have been some off-field issues, especially under Blanc this season, which have contributed also but he has occasionally delivered on the pitch when he has been given the chance. It was only last season that he made 30 league appearances and scored the goal that confirmed PSG's title win, so, if he can repair his relationship with Blanc, there is no reason to suggest why Ménez cannot have a moderately successful 2014 just where he is: at PSG.

'I have never said that I want to leave.'

Jérémy Ménez

3rd November 2013

DID YOU KNOW? In October 2013, Jérémy Ménez stormed off the substitutes bench and down the tunnel when he was told he was not going to be substituted on in a Champions League match vs Benfica.

68. Alexandre Lacazette

Club: Olympique Lyonnais

Date of Birth: 28th May 1991

Position: Attacker



Despite what could be called a very poor 2013 for Lyon, forward Alexandre Lacazette has gone from strength to strength and the fallout of Bafétimbi Gomis with the club appears to have helped him to pin down a first team place and from this platform he has been able to perform.

It is fair to say that 2013 could be described as a break-through year for the 22 year old. As much as he was a first team regular in 2011 and 2012, in 2013, Lacazette has been given the minutes to perform consistently more and has also been noticed by his country in the process. Lacazette played in two international friendlies at the start of 2013, and although he has yet to play for Les Bleus since, a call up for the World Cup has to be in the back of Didier Deschamps' mind considering the lack of goals that the current front men in Giroud and Benzema have produced in World Cup qualifying.

In terms of form for Les Gones, Lacazette started the majority of the 2012/2013 season on the wing and helped his team more with assists rather than scoring goals. In the last 6 months, however, Lacazette, has played more games upfront and Lyon as a whole appear to have reaped the rewards.

The player's standout game in 2013 came recently in a 1-1 draw with Toulouse, where Lacazette scored with a thunderbolt into the bottom corner from the edge of the area as well as creating various chances and linking up well with the then recently-returned Bafétimbi Gomis. On his performances alone, Lyon were unlucky not to come away with all three points and indeed the Frenchman was named man of the match.

As with many other players in this GFFN 100, Lacazette's versatility and ability to play in different positions separates him from the rest. The player has played in three different positions this year, on the left, the right and down the centre.

As mentioned, Lacazette does appear to now be thriving down the middle as a sort of second striker, but he has had game-time down the wings this season and played just as well. Having said that, Lacazette has already scored more goals than last season and so striker has to be his main, long-term position.

Even in games when Lyon haven't been at the races so far this season, Lacazette has been the stand out performer and if he continues with this vein of form. If Lyon's poor form remains, the Frenchman could attract interest from many other clubs. At the age of 22, Lacazette's progress is reaching that optimal stage of rapidity as he has the sufficient confidence to hone in on his greatest attributes in match situations. Lacazette is a danger for the opposition on the counter attack due to his pace and has scored a few goals on the break this year. He has a good understanding with the likes of Clement Grenier and has often been played in by that very team-mate. The forward's sharp movement is also something which is difficult for the opposition to contain, with Lacazette often making wily runs across a side's back four before darting forward to receive a ball through. Lacazette's timing of his runs is not always perfect and he has probably been caught offside too often for his liking over the last year.

However, it has not all been plain-sailing for the 22 year old. Discipline does appear to be an issue for the player who has tendencies to pick up yellow cards and worse. He has already picked up two red cards as 2013 closes in instances where his emotions appeared to have boiled over. At such a young age, this can occur, but it perhaps shows that mentally and in terms of maturity, Lacazette is not yet quite the full package. However, he has much time to ameliorate his temperament with the right sort of guidance.

Overall, Lacazette has been a shining light in a poor season thus far for Lyon. If he keeps performing in this manner in a team where the best players, in Gonalons, Grenier and Gomis do look set to leave soon, then his future could lie elsewhere. However, for the time being, Lacazette's ability to run at people, provide and score goals, as well as shoot from range is causing opponents difficulty and allowing him to thrive for Les Gones, earning him a place in this year's GFFN 100.

'In my head, I have not done enough time at this club yet.'

Alexandre Lacazette

25th December 2013

DID YOU KNOW? Alexandre Lacazette has represented France at all seven different levels, from U16's to the senior side.

67. Romain Alessandrini

Club: Stade Rennais

Date of Birth: 3rd April 1989

Position: Attacker

After a wonderful start to his career at Stade Rennais during his first seven months of the 2012/2013 season, a cruciate ligament injury to his knee in February put the winger out until August when he began to train again with his teammates. Nevertheless, the player's form before and after the incident in 2013 has been enough to enable him to seize a place in this year's GFFN 100. Whether or not you appreciate the Frenchman's rather abrasive character, the abilities Alessandrini possesses were simply too great to ignore, despite his being rather handicapped in terms of the 2013 judging because of the serious injury he suffered at the beginning of the year.

As 2013 commenced, Alessandrini was in blistering form. He scored goals against Toulouse, Bastia and Marseille in the opening weeks of the calendar year and his confidence was sky-high. At that point in time, Rennes were flirting with the idea of a finish among the European places. Alessandrini scored ten goals in just twenty two appearances for Rennes last season. His long shots are a major strength of his and he has scored many beltors for his previous club Clermont over the years but 2012, in the first six months of last season, marked a period where the Frenchman scored many of these. This year, however, in 2013, when he has been playing rather than sitting on the treatment table, Alessandrini failed to score any stunners, but he still provided vital goals for his team.

As well as having a fearful shot, the Frenchman has developed many other attributes which he has displayed throughout the year. The player is a bit of a set piece specialist, taking corners, as well as most indirect free kicks into the box. The winger's crossing is definitely one of his strong-suits, as is his adaptability: The player has played all over the park over the course of the 12 months. Alessandrini has played on the left wing, in a slightly deeper role on the same hand side and has also made an appearance as a central striker. The deeper role on the left hand side perhaps originates due to the 24 year old's defensive ability. The player has shown great ability to be able to track back and double up in defence with the relevant left back in order to give his side more protection down the flanks.



Alessandrini has had two fantastic games against Toulouse this year and really appears to thrive against that particular opposition, something to note for the future. He has scored two goals in these games in Ligue 1, the most recent one coming in a man of the match performance in October, when Toulouse were put to the sword and lost 5-0. Alessandrini's quick responses gifted him a goal as he met a ball rolling out to the edge of the box and passed it into a fairly open net. Despite an easy goal, Alessandrini's distribution was first class and his distribution radar is another of his fortes most certainly, with the 24 year old loving a long ball.

Alessandrini's fantastic form at the start of 2013 gained him an international call-up, but he did not play. Alessandrini was included in the squad, but was not actually picked to play by Didier Deschamps, although a first appearance did seem just around the corner until the Frenchman's horror injury. If the player can regain the form that he had at the beginning of the year he could soon make Deschamps' squad again, as despite the positives, it is clear that Alessandrini is not quite performing at the same level this campaign as last.

Alessandrini was heavily linked with the likes of Marseille this summer, but has stayed with Stade Rennais, despite publicly stating his interest in joining OM. Despite some strong performances, it does seem that the player has lost a bit of the confidence and motivation that he had last season and is now finding it hard to beat players as easily as before. This is possibly why Alessandrini appears to be being eased back into the Stade Rennais team in the first half of the 2013/2014 campaign and is not playing week in week out. Nevertheless, Alessandrini's performances so soon after coming back from a career threatening injury have been solid, and his performances at the beginning of 2013 made him one of the best performers in Ligue 1 at that point in time.

'Now I am at a real low point. I really don't want to fight for Rennes anymore. They are doing everything to make me unstable.'

Romain Alessandrini

On failed Marseille move- 8th August 2013

DID YOU KNOW? Romain Alessandrini launched an extraordinary attack on his club in August 2013, moaning about a contract extension offer he received when Rennes offered him a 70% wage rise!

66. Daniel Wass

Club: Evian TG FC

Date of Birth: 31st May 1989

Position: Midfielder



2013 has been some year for Daniel Wass. The 24 year Dane has established himself as a permanent fixture in the Evian side. At the end of 2013, it is clear that Evian will have to fight all the way in order to stave off the threat of relegation from Ligue 1. Wass is yet to receive any great recognition outside of the French footballing world. However, ask those who follow the domestic game across the channel about Wass's attributes and potential and a picture of an exciting versatile talent will emerge.

One of Wass' most enviable strengths is his versatility. Originally a right back, the Dane has crept up the pitch to right winger, but in truth is comfortable anywhere on the right hand side of the field. He has also played across the park at left back and, this season, has occasionally slotted into the centre of midfield. Wass is known for his pace and direct running, and can be frequently seen racing beyond his opposing full back, whether playing in defence or midfield. Quick footed and aware, Wass' runs between and beyond defenders are equally useful at creating space for those around him to drive into. Comfortable with either foot, the Evian number 18 is also impressive in the air, standing at just under six foot, but with an energetic leap.

In order to fully understand why Wass is emerging only now, one must assess his early years in the footballing obscurity of Denmark. Wass began his career excelling in the youth sides of first BK Aavarta before being spotted by a scout for Brøndby IF in 2006. After only a year in the youth sides of the Drengene Fra Vestegen, he was promoted to the first team. Between 2007 and 2011, Wass appeared for Brøndby 85 times, scoring 8 goals. The only blip during his time spent at Brøndby was a loan spell midway through his career designed to give the youngster more experience. Wass was loaned out to Norwegian side Fredrikstad, but a managerial change at the Norwegian club led to Wass becoming surplus to requirements and he played only 3 games. On his return to Brøndby, Wass established himself in the starting eleven and, in the following season, became the club's first choice right back.

After an unsuccessful spell with Benfica he headed for Evian. At Les Croix de Savoie, Wass linked up with fellow Danes Christian Poulsen, Stephan Andersen, and Thomas Kahlenberg and, despite initially struggling to impose himself on the Evian squad, became a firm fixture in the side. On June 20th last year, Wass signed a permanent deal at Parc des Sports for a fee of €2.5m.

2012-13, Wass' first season as a permanent Evian player, saw the Dane make his mark as one of Ligue 1's brightest youngsters. Evian narrowly avoided relegation, finishing just two points above the drop zone, but were also agonisingly close to winning the Coupe de France; a last minute strike by Cheick Diabaté handing Bordeaux the trophy. Wass had by this point secured his place on the right hand side of midfield, scoring on the opening day of the season, and then again in late January against Ajaccio, racing beyond the last defender to nod over the oncoming keeper.

This season, Wass has found the net three times, but also provided three telling assists, all coming in different games during the campaign. His three goals have all demonstrated the young man's variety and technical ability: his pace saw him burst beyond the Monaco backline to slot home Modou Sougou's flick on, he rose highest to nod home against Toulouse and, last but not least, he rifled home a bullet free-kick in Evian's 2-2 draw against Montpellier HSC. Wass scored a similar effort last season, crashing home from distance against Bordeaux. The Dane's right footed set pieces are becoming something of a trademark. With a short run up, Wass bends the ball with dip and pace, and will surely find the net with such efforts in future.

The future for Wass looks bright. He has now played approaching 20 matches for his country, and will surely be a part of Denmark's qualification attempt for Euro 2016. As for the rest of the season with Evian, it could still yet be a successful campaign. After week 18, the club languish in 16th place, but have a comfortable 9 point gap between themselves and Valenciennes FC in 18th. An incredible 2-0 win over PSG at the start of the month has instilled confidence in the side that they can climb the table, and with Wass beginning to realise his full potential as part of the Evian attack, 2014 could turn out to be a very good year indeed for the young Dane.

'I must admit I'm not at my level yet. Maybe because the summer break was so short...'

Daniel Wass

On the strain of Euro 2012- 30th January 2013

DID YOU KNOW? Daniel Wass is only 24 but is already the father of two children.

65. Marko Baša

Club: LOSC Lille

Date of Birth: 29th December 1982

Position: Defender

This commanding Montenegrin centre back is firmly part of new Lille boss René Girard's first team plans, having started 16 of 19 matches in Ligue 1 in the 2013/2014 campaign before the close of the year. Baša has been fully involved in the first team since his move from FC Lokomotiv Moscow in the summer of 2011, and although the club have been unable to capture a Ligue 1 title in his time at the club, there are signs that this season could be a profitable one providing they stay in touch with the recently established 'big two' in Le Championnat: the prolifically spending PSG and AS Monaco.

At the time of writing, LOSC Lille lie third in the Ligue 1 table, behind the aforementioned PSG and AS Monaco, but Les Dogues have crucially managed to keep in touch with the two big spenders. Lille are nine points clear of fourth placed Girondins de Bordeaux, two behind AS Monaco, and a further two behind title favourites PSG. Lille may not have scored as many as either of the sides ahead of them, but they have the meanest defence in the league, a statistic that Marko Baša has played a significant role in creating.

Lille have conceded just six times in Ligue 1 this season, and went on an incredible 11 match streak of clean sheets only ended by Bordeaux. Baša, the veteran of the Lille back four, has played his part in these miserly defensive performances. Traditionally a centre back, the 30 year old has displayed a mature versatility this campaign, operating at left back on occasion.

Baša is a commanding presence in defence. Standing at 6ft 3in, the Montenegrin international has a powerful aerial aura, and is particularly adept at defending set pieces; flinging himself at the ball with determination and desire. The same can be said for his presence in the opposing penalty area, as he is a potent attacking threat from corners.



Baša famously nodded a late, late equaliser against Bordeaux last season, with a bullet header into the net from a deep corner. This time around, the defender has found the net just once so far in Ligue 1, but it was a memorable goal indeed. Trailing Stade de Reims 2-0 with less than five minutes remaining, Baša picked up the ball on the left flank just inside his own half. He then drove purposefully at the heart of the Reims backline, exchanging two quick one-tos to set himself through on goal. Then, with all the elegance of an assured finisher, he dinked the ball cheekily beyond Reims' 'keeper Agassa into the far corner. The result stayed at 2-1, and Lille suffered defeat, but Baša's goal was a shining moment in what had been a far from convincing display by René Girard's men.

Baša has managed two assists this season at the end of the calendar year and has proven himself more than adept at performing out on the left flank, comfortable at getting forward as well as being reliant and committed at the back. Despite being naturally right footed, Baša can frequently be seen overlapping on the outside during matches (when deployed at left back) and is capable of providing telling crosses with either foot when in advanced positions. With Baša as part of Lille's back four, the club can afford to be confident heading into the new year. Given the exceptional depth and talent at PSG's disposal, a tilt at the title may just be beyond Baša and company this season, but with a big lead over their nearest challenger for third place established already, Baša may well be appearing in the Champions League with his side next season. Lille's number 25 has two years on his contract remaining and, providing he stays fit, looks to be a firm fixture in the side for the next few seasons.

After a troubled relationship with the Montenegrin national team dating back to 2007, Baša has established himself as a regular at the heart of Branko Brnović's defence. Baša has two international goals to his name, and will be bitterly disappointed to miss out on qualification for World Cup 2014, as Montenegro finished third in their group behind England and Ukraine. Montenegro will be hoping for a solid start to their Euro 2016 qualification, which for Baša could represent his last shot at a major international tournament.

'I prefer to let my performances do the talking...'

Marko Baša

13th March 2013

#GFFN recommends: @mohamedbouhafs: RMC's 'mercato' specialist and a close friend of Get French Football News does his best to tweet exclusive news in as many languages as possible.

64. David Ospina

Club: OGC Nice

Date of Birth: 31st August 1988

Position: Goalkeeper



For David Ospina, 2013 was a year to remember. On a domestic front, Ospina surpassed the 150 appearances mark for OGC Nice as the club finished 4th in Ligue 1; continuing an impressive improvement in league form. In 2010/11 they narrowly avoided relegation, in the 2011/12 season they finished in an unconvincing 13th position, and in 2012/13 they rose to an unprecedented 4th place ahead of established sides such as Lille and Bordeaux.

But, for Ospina, 2013 was a landmark year for his national side, as Colombia secured qualification for the most anticipated international tournament in recent times; the 2014 World Cup in nearby Brazil. Colombia were outstanding during qualification, spearheaded by the irrepressible Falcao, and rear-guarded by Ospina, who established himself as the national side's first choice stopper in place of the ageing Faryd Mondragón. Colombia are at the time of writing ranked 4th in the world, and rose to a highest ever placement of 3rd during the summer months of 2013.

Qualification for the 2014 World Cup translates into a return to the competition for Colombia after a 16 year absence, and David Ospina is in prime position to don the number one jersey for *Los Cafeteros* in June next year. During the qualification stage Ospina earned wide ranging praise for his athleticism and reactions, particularly after a superb performance against Argentina in Buenos Aires in June of this year. Against an attack comprising of Gonzalo Higuaín, Ángel Di María and Sergio Agüero, not to mention Lionel Messi, Ospina was in inspired form, earning great plaudits from both José Pékerman and Alejandro Sabella as Colombia held on for a 0-0 draw.

The Argentina game allowed Ospina's to showcase his finest qualities. The 25 year old stands at just over 6ft, yet is a brilliant shot stopper down low. His reflexes and reactions are consistently talked of in a positive manner, and his ability to get down to save, either at the feet of onrushing attackers, or low to either corner of his goal, mark him out as a goalkeeper at the very top of his game. Ospina also possesses a commanding sense of power in his own area. Just as he excels at getting down low to save, he is also has a springy leap, which means he frequently claims crosses and corners in his own penalty box.

There is no reason why Ospina cannot go on to become a top world 'keeper. He has all the attributes required to excel and, importantly, has a great deal of experience, having been a key figure for Nice since his time at the club began. Two factors may hinder his progress. Firstly, his discipline. The Colombian received three red cards last season in domestic football, and on occasion his temper, or merely frustrations, can get the better of him. Furthermore, although he is exceptionally adept at coming from his line to close down attackers or claim crosses, there is a danger in being too keen to stray from one's line, as it can lead to being overexposed, or to committing rash challenges which can also result in red cards.

Secondly, this season a slight doubt has emerged over his injury problems. Having been previously a constant presence in the Nice goal, Ospina has missed a month of this season's campaign already with knee problems. For both Nice's sake and the sake of the Colombian national team, Ospina must keep fit in the run up to the World Cup; a tournament which Colombia are tipped to do well in, and which could give Ospina greater exposure.

As for Nice's domestic performance this season, the club occupied an unglamorous 15th position at the close of 2013, a far cry from their previous campaign where they contested throughout the year for the European places. Ospina himself was absent from Nice's worst run, which saw them lose four times on the trot, conceding eight goals without reply.

Ospina returned to the Nice starting line up for the Week 18 clash at home to FC Sochaux-Montbéliard, and it was no surprise that Nice consequently kept a clean sheet, and recorded a valuable victory in the process. Ospina is proving more and more crucial to the success of the teams he plays in, as both OGC Nice and Colombia look distinctly more solid with him as the last line of defence. 2014 promises much for the man from Medellín.

'The coach places his confidence in me.'

David Ospina

On Claude Puel- 19th October 2013

DID YOU KNOW? In 2012, David Ospina was set for a move to Besiktas but OGC Nice pulled the plug when the Turkish side failed to provide 'bank guarantees'.

63. Jonathan Pitroipa

Club: Stade Rennais

Date of Birth: 12th April 1986

Position: Attacker



Despite impressing on a regular basis since moving to Rennes from Hamburg in the summer of 2011, 2013 has been something of a breakthrough year for Jonathan Pitroipa. While Rennes faded away after a promising start to their 2012/13 Ligue 1 campaign, Pitroipa's stock has continued to rise significantly over the last 12 months.

Deployed predominantly down the right wing, occasionally switching over to the left and even playing through the centre, Pitroipa has further honed the impressive pace and dribbling skills that initially drew Rennes to signing him. With these attributes 'Pit', as he is often known, provides a constant threat on the counter attack and draws fouls on a regular basis. Furthermore, when coupled with his keen eye for a pass and some deft finishing, the Burkina Faso international can take some stopping.

Meanwhile, less desirable attributes that continue to blight his otherwise impressive game include an unfortunate tendency to hold onto the ball for too long and his occasionally suspect crossing and shooting – demonstrated by the fact that he has managed just two shots on target from 16 attempts in the league so far this season.

However, it is on the international stage that Pitroipa really excelled this year, cementing his place as a footballing legend in his homeland in the process. With 44 caps and 9 goals for his country to date at the time of writing, his performances at the 2013 Africa Cup of Nations saw him emerge as not only a true star in his own country, but across the entire continent.

After creating Alain Traore's late goal to clinch a point against Nigeria in their opening Group C game on 21 January, Pitroipa scored a stoppage time goal to round off the 4-0 victory over Ethiopia in the second group game. On the back of these results his country secured top spot in the group ahead of eventual winners Nigeria.

The Cup of Nations got even better for Pitroipa in the knockout stages as he scored a 105th-minute winner against Togo in the 1-0 quarter-final victory before helping his side to a 1-1 draw with Ghana in the semi-finals.

Then disaster struck in extra time against Ghana as Pit was controversially shown a second yellow card for simulation after 117 minutes. He was forced to miss his side's crucial shootout – which they narrowly won 3-2 – and his entire Cup of Nations dream seemed over.

After the match, however, Tunisian official Slim Jdidi admitted to making a mistake and Pitroipa's ban was rescinded, allowing him to take part in the Stallions's first Cup of Nations final. And while his country went on to suffer a 1-0 defeat, this proud moment will undoubtedly be remembered as one of the fondest memories of his career, fittingly rounded off when Pitroipa was named as the tournament's best player.

Since then, Pitroipa came within a whisker of inspiring his country to a first ever World Cup place after starring throughout their qualifying campaign, scoring three times, and taking them all the way in their playoff defeat to Algeria on away goals.

This prominent role in inspiring his country's meteoric rise has seen Pitroipa lauded on a personal level as he was more recently shortlisted for the African player of the year award. Seen as many peoples' outside bet for the competition, the clear favourite for the prize is Manchester City's Yaya Toure but no-one would argue if Pit was crowned champion on 9 January after an impressive year on the global stage.

In Ligue 1, meanwhile, the 2012/13 season ended with Pitroipa amassing 7 goals and 6 assists despite missing two months of action due to his international commitments. A total return of 10 goals and 10 assists in all competitions throughout the season testifies to what has been an exciting 12 months for the Burkina Faso winger.

The current season has started in a more quiet fashion for Pitroipa, with just two assists and no goals in 17 appearances in the league so far, but there have been some outstanding performances already this term – notably in the 5-0 win over Toulouse in October when he was central to so much of his side's good attacking play, linking play and providing key passes to his team-mates in an excellent showing – and there is definitely more to come.

Ultimately, at 27 years old and with considerable experience under his belt, the player is approaching his peak. Having been relatively subdued of late at club level by his own high standards amidst his incredible international exploits, it will be worth keeping a close eye on Pitroipa in the coming months and years as the ambitious winger looks to revive *Les Rouges et Noirs*' fortunes in the league. Who knows where his talent will take him?

'For now, I'm focused on my club. I still have a contract at Rennes and all I can do is keep trying my best to go as far as possible.'

Jonathan Pitroipa

On his future

DID YOU KNOW? Jonathan Pitroipa has his own song dedicated to himself, which plays upon entering his website: www.jonathanpitroipa.com

62. Rio Mavuba

Club: LOSC Lille

Date of Birth: 8th March 1980

Position: Midfielder

At the heart of all good sides is a character who holds everything together, a positive influence whose presence alone can be enough to get the team to raise their game. In Rio Mavuba, Lille certainly have one such player.

An ever-present so far this season, playing in all 19 matches to date, the combative defensive midfielder is Lille's captain fantastic and has been a key part of their recent success. After finishing a disappointing sixth last season and missing out on European football all together, *Les Dogues* currently occupy third place half-way through the 2013/14 campaign, and are just four points behind leaders PSG.

Boasting excellent passing skills along with the ability to break down attacks with well-timed interceptions, Mavuba has put in consistently excellent performances this season whether his team have played well or not and leads by example. The France international can run for days and his statistics back up this centrality to the team: his pass success rate of 87% is only eclipsed by David Rozenhal and Marko Baša in the Lille squad, both being centre backs who favour more conservative passing options.

Arguably most effective when played in a midfield trio alongside Idrissa Gueye and Florent Balmont, Lille's midfield unit in a 4-3-3 is a match for any side. With all three players primarily central midfielders, shifts to other formations (Lille have used a 4-1-2-1-2 extensively and a 4-2-2-2 at times) see them sacrifice some of their players' effectiveness but Mavuba is always retained in the central role at the heart of his side.

Goal-scoring has never been a big part of his game, meanwhile, and his only goal in this calendar year came in the final game before the winter break as Lille drew 2-2 against PSG. Yet this deficiency should not detract from what has been an excellent year for the player, working hard in a position that can often see excellent performances go unnoticed as other players steal the limelight with goals and assists.

Even so, the start of the year was not overly noteworthy for Mavuba as he missed large chunks of his side's run-in and managed just seven matches in all competitions from January until the end of the 2012/13 season due to injury.



Indeed, more notable than his on-pitch contribution was perhaps his charity work off the pitch, where he continued to organise fund-raising events for his 'Orphans of Makala' charity group, set up in 2009, including a huge gala in Lille in April.

On the pitch more recently, however, Lille's – and indeed Mavuba's – form has been outstanding. In defence in particular they have been among the best in the league, conceding a league-best 8 goals in their opening 19 matches – an incredible figure that is undoubtedly linked with Mavuba's excellent performances in guarding the back-line.

Speaking to LOSC.fr recently about his side's season so far, Mavuba commented: "It's positive. At the start of the season nobody expected us to be among the top three after 18 matches. Nothing was written on the subject but we knew that PSG and Monaco had much bigger squads and budgets than ours. All in all though, everyone knows that logic isn't always respected in football. Our goal is still to finish among the top five and to do this we need to keep up this team spirit."

And this purple patch of form for his club certainly has not gone unnoticed by the national team bosses, with a figure as experienced and influential as Mavuba representing a real, potential asset for *Les Bleus*.

On the bench for the recent World Cup playoff matches against Ukraine and without a full cap since the end of 2012, Mavuba will see his excellent performances throughout this season as the perfect springboard towards a place in the starting XI this coming summer, despite stiff competition in the squad.

Ultimately, while he is perhaps something of an unsung hero in this Lille side, Mavuba is currently at his peak and is providing the kind of impact in games that any side would benefit from. If he maintains this current run of form and fitness, the player could well have a big part to play on the global stage next summer. With a big heart to accompany his big presence on the pitch, Mavuba should not be so easily overlooked.

'In France, there are not may better clubs than Lille.'

Rio Mavuba

29th June 2013

DID YOU KNOW? Rio Mavuba was actually born at sea! He was born inside a boat off the coast of Angola and therefore 'born at sea' is indicated on his French passport.

61. Kevin Berigaud

Club: Evian TG FC

Date of Birth: 9th May 1988

Position: Attacker



While many professionals have to make many club changes at both youth and senior levels to finally find somewhere where they feel truly accepted, Kevin Berigaud has never faced such complications. Evian's marquee attacker for the vast majority of 2013, Berigaud spent eight years perfecting his football from the ages of eight to sixteen with Swiss side Servette before making the short move to the Annecy-based Ligue 1 side, hopping just across the border in the process into France. There, Berigaud has remained ever since.

With 5 goals in his first 5 games at the beginning of this 2013/2014 campaign, one can be forgiven for acting a little surprised as Berigaud sprung, seemingly out of nowhere, onto the map of one of Ligue 1's most dangerous goal-scorers, sharing the limelight with the likes of Zlatan Ibrahimovic and Falcao in the early part of this season.

In the current Evian set up that Berigaud finds himself in, he is expected to perform as a very complete centre-forward. This admittedly is a role in which he often becomes isolated, as Les Roses are typically forced to tire throughout Ligue 1 matches without the ball, often operating offensively only really on the counter attack. At 1.78m, Berigaud is not remarkably tall for a lone striker, but his ferocious physical nature often compensates for this.

This paralleled with his genuine ability to strike the ball using a variety of different methods, be it driving or placing the ball past the keeper, has made Berigaud a serious threat for French defences. This was most poignantly evidenced in a Ligue 1 match in August 2013 against Rennes when the Brittany side's defence allowed Berigaud too much space on the edge of the area and he was able to hit a lovely, looping shot into the far corner.

Unfortunately for the Thonon-born forward, he suffered a thigh injury in the middle of October 2013 when he was going through a period of high confidence and consistent goal scoring and is yet to return as we reach the close of the calendar year.

At the age of 24, we most probably have yet to see the best of Kevin Berigaud, although there are some serious failings in his current style of play that perhaps explain why the Frenchman has never attracted serious interest from a club of a more elevated status than that of the often relegation-threatened Evian.

Although Berigaud's forward runs in behind defences are often intelligent and quirky, he does not make enough of them to provide a consistent threat for Evian to score the multitude of goals they need on a game-by-game basis to compensate for the shaky defensive midfield they currently host which is often at fault for the vast number the Ligue 1 side seems to concede. Indeed, 9 Ligue 1 goals in the calendar year of 2013 is simply not enough for Berigaud to make a case for a big career move. The rather typical excuses will be outlined by the player's loyal supporters that he has suffered injuries at crucial periods or that his teammates have not been providing him with the calibre of service he deserves, but the reality is that football is tough. In order to work his way to the top, Berigaud must stop relying on others and produce consistent moments of brilliance in 2014 to force the rest of France to pay him more attention.

Berigaud however merits the elevated position of #61 in this year's GFFN 100 because of his increased rate of tirelessness in attack and jaw-dropping goals specifically in 2013. He is a fighter and must learn to focus his energies into making intelligent runs for 90 minutes rather than berating teammates, the opposition or the officials.

The Frenchman has an extremely close bond with Evian manager Pascal Dupraz, who has known him since Berigaud's teenage years and the pair have grown through the ranks simultaneously, one on the managerial side and the other on the playing side. At the age of 24, Berigaud may well experience a year in which he finally steps out of the comfort zone that currently surrounds him at Evian and leave a proper mark on Ligue 1 in this 2013/2014 campaign, should he recover from that thigh injury.

'Kevin has the potential to become one of France's greatest attackers.'

Pascal Dupraz

On Kevin Berigaud- 17th April 2013

DID YOU KNOW? Kevin Berigaud played an integral part in Evian's promotion through three different divisions in four seasons, scoring 43 goals from 2008-2012.

GFFN 100: 80-61 RECAP:

| | | |
|-----|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| #80 | Mathieu Dossevi | (Valenciennes FC) |
| #79 | Lucas Ocampos | (AS Monaco) |
| #78 | Kossi Agassa | (Stade de Reims) |
| #77 | Florent Balmont | (LOSC Lille) |
| #76 | Cheick M'Bengue | (Stade Rennais) |
| #75 | Jordan Ayew | (Olympique de Marseille) |
| #74 | François Clerc | (AS Saint Étienne) |
| #73 | Yannick Ferreira Carrasco | (AS Monaco) |
| #72 | Eric Abidal | (AS Monaco) |
| #71 | Simon Kjaer | (LOSC Lille) |
| #70 | Issa Cissokho | (FC Nantes) |
| #69 | Jérémy Ménez | (Paris Saint Germain) |
| #68 | Alexandre Lacazette | (Olympique Lyonnais) |
| #67 | Romain Alessandrini | (Stade Rennais) |
| #66 | Daniel Wass | (Evian TG FC) |
| #65 | Marko Baša | (LOSC Lille) |
| #64 | David Ospina | (OGC Nice) |
| #63 | Jonathan Pitroipa | (Stade Rennais) |
| #62 | Rio Mavuba | (LOSC Lille) |
| #61 | Kevin Berigaud | (Evian TG FC) |

60. Nicolas N’Koulou

Club: Olympique de Marseille

Date of Birth: 27th March 1990

Position: Defender



It’s safe to say that Nicolas N’Koulou has endured a rather tumultuous 2013 at Olympique de Marseille. Though, that is not to say that every year on the Canebiere isn’t tumultuous. It has been a year of many highs and also lows for the Cameroonian international, who – at 23 – is now beginning to court several of Europe’s top clubs.

The commencement of the Ligue 1 season after the 2012 winter break underlined that very fact. Marseille, who then were (and perhaps still are) a side devoid of determination, grit and attacking abundance were rejuvenated under former boss Elie Baup, and entered 2013 level on points at the top with PSG and Lyon and heading towards an unlikely title challenge.

N’Koulou would be central to any hopes Marseille had. Up to this point, he had featured in every league game, and would do so right up until December 2013. The combative defender, with his neat interceptions and strong defensive ability would bring an added layer of protection to an increasingly solid Marseillais defence.

N’Koulou and co. struggled in the opening stages of the year. The defender was directly responsible for seven goals conceded in three games – a 3-1 defeat to Sochaux, a superb 3-2 turnaround against Montpellier and then a 2-2 draw away to Rennes, before Marseille’s jittery form, and the beginning of the end for OM’s title hopes.

Frequently partnered with Brazilian recruit Lucas Mendes – a defender in the same build as N’Koulou, though not as technical – the Cameroonian took a while to blossom in January and February, as OM struggled upon the return of the winter break.

After the culmination of a 2-0 defeat to soon-to-become champions Paris Saint-Germain, at a time when the Cameroonian defender’s performances were starting to pick up – the 23-year-old’s season would really take off, if that of Marseille’s remained rather stagnant.

After a narrow 2-1 win over ESTAC Troyes at home, Marseille – with a defence harboured by the likes of Steve Mandanda, Lucas Mendes, Souleymane Diawara, Rod Fanni and Jeremy Morel, along with the burgeoning N’Koulou would go on a stunning run of seven games without conceding. A run that included draw away to Lille and Lyon, and a home win over Bordeaux amongst others.

N’Koulou’s star had really taken off. Those seven games – in which the former Monaco man played all but 14 minutes in that run had shaped N’Koulou’s reputation as one of the best up and coming defensive talents in European football.

More technical than the rest of the defence, N’Koulou’s preference to play the ball short, instead of hoofing it away had garnered plaudits and criticism. However, it was a skill that he perfected as OM rallied to a solid second place. Dribbling his way out of trouble had become his trademark, and it was no surprise that several clubs were beginning to take note.

The summer of 2013 saw N’Koulou linked with former club Monaco, who now having found riches wanted to bring their young starlet back, having been forced to sell him upon relegation in 2011. European champions Bayern were credited with an interest, and so too were several Premier League clubs. N’Koulou was persuaded to stay by Marseille – with the bonus of playing in the Champions League in which the team had worked so hard to qualify for, being the main factor.

But should he have gone? A €20m value was touted, and perhaps Marseille & the player should have taken it, for the latter half of 2013 had started to take its toll on N’Koulou.

Marseille had once again started the season strongly, though the defender was criticised for a lax display against EA Guingamp, and then Evian where he would routinely lapse in concentration, allowing quick players to get in behind.

Perhaps it was the dangerously high line Elie Baup had forced Marseille to play in, or perhaps N’Koulou’s form began to wane – but this time it was at an alarming rate.

The group of death that OM had found themselves in the Champions League could have – and perhaps should have – been the stage where N’Koulou could’ve announced himself. But a host of comical errors and shoddy performances saw OM finish bottom with 0 points, and with it, a new level of criticism. N’Koulou and Marseille had lost their defensive sparkle, having only managed three clean sheets since September.

For N’Koulou – it was a year where he grew as a player, but also experienced complete loss of form and helplessness. However, he deserves the plaudits, and is rightly recognised as a key talent in Ligue 1. With the World Cup to look forward to as the ultimate opportunity for a future move, the young defender must first seek to bolster a meagre end to 2013, and start the New Year with aplomb.

‘I owe a lot to Marseille. They are the team that sort of released me onto the forefront.’

Nicolas N’Koulou

17th December 2013

STATS CENTRAL: Nicolas N’Koulou played every minute of all 38 Ligue 1 matches that Marseille had in 2013.

59. Éric Bauthéac

Club: OGC Nice

Date of Birth: 24th August 1987

Position: Attacker



In an age where player power often dictates the outcome of transfer wrangles and club loyalty takes a back seat to the search for a more lucrative pay packet, it is refreshing to come across instances where this loyalty still counts. One such example is Nice's French winger Eric Bauthéac - a breath of fresh air both on and off the pitch.

In flying form on the left wing for much of the year, Bauthéac has proven to be an excellent set piece taker as well as always offering a threat with his devilish crossing. Meanwhile, while he draws plenty of fouls with his excellent dribbling skills, a tendency to commit just as many with his poor tackling makes him something of a liability when going in for a challenge – committing 59 fouls and earning 6 bookings in 35 games last season.

Aside from the minor disciplinary problems however, left-footed Bauthéac enjoyed an excellent 2012/13 campaign. Over the course of the season he grabbed 9 goals and 7 assists and his value soared. After helping his side to finish in fourth place and having enjoyed a great season on a personal level, it was obvious that there would be suitors looking at Bauthéac when the 2013 summer transfer window opened.

According to reports, interest was shown by some of Europe's big names but Bauthéac was determined to remain loyal to his current employers and repay the faith shown in him. In stark contrast to several of the other Ligue 1 transfer sagas that dominated the summer - with Florian Thauvin missing training to force through a move to Marseille and Romain Alessandrini of Rennes publicly criticising his club for blocking his departure - Bauthéac was not swayed.

Speaking to L'Equipe in April, he said: "Of course it's flattering when a club like Newcastle, OM or Lazio are following me, but I signed a three-year contract with Nice. I really want to experience the new stadium so I will do all I can to still be here next season. But we will have to see what the directors want." And this sense of pride in representing his side demonstrates a precocious maturity in a 26 year old who still has his best years ahead of him.

The current campaign has been a different story for both Bauthéac and his club, however. After a promising opening month or two, a series of knee injuries have limited him to just 11 Ligue 1 appearances so far and his club's form has suffered as a result. With the former Saint Etienne youth player's fitness representing such a crucial part of their hopes, the lack of an adequate replacement was painfully exposed during his absence.

His knee problems effectively meant a two-month absence from the end of September to the start of December. The player did play in the loss to Bordeaux in early November but felt a twinge in his knee the following week in training and subsequently missed the next month and a half. Evidently brought back into action too soon, this unfortunate incident only serves to further highlight his importance.

In the few appearances he has made, however, he still managed to notch 4 goals, making him Nice's second highest scorer this season after Dario Cvitanich – the only man to outscore Bauthéac last season for L'OGCN, with 19 strikes.

Indeed, Bauthéac has demonstrated that he can be the man to turn games around almost single-handedly on occasion. After losing seven consecutive games for the first time since 1965, it took the winger's return to help Nice recapture their winning ways.

On 14 December he inspired his side to victory over Sochaux, scoring the only goal of the game with a close range finish after an exquisite piece of chest control freed him from his marker. Then, on 21 December, Bauthéac was unstoppable in Nice's 3-1 victory over Evian, finishing the match with two goals and a booking: a neat representation of the player's all-round game and a performance that capped off what has been an excellent year.

Now Les Aiglons will be hoping that he can maintain this level of form and fitness as they look to climb up the league and replicate their excellent results of last season. A huge second half from Bauthéac will be pivotal to his side's chances of European football next season and, after proving to be the match-winner in the final two games of 2013, Bauthéac himself will certainly be hoping to take this form into the New Year.

After leaving relegated Dijon when his contract expired and moving to Nice on a free transfer, Bauthéac has certainly warranted the faith shown in him with the influential year that he had in 2013. It seems that more is on the way, however, as his sense of loyalty and determination will see him keep pushing for the best results possible. If he maintains top form and stays injury-free over the coming months, perhaps he will even be able to catch the eye of Didier Deschamps in time for a summer trip to Brazil.

'When we speak about the manager we have to make sure he's not next to us!'

Éric Bauthéac

On the fact that Nice right back Gregoire Puel is manager Claude Puel's son- 18th February 2013

DID YOU KNOW? On the 22nd September 2013, Éric Bauthéac became the first Frenchman to score a goal in OGC Nice's new Allianz Riviera stadium.

58. Julien Féret

Club: Stade Rennais

Date of Birth: 5th July 1982

Position: Midfielder

The Ligue 1 veteran finally received the plaudits he has strived for throughout his career and fully deserves them after an impressive 2013.

On the face of it, a player with only 3 goals and 4 assists over the course of the calendar year in Ligue 1 does not merit such a high ranking in this year's GFFN 100, but Féret brings much more to the Rennes setup than the final products. One simply cannot help but marvel at the respect he receives from his teammates as well as the wonderfully quick feet he has which enables him to move the ball on quicker and sharper than most players belonging to some of Ligue 1's mid-table sides.

Standing at 6 ft 2 tall, Féret is not your typical attacking midfielder. He possesses great advantages over other, smaller players occupying the same position in Ligue 1 because it is dreadfully difficult to muscle the 31-year-old Frenchman off the ball. Féret is very much aware of this and it gives him the necessary confidence to attempt to surge past defenders and into goal-scoring positions rather than simply passing the ball on.

Yet perhaps Féret's greatest quality is one that seems to very much be dying out in world football, as an ever-increasing number of sides prefer to 'walk the ball into the net'. I am of course talking about the art of shooting: not just getting a clean strike on the ball, but manipulating the trajectory of it as it races towards the goal. Whether you choose to assess his exquisite chip against St Étienne on the 8th of March where he embarrassed Stéphane Ruffier after making a zig-zag run which completely bamboozled Les Verts' back four before poking it over the flailing keeper, or his smart finish against Evian on the 13th of April after a one-two with a Rennes teammate that begun on the halfway line culminating in a quick jink of the feet before firing across goal and slotting home; you will arrive at the same conclusion: Féret's technical ability is most superior.

The future is however uncertain for the man whom many are giving an outside chance of making the French squad for the 2014 World Cup to. Since the arrival of new manager Philippe Montanier, Féret's influence has notably diminished. In 16 performances in all competitions, Féret has failed to find the net and has been unable to muster up a single assist either.



This downturn in form is possibly due to the alterations the new manager has made to Rennes' formation, which forces Féret to play deeper than his preferred position on the shoulder of the main striker. This coupled with the departure of Frédéric Antonetti, who had built a really special relationship with the player has undoubtedly affected Féret. Like most professionals, Féret has had numerous trying periods during his career but has sufficient proficiency to force his way out of the mini-rout he currently finds himself in.

At the time of writing, Julian Féret has yet to extend his contract, which expires in June of next year. Expect the French rumour mill to run riot with stories about the player's possible departure, but Féret might as well pause for thought and assess all the options available to him. After all, he deserves to be playing regularly for a side of a similar standing to that of Rennes. At the age of 31, he most probably has one, big move left in him and it really depends on how much he believes in the project that Philippe Montanier is currently constructing. Will Féret be assured game time? When will Montanier put youth ahead of experience, as Vincent Pajot, Tiemoué Bagayoko, Adrien Hunou and Saido Diallo are all showing signs of rapid progression?

There will always be this tinge of anxiety playing foul in the back of Féret's mind as he remembers his rejection by Rennes as a youngster. Being a late bloomer, having notched his first Ligue 1 appearance as late as at the age of 26, the Frenchman has every right to believe that he can push on and fight for the French international call-up he has so craved. After a rather indistinguishable first half of the 2013-2014 season however, he has most likely left himself with too much to do to earn a seat on that plane to Brazil.

'Féret is now at an international level.'

Frédéric Antonetti

Féret's former manager at Rennes allows his feelings to be clearly known on the subject of the player- 19th April 2013

DID YOU KNOW? Julien Féret spent three seasons at Stade Rennais' youth setup before they chose not to offer him a professional contract, only for the club to sign him seven years later!

57. Yohan Mollo

Club: AS Saint Étienne (loan)

Date of Birth: 18th July 1989

Position: Attacker

Still officially a Nancy player, 2013 has been all about Saint Étienne for Yohan Mollo. Having arrived at the start of the January transfer window, Mollo impressed during his first loan spell with *Les Verts*: as a result he was brought back to the club in September in an attempt to replicate this earlier impact in the current 2013/2014 season.

Capable of playing on both wings, the tricky youngster is lethal when cutting inside onto his favoured right foot, but also boasts crossing abilities strong enough to justify putting him out on the right. The speedy winger cuts an unerringly positive figure, always looking to cross, shoot from range and seek out that killer pass when appropriate. Furthermore, his increasing maturity and unselfish nature have seen him entrusted with set pieces at Saint Étienne, with 5 of his 11 assists during the 2012/13 season coming from corners or free kicks.

Yet this solidity to his game starkly contrasts his ever-present penchant for showmanship and a notable flair for the flamboyant. Regularly adorning his on-pitch performance with tricks and flicks, Mollo has lived up to his billing as the “Cristiano of France”, a nickname given to him at Monaco following his performances in the 2006/07 season that demonstrated a playing style similar to that of Madrid maestro Cristiano Ronaldo.

On a more sobering note, a tendency to commit silly fouls is something that Mollo will need to work on. In this season alone, despite only starting 6 times for Saint Étienne, he has already picked up two bookings and committed 12 fouls on the back of committing 45 last season.

Given his undoubtable talents, Nancy’s decision to allow one of the club’s most prominent attacking assets to leave for Saint Étienne was rightly questioned, especially given that the club were battling against relegation at the time. It is believed that Mollo’s prohibitively high wages were a key factor in his departure at that time.

Arriving with a burgeoning reputation to accompany his sizeable pay packet, the young player revealed no signs of nerves as he marked his Ligue 1 debut for *Les Verts* with a goal and an assist, instantly winning over the Stade Geoffroy-Guichard faithful and providing an indicator of what was to come. Over the course of his first few months at the club Mollo scored 4 goals and racked up 7 assists as he helped Saint Etienne seal an impressive fifth-place finish to accompany their Coupe de la Ligue triumph, which saw them end a three-decade long wait for a domestic trophy.



In a rare low for the youngster, however, Mollo suffered the heartbreak of a penalty miss in the semi-final shootout against Lille as he blazed his spot kick over. Fortunately the miss did not prove too costly to this victorious cup run as *Les Verts* went on to win the shootout 7-6 and the Cristiano of France bounced back to play the majority of the final and help his side to seal the historic win.

While his current campaign has yet to really ignite (being limited to hour-long cameos and substitute appearances at times) his form in the 2012/13 campaign ranked alongside the best in the league as the speedy winger led the Ligue 1 assist charts until late April.

While he ended up finishing in joint third place, behind Payet and Mathieu Valbuena and level on 11 with Gaël Danic, in an interview Mollo rightly pointed to the fact that Payet and Valbuena played significantly more than he did throughout the season (3,211 and 3,131 minutes respectively, compared to Mollo’s 2,229) which highlights his excellent set of statistics.

Although the gulf in class between the real Cristiano and the French Cristiano has widened considerably since 2007 – by no means a slight on Mollo, purely a nod of recognition to one of the greatest players in the game – if the young winger can close the gap even slightly in the coming years then we are in for a treat.

With the player due to return to Nancy when his loan expires at the end of June, his future path is yet to be decided. Crystal Palace were rumoured to be favourites to land his signature in the summer before he opted to re-join Saint Etienne and Mollo has often spoken of his interest in joining “the club of his dreams” Marseille. Interest in the winger is likely to soar in the coming months if he hits top form and, still to earn a full cap after previously representing France’s U-21s, a call-up for *Les Bleus* will undoubtedly be among his targets for the future.

A green flash of pace and trickery, there is plenty more to come from Mollo this season and, with time on his side at just 24, the gifted youngster has the potential to light up French football for years to come.

‘What I want is to feel fulfilled and for everyone around me to feel the same.’

Yohan Mollo

26th November 2013

DID YOU KNOW? Yohan Mollo is Marseille striker Andre Pierre Gignac’s cousin.

56. Jean-Armel Kana-Biyik

Club: Stade Rennais

Date of Birth: 3rd July 1989

Position: Defender

Cameroonian international centre back Jean-Armel Kana-Biyik has been a consistent member of both Frédéric Antonetti's and Philippe Montanier's sides at Stade Rennais over the course of 2013 and a good performer within them, particularly in the last year.

One major highlight for Kana-Biyik in 2013 will have been his contribution to Cameroon's successful attempts to qualify for the World Cup finals in Brazil. The defender played in some of Cameroon's group games and was generally unshaken throughout by the international stage, but sat on the bench as Cameroon won 4-1 away at Tunisia in the decider. Nevertheless, Kana-Biyik admitted to being delighted of his country's achievement and although nothing is ever certain in terms of selection, the player should make Volker Finke's World Cup squad for this summer, barring an injury issue. Kana-Biyik has now made three appearances for the national team of Cameroon, despite representing France at youth level.

One factor, which separates the defender from the rest, is his strength. The 24 year old is apt at holding off imposing forwards by using his often superior upper body strength to win aerial duels, ensuring that the long ball tactic is rarely an effective one for the opposition he faces. Incidentally, this strength, combined with a 'never say die' attitude was what allowed Kana-Biyik to make his only notable attacking contribution of the calendar year, his only goal. The player was on the scoresheet against Bordeaux in a 1-1 draw in November, where, after falling to the ground after his initial attempt was unsuccessful, he got up and outmuscled a defender to head the ball again, but this time with greater power and most importantly into the net.

Stade Rennais' relatively stable league position at the time of writing is in no small part down to their defensive record. Not only is the Franco-Cameroonian centre-back a dominant force when it comes to the matter of the physical battle, but he has the footballing intelligence required to play successfully in any league in Europe, being able to track strikers' runs and cut the ball out before it becomes a danger. Arguably, Kana-Biyik's form has dipped post-summer 2013. The central defender became very close to French full-back Kevin Theophile-Catherine last season on a personal level and his departure to Cardiff meant that Kana-Biyik has lost a friend in the dressing room and with that some of the presence and confidence that he displayed over the course of the 2012/2013 season.



On a footballing level, the departure of Theophile-Catherine has had little effect on Kana-Biyik, more the fact that since the summer arrival of Sylvain Armand, Rennes' new boss Philippe Montanier has switched Kana-Biyik to play the role of the right-sided centre back rather than the left-sided position that he has spent most of his career to date competing at. Subtle changes like these can often cause changes in form and, without a doubt, Kana-Biyik spent the majority of the second half of 2013 adjusting to the changes of a new manager, position, teammates and style of play.

One of the more obvious weaknesses that the player harbours is his inability to sometimes distribute the ball effectively. When in danger, the player often likes to boot the ball up the field rather than look for a simple pass. This is an area of his game which he has considerably improved on over the year, with the player starting to play his way out of trouble, but it could be developed even further, and at the age of 24, it is something that he has plenty of time to work on. For someone this age, the Cameroonian does indeed generally have very good composure and often looks more comfortable off and on the ball than some of the players that play around him in an often chaotic Rennes defensive unit.

Every player has an off day, and in 2013 Kana-Biyik was not an exception. The defender had a nightmare against Sochaux in December of 2013 during a 2-1 defeat, where he first conceded a penalty for a clumsy challenge on Roy Coucout and was then beaten all ends up Cedric Bakambu who slotted home the winner. It was a game to forget for Kana-Biyik just before the winter break. Hopefully, the Cameroonian will be able to eradicate this performance from his memory bank and begin 2014 with aplomb.

'At times we are too cocky. But we cannot afford to be. We do not have the necessary quality.'

Jean-Armel Kana-Biyik

16th March 2013

#GFFN recommends: @Sandal4Goalpost: This band of African football experts are a go to source for analysis of Africans playing in Ligue 1.

55. Mickaël Landreau

Club: SC Bastia

Date of Birth: 14th May 1979

Position: Goalkeeper



Mickaël Landreau has been around for what seems like an eternity, since 1996 to be precise, and it is a testament to his longevity that he is still, at 34 years of age, one of the top Ligue 1 goalkeepers. It is not, however, on his past form that Landreau has made the GFFN 100. We have based the decision on his form since he joined his current team, SC Bastia, at the very end of 2012.

Landreau left his old club, Lille, where he previously had won the league and cup double, under controversial circumstances. He was reported to have fallen out with general manager Frédéric Paquet, and was quoted as saying: 'the most important thing is to blossom on the pitch. I could not anymore.' Well, he would certainly blossom at SC Bastia...

Since his debut for Bastia, a 2-1 away win against Reims, he has not missed a single Ligue 1 game – playing the full 90 minutes in each fixture, as one would naturally expect a goalkeeper to do so. Just before Landreau arrived, Bastia were in 17th place, teetering on the brink of relegation. The arrival of the veteran 'keeper soon solidified their defence, and propelled them to a 12th place finish – comfortably avoiding the drop by 9 points.

The statistics support the suggestion that Landreau played an integral part in the amelioration of Bastia's defence. In the first 19 games of the 2012/2013 season, which did not involve Landreau, Bastia conceded 41 goals. In the next 19 games, during all of which Landreau was ever-present, Bastia only conceded 25 goals. That figure is almost a goal less for every game played.

Landreau was rewarded for his good work by Bastia with a one-year extension to his contract. He had initially been brought in on a one year deal, as Bastia were not sure if the 34-year-old's powers were quite what they used to be, but after his impressive first season at the club the manager, Frédéric Hantz, had seen enough to warrant an extension. This season, however, is set to be much more than any ordinary one for Mickaël Landreau...

After signing his contract extension, Landreau announced that, after 18 years as a Ligue 1 goalkeeper, he would finally retire at the end of the season. As is fitting for such an illustrious career, it looks like fate has played its part to set up the perfect final match. The last game of the season for Bastia is a match against Nantes, Landreau's first ever club, at the Stade Furiani. It is, in Landreau's own words, 'just as it was for my very first match for Les Canaris back on 2 October 1996.' It is widely expected that both sets of fans, Nantes and Bastia, will pay a joint tribute to the veteran French goalkeeper, and it is hard to think of a man who deserves such an honour more.

In another strange coincidence, Landreau is broke Jean-Luc Ettori's all time record appearances for a 'keeper in Ligue 1, 602, in one of Bastia's most valued fixtures of the season. According to Landreau, 'if everything goes according to plan, I will break the record during another fairly special match: the Corsican derby against Ajaccio in Week 16 in December.' While the sides battled out a close encounter which ended in a one-all draw, Landreau's name was etched in the history books.

So, just how has Landreau been able to maintain such a high and consistent level of performance over 18 years of Ligue 1 football? At just above 6 foot tall, he is surprisingly small for a goalkeeper, and he has never been the quickest or had the best dive, so what is his goalkeeping style? Landreau, now at 34 more so than ever, relies on his wonderful sense of positioning to come up with key saves. Of course, this is a skill that develops with experience, and Landreau has progressed over the years a brilliant sense of positioning. He may not be particularly tall, and may not have the strongest leap, but he often does not need it – he is already in the correct place to save the ball. This sense of positioning, a skill that develops with age rather than worsens, is one of the main reasons why Landreau has been a top quality 'keeper for so long.

It is also important to note Landreau's contribution to the French national side throughout his career. Although his last competitive appearance came in 2008, he has been a consistent fixture as 3rd choice goalkeeper for France in recent years. Although he is realistically very unlikely to play, Landreau still brings important qualities to the squad. He is picked to help out the younger players in the squad and teach them, for example, how to deal with the pressure of playing for their country. It is for this reason why Landreau is preferred over other goalkeepers such as Stéphane Ruffier and Cédric Carrasso.

Throughout the years, Mickaël Landreau has given his heart and soul to French football. If this list were based on players' whole careers, Landreau would surely be much higher up the order. However, the fact that he has found himself a place the GFFN 100, based purely on his 2013 form at the age of 34, is a huge tribute to the quality and endurance of the veteran French goalkeeper.

'There is a sense of pride yes. To complete that amount of matches, it is something.'

Mickaël Landreau

On breaking Ettori's appearance record- 3rd December 2013

STATS CENTRAL: Mickaël Landreau has won 6 club trophies to date with three different clubs: Nantes, PSG and Lille.

54. Guillermo Ochoa

Club: AC Ajaccio

Date of Birth: 13th July 1985

Position: Goalkeeper



Ligue 1 is becoming noted for the array of world class attacking talent that it contains. With the addition of Edinson Cavani and Radamel Falcao, paralleled with the exquisite talent of Zlatan Ibrahimovic, Le Championnat now boasts some of the most fearsome strikers in world football. However, away from the internationally renowned goal-scorers, France's top football division also boasts an impressive array of exceptional goalkeepers. One such keeper is AC Ajaccio's Guillermo Ochoa, the big-haired Mexican.

Ochoa is, above all, a superb shot stopper. His reactions are nippy; frequently he makes double, and sometimes even triple, saves, frantically flinging himself across his goal to keep the ball out. It will be a surprise to many people that Ochoa is still an AC Ajaccio player. The 28 year old has long been linked with a move away from Stade Francois Coty, with increasingly influential admirers expressing an interest in the Mexican. Before moving to Ajaccio, Ochoa was linked to Fulham, and more interestingly Manchester United, and since his time with ACA he has been reportedly a target for Villarreal and, most recently, Liverpool, as the Merseyside club looked recently for a replacement for Pepe Reina.

Despite this interest, Ochoa stayed with AC Ajaccio, a decision that chairman Alain Orsoni would have played an undoubtedly key role in. Ochoa's commitment to the Corsican club showcases the sort of professionalism that we seem to often lack in the modern game from its players. After Week 18 of this Ligue 1 campaign, Ajaccio are slumped in 19th place, seven points from safety, with only a single point in their last five games. The club have not kept a clean sheet in Ligue 1 since August, and it is likely that, if performances and results do not pick up, then Ochoa could begin the next season at another club. The stopper is too good to be playing second division football, especially as he has established himself as Mexico's number one goalkeeper as the World Cup approaches.

Ochoa, who has won AC Ajaccio's Player of the Year award for the last two years in a row, is set to start in goal for Mexico when they compete in Brazil in 2014. The Mexican side needed a play-off victory over New Zealand to seal their place in the final tournament, after a generally uninspiring campaign. Ochoa, who's appearance against Costa Rica in October took him to 55 international appearances, will be a key part of Miguel Herrera's plans, despite his rocky relationship with the national side, as *El Tricolor* look to negotiate a tricky Group A which includes hosts Brazil.

Ochoa's performances in the second half of the calendar year have largely been mixed for Ajaccio. Blame for the team's lowly form cannot be laid at his door alone, indeed the Mexican has put in a few sensational performances. The highlight of these, quite possibly the highlight of Ochoa's 2013, was a heroic performance against the mighty PSG near the start of the season. Ajaccio miraculously held the current league leaders 1-1 away in the cauldron of noise that is the Parc des Princes.

PSG had a total of 39 shots on goal, and Ochoa pulled off 12 saves, some of them truly incredible. A smart double save from an initial Ibrahimovic free kick, and then the rebound stop from Javier Pastore was the first of many fine pieces of goalkeeping that Ochoa produced over the course of 90 minutes. Cavani, Ibrahimovic, and numerous other PSG players were denied, as Ajaccio looked set to hang on for an improbable, memorable victory. With time ticking away, Edinson Cavani struck to cost the Corsican side a famous three points. Ochoa earned great praise for his heroics in the game, and the performance has seen his stock rise despite Ajaccio's lowly position.

What the future holds for Ochoa is uncertain. Ajaccio are in a lot of trouble at the foot of Ligue 1, and are among the favourites to be relegated when the season culminates in May of next year. For Ochoa, who's deal with Ajaccio last until June of 2014, relegation will surely see him move. Performances such as the superb display against PSG have raised the keeper's European and indeed global profile, but if he, although this is unlikely, stays with Ajaccio then he is in danger of dropping off the radar. As previously mentioned, Ochoa has come close to moving to a bigger side in recent years, and for him to build on a good 2013, 2014 should see the 'keeper move on.

'The level of football in France is ever-increasing.'

Guillermo Ochoa

22nd February 2013

DID YOU KNOW? Guillermo Ochoa's football inspirations are Peter Schmeichel and Oscar Cordoba.

53. Filip Djordjevic

Club: FC Nantes

Date of Birth: 28th September 1987

Position: Attacker

Next to make the GFFN 100 this time around is Nantes' frontman Filip Djordjevic. The 26-year-old Serbian international has had a prolific 2013, playing a crucial part in the Nantes team that went from Ligue 2 last season to being high-flying Ligue 1 outfit as we reach the midpoint of the 2013/2014 campaign.

Although the Serbian is a gifted footballer in many areas of the game, arguably Djordjevic's main weapon is his quality in the air. The majority of his goals and shots result in part due to some sort of aerial build up or finish, and this is perhaps because he possesses a brilliant leap, which allows him to get above most opposition defenders. His height, 6ft 1, also aids him in this respect it allows him to reach crosses other striker would not. However, for a striker to become as accomplished as Djordjevic in the space of one year, aerial prowess cannot be and indeed is not his only quality. Another of his great strengths is his sense of positioning. When watching Djordjevic, you can see that he scores a lot of goals into empty nets, and this is because whenever his teammates are through on goal he has the omnipresent nature about him, always providing an option. In the process, the goalkeeper is often taken out of play, allowing Djordjevic to score a seemingly 'easy' goal.

It is easy to argue that, without Djordjevic, Nantes would be nowhere near where they are at present. In the years previous to 2013, Nantes were predominantly a Ligue 2 side and, although they got promoted to Ligue 1 in 2008, they were relegated the season afterwards. However, that was all to change from 2012/13. Suddenly, Djordjevic burst onto the scene. During the 2012/2013 Ligue 2 campaign, he scored 20 league goals, making him the top scorer in the process but more importantly helping Nantes to promotion to Ligue 1 for the season we now find ourselves embroiled in. Although it was an extremely impressive record, many still doubted Djordjevic and Nantes, believing that Ligue 1 would prove to be to great a step up from the second tier of French football, and that Nantes would go straight back down from where they came.

Judging by the start they have made to this campaign, one could not have been more wrong about either Djordjevic or Nantes. By mid-November, the Serbian striker had already netted an impressive 7 goals from open play, which at the time was more than any other player in the league, including multi-million euro signings Falcao, Cavani and Ibrahimovic.



Nantes were equally impressive. Many had tipped them for relegation back to Ligue 2, but they started the season on fire. By mid-December, Nantes had reached an astounding 4th place in Ligue 1, behind only Lille, PSG and Monaco, and ahead of teams such as Marseille and Lyon. They have without a doubt been the surprise package of the season and one hopes that they do not drop off as we enter 2014.

Djordjevic's consistent goal scoring record over the last year has led to him being called up for the Serbian international team, for which he has made 8 appearances and scored 3 goals, the most recent of which was in a 1-1 draw with Russia in mid-November. If his prolific scoring continues into the New Year, he is bound to feature more prominently in the national line-up.

There are a couple of factors contributing to the success of Djordjevic has enjoyed at both Ligue 2 and Ligue 1 level. Firstly, Djordjevic is a player who thrives on playing week-in, week-out. In his early years at Nantes, during which he would only appear once every few games, he scored much less regularly. However, once he got his first real run in the team last season, he has never looked back. In addition, his playing style is such that he made the adaptation to Ligue 1 without a problem. The art of heading is still very effective whether it be against a Ligue 1 defence or a Ligue 2 defence, while even the best Ligue 1 teams struggle to deal with his great sense of positioning, which always allows him to be in the right place at the right time. Because of this adaptability, I think Djordjevic will be a success not only for the remainder of this Ligue 1 season, but also wherever he decides to move to take the next step in his footballing career.

Over the course of 2013, Filip Djordjevic, alongside his team Nantes, has proved countless critics wrong. If his form last year is anything to go by, he is set to accomplish even more in 2014. If his prolific form does continue, Nantes may find it difficult to hold off the advances of richer teams with money to entice the Serb away, but for the sake of football let's hope that Djordjevic and Nantes can both continue their unexpected rise in the leagues of French football.

'In Serbia we don't speak about Cristiano Ronaldo, but we speak of Djordjevic.'

Nemanja Pejčinović

Filip Djordjevic's compatriot speaks about the adoration the forward receives in his home country

DID YOU KNOW? Filip Djordjevic is among the top three highest paid players at Nantes at the time of writing, earning €60,000 a month.

52. Steed Malbranque

Club: Olympique Lyonnais

Date of Birth: 6th January 1980

Position: Midfielder



Despite starting his career as a winger, Malbranque is one of those players who has refined his position with age and is now operating in a central position for Lyon. At the age of 32 in 2012, many wondered why Lyon decided to acquire Malbranque that very summer, but the player has responded by hitting some of his best form to date the following year (2013).

This year, Steed Malbranque has played a surprising amount of games considering the squad depth Lyon manager Remi Garde is fortunate enough to have at his disposal and this is testament to the player. The player has provided one goal for his team this year, merely a bonus with his main task being to distribute the ball in the midfield, win it back and create chances. This goal came in a 2-1 win against Ajaccio, where Malbranque guided the ball into the far corner with the outside of his boot from the edge of the area. It was an impressive finish and shows that the player still has the ability to score from a reasonable distance.

As mentioned, the player has primarily been deployed at the heart of Les Gones' midfield but it is worth noting that the vastly experienced Belgian-born Frenchman has played a few games on the wing this year. Malbranque's key strength, which has certainly made the former Fulham, Tottenham Hotspur and Sunderland player more selectable over the course of 2013 is his trusty passing radar. The variation to his game in terms of ratio between long and short balls is roughly 25-75, showing that Malbranque takes a sensible approach to building up the Lyon attacks. A quality that undoubtedly contributed to their securing of a Champions League place for the 2013-2014 season. Overall, Malbranque has a passing accuracy of nearly 90% this year, which further emphasises the success he has been enjoying.

An element of Malbranque's game which is starting to wane is his defensive contribution, so much so that Garde often has to play two defensive midfielders behind the Frenchman or, when played in that holding role, is supported by another deep-lying midfielder. Without these tactical adjustments when Malbranque is playing in the central midfield areas, Lyon's defence would be put under much greater pressure. This is obviously a skill that he has only had to develop recently with the new midfield role he first went into during his time with Sunderland, but Malbranque has clearly worked on his tackling and awareness of where the opposition are. While this is the case, he now lacks the pace to make those interventions to the same extent that he was previously able to. The player is also a strong dribbler, which comes from his days as a winger and so despite his lack of pace at the age of 33, Malbranque is still able to beat people using his skill.

It is probably fair to say that Malbranque has not been quite as good this season that in the first six months of this year, but to be honest, Lyon as a team are performing worse and so the same can be said for the majority of their player, with Alexandre Lacazette being an obvious exception. The difference is that Malbranque is not making the same impact when coming off the bench this season and it appears that the player needs at least ten minutes in order to settle down into the game. At around five foot seven, another issue for the player is his aerial ability, although this has obviously been an issue to whole of his career. The problem is that now playing in a central role, the 33 year old is more dependent on his head and so sometimes fails to win balls for his team.

Nevertheless, Malbranque adds vital experience to his team and appears to knock the ball about effortlessly to his teammates. He has demonstrated this year that he can still score and although perhaps it would be inaccurate to say his overall game has improved a great deal in 2013, he has certainly become more confident and established in this Lyon side in 2013. With Malbranque showing no signs of letting off, he could soon be seen as the French Ryan Giggs, although he is still a bit young! Malbranque has tended to play better in Europe this year than in the league and this is most likely due to the fact that Europa League opposition are less prepared tactically to exploit his deficiencies.

'I realised that I made a real mistake'

Steed Malbranque

On joining Lyon's bitter rivals Saint Étienne in 2011

DID YOU KNOW? Vicious rumours circulated a month in to Steed Malbranque's deal with St Étienne that his son was terminally ill with cancer, a rumour that was totally false but the player cancelled his contract with St Étienne shortly after anyway.

51. Serge Aurier

Club: Toulouse FC

Date of Birth: 24th December 1992

Position: Defender



Toulouse full-back Serge Aurier is a name probably more familiar than others to continental football fans. This is merely as the player's performances over the last few seasons have led to speculation about a possible move to some of Europe's most prestigious footballing outlets. Aurier is incidentally a self-confessed Arsenal fan and has admitted on multiple occasions over the course of the calendar year that this would be a dream move. Aurier has also confirmed in the past that he rejected a move to Manchester City before his move to Toulouse. Aurier also had talks with Marseille president and now manager Jose Anigo in the summer, but no formal offer was eventually made. Perhaps we forgot to mention that Aurier is still astoundingly only 21 years of age.

In terms of footballing attributes, Aurier has already proved himself to be an accomplished crosser of the ball and is almost addicted to overlapping down the flanks. Yet the most notable improvement in terms of attributes over the calendar year if one was pressed to name just one would be his increased aerial ability. Having played down the flanks for the majority of his youth career, the Ivorian international was never really forced to use his head neither offensively nor defensively. However, he is being to learn that not only is he blessed with pace but that he also possesses a suitable build to be able to fight just as aptly for the ball over the waist as he does in a fiery fashion below the waist. Many may go on to presume that at such a tender age, there must be parts of Aurier's game that are notably underdeveloped but due to receiving playing time at both centre-back and right midfield in 2013, he has been able to improve the offensive and defensive sides of his game equally, turning him into quite the footballing machine. On a personal level, Aurier has made some rather unprofessional posts on social networking site Twitter in the last year, including one of him in an Arsenal shirt and incessant 'retweeting' of Arsenal fans begging for him to sign for the London outfit. It is perhaps surprising that the management at Toulouse has failed to pick up on these actions.

Perhaps the 21 year olds stand out performance of 2013 came this season against Ajaccio in a 1-1 draw when the player stopped the Corsicans in their tracks, winning duel after duel, making interception after interception, when his teammates otherwise gave a gutless account of themselves.

It is fair to say that Aurier has been Toulouse's stand out performer this year amid a faltering backline. The player has put in consistently good performances and due to the team being ever so slightly dilapidated over the last year, with the departures of the likes of Etienne Capoue, Moussa Sissoko and Franck Tabanou, it remains to be seen how much longer the Ivorian international will stay at Toulouse considering the previous interest from elsewhere.

Despite being consistent throughout the season, it could be said that Aurier does tend to have his better games against weaker opponents and that he tends to go ever so slightly missing against the better teams. It could be said therefore that Aurier needs to progress even further before he can make a move to a better club and a higher quality of football, as he has been unable to cope with big strikers and the likes of Zlatan Ibrahimovic amongst others in the past.

Internationally, this has been a good year for the player. Previously, despite knocks on door from the Ivorian side, Aurier did not feel that he was ready for a call up, stating: *"I've been approached several times by the Ivory Coast coach Sabri Lamouchi. He has called me numerous times. We had a chat and I told him that I'm not yet ready to play international football."*

Now, however, Aurier has decided that the time has come and at the time of writing had played 7 convincing performances for his National side and helped them to finish of qualification for the World cup, a tournament which Aurier will want to feature in. The World Cup will be a test to see if Aurier can play against the best players in the world, and presuming he goes, his encounter with the likes of Falcao could be very interesting the group stage.

Overall, on consistency alone, Aurier makes the GFFN 100. The player is receiving as rich a football education as any under the wing of Toulouse manager Alain Casanova and, although it is clear that Aurier's potential is frankly enormous, a move to a bigger club at the end of the season may wreck the rapid progression he is currently achieving.

'He has huge potential. Frankly, I wish I could clone him.'

Alain Casanova

Serge Aurier's current manager at Toulouse sings the Ivorian's praises

Quotes of the Year: Serge Aurier: "I have a problem with the men in yellow."

Toulouse's right-back admits that one of the weakest parts of his game is the amount of fouls he concedes, referring to referees as a 'the men in yellow'.

50. André Pierre Gignac

Club: Olympique de Marseille

Date of Birth: 5th December 1985

Position: Attacker



André Pierre Gignac was wondering where it had all gone wrong. It was the end of the 2011/12 season, without doubt the most disappointing season in Gignac's career, and doubts were beginning to creep into his mind. In a season blighted by injury, Gignac had managed just 1 goal in 21 league games, a far cry from his prolific days in Toulouse colours. Was Marseille really the right choice? Had he made a mistake in leaving Toulouse, the club where he had had so much success?

Well, 2013 confirmed that it was, in fact, no mistake. After the huge disappointment of his first season at the club, Gignac has begun to dip back into the form that earned him a move to the club in the first place. Last season, he managed to make the starting place as the spearhead of Marseille's attack very much his own, and he repaid the manager's faith with 13 league goals in 31 league appearances, a much improved rate to that of the previous season.

At the midpoint of the 2013/2014 campaign, 'Big Mac' as he is affectionately or not so affectionately known, has already managed 8 goals from 17 games, starting 12 games and coming on as a substitute in 5. His minute per goal rate currently stands at 138 minutes per goal for this season. Gignac has only ever managed to better that figure over the course of a season once in his whole career, in 2008-2009, when he scored 24 goals in the league for Toulouse, undoubtedly his most accomplished season as a professional footballer. This was incidentally the first time that Olympique de Marseille showed serious interest in him. His record for that season was 136 minutes per goal, just 2 minutes less than his record for the current season at the time of writing. Clearly, after a rocky start at Marseille, Gignac is once again producing some of his best football.

So, what sets Gignac's game apart from other strikers? First of all, he stands at around 6ft 1 inch tall, so he is a strong physical presence and will certainly score his fair share of headers. Despite this, Gignac does have a tendency to avoid using his head whenever he can, a rather peculiar habit for a centre forward indeed but at times it is almost as if he is frightened to put his body in potentially dangerous and physical situations. This could be a psychological block that remains ever-present in the forward's mind because of his injury-susceptible nature.

However, Gignac's real strength lies with his feet, and in particular his finishing. Because of Gignac's physical stature, he does not possess lightning pace, so will find it hard to make runs in behind the opposition's defence. As a result, many of his goals come from shots from a slightly further distance, and this is made possible by his powerful finishing, in particular from his favoured right foot. Especially for Marseille, many of Gignac's goals have come when there are still defenders between him and the goal, in other words not in 1 on 1 situations. He can score these goals because he has a very accurate, powerful shot that goalkeepers find hard to deal with. In fact, many pundits in France would go as far to say that his ability to strike the ball is unparalleled in Ligue 1, perhaps in some cases even than by the sharpshooting finisher that is Zlatan Ibrahimovic.

It is also true that Gignac has a knack of scoring important goals, something which has been especially evident during his time at Marseille. Halfway through the current season, it is still the case that Marseille have only ever lost 1 game when Gignac has scored. In addition, in all but 1 of the games in which Gignac scored in the league last season, the match was decided by just 1 goal. As a result, Gignac's goals over the past calendar year have not just been useful for goal difference; they have repeatedly earned his side valuable points.

Although there remain some weaknesses in Gignac's game, (he is yet to make an assist for Marseille in the league after 2 and a half seasons), he has shown some clear signs that he is returning to that blistering form he displayed in the 2008/9 season for Toulouse, at least in goal-scoring terms. The calendar year of 2013 has been comfortably Gignac's best in Marseille colours, and he is a worthy member of the GFFN 100. Gignac is on the road to recovery and may well have finally shaken off the weight of the enormous €18m transfer fee that he commanded when he first arrived at the Stade Velodrome. Perhaps this loss of weight will ensure that the player's critics cease from insisting on goading him with the infamous 'Big Mac' label.

'I am still paying the price for the salary I receive and the transfer fee that I cost Marseille.'

André-Pierre Gignac

20th December 2013

DID YOU KNOW? André-Pierre Gignac often celebrates his goals by sucking his thumb in honour of his first son, 'André-Pierre Junior'.

49. Jérémy Toulalan

Club: AS Monaco

Date of Birth: 10th September 1983

Position: Midfielder

At 30 years of age, many thought that Toulalan was past his prime. When Monaco approached him to bring him to the club, some critics claimed that he was too old and slow to deal with the strength and speed that is now a feature of football in France. Others believed that it was a truly inspired piece of business from Les Monaguesques who had secured themselves a defensive midfielder with experience at the highest level who had just completed a fantastic season with La Liga side Malaga. Monaco, instead of seeing an ageing player past his prime, saw a clever, experienced player who would be vital to the success of a Monaco side full of young talent. They put their faith in the veteran Frenchman and, in 2013, he has already managed to repay them.

If really does feel as if Jérémy Toulalan has been in and around European football for a long time, with the often quip being that he looks far older than he is. In fact he has, having made his first Ligue 1 appearance in the 2001/2 season, at the age of only 17 years old, with Nantes. In the following 12 seasons of his career, 10 have been spent in Ligue 1 with Nantes, Lyon and Monaco, with a two year spell at Malaga just before he joined the latest of his collection of Ligue 1 teams. At the age of 30 and having notched up over 250 Ligue 1 appearances, Toulalan is very experienced at the highest level of French football, and this experience has helped a new-look Monaco, with many players that possess little Ligue 1 experience, live up to their potential so far this season.

Toulalan has never been known for his pace, and this is even more evident as he has aged over the years. He never used to be able to keep up with the quicker players in the game, although his sudden surges in terms of changes in acceleration have often aided him in breaking down opposition moves, but he has nevertheless developed ways around this over the course of his career. The first way he can combat this problem is using his sense of positioning in front of the back four; if there is nobody to chase after because you have already stopped them, your pace, or lack thereof, cannot be exploited. Second of all, Toulalan possesses the ability to execute complete challenges, both standing and sliding, which do not just delay an attacker's progress but stops them from contributing to the attack any further. This is of course more evident in the sometimes crunching sliding challenges that we have seen from Toulalan in years gone by but remains an integral part of the Frenchman's game and a subtle and underrated characteristic.



Last of all, the defensive midfield has never been a position that requires an unreasonable amount of speed. If you do your job well in sitting in front of the back 4 and restricting the space for the opponent's creative players to use, you will find that they have no space left to run around you and expose their superior agility.

There are, however, some problems that come with age that are not quite so easily evaded. Although Toulalan has had an impressive 2013 by all accounts, with his age a new problem has crept into his game: injuries. Last season he missed 13 Liga BBVA games through various different injuries, a figure, which amounts to close to half of a season, and during this 2013/2014 campaign for Monaco, he has already missed 5 of the 19 games with a torn muscle, which remain the only games he has missed all season so far. Although Toulalan can make up for deficiencies in his game relatively easily, as he has done throughout his career, it is much harder to control a circumstance such as injuries, which are essentially out of your control, especially as you get towards the back end of your career.

However, in spite of his injuries, when he has played Toulalan has impressed all around, and the statistics evidence this. Malaga's heaviest defeats in the league, 6-2 and 5-1, both came when Toulalan wasn't in the team. When Toulalan played the full 90 minutes, Malaga only conceded more than 2 goals once in 2013, against Barcelona in the Nou Camp. When he didn't, Malaga conceded more than 2 on 5 separate occasions. Clearly, Toulalan was a crucial part of the Malaga setup. Toulalan also played an understated role in Malaga's Champions League run to the quarter finals, where they were desperately unlucky to lose to Dortmund after conceding 2 goals right at the death.

This kind of pattern is even more obvious in his short time with Monaco. When Toulalan did not play the full 90 minutes for Monaco this calendar year, they only kept clean sheets 29% of the time. When Toulalan did play the 90 minutes, that figure rose to a massive 58%, exactly double that of the previous figure. Even in the short space of time that Toulalan has been wearing the ASM shirt, it is clear that his experience and serenity when defending has greatly enhanced Monaco's defensive record.

Overall, 2013 has been a very successful year for the French veteran midfielder. His performances have been crucial to both Malaga and Monaco and, if he can hold back his increasing injury problems, there is no reason to suggest that 2014 cannot be just as good for Jeremy Toulalan.

'I will not be speaking about the French national team.'
Jérémy Toulalan

After his actions at Euro 2012, it remains a touchy subject- 9th July 2013

DID YOU KNOW? Jérémy Toulalan has admitted if he had not become a footballer he would have become a baker.

48. Anthony Lopes

Club: Olympique Lyonnais

Date of Birth: 1st October 1990

Position: Goalkeeper



They say patience is a virtue. A man who follows this age old saying is Anthony Lopes, ranked 49th in the GFFN 100. For years, he sat on the bench or watched his side play on the television, waiting for his chance. One fine day in 2013, it finally arrived, and boy did he take it.

Rewind back to the 19th April, 2013. It was Montpellier vs Lyon, and an important game in Les Gones' season. However, Lopes was sitting on the bench for Lyon for the 30th time in the league that season, still waiting for his opportunity. The 90 minutes passed by, every minute more and more painful for the Frenchman. It must have dawned on him that he was wasting priceless time in his career he would never get back. Was Lyon the right place to be? Should he move to a smaller team, where he would get more playing time? The match finished 2-1 to Lyon, but Lopes took little joy from the win. At that time, it appeared to be the usual, uneventful day in Lopes' career. Little did he know that, the following game, he would be making his long awaited debut for Lyon.

It often happens that, as the saying goes, every cloud has a silver lining. Lyon's first choice 'keeper at the time, Remy Vercoutre, suffered a serious injury, a cruciate ligament rupture, which would keep him out for months. There was, though, one man whose career that very same injury would kick-start. Lopes was finally given his chance, and his patience with Lyon finally paid off. Against Saint-Etienne on the 29th of April this year, he made his debut, in an engaging 1-1 draw. Since then, he hasn't looked back.

In the 5 games that Lopes played to close out the 2012/13 season, he managed to only concede 3 goals, at an average of 0.6 goals per game. When Vercoutre was in goal, he conceded 33 goals in his 31 games, at a rate of over 1 goal a game, comfortably worse than Lopes' record. Because of the severity of Vercoutre's injury, Lopes was assured to have time on his side to adapt to the pressures of starting Ligue 1 games. This made it far easier for the inexperienced Frenchman to perform to the top of his ability, after all, there was almost no way he could be dropped.

Lopes' patience merited some luck, and it came in the form of Vercoutre's injury, but the chance still needed taking. If Lopes performed badly, or even at an average standard, Vercoutre would have been straight back into the team. Lopes, though, put in some assured performances, enough to secure his first team place for sure. Or so he thought.

There was to be yet more drama in 2013 for Anthony Lopes. In keeping with the theme of sayings, the latest to affect Lopes was 'what goes around comes around.' Just as Vercoutre's injury played into Lopes' hands, another injury dented Lopes' year. This time it was his own. Just as Vercoutre returned from his long absence, Lopes picked up an injury in the home match with Guingamp. It appeared that Lopes had unwittingly handed his teammate a chance to reclaim his number one spot. Vercoutre was in goal for the next 5 games, but, luckily for Lopes, he couldn't manage to keep a clean sheet, conceding 9 goals in the process.

The final defining moment in 2013 for Anthony Lopes came on the 22nd of December. For the first time in over half a year, both Lopes and Vercoutre were fit and ready to play. So who would the manager chose? Well, confirming both Lopes' rise and Vercoutre's decline, it was the former who was given the nod. It was confirmed. His patience had paid off. He was the undisputed number 1.

So, what in Lopes' game has merited the Lyon number 1 spot? Well, at just about 6ft tall, Lopes is not particularly tall for a goalkeeper, which could be seen as a disadvantage. However, his lack of height means that he is far more agile than many of his Ligue 1 counterparts. He makes a lot of reaction saves, and uses his legs to great effect, two things taller goalkeepers tend to find difficult. Finally, his sense of positioning is very good, which is perhaps surprising for a goalkeeper who has played so few games, and often he is in just the right place to save the ball, making the stops look much easier than they otherwise would have been. These attributes are backed up by his 2013 statistics. In the past calendar year, with Lopes in goal, Lyon have kept a clean sheet every 3 matches on average. Without Lopes, that figure rises to once every 4.8 games. Clearly, having Anthony Lopes in goal has been beneficial to Lyon in defensive terms.

As we have seen, 2013 has been an eventful year for the young Anthony Lopes. After years of waiting, he was given his first chance in Ligue 1 in April, a chance he was determined to take. Barring a spell on the sidelines through injury, he has grasped the opening with both hands, confirming his first team spot in one of Ligue 1's top teams and, for the first time in a while for Anthony Lopes, the future looks bright. Heads may roll when reading this work that the little-known Lopes has made it into the top half of this year's GFFN 100, but Portuguese goalkeeper's achievements fully merit the position he finds himself in.

'I'm still sad for what happened to him...'

Anthony Lopes

On his counterpart Rémy Vercoutre's injury- 28th April 2013

#GFFN recommends: @RBairner: goal.com's principle French football writer provides consistent and reliable French football headlines day-in, day-out. In English of course.

47. Jérémie Aliadière

Club: FC Lorient

Date of Birth: 30th March 1983

Position: Attacker

While for many English football fans the enduring image of Jérémie Aliadière will be of an undoubtedly gifted young attacker who showed great promise before failing to live up to his enormous potential, the 30 year old is now plying his trade at Lorient and is a different proposition all together.

A graduate of the elite Clairefontaine academy, the young Aliadière arrived at Highbury at the age of just 16. He started out well before losing his way over seasons that followed amid an unfortunate run of injuries and with the likes of Thierry Henry and Dennis Bergkamp ahead of him in the pecking order.

While his clinical finishing ability has continued to develop and his pace is still there, much has changed since his time in England. Furthermore, in finding a tactical setup that both suits and motivates him and a regular starting spot at Lorient, Aliadière made 2013 in particular a year to remember.

That's not to say that he has ironed out all of his flaws, however, as his often-poor offside awareness and questionable defensive work-rate still represent a slight cause for worry for any potential suitors in the transfer windows, which follow. On occasion his wretched luck with injuries still haunts him too, but with 18 goals in 37 appearances in league and cup last season, it is clear how much he has progressed both in terms of attacking output and the amount of minutes played.

In 2013, he finished 6th in the Ligue 1 scoring charts with 15 strikes and 9th in the assist charts with 7 in what was truly a great all-round season. In doing this, Aliadière's goal return eclipsed his team-mates' contributions by a long way (the next highest returns came from Alain Traoré and Kevin Monnet-Paquet on 6 each) and his prolific form was a key part of Lorient's excellent 8th place finish.

Demonstrating his ability to score with both feet and posing a threat in the air, Aliadière was at his very best. Meanwhile, his ability to pick out key passes served as a further indicator of how far the talented French attacker has come.

This season has seen injuries curtail his progress and Aliadière will be eager to recapture his form and his place in the side. This worrying return to the early days of his career has limited him to just 8 appearances and 2 goals so far this term.



During his absence Vincent Aboubakar has taken up the goal-scoring mantle and 11 goals in 19 matches have marked a breakthrough season for the player who arrived from Valenciennes in July. However, rather than worrying that his opportunities will be limited by the emergence of the 21 year old, Aliadière's presence up front alongside Aboubakar in the team's favoured 4-4-2 system will allow Lorient to boast a deadly strike duo. Comprising both youth and experience, the attacking partnership can set the league alight in 2014, form and fitness permitting. The only drawbacks that exist with this new formation is that Aliadière will have to share the striking spotlight, something that may affect both is effort and performance levels as the season progresses. One thing is for certain, Aliadière will not be totting up as many goals as he did during the 2012/2013 campaign.

While Aliadière freely admits to not being a leader on or off the pitch, his positive attitude towards the game is a big part of the team spirit in the Lorient camp. When speaking about his move to Lorient in interview with Ligue 1, he demonstrated his natural hunger for the game: "All I wanted was to enjoy playing football again. I knew Lorient could offer me that and give me pleasure when I come training every day."

Furthermore, speaking after his side's win over Ajaccio on 14 December, the fifth win in a row for the in-form outfit, Aliadière made it clear to BeIN Sport that he plans to keep this positive run going for as long as possible: "At the moment we have a great team spirit and we're really clinical in front of goal. We need to keep this form up."

Currently sitting in 9th place in the table, Lorient will hope that the return of last season's talisman will galvanise the squad in the New Year. Unbeaten in their last seven games, winning five and drawing the other two, Lorient are in great form and Aliadière's fitness will be crucial to extending this streak.

With his determination and natural hunger for the game, Aliadière has become the type of player that those who followed him earlier in his career always knew he could be and Lorient will be keen to keep reaping the benefits for as long as possible.

'I am not able to say that I will stay.'

Jérémie Aliadière

3rd August 2013

DID YOU KNOW? In July 2013, Jérémie Aliadière refused to train with Lorient in an attempt to force a move away from the club but it failed. He was sanctioned severely by President Loïc Féry.

46. Henri Bedimo

Club: Olympique Lyonnais

Date of Birth: 4th June 1984

Position: Defender



The Cameroonian full back has continued to impress in 2013, for Montpellier, his team in early 2013, and Lyon, the team he joined in August. He is one of the regulars in the Lyon squad so far this season, and has put in consistently solid levels of performances which will undoubtedly carry on into the New Year. Bedimo is putting together a strong case for being Lyon's most reliable player of the 2013/2014 campaign, something that cannot be taken lightly for certain.

Bedimo is very much a typical Ligue 1 full back. He is not particularly tall at 5ft 11, but is very quick and has great stamina, this allows him to both go forwards when he needs to and also be able to get back and defend if the attack breaks down. Bedimo in particular enjoys the offensive duties that come with his role as a liberal flank player. His last crucial asset is his ability to cross the ball. Being a left-footed left back means that he can bomb down the wing and whip in dangerous crosses for his forwards to get on the end of without having to cut back onto his preferred foot. By mid-December, Bedimo already had 4 assists for Lyon in the league. This means he was involved in 1/6 of their league goals, which is an impressive figure for a defender, a ratio unparalleled by any other Ligue 1 defender at the time of writing.

Bedimo is also quite extraordinarily technically gifted, especially for a defender. He does not look at all out of place when going forwards, unlike some full backs, and uses his technique and pace to get past defenders and deliver dangerous crosses.

On the defensive side of things, Bedimo can occasionally be caught exposed after some gallivanting forward on one of his attacking adventures, but whenever he is in a position to defend he has a knack of ensuring his opponents have no way of getting goal-side of him. If one does managed to confuse Bedimo with a piece of trickery, unless you have significant pace, Bedimo will merely catch back up with you and the attacker finds themselves in an identical scenario from the one that occurred just seconds beforehand only a few metres further down the pitch.

Bedimo is one of those full backs who likes to express himself; he does not feel he is constrained to a certain area of the pitch just because he is a defender, and likes to think of himself as a wing-back as much as anything else.

Bedimo is one of those full backs who likes to express himself; he does not feel he is constrained to a certain area of the pitch just because he is a defender, and likes to think of himself as a wing-back as much as anything else.

His small stature does not mean he isn't strong. In fact, Bedimo's strength is an important weapon of his; most of his opponents do not realise how strong he is, and find that he can bully them off the ball at times.

Statistically, it is clear to see that Bedimo is a crucial part of whichever team he plays for. In the 2012/13 season, he played 32 out of the possible 38 games for Montpellier and in the first half of the current season, he only missed one game, a 1-1 draw with Bordeaux, and started the rest for his club Lyon. It is clear that he is a player a coach can depend on to put in consistent performances week-in week-out, and it is for this reason that he often earns the often regarded as irrelevant title of most played outfield player at a club over a course of a Ligue 1 season.

Besides his physical and technical qualities, Bedimo also has a vast amount of experience in French football. He has played almost 300 games as a professional in France (including his days in Ligue 2), which is a huge number of games for a player who has 29 years of age. At present, Bedimo has the ideal blend of experience with ability, and he is probably near the peak performance of his career; 2013 has certainly been a good year for the Cameroonian international. His experience means that he is also a key figure in the dressing room, especially at Lyon. As a former Ligue 1 Champion with Montpellier, Bedimo knows what it takes to be the best in France, and can pass on his knowledge to his fellow players whenever he sees fit. Les Gones of course currently pride themselves on an extremely young squad at present.

Mr Reliable remained a constant throughout his time at Montpellier and although it is early days in terms of his Lyon career, it seems as if he will achieve the same feat at the Stade de Gerland. Expect more quiet brilliance from Bedimo in 2014.

'We had some fun with our fallout last season, but I shouldn't have to deal with this crap anymore. I'm disgusted.'

Henri Bedimo

On the way Montpellier's President treated him- 28th April 2013

Quotes of the Year: Louis Nicollin: "Henri Bedimo was a big pancake this season." *Montpellier President Louis Nicollin was clearly not as impressed with Henri Bedimo's performances as we have been over the course of 2013.*

45. Mounir Obbadi

Club: AS Monaco

Date of Birth: 4th April 1983

Position: Midfielder

When Russian billionaire Dmitry Rybolovlev's takeover ushered in a new, mega-rich era for Monaco in December 2011, great things were bound to happen. However, amidst the arrival of some of the biggest names in football, few would have expected one of the great success stories to come from one of the more low-key signings, but that is exactly what has happened.

Moving to the Stade Louis II from Troyes in January 2013 for the relatively minuscule sum of 1.2 million Euros, Mounir Obbadi has gone on to become one of the key players in a star-studded line-up over the course of an impressive 12 months at the club.

The player himself freely admits a sense of amazement at the position he finds himself in: "Toulalan, Moutinho, Obbadi – spot the mistake" read a text message sent to his friend and former coach Jean-Marc Furlan earlier this season. Yet while his move to Monaco was indeed low-key in comparison to the megastars like Falcao and co., Obbadi has more than earned his spot at the heart of the side and fully vindicated the gamble that coach Claudio Ranieri took in bringing him to the club.

A combative defensive midfielder, the former PSG youth player has shown himself to be extremely gifted at holding onto the ball while also demonstrating an outstanding short passing game and a penchant for powerful long-range strikes. This skill set allows him to offer more than a simple ball-winning defensive midfield role in front of the back four as he is as comfortable and composed with the ball at his feet as he is at winning it back.

Standing at 5 ft 7, Obbadi is relatively short compared to many of the players in his position in the modern game and comes out second best in the majority of aerial duels. Meanwhile, his eagerness to join attacks may not be suited to teams whose style of play demands a more conservative holding player, but in this Monaco side he has found a perfect fit.

Upon arrival at the club at the start of the year, Obbadi went straight into the line-up and played in every game as his side battled their way to promotion. This season, meanwhile, he has played in all but one of their matches so far.



During this time, he has proven to be increasingly influential in their performances and has even added a few exquisite goals to his game in recent weeks. Firing home a superb long-range strike against Nantes in November - ending a three-match losing streak for Monaco in the process – he also scored an equally impressive 25-yard half-volley against Lyon in October.

So far this season, the stats speak volumes about Obbadi's ever-increasing centrality to his side and outline his all-round game. With 18 appearances this season and 1,532 minutes played, Obbadi is the most-used midfielder under Claudio Ranieri. Averaging around 65 passes per game and boasting a pass success rate of 87.9%, Obbadi can count himself among the leading distributors in the league. Now, after spending years in France's second tier, he looks comfortable among France's elite and represents a risk that has paid off handsomely for Ranieri.

And while this key role is something that has surprised the Morocco international, he seems to be taking it well within his stride. Speaking to L'Equipe, he admitted: "I'm not going to lie, I've played a lot since the start of the season and it wasn't something I was expecting, but I've always believed in myself. I said to myself at the start of the season that I have nothing to lose."

Despite the millions upon millions of Euros that have been lavished on other buys and have seen Monaco become overnight title contenders, Obbadi is a guaranteed starter at the heart of the side and has proven to be just as pivotal as any of the other acquisitions. Now 30 and undoubtedly at his peak, an exciting 2014 run-in will give Obbadi the perfect opportunity to cement his place as a club legend.

Finally, back in the Morocco squad, the box-to-box midfielder should now be able to add to his four caps - an underwhelming figure for a player who has developed to such a high level. An anti-star among some of the biggest names in world football, Obbadi is not afraid of roaring at his team-mates when necessary and, based on his performances in 2013, nor should he be.

'Monaco insisted on seeing me and I accepted their offer straight away. You don't refuse a team like that.'

Mounir Obbadi

11th March 2013

DID YOU KNOW? Mounir Obbadi made his international debut for Morocco in 2005 but only received another cap 8 years later after impressive performances in the Monaco shirt in 2013.

44. Idrissa Gueye

Club: LOSC Lille

Date of Birth: 26th September 1989

Position: Midfielder



Generally speaking, the rest of the continent seems to consistently overlook some of Ligue 1's most promising and effective defensive midfielders. This hypothesis could not fit 24-year-old Lille defensive midfielder Idrissa Gueye any better.

The Senegalese hustling and bustling central player was able to burst onto the Ligue 1 scene properly for the first time in 2013 thanks to the consistent injury problems that faced fellow defensive midfielder and Lille captain Rio Mavuba over the course of the calendar year.

Several seasons working in the shadows of French household footballing names in the form of Benoit Pedretti, Rio Mavuba and Florent Balmont painted a consistently frustrating picture for the Diambars graduate, arguably Senegal's greatest footballing academy in terms of producing talent, with the likes of Patrick Vieira and friend of Get French Football News and Sochaux's defensive midfielder Joseph Lopy having frequented the institution. A period of three seasons without exposure to first team football is difficult, no matter how gifted you are because it destroys belief and confidence, even at an early age when it is to be expected, and Gueye's quiet nature off the field will certainly have contributed to the lack of conviction he was showing between 2009 and 2012 in terms of overhauling the likes of Balmont from the starting XI.

Either way, it did not matter because when Gueye was given his chance, he more than took it. Very much your archetypal machine of a defensive midfielder, Gueye's work rate may well be greater than that of his team mates competing for the same spot in the starting XI but he is perhaps not as efficient when it comes to stopping opposition attacks from forming. Although Gueye has shown some dominant displays and a great awareness for his teammates positionally in terms of kick-starting attacking moves from the heart of the midfield, his attempts to do the defensive donkey work required is not always completed as neatly as it should be for a side that flirted with Champions League qualification places last season and will certainly be doing so again over the course of this campaign. A performance against PSG in January of 2013 stands out, when he appeared shake and conceded several fouls in compromising areas of the field.

Athletic and imposing in terms of build, his game style is not dissimilar to that of PSG's midfield maestro Blaise Matuidi. Although Gueye has been regularly selected by new Lille boss René Girard this season, missing all but one Ligue 1 encounter of this season's campaign at the end of 2013, the former Olympian's (represented Senegal in London 2012 in the football discipline) roll was criminally understated in Les Dogues' run of eleven Ligue 1 games unbeaten running until a defeat to Bordeaux in December 2013.

Gueye was most likely not given the credit he deserved because he was not making last-gasp challenges like Simon Kjaer nor was he pulling off acrobatic save after acrobatic save like Victor Enyeama. No, instead Gueye was rushing forward to stop opposition moves from the source- the midfield area. His anticipation of what his opponent will attempt to achieve next is a sharply refined skill long ahead of his still youthful age in footballing terms of 24. With this ability, Gueye can charge passes down and intercept the ball in an area where, to the naked eye, there does not appear to be imminent danger. This was one of Lille's understated ways of achieving such defensive solidity in the first half of the 2013/2014 campaign.

His huffing and puffing was awarded in July of this year with him being offered a five-year contract extension by his employers Lille. The very offer in itself was a huge commitment made by a historically financially-troubled football club and showed just how valued Gueye had become in just a period of 6 months when he lurched from the shadow of Rio Mavuba.

The future for Idrissa Gueye is most likely something he is not thinking about. He has yet to play a full season at the core of the Lille squad and will look to enjoy Les Dogues' quest for Champions League football next season as we enter 2014. Lille fans will tell you his destined to replace the tired legs of players like Mavuba and Balmont, but give it another year or so and Gueye will no longer be lurking in the shadows of European football, if he chooses not to that is. His talent is unquestionable.

'No player wants to sit on the bench. I never let my unhappiness be known.'

Idrissa Gueye

29th November 2013

#GFFN recommends: @FRFootballWill and @FRFootballMax. Two French football analysts working for Football Radar. Between them, they have almost every Ligue 1 and Ligue 2 match covered in terms of commentary.

43. Gregory van der Wiel

Club: Paris Saint Germain

Date of Birth: 3rd February 1988

Position: Defender

It was the summer of 2012, and Gregory van der Wiel's life was about to change. He had spent 6 seasons at Dutch giants Ajax, after making his debut at the age of 18, but it was time to move on: Paris Saint Germain had come calling.

It must have been a hard offer to refuse. After all, PSG boasted some of the top players in the world, none greater than Zlatan Ibrahimovic, and no doubt the potential of the side was clear to see. The young Dutchman, though, was unsure. Ajax was all he had ever known. The club had been very good for him, educating him and overseeing the growth of his football career, and he had never played for a different city, never mind an altogether new country. In many ways, it was a risk. He was living a stable life at Ajax; he was a first team regular at the club and his first team place was virtually secure. All sorts of questions must have popped into his mind: 'How will I adapt to football, and life, in France?', 'Will I be assured a first team place?' Eventually though, with help from manager Carlo Ancelotti, van der Wiel was decided. Next stop: Paris.

Gregory van der Wiel had never played outside Holland. When he arrived at PSG, many thought that he would need more time than he did to adapt. In truth, it took him hardly any time at all. In the year and a half that he has been at PSG, he has played 34 Ligue 1 games, scoring a goal and making 4 assists on the way to helping PSG pick up the Ligue 1 crown that they so lusted after. In this current season, van der Wiel has played 14 games and PSG currently top the standings at the halfway point of the Ligue 1 campaign. There have been a few setbacks in his time in France, but van der Wiel is a man who is a battle-hardened footballer when it comes to dealing with these issues.

Rewind back to October 2009. Holland had a friendly game with Australia, but van der Wiel pulled out citing a concussion obtained with Ajax, only to go to a Lil' Wayne concert and post a picture of him with the artist on his Twitter feed. Dutch coach Bert van Marwijk was confused, saying 'It's rather strange that he was able to go to a concert, given that he told me that he was not allowed to fly by the Ajax medical staff.' It needed then Ajax boss Martin Jol to intervene to help resolve the situation.



This, though, was nothing compared to the disappointment suffered one night during the summer of 2010. Netherlands had made it all the way to the 2010 World Cup, with van der Wiel being an integral part of the team, and in the 115th minute, with 10 men, were desperately trying to hold off European champions Spain. Torres picked up the ball next to Van der Wiel, who couldn't prevent the cross, and a ricochet and a Fabregas pass saw Iniesta breakthrough to crush Dutch hearts in the process. It was the darkest night in van der Wiel's career, but he has moved on and, after a change of scenery at PSG, has put it past him. Van der Wiel has had various setbacks in his career, but he has never let them get to him, at least not in the long term.

Van der Wiel's career has come on a great deal in 2013. The experience of playing in a new league has really helped develop his game, and he has learnt a lot from the style of football he has been faced with in France. More so than in Holland, the French game relies on physical strength and maturity, especially in defence. This is why many defenders in Ligue 1's top teams are older than in other leagues, and it has meant that Van der Wiel has had to improve on the physical side of his game to succeed in France. He has matured into a stronger, fitter player than when he was when he arrived, and he is now able to match his opposing winger physically, which has set him apart in the last calendar year. Of course, he still maintains his impressive pace, which has always been a huge asset in his game.

2013 has been one of van der Wiel's most stable years in his footballing career. He has all but secured his spot as PSG's first choice right back and has improved both his defensive and, in particular, attacking play, with the quality of his deliveries notably improving over 12 months. He has matured and developed his game and become one of the leading full backs in the country, and to do it so soon after his move from Ajax must be pleasing for him. In fact, PSG's only loss this season so far, a 2-0 loss to Evian, came when van der Wiel wasn't playing. At only 25 years of age, he has many years left yet in his career, and 2014 will bring success for the Dutch full back, certainly in the colours of PSG but perhaps even at the World Cup in Brazil, where he will hope to go one stage further than that fateful night in 2010. 2013 may well be looked back upon as the year that van der Wiel truly became an established footballer.

'I get on well with Christophe (Jallet), even when he is playing more than me!'

Gregory van der Wiel

2nd November 2013

#GFFN recommends: @jeremysmith98: Writer at French Football Weekly, a sensible and intelligent French football pundit who rarely lets his emotions get in the way of the events that invariably unfold.

42. João Moutinho

Club: AS Monaco

Date of Birth: 8th September 1986

Position: Midfielder



The Portuguese midfield maestro signed on to the Monaco project for a fee of 25 million euros in June and João Moutinho has had a point to prove in France since the summer in order to set about going some way in showing fans that he is worth every penny. Moutinho is clearly an exceptional player with the sort of talent that would make it difficult for most top teams in the world to turn his services down. However, it is fair to say that in these last 6 months of 2013, he has found the going in France tougher than he was perhaps expecting.

The 27 year old has been a regular in the team, with a sense that the fee paid for the player commands an automatic starting place in the Monaco side, even when the trio of Obbadi, Toulalan and Kondogbia, although more defensive, may have at time worked more efficiently as a midfield trio. However, manager Claudio Ranieri has played Moutinho in different positions in the midfield in order to get the best out of the established Portuguese international. Moutinho has played in attacking midfield, central midfield and defensive midfield this campaign, and it could be viewed that Moutinho has not been creative enough in the final third. In fact, he has tended to play better when featuring in deeper positions this season, a contrast to the positions he used to take up successfully earlier on in the calendar year for Porto.

Despite a disappointing level of creativity perhaps, Moutinho has still been one of Monaco's star players this season. The Portuguese international has featured in almost every game for the big spenders and has formed a strong partnership with the likes of Mounir Obbadi and Jeremy Toulalan in the midfield as well as those who he used to play with at Porto. There is no doubt that making your first substantial career move going to a new country as an established player for the first time does not come with difficulties. Not least as Moutinho's French was exceedingly limited upon his arrival in the summer.

This creates all sorts of communication difficulties for Moutinho not only with his teammates but also with the staff who are trying to get their message across to him. Time will of course smooth these issues over as Moutinho begins to learn the French language and get to know the personnel at Monaco better.

Perhaps the 27 year old's best game of the season came in a 2-1 win against Lyon, where Moutinho was able to control the tempo of the game throughout and even went on to provide an assist for his team. Indeed, one of the player's main strengths is clearly his passing; with a passing accuracy rate of nearly 90%, Moutinho is close to leading the statistics charts for Ligue 1 this season and such ability to play the ball to a team-mate means that Monaco are good at keeping the ball for long periods of time when they have it in midfield and thus building attacks.

The Portuguese star also sees himself as a bit of a dead ball specialist and has in the past scored quite a few goals from direct free kicks. This skill was demonstrated this season in a 1-1 draw with Stade de Reims, where he fooled the keeper into thinking he would whip a ball into the box and ended up curling one in of the near post. Despite this goal, it could be argued that for a supposed attacking midfielder, Moutinho does not hit the net enough times. On a creative front, Moutinho is yet to hit his heights from Porto, where he created a wonderful 12 goals in the 2012/13 season.

Internationally, Moutinho has been ever-present in the Portuguese squad this year and helped to guide them to the World Cup. Navigating through a series of testing matches including a playoff against Sweden. He has formed a good partnership with Cristiano Ronaldo in particular and this could be a crucial key to more international success for Moutinho over the summer with Portugal going to the tournament as relative outsiders.

Overall, therefore, Moutinho has demonstrated class and experience that Monaco needed. There is certainly a case to argue that his overall contribution has thus far been inadequate and that he does not score enough goals and has not been good enough in the final third in the second part of this year, but nevertheless, his stellar performances with Porto in the first half of the year paralleled with his potential to become a leading figure in Monaco's history books as Rybolovlev's project really starts to take off next season scores Moutinho a high classification in this year's GFFN 100.

'To be champions you have to win everything. It is still early days but...'

João Moutinho

2nd September 2013

Quotes of the Year: João Moutinho: 'Xavi and Iniesta? I am a mix of them both.'

João Moutinho is full of confidence in November of 2013 in his ability.

41. Alex

Club: Paris Saint Germain

Date of Birth: 17th June 1982

Position: Defender



For a certain Brazilian as 2011 drew to a close, it looked like it was all over. His dream, what he had been doing since he was a small child, it seemed as if his time was up. 2011 had been, undoubtedly, the worst year of his long career, and many thought it would be the last. As Alex looked onto the horizon from his London residence, he must have wondered if it was the end. And so it may have been, if it wasn't for a French club who gave him another chance.

Alex's career at Chelsea was going very well until late 2010. He was a first team regular at Stamford Bridge, and it looked like he may have even gone through to finish his career at the club, such was his success. That all changed, though, in the harshest of ways. Late in 2010, it became clear that Alex needed an operation on his knee. He lost his place in the first team, and never got it back. In the whole of the next calendar year, Alex made just 5 starts, either dropped or injured for almost all of the games. Alex was already getting on in football terms, being 29 years old, and many wondered whether it was the end of his career at the top level of world football. Clearly, a certain Parisian club thought differently.

At the beginning of 2012, Alex was given another chance. He must have thought it a late Christmas present. PSG, the same club who would sign players like Ibrahimovic and Thiago Silva, players at the top of their game, were interested. Alex would have been willing to eat you whole, never mind bite your hand off, if you offered that to him in his days on the side-lines for the Blues, and he took his chance without even a second thought.

Even so, few predicted what was to come in the next two years. Alex looked a man transformed from his days at Chelsea, and that hunger for keeping out the opposition and seeing out games returned with a new determination and drive. Alex soon became a first team regular at PSG, forming a brilliant partnership with Thiago Silva, and keeping out one of PSG's most highly rated youth products Mamadou Sakho from the team, so much so that it triggered Sakho's move to Liverpool last summer. The Silva-Alex partnership worked so well because it combined experience, strength and aerial prowess with speed, agility and craft. The players complemented each other perfectly, and Alex's career was rekindled once more.

This partnership with fellow Brazilian Thiago Silva is perhaps one of the main reasons why Alex has been succeeding in 2013. Alex has never been the quickest, especially as he has aged, but having someone as fast and agile as Silva at the back has helped take a huge weight of Alex's shoulders. This means Alex, over the past year, has been able to display the real strengths in his game. He is strong, tall and brilliant in the air. Alex is often handed the job of picking up the tall, target-man type striker that PSG come across, while Silva will deal with the small, tricky type that Alex would otherwise have trouble with. At Chelsea, Alex's main partner was John Terry, a player who is wonderful in the air, just like Alex, but has never been the fastest player either.

2013 must surely rank a one of the best years in Alex's career. He may have had better purely based on statistics, but if we look at where he came from, just a year or two earlier, it is astonishing what he has achieved at PSG. In his short stay at the club, he has already racked up 55 Ligue 1 appearances, scoring 4 and assisting 2, on the way to helping PSG win the Ligue 1 crown they so desperately wanted. Even at the age of 31, Alex still looks and feels like he can keep going and extend his career for another few years at least. His current deal runs out next summer and we shall see if he can convince the PSG board to extend his stay. His being in the side may be hindering the chances for other younger defenders in the first team but Les Parisiens look set to have as successful a season as any across all competitions, so why change a winning formula?

If we could take a peek at one of Alex's dreams midway through 2011, it would probably resemble what has happened to him in the past 2 years, at least in terms of football. He has, with the help of PSG, prolonged his career and at the highest level of European football too.

'I want to stay at PSG. I have lots of friends here and I want to continue playing here.'

Alex

6th July 2013

DID YOU KNOW? Alex is adjudged to have made a series of homophobic comments in 2013 including: *'It is Adam and Eve not Adam and Adam for a reason.'* On a Brazilian TV programme called 'Jesus Football Club'.

GFFN 100: 60-41 RECAP:

| | | |
|-----|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| #60 | Nicolas N’Koulou | (Olympique de Marseille) |
| #59 | Éric Bauthéac | (OGC Nice) |
| #58 | Julien Féret | (Stade Rennais) |
| #57 | Yohan Mollo | (AS Saint Étienne) |
| #56 | Jean-Armel Kana-Biyik | (Stade Rennais) |
| #55 | Mickaël Landreau | (SC Bastia) |
| #54 | Guillermo Ochoa | (AC Ajaccio) |
| #53 | Filip Djordjevic | (FC Nantes) |
| #52 | Steed Malbranque | (Olympique Lyonnais) |
| #51 | Serge Aurier | (Toulouse FC) |
| #50 | André-Pierre Gignac | (Olympique de Marseille) |
| #49 | Jérémy Toulalan | (AS Monaco) |
| #48 | Anthony Lopes | (Olympique Lyonnais) |
| #47 | Jérémie Aliadière | (FC Lorient) |
| #46 | Henri Bedimo | (Olympique Lyonnais) |
| #45 | Mounir Obbadi | (AS Monaco) |
| #44 | Idrissa Gueye | (LOSC Lille) |
| #43 | Gregory van der Wiel | (Paris Saint Germain) |
| #42 | João Moutinho | (AS Monaco) |
| #41 | Alex | (Paris Saint Germain) |

40. Aymen Abdennour

Club: Toulouse FC

Date of Birth: 6th August 1989

Position: Defender



The Tunisian international has been ever-present in the Toulouse back line over the past few seasons and shows a real maturity in his play. Abdennour's talent has attracted interest from the likes of Barcelona, who despite attempting to charm Abdennour with Champions League tickets for a match against AC Milan which the Spanish side won 4-0, failed to entice the Téfécé player to compromise his professionalism by taking up the super club's offer. Toulouse did not let the defender go to the game and it appears that an offer for the Tunisian never came in the summer. Nonetheless, Abdennour looks the real deal and other clubs do want to pounce on the player. The 24 year old's performances in 2013 have been a main reason as to why.

Despite playing as a left back going into this calendar year, Abdennour has now returned himself to the position he has always wanted play in the middle of a back four. The Tunisian is perhaps better suited to this role due to his strength and power and he is good at stopping big forwards in their tracks. Maybe this move was also to do with Abdennour's weaknesses as well as his strengths. His crossing of the ball was not always good at times and he maybe lacked some potent decision making in the final third. Nevertheless, the decision made to make Abdennour a centre back has been a good one for the most part. Some of the performances that stand out the most came in the early part of this season. Abdennour won a man of the match award in a 1-0 win against Lorient where he was able to shut down the dangerous Vincent Aboubakar for the majority of the game.

Abdennour is known for his unshakeable focus on the pitch and his general awareness of his surroundings. The defender rarely makes mistakes or lets runners ghost in past him unnoticed. The player is also very good in the pass, with a success rate of over 80% across the whole year and he loves playing long balls up to the front men. Tackling is also one of the player's strong suits and the Tunisian always appears up for a challenge, although, admittedly, it often does not get to the stage where Abdennour has to win the ball of an attacker using his feet.

The majority of the time, Abdennour is able to deal with the threat aerially, with the majority of Ligue 1 attacks not ever really pursuing the tactic of running at the heart of the oppositions defence. However, in recent months, the player's form has dropped a bit and his performances have become less consistent. This was capped off by a dreadful outing in a 5-0 home drubbing by Rennes, where Abdennour appeared incapable to control the dangerous runs of Nelson Oliveira throughout the whole game, and this resulted in the Portuguese international coming away with two goals from that very encounter. The player's form this season has not been helped by a thigh injury, which kept him out of the whole of November.

Perhaps another weakness of Abdennour's play this year has been his discipline. It is certainly a positive that Abdennour is committed in the challenge and willing to put his body on the line for the team, but the player does tend to give away more free kicks than most and this has led to his downfall on more than one occasion in 2013. The defender has also been banned twice for a collection of yellow cards, and in this way the Tunisian has not helped his teammates.

The African Cup of Nations was perhaps a disappointing one for the player, as despite good personal performances, and only one defeat, Tunisia went out in the group stage. Here, however, playing at centre-back, Abdennour showed Africa that he was able to play against the best, as despite being involved in a 3-0 defeat to the Ivory Coast, he actually performed better than most of the players on the winning team that day.

Overall, Abdennour can be viewed as one of Ligue 1's brightest talents. At the age of 24, he is a first team regular for Toulouse and has many top clubs vying for his signature. He has great vision and his reading of the game is first class. The Tunisian has put in a few poor performances this year, however, and this is something he will need to iron out of his game in years to come.

'My duel with Abdennour? He is a very good player and a very good defender.'

Falcao

11th November 2013

Quotes of the Year: Víctor Valdés: 'I am very close to Abidal. I see him as my brother. Playing with him again would be very special indeed.'

FC Barcelona goalkeeper Víctor Valdés drops a heavy hint as to where he may be next season.

39. Alaixys Romao

Club: Olympique de Marseille

Date of Birth: 18th January 1984

Position: Midfielder



It had been an explosive start to 2013 for Alaixys Romao, though not an undeserving one following the former Lorient midfielder's strong 2012 campaign.

The Togo international swapped Les Merlus for Olympique de Marseille in January, a move which recognised his value as one of the league's top midfielders though despite the transfer, it wasn't until February that the 29 year old stepped out at the Stade Velodrome, having initially, required to travel to South Africa to feature in the Africa Cup of Nations.

Following Togo's exit at the quarter-final stage, Romao returned to France – though questions would remain – as always – as to how players returning from the AFCON would find their rhythm from the off, especially at a Marseille side gunning for the title with limited means.

Nevertheless, there was no such problem with Romao – who was inserted seamlessly to add steel to a Marseille side that looked a bit light in midfield. Indeed, he would unseat Joey Barton, on loan from QPR, as the primary partner to Benoit Cheyrou in the heart of the Marseillais midfield.

Bringing his seemingly limitless energy to a flagging side, Romao not only brought replenishment to the club, but also added a new dimension to Elie Baup's often stoic brand of football. The 29-year-old is usually a combative, industrious midfielder, who is comfortable across the midfield. Sitting in front of the defence, he would act as the instigator of Marseille's offensive ventures with a preference to ping the ball over the top for the likes of Andre Ayew or Mathieu Valbuena to chase.

His statistics also resemble his efficiency in the squad, with an 87% pass completion rate. Romao subsequently featured in the next 15 games for OM, as they eventually ended the season in second place, 12 points behind eventual winners Paris Saint-Germain, but mathematically in the title race until the week before the penultimate round of matches.

As the 2012-13 season was brought to a close, the Togolese international was lauded as a fantastic signing by the hierarchy, and that couldn't have been disputed. Plucked from Lorient, themselves in mid-table obscurity, he launched himself into a bigger club and fared well.

The 2013-14 season would be a whole different experience.

Romao was met with uncertainty in the summer of 2013, with Joey Barton coming to the end of his loan deal and Benoit Cheyrou, who would begin to take on a more peripheral figure, Romao was really, the only primary first-team central midfielder left in the side.

Eventually, Marseille settled on two fantastic young talents to supplement their midfield – though neither brought with them the experience and mentality required to succeed at that level. One of which however – Mario Lemina – was signed from Romao's ex-club – a triumph for the player.

Romao started the season in as strong form as he ended the 2012-13 campaign as Marseille rocketed to the top of the table with three wins from three. Though, really, that remained the highlight of his season to date.

Marseille's jittery form began in September with a 2-1 capitulation to Monaco, after a number of defensive errors. Two draws to Toulouse and Bastia followed, and the doubt began to settle. For Romao, he wasn't able to produce his best form – especially at a time when his midfield partner (OM normally played in a 4-2-3-1 formation) would fluctuate game to game from Giannelli Imbula, Cheyrou, and latterly, Mario Lemina. There was no regularity with the starting eleven, and there was no regularity with Romao himself.

The highlight of the midfielder's year remains his first encounter with the UEFA Champions League – his premier continental competition at club level, at age 29. It proved to be a chastening experience however as OM were out of their depth, suffering six losses – five of which featured him.

Though Romao was unrelenting, maintain his presence in the heart of midfield – and highlighting his superb traits in every single encounter. If those around him weren't playing well, the same couldn't be said of the former Lorient man. A testament to his ability.

If the year has been tough on Marseille, not so for Romao. In little under 12 months, he has gone from being a staple of the Lorient midfield, to the primary midfield man at the biggest club in France, and has tasted both European and international action. Not bad at all.

'I was the wrecker service. I got penalised and then my team got penalised as I picked up cards stupidly.'

Alaixys Romao

On his role at former club FC Lorient- 10th February 2013

DID YOU KNOW? Alaixys Romao temporarily suspended his international career with Togo after the horrific bus shooting occurred in 2010 when two teammates and several staff were seriously wounded by supposed Angolan rebels.

38. Thiago Motta

Club: Paris Saint Germain

Date of Birth: 28th August 1982

Position: Midfielder



One of the most enriched footballers currently plying their trade in France, Thiago Motta has been at the top teams across Europe, be it FC Barcelona or Inter Milan, and played pivotal roles in those very teams' successes whilst he wore their colours. It was perhaps no surprise therefore that Thiago Motta brought this ability with him from Milan to Paris and in the meantime has won the title of PSG's most understated player in terms of importance.

Every international club needs a player that acts as the glue which keeps the squad in tact no matter which languages are being spoken or what the situation is. Thiago Motta has become that man, partly down to his own qualities on a human level, but also partly down to chance.

First of all, Motta's ability to speak French to an adequate level paralleled with his fluent Italian and Portuguese (Brazil) enables him to interact with the core of the foreign contingent of the current PSG squad, with the vast majority of the South American players originating from Brazil in Marquinhos, Thiago Silva, Lucas and Alex. Marco Verratti is of course Italian and so was PSG's manager Carlo Ancelotti, at least for the first half of 2013.

That ability to ease communication between different sectors of the squad whilst also being an extremely accomplished and decorated footballer in your own right is what makes Thiago Motta's 2013 contribution frankly outstanding. What does he do on the pitch?

At the age of 31, Thiago Motta is not bouncing across the pitch as he may have done during his Barcelona playing days. Instead, in a tactical change that Laurent Blanc implemented, the Brazil-born midfielder sits as the deepest of the three in the centre of the park, giving licence to the usual pairing of Marco Verratti and Blaise Matuidi to provide further attacking options. The latter in particular has done so in recent months and has really added a new dimension to the PSG attack in the process. Where in some games, Ancelotti's PSG may have struggled to score, Blanc's outfit is able to commit more men to each attack as Thiago Motta reserves himself to making timely interceptions if the opposition ever troubles him that is.

In truth, Thiago Motta's role in terms of active defending with regards to coming up against one on one duels with the opposition is limited because he realises his ability to track back is not what it once perhaps was. PSG are rarely hit on the break in Ligue 1 and when they are, Verratti or Matuidi will track the opponent from behind and Thiago Motta will look to hold them up for as long as possible, ensuring that when it comes to defensive duties, Motta is rarely left to do the job alone, but instead a sort of tag team forms to more effectively crowd out the opposition attacker.

Motta's technical abilities were gifts from a higher being. Despite his sometimes cumbersome nature when having the ball at his feet, his passing radar is unparalleled in Ligue 1. The vision, experience and level-headedness he brings to an otherwise often argumentative PSG team when it comes to berating referees and match officials (Zlatan Ibrahimovic, Thiago Silva and Marco Verratti are principle culprits for the aforementioned crime) adds a touch of class to the player's game which simply cannot be taught, making Motta's achievements more impressive with the supposed effortless aura he gives off when on the pitch.

PSG's midfield is much more coherent this season than in the last and that is because Thiago Motta has yet to suffer an injury that sidelines him for a substantial period of time as he did in the 2012/2013 campaign. His presence makes the difference in what would already be a world class midfield with the likes of Marco Verratti and Blaise Matuidi in it.

2013 has also been a year of further international progression for Thiago Motta. Having only received a call up at the late age of 29 for Italy, Thiago Motta is making every chance he gets count. This was noticeable in a recent friendly Italy had vs Germany where Motta played the majority of the encounter and gave a good account of himself as the game eventually ended in a one all draw.

Eventually, Thiago Motta will be pushed out of the PSG starting XI and eventually for the squad all together because of his age, and with supposed targets including Paul Pogba being mentioned, this may be Motta's only complete season that he plays an integral part in for the team he joined in January of 2012. While his brilliance is undoubted, his contribution in terms of goals and assists for 2013 were comparatively weak and he was often out injured, otherwise Motta would have finished much higher in this year's GFFN 100.

'For me, Marco Verratti is one of the most technically gifted players in the world.'

Thiago Motta

On his 'protégé' Marco Verratti

DID YOU KNOW? Thiago Motta says he always dreamed of playing at PSG, the club where Brazilian legends like Ronaldinho, Raí and Leonardo used to play.

37. Saber Khalifa

Club: Olympique de Marseille

Date of Birth: 14th October 1986

Position: Attacker

Few players have made such a large step in their careers in 2013 as Tunisian international Saber Khalifa has done. A series of electrifying performances for Ligue 1 strugglers Evian in the early months of the calendar year caught the eye of arguably France's biggest club in the form of Olympique de Marseille in the summer of 2013.

With Les Roses, Khalifa found footballing piece of mind and his goals to games ratio of about one in every three over the course of one and a half seasons unequivocally made him stand out to a raft of other suitors in the summer of this year, including Premier League sides and Montpellier, who nearly signed him weeks before his eventual move to L'OM.

Khalifa's has endured hiccup after hiccup in his career to date and so to move from a club where he was comfortable and cherished at Evian, to go to a side where the competition for places is much greater and the media spotlight is more intense than anywhere else in French football at the Stade Velodrome was a risky move for the versatile attacking player who, if his first six months with OM are anything to go by, must still be looking for his perfect club.

Having survived the threat of war in Libya during a spell at Al Ahly Benghazi in 2011 in which he only played twice, Khalifa constantly seems to be drawn into potentially dangerous situations. When the player is in form, these are the very situations he creates for opposition defenders with his nifty touch and intelligent forward running, Khalifa, although not as fast as your typical winger, often creates spaces for his teammates by distracting the opposition through tracking his runs rather than those of his fellow offensively positioned colleagues. This perhaps gives an explanation for his general lack of goals since he made the summer move to Marseille- he has only scored once in the league this season at the time of writing.

While Khalifa maybe receiving flack for his apparent lack of pace and enthusiasm on the ball, this is often due to the excess work that he has carried out without the ball, a subtlety that the majority of Marseille fans seem to overlook.



When Khalifa does score however, he makes it count with classy and inspiring finishes from varying angles and distance away from goal over the course of 2013. In late November, Khalifa capped of an OM victory over Montpellier with an effortless finish that followed when he received the ball on the edge of the area to round of a Marseille counter attack. The player ran half of the pitch to provide an option for teammate Thauvin before stopping the ball dead, and, after a few seconds' pause, slotted the ball neatly through the legs of defender Benjamin Stambouli and out of the goalkeeper's clutches low into the bottom right corner.

Another phenomenal solo effort occurred in May 2013 when Khalifa was still wearing the rather loud pink colours of Evian TG FC. He completed a 4-0 rout over OGC Nice in the most unique of styles. The ball was cleared from an OGC Nice corner and Khalifa took it, ran to just behind his team's side of the centre circle, before unleashing an incredible half volley which travelled spectacularly, looping over a sprawling David Ospina and into the back of the net.

In total, Saber Khalifa has hit the back of the net eight times during this calendar year, but only once for his new club. In these simplistic terms, Marseille may be of the opinion that he does not have much use at the club, failing to really challenge André-Pierre Gignac for the spot as the lone striker. If they are so inclined, they fundamentally lack the tactical insight required to realise that Khalifa offers a team's attacking unit so much more than goals. His off ball movement combined with the general gusto he has showcased in the last 12 months make him a subtle but severe threat to defences, wherever he may be.

However, it does seem as if the Marseille faithful have already given up on the player and if this is the case, then Khalifa may well have to move again in 2014 unless OM's eventual new manager can take a favourable view on the Tunisian, as he well deserves it. Either way, hopefully Khalifa can take one step closer to finding footballing happiness rather than continuing to rot in the shadows at the Stade Velodrome, as he is expected to after a perceived poor run in form from October to December.

'I like this club a lot, much like Hammam-Lif.'
Saber Khalifa

On comparing Evian to his local club in Tunis-
29th March 2013

DID YOU KNOW? Saber Khalifa won the UNFP award for most beautiful goal of the season 2012-2013 with his screamer vs OGC Nice.

36. Sébastien Corchia

Club: FC Sochaux

Date of Birth: 1st November 1990

Position: Defender



Sébastien Corchia is a name familiar to most French football fans. The 23 year has been tipped to become a future international right back, and his form over the last year has done much to help his cause. Despite a poor twelve months for Sochaux on the whole, Corchia has been by far the stand out performer and a break down in a move to Lyon this summer has allowed the Frenchman to continue shining on the east coast of France.

Corchia ended last season with some terrific performances, notably in a famous 2-1 against Lyon. It appears that the right back is refining his huge potential every week; Sébastien Corchia is known for being a cruel attacker on the wings with the potential of playing in all positions in the back. Put him as a left-back or a right-back or even a left winger he will succeed. Clubs are looking for defenders with the ability to rapidly run back and defend after helping out in attack, and Corchia is one of them. His crosses are dangerously accurate and his concentration on the ball is top class. He has excellent positioning and superb tackling skills that makes him a successful defender. These last twelve months, he had excellent performances against Paris Saint-Germain, Rennes, and Marseille showing his capabilities to play against bigger clubs.

Corchia's main job has been to stop the opponent in their tracks first and then bomb up-field. Corchia has highlighted his defensive qualities with French fans. His ability to tackle to win the ball, without giving away stupid free kicks has become apparent with the Frenchman receiving more free-kicks than fouls that he has conceded; He appears to have a great footballing brain and is able to think one step ahead of the attacker. He has made countless interceptions and goal saving challenges which invariably contributed to Sochaux's narrow avoidance of being relegated to Ligue 2 in May of 2013.

Corchia, perhaps uncharacteristically, has also added a single goal to his Ligue 1 game this year. It came in February of last season and merits a mention purely for the fact that it was a brilliant individual effort. Corchia ran inside from the right to beat three men and smash home with his wrong foot from inside the box. Such a goal showed the Frenchman's class in using his pace and skill to ghost through the Rennes defence easily. Corchia also scored a late winner this season in a Coupe de la Ligue game against Montpellier. Towards the end of the calendar year, Corchia had begun to take set pieces for Les Lionceaux. Corchia's portfolio of qualities seems to just continue to enlarge.

Sébastien Corchia's reputation with the Sochaux fans remained as good as usual despite antics this summer when Corchia was left steaming at a break down in a move to Lyon. President Aulas opted to sign Portuguese full-back Miguel Lopes on loan instead of snapping up Corchia for a fee which was seen by many as well below his true value. Corchia has this to say at the time: "I do not understand why Lyon could not just pay €250k more! Now I look abroad, my agents are working....I do not understand Lyon's position. When I met Remi Garde at the training ground he said I was 1st choice." The 23 year has set about proving the Lyon president wrong, who displayed some antics himself throughout the whole of the summer window. Moves to Arsenal, where a release clause was agreed earlier in the season only in the case of Sochaux being relegated, Marseille, where the player was in talks for a period of time, and to other places were possible, and the player was even rumoured to be on a plane for Italy on transfer deadline day. Corchia stayed put for now though, but one cannot see the full-back staying on the east coast of France for too much longer, however, after his recent performances.

It could be said, however, that Corchia's performances this season have not been as good as the ones towards the back end of the 2012/13 campaign; The defender has shone in recent games against St Etienne and Valenciennes, but he did endure a nightmare evening in a 4-1 loss to Bordeaux, where he produced well below what we know he is capable of. Corchia has also admitted that he is enjoying working under his manager: "He brought a different style of game that suits us very well." Nevertheless, Corchia is on the whole very consistent and on the whole consistently good, Despite maybe slightly poorer performances this season, Corchia was critical in keeping Sochaux up at the back end of last campaign and performances such as these cannot be ignored. Corchia was indeed acknowledged by us and leading French football pundits, who voted him into the 'Get French Football News Team of the Season' for 2012/13. Thus Corchia makes the GFFN 100.

Corchia's international career has also stalled for the moment, with the player now being too old to play for the U21s and not developed enough, in Didier Deschamps' eyes to step up to the national team. Thus 2013 has been a year where we are unable to judge Corchia on international appearances, although one does not presume that it will be too long before the French boss comes calling for Corchia.

'For the moment, I am only thinking about working hard, if it is meant to happen, it will happen.'

Sébastien Corchia

On a future in the French national team- 27th August 2013

DID YOU KNOW? Part of Sébastien Corchia's youth career saw him train for three seasons at the prestigious Clairefontaine academy.

35. Romain Hamouma

Club: AS Saint Étienne

Date of Birth: 29th March 1987

Position: Attacker

Unlike many of his St Étienne team mates, Romain Hamouma went into the summer of 2013 with a slightly sceptical feeling about the coming season. His team had just completed a record-breaking campaign, having won the Coupe de La Ligue for the first time in their history, but Hamouma had not had the best of beginnings to the calendar year. He picked up an injury in January 2013 which ruled him out for 6 games, and upon his return, he did not play a single Ligue 1 game for the full 90 minutes until the end of the season. In that time, he scored just one goal. As a result, his blistering form in the 2013/14 season surprised everyone, including Hamouma himself, the player has admitted.

Hamouma has progressed phenomenally as a footballer over the last 12 months. Despite his relatively weak start to the calendar year, he started the 2013/14 season with a bang. Having played 14 of St Étienne's first 15 Ligue 1 games, Hamouma managed to score 6 goals and make 4 assists, ensuring that his team had the 3rd best attacking record in the League. In those opening 15 games, he was involved in 10 goals (6 goals, 4 assists), which was the second highest total in all of Ligue 1, behind only Zlatan Ibrahimovic, who managed 15 (11 goals, 4 assists). Hamouma appeared unstoppable in the latter half of 2013, so what is it in his game that allows him to be so effective?

One of the main reasons behind Hamouma's success this year is that his goals come from all sorts of situations. Sometimes, he is on hand to capitalise on defender's mistakes and punish them, as shown by his goal against PSG in October after some calamitous defending by the PSG back four. The fact that he always seems to be in the right position to punish his opponents can be put down to his brilliant sense of positioning. However, especially in the latter half of 2013, he has scored some absolutely brilliant goals. Against Lyon in November, in the 65th minute he produced a simply stunning bicycle kick to beat Lyon goalkeeper Anthony Lopes, while he scored a 25 yard belter against Valenciennes in September. Some of Hamouma's goals really do leave you speechless, and his natural talent is undeniable.



Hamouma has a lot in his game that most wingers wish they could have. He is very quick, often leaving defenders for dead with his pace, he has very good close control and can produce a blistering shot when he strikes the ball as he can do. The combination of these three assets makes him very hard to deal with for opposition defenders, something St Étienne have used to their advantage many times this season. If there was one criticism to be made about Hamouma, it is that he perhaps needs to improve his consistency if he is to make the step up into the elite level of right wingers. When the stakes are high in big games, you can rely on Hamouma to put in a performance, but against the 'smaller' teams his concentration is often not at the same level as it is when he is facing the likes of PSG, Monaco or Marseille.

Hamouma is not, however, all about goalscoring. His 4 assists in the opening 15 games of the Ligue 1 season put him at joint 3rd in the Ligue 1 assists table, which is an extremely impressive record. As a right winger, it is very important to combine both goals and assists, and Hamouma does this perfectly. He has an accurate delivery from set pieces, and is always looking to find target men like Brandao in the box when he finds himself out wide with an opportunity to cross. He can use his close control to skip past defenders, and then has the vision to pick out his team mates if they are in good attacking positions.

Over the course of the last calendar year, Hamouma has adapted his game to be much more well-rounded. At the current stage of the Ligue 1 season, with the winter break approaching, he tops St Étienne in both goals scored and assists, which is a fantastic achievement. Romain Hamouma undoubtedly has a very bright future ahead of him, and he is undoubtedly a crucial member of the GFFN 100. We have no doubts that he will continue to improve in the coming calendar year.

'In order to live a happy life, you need to have a life that is hidden away. I live like that.'

Romain Hamouma

24th December 2013

DID YOU KNOW? Romain Hamouma is a huge fan of playing golf and believes that he is the best at the sport compared with everybody else at St Étienne.

34. Lucas Moura

Club: Paris Saint Germain

Date of Birth: 13th August 1992

Position: Attacker



After announcing himself on the European stage for the first time this calendar year, we can say without doubt that Lucas Moura is one of world football's brightest and most pronounced young talents. Many saw his raw potential when he was playing for São Paulo in the Brazilian league little over a year ago, but he had yet to prove he could battle it out in one of the big European leagues. In January of 2013, oil-rich PSG presented Lucas with the opportunity to show everyone his undeniable talent, and, over the course of the last twelve months, many would agree that he has done just that.

Lucas arrived at PSG in January 2013, in the middle of PSG's title challenge that would ultimately prove successful. He made an almost immediate impact, creating 5 assists in his first 6 games for the club, but as a result of some small injuries and very strong competition for places, during the first six months he was limited to 10 league appearances out of a possible 19 games. Lucas had shown glimpses of his raw ability on the ball, but he had certainly not reached his peak performance. However, after the summer break, Lucas was raring to go for another challenge in the form of the 2013/14 season.

The start of the 2013/14 season has proven a big success for the young Brazilian. Still at just 21 years of age, he played a part in 17 of PSG's 19 Ligue 1 games so far, scoring 3 goals and making 6 assists. Although he has often been used as a substitute, (he has played the full 90 minutes only on 3 occasions so far), whenever he has been given the chance, he has impressed. His three goals have each been individually unique and impressive, perhaps the pick of the 3 being his goal against Stade de Reims in Week 14, when he breezed past a defender on the edge of the box and powered a shot into the top corner. On top of his goals, only Ibrahimovic amongst his PSG teammates rivals his 6 assists. Clearly, Lucas is an extremely effective player when he is given the chance to perform.

Lucas has several key attributes that make him stand out from other wide players. First of all, he is extremely quick, and can outrun almost every, if not every, full back in Ligue 1, never mind the centre backs. This trait is extremely useful, as it allows Lucas to have the option of either coming into midfield to collect the ball, or hovering on the last man, and looking to burst onto a through ball in behind the defence which would put him through on ball. Because of this, defenders have to be particularly alert when marking Lucas, if they get too tight to him, he will just glide past them, and that will be the end of that. The opposition need to give Lucas a few yards when they face him, so that they can react adequately to his next move.

However, more important to Lucas' game than his speed is his ability to dribble, which is almost unparalleled amongst his teammates. Lucas has such great close control that, as with many world-class players, the ball appears to stick to his feet. Combine his speed with that kind of dribbling ability, and you can see why Lucas often makes long, surging runs from deep inside his own half, passing 3 or 4 defenders in the process. When Lucas truly gets going, often the only way to stop him is to bring him down and give away a free kick. These runs, invariably, commit defenders to trying to impede him. This means that space is created for his teammates to occupy, and this is one of the main reasons why Lucas has so many assists. He will commit defenders, and then pass the ball off into the space he has just created, allowing the likes of Ibrahimovic and Cavani a clear shot at goal.

Having said that, there remain a few areas in Lucas' game that need refining. He can sometimes lack consistency, and if his opposing full back is experienced and strong, he often struggles to influence games. Since his style is so direct, he is bound to be vulnerable to dips in form, and if Lucas can produce something near to his best every time he steps out onto the pitch, he will make the step up into the elite level that some of his teammates find themselves in.

To conclude, Lucas has had a fantastic 2013, showing everyone just how talented he is, and how big a potential he has. He has begun to receive more playing time for PSG and, still only 21 years old, he has a lot of time left to develop his game in the future. If Lucas continues improving, and makes the necessary adjustments to his game, he can truly become one of the top players in European football, never mind French football, such is this young Brazilian's natural talent.

'Neymar is a footballing genius. Who is Barton?'

Lucas Moura

On the validity of the former Marseille man's sentiments towards Neymar's ability- 16th April 2013

DID YOU KNOW? As an adolescent, Lucas Moura had serious growth problems. Instead of taking growth hormones, he employed a nutritionist and is now standing at a more noticeable 5 ft 8.

33. Vincent Enyeama

Club: LOSC Lille

Date of Birth: 29th August 1982

Position: Goalkeeper

To say that Vincent Enyeama's 2013 did not start as planned is an understatement. At 30 years of age, he had gone 7 consecutive games without playing for his club side Maccabi Tel Aviv, and many thought that his career was drawing to a close. However, deep inside, Enyeama knew that he still had it, that he could make it as a regular in one of Europe's top leagues. He just needed someone to give him that chance. Luckily for the Nigerian international, his parent club, Lille, were willing to give him a shot. What then happened in the second half of 2013 must have been beyond even Vincent Enyeama's wildest dreams.

Enyeama is a brilliantly unique goalkeeper. Rather than relying on a tremendous amount of positional awareness and know-how, like many of his contemporary Ligue 1 goalkeepers, Enyeama is amazingly athletic for a man of his age, and can pull off some saves that people would think were simply impossible. He has improbable reflexes, maybe the best of any Ligue 1 goalkeeper, coupled with his brilliant athleticism, which allows him to leap across goal with ease, and you have a shot-stopping machine. Enyeama's form in late 2013 has been so inspired, that he has been given various nicknames, varying from 'Eight-armed Enyeama,' which emphasises his shot-stopping ability, to 'The Cat,' which points to his cat-like reflexes.

Anyone who has watched Enyeama play will know that he is a nightmare for strikers to play against. Although he is not particularly tall for a goalkeeper, his agile movement across his line more than makes up for that, and his impressive leap means that he can command high balls into his box effectively. Enyeama also has a bit of a strange style, in that he often prefers to punch the ball clear rather than attempt to catch it if the ball is too awkward. Although this can occasionally put his side in precarious situations, the Nigerian considers it to be the safest option, and it has definitely paid off for him in 2013.

In addition, Enyeama also has one other crucial part to his game. Yes, he is very good at making reflex saves, but he is also able to do the basics well. He spreads himself wide in 1 on 1 situations, which has saved Lille on countless times this season. There have been so many brilliant pieces of goalkeeping from Enyeama even just half way through the current season, that it is hard to single particular saves out. However, his double save against Monaco and stunning back-post stop against Montpellier truly stand out.



Sometimes, statistics can be misleading, but the statistics that are associated with Enyeama's last 6 months at Lille are so impressive that they are well worth looking at. As the majority of readers will know, Enyeama helped Lille keep an unreal 11 consecutive Ligue 1 clean sheets, lasting 1,062 minutes without conceding, until defender Simon Kjaer fired past him into his own net, leaving Enyeama no chance of keeping it out. In doing so, he came extremely close to beating Huard's all time record of 1,176 consecutive minutes without conceding.

However, it is when we compare Enyeama's form to his contemporaries, rather than his predecessors, that we understand exactly how stunning the Nigerian has been in 2013, and in particular in the 2013/14 season. 19 games into the season, as European leagues headed into the winter breaks, Enyeama was ranked as the top European goalkeeper of the season so far. In terms of the ratio of shots saved to goals conceded, Enyeama's ratio of 7.0 was around twice as much as his European compatriots. Manuel Neuer, the top Bundesliga goalkeeper, had a ratio of 3.9, while veteran Italian Gianluigi Buffon's stood at a measly 2.3, almost 4 times worse than Enyeama. Whichever way you look at it, Enyeama's form in the first half of the 2013/14 season was nothing short of truly inspired.

So, what lies ahead for the veteran Nigerian? Well, for the first time in his career, he is playing regularly in one of Europe's top leagues, and drawing praise from all over the world. This summer, he will undoubtedly be Nigeria's number 1 choice goalkeeper for the World Cup, and with a relatively favourable group stage draw, Enyeama will be looking to propel the Super Eagles into the knockout stages. In a recent interview, Enyeama was quoted as saying 'I honestly think we (Nigeria) can reach or surpass the semi-final, because the attitude of the players in this team is splendid.' Who knows, with their talismanic Lillois goalkeeper, Nigeria may just have a shot...

'I will work, work, work and then work some more. I will cut out these errors.'

Vincent Enyeama

20th August 2013

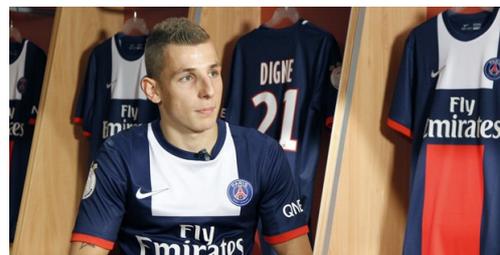
DID YOU KNOW? In 2004, Vincent Enyeama was involved in a car accident which killed two motorcyclists, as well as the man driving the car that the Nigerian international was in at the time.

32. Lucas Digne

Club: Paris Saint Germain

Date of Birth: 20th July 1993

Position: Defender



2013 has been a breakthrough year for Lucas Digne, a full back who represents one of France's most promising young talents. Having come through the system of French football right from the bottom, Digne has recently finally made it in the country's top league, with the league's top team, PSG. A remarkable feat for a player who is still just 20 years old, and remains far from hitting his prime. Digne's ability and maturity at such a young age is why many pundits believe him to be the long-term successor of Patrice Evra in France's left back position.

Although those involved in the French youth system circles were already aware of Digne's high potential, he only really burst onto our television screens in the past two years. In early 2012, he made his Ligue 1 debut, with Lille, in a 3-0 home victory over St Étienne. Soon enough, he was the regular left back for Lille, and had cemented his spot by the end of the season, at the age of just 18 years old. His pace and sharp thinking injected some much needed drive and energy into a Lille side which ended up finishing a highly respectable 3rd place in Ligue 1 that year.

The 2012/13 campaign, though, was when Digne had his first real shot at a full Ligue 1 season. He played 33 games for his club in the league, more than any other defender apart from Marko Basa, and made a lasting impression on not only his teammates, but also the rest of France that was watching him. The undoubted highlight of that season, and perhaps his highlight of 2013, was his fantastic winner against Bastia in the 85th minute. Idrissa Gueye squared the ball to him and, still 25 yards out from goal, Digne crashed a powerful shot into the top corner past the helpless Landreau to give Lille a vital 3 points. In doing so, Digne showed that he could be very competent in the final third, not just when he is defending his own goal.

As the 2012/13 season came to a close, many Ligue 1 players were looking forward to a period of relaxation before pre-season, spending time away from football with their families. For Lucas Digne, though, this was not the case. France was about to take part in the U20 World Cup, and Digne was the first choice left back for his country's team. In fact, he started all 7 of France's games in the tournament, scoring goals against Ghana and Turkey in the process, as France claimed the World Cup title. Digne was a vital member of the squad, as he already had the experience of a full Ligue 1 season under his belt, and was able to dominate almost all of the wingers that he came up against.

However, Digne's summer was not without another twist. As is often the case with France's promising young players, it was not long before the country's top current team, Paris Saint Germain, were after his signature. Soon enough, a deal was agreed between Lille and PSG, though to be around €15 million, that saw Digne make the move to the capital to play for the Ligue 1 Champions. Up until the end of 2013, Digne has found it much harder to get consistent playing time at PSG, having played just 7 of PSG's 19 Ligue 1 games so far this season. However, it is pretty easy to understand why. Digne is still young, and Laurent Blanc is clearly keen to integrate him into the team slowly, and only give him the first team spot when it is fully clear that he is the best man for the job. It only seems a matter of time though until Digne becomes PSG's first choice full back.

So, what in Digne's game has made him so sought-after by many Ligue 1 sides? As a left-footed left back with bags of pace, Digne is a real threat going forwards. He has an accurate cross from his left boot, which has led to 2 assists at the U20's World Cup in 7 games for the youngster. In defence, he shows maturity well beyond his years. Last season for Lille, despite playing 33 games, he picked up just 3 bookings. Digne tends to be measured in the way he approaches his defensive work, and is thus very effective at winning the ball back from his opponents. Rather than bounding up and down his left flank to make last-ditch challenges, Digne takes a measured approach. Despite this, with the energy that only young players like Digne have, he never seems to stop running for the 90 minutes, which allows him to both be a nuisance going forwards, and very solid when defending.

Overall, Lucas Digne must be delighted with how his 2013 calendar year has gone. He established himself as a starter at one of France's top clubs with Lille, helped his country to an U20 World Cup victory, and earned himself a move to PSG, Ligue 1's current Champions. The future is undoubtedly bright for this youngster, and no doubt we will be seeing him in France's full colours very soon.

'The most surprising thing about these players is their professionalism. They will stop at nothing for perfection.'

Lucas Digne

On his new PSG team mates- 22nd November 2013

#GFFN recommends: @cjpeilow and @ronaldingo14. Two of the key drivers behind the @TheLigue1Show, which plays an integral part in making Ligue 1 a worldwide footballing experience.

31. Giannelli Imbula

Club: Olympique de Marseille

Date of Birth: 12th September 1992

Position: Midfielder

21 year old defensive midfielder Giannelli Imbula burst onto the scene in 2013, and his talent and prowess has been noted by some of Europe's most high profile personalities including Chelsea manager José Mourinho. The Belgian-born young man of Congolese descent broke onto the Ligue 1 scene for the first time this summer after making the switch from newly promoted outfit EA Guingamp to join French footballing giants known as none other than Olympique de Marseille.

Marseille pursued a summer transfer window policy that was based around acquiring some of French football's roughest diamonds, French youngsters with enormous potential in order to build their squad for the long-term. The other advantage that comes with pursuing such a policy is the fact that generally-speaking, Marseille will eventually sell the likes of Florian Thauvin and Giannelli Imbula for a much larger fee than for what they had initially paid for them, which gives these investments added value because of their potential in terms of financial lucrativeness. In July of 2013, Marseille got their holding midfielder for a fee of just €7m including bonuses.

So what exactly had Imbula achieved in the build up to the summer transfer window which made this move happen in the first place? The left-footed midfielder played an instrumental role in Guingamp's eventual promotion in May of 2013 to the French top flight, 9 years after they had been relegated from Ligue 1 previously. As one can imagine, being held responsible for such success earned Imbula the instant adoration of the Guingampais faithful. Over the 2012-2013 season, Imbula protected a slow and ageing back four whilst also providing consistent attacking options through his bountiful forwards at pace. This combination of talent in both offensive and defensive areas of the game paints a suitable picture of Imbula's vast and seemingly limitless skill set.

Imbula of course possesses the necessary build, incisiveness in the tackle, change of acceleration and fitness to carry out his holding midfield duties without any great deal of trouble on most occasions. In fact, Ligue 2 became so unchallenging at times for Imbula that he was encouraged to assume more advanced central roles. So much so, that he is now equally as comfortable playing behind a striker and flanked by a pair of wingers as he is in the holding role he has typically played in since arriving at OM over the summer.



Furthermore, it appears as if the only ball that Imbula is comfortable and assured with playing is predominantly short passes to teammates immediately ahead of him. He seldom attempts to play balls over the top, in part down to Marseille's game style but also because of a self-admitted lack of confidence on his part. In terms of the short passing he engages in, when distributing to the flanks especially, the balls he provides are often too far behind his colleagues who have already set off on a surging run. Communication issues are however easily sorted and are characteristic for a youngster who only recently arrived at a new club.

Imbula's jinking and direct style of running is often topped off by the vicious shot that he possesses in his locker which he has been seen to unleash from outside the area on multiple occasions over the course of the calendar year. Although he has only scored three times in Ligue 1 and Ligue 2 collectively in 2013, his goals against Le Havre and Arles Avignon left many salivating. In both cases, Imbula dribbled some way before releasing the final product.

Another final cause for joy for Les Marseillais faithful is that Imbula tends to give his best performances in the big games- he notably impressed during his Champions League debut vs Arsenal in October and L'OM only really lost control of the game once manager Elie Baup had made the decision to bring Imbula off the field of play.

In order to continue his rapid rate of progression, Imbula must ensure that he is not sidelined by the likes of Cheyrou or Lemina for that second defensive midfield spot alongside Alaixys Romao in 2014. He won the UNFP Ligue 2 Player of the Year Award in 2013, what can he win in 2014?

'Truthfully, I had advanced talks with Chelsea. I didn't see myself over there. To do what? It was too early.'

Giannelli Imbula

28th November 2013

DID YOU KNOW? Giannelli Imbula has even offered up to play for the Marseille U19's side since joining OM, just so that he can play competitive matches.

30. Maxwell

Club: Paris Saint Germain

Date of Birth: 27th August 1981

Position: Defender

In went another. 5-0 to Barcelona: a totally dominating display produced yet again by the Spanish giants. But Maxwell looked on from the bench, wishing that he was playing to celebrate with his teammates. Frankly, it was the story of the Brazilian's season during that particular campaign. In the first 18 games Barcelona played, Maxwell had started just 4 of them. He did not want to finish his career like this, watching others play football. Logically, one can retire to do that. Luckily for him, the January transfer window was just around the corner, and an up-and-coming French side were on the lookout...

As we know, Maxwell signed for Paris Saint Germain in January 2012, and soon enough his fortunes began to change. He was given far more playing time at PSG than he was at Barcelona, and after relatively little minutes played in the more physical French league, the Brazilian began to build up his fitness once again- no mean feat for the then 30 year old to achieve. As soon as he was eligible, he started the first six matches in and once he reacted in a positive way to the immediate responsibility placed upon his shoulders, he produced the confidence necessary to express himself as the season went on. It was almost as if the full-back felt he had to prove his own ability to himself again, before really settling in the French capital.

In the 2012/13 season, Maxwell played in 33 of the 38 Ligue 1 games, on the way to helping PSG win the Ligue 1 title. He also managed 2 goals and 3 assists, an impressive record for a player of his position. This meant that he was involved in 5 goals over the course of the season, more than any other defender in the team, as well as the majority of the midfielders. Clearly, Maxwell is particularly strong going forward.

Maxwell's attacking contribution during this first half of the season is already almost as substantial as his totals for the whole of the 2012/2013 campaign. Maxwell already has an impressive 2 goals and 2 assists in the league, meaning he has played a part in 4 goals in total.

In the PSG squad as a whole, only Lucas (7), Cavani (12) and Ibrahimovic (21) have been involved in more goals. Over the course of 2013, it is evident that not only has Maxwell been valuable in defensive terms, but he also provides Les Parisiens with wide option when they look to formulate attacking moves.



The latest statistics also suggest that when Maxwell plays, his teammates thrive on it. PSG have only lost 2 competitive games so far this season, against Benfica in the Champions League and Evian in Ligue 1, conceding 2 goals on both occasions. In both of these games, Maxwell did not play. Having said this, Maxwell can sometimes be a liability at the back with his attacking style of play. In the league this season, without Maxwell PSG on average keep a clean sheet 57% of the time. With Maxwell, though, that figure falls to a considerably lower 42%. Although Maxwell is provides a forward option, he can be liable at the back.

So, what is Maxwell's style of play? Well, as the statistics have shown, he is never afraid to attack from his left back position, as indeed is the Barcelona way. Having spent years developing the technical side of his game at the Nou Camp, Maxwell is extremely comfortable on the ball, both in terms of dribbling and in terms of passing or crossing. In defence, he is solid in 1 on 1 situations and it is often very hard to pass Maxwell if he is in front of you. However, as he is often higher up the pitch, he tends to leave a few gaps behind him in defence, which explains the aforementioned clean sheet statistic.

Overall, Maxwell has been a valuable constant in the PSG setup over the course of 2013. He has been a fundamental part of the Paris Saint Germain defensive line-up, and poses a considerable threat going forward, as well as being a diligent defender. In the summer of 2013, the arrival of one of the most promising French left backs in football at present in the form of Lucas Digne may have been a cause for concern for the veteran Brazilian who now has an obvious successor. However, as the first half of the 2013/2014 campaign showed, Digne was generally kept out of the starting XI for the more experienced Maxwell. How much longer this will be the case is not immediately clear, and with Maxwell set to be celebrating his thirty-third birthday in 2014, he might as well cherish the game-time he is currently receiving.

'He is extraordinary. Always open and happy to give advice. He speaks perfect French as well!'

Lucas Digne

On Maxwell- 5th September 2013

DID YOU KNOW? Maxwell earned his first senior international cap for Brazil at the grand old age of 31, on the 14th August 2013 in a friendly match vs Switzerland.

29. Salomon Kalou

Club: LOSC Lille

Date of Birth: 5th August 1985

Position: Attacker



If one could summarise Salomon Kalou's 2013 with one phrase it would be 'topsy-turvy'. He returned from the Africa Cup of Nations at the beginning of the calendar year in scintillating form, and there was a lot of promise surrounding the Ivorian going into the 2013/14 season. However, as the current campaign begins to take shape, he has not been able to reach the same heights as in the previous season, and has been criticised by many of the Lille faithful themselves. Although Kalou has, and always has had, a lot of natural talent, in recent times his ability to appear both consistent and motivating in showcasing his talent has often come into question.

Salomon Kalou's start to the calendar year saw him produce some of the best form of his career thus far. In the final 15 games of the 2012/13 Ligue 1 season, Kalou managed a significant 12 goals and 3 assists. In those 15 games, his 12 goals were the most scored by anyone in Ligue 1, more than even the mercurial Zlatan Ibrahimovic. There is no question that Kalou was the main reason behind Lille's success in the first half of the calendar year of 2013 and they were unfortunate to miss out on continental qualification in May 2013, although their abhorrent first half of the 2012/2013 campaign left them ultimately with too much to do.

Kalou managed to get that number of goals in the first half of 2013 because he was finishing prolifically. When he was given a chance by his teammates, he would seem to always find a way of putting it away. In fact, the majority of his goals were not at all spectacular, but were just well taken when the chance came. His finishing inside the box was his real strength; in fact 11 of those 12 goals were scored from inside the 18 yard box, most of them being rather routine finishes from around 6 or so yards out.

However, in this strength lies one of Kalou's main weaknesses. As a striker, he relies almost solely on being able to finish chances. When things are going well and he is in good form, he takes his chances, and his scoring record appears to be brilliant. However, Kalou often finds himself in prolonged spells of goal scoring drought, where his concentration levels are not what they can be, and suddenly his finishing is nowhere near as consistent. Unfortunately for the Ivorian, this was exactly what happened at the beginning of the 2013/14 season.

If Kalou's form in the first half of the calendar year was spectacular, his form in the second half of the year was disappointing to say the least. In the opening 19 games of the Ligue 1 season, he scored just 6 goals, meaning he was ranked 18th in terms of Ligue 1's top scorers at the halfway stage of the season. Compared to his blistering form earlier in the year, this was a considerable step down for Salomon Kalou, and the Lille fans began to turn against their front man, who is well-known for being on notoriously high wages for a club of Les Dogues' financial means. But how did this spell of bad form affect a player who looked untouchable just a few months previously?

As we have mentioned previously, Kalou's game relies on his acute sense of positioning, and his ability to finish chances when they come. What has happened recently to Kalou is not to do with a lack of chances; a talented player like Kalou tends to still have a knack of getting into good positions even when they are in a bad run of form. Rather, it is down to the fact that he was just physically unable to put away most of the chances that came his way. Just as Kalou can put together a run of games in which he cannot stop scoring, as he did in the first half of 2013, he is just as capable of putting together a run of games in which he cannot start scoring, and this is what frustrates fans so much. Finishing relies heavily on confidence, and when a player does not have it, like Kalou in recent months, it is often very hard to get it back. If Kalou could improve his consistency, he could raise his game to the next level, but given the nature of his game, and the fact that it relies so strongly on confidence, consistency is something that is very hard to come by for Salomon Kalou. Something he may never come by, being a player naturally so sensitive mentally.

All in all, Kalou has had an impressive calendar year. Despite the aforementioned criticism, his impulsive and instinctive finishing, when they are apparent, make him into one of the most accomplished forwards in France's top flight. If he had been able to continue the brilliant form he had earlier on in 2013, he would be ranked much higher on this list, but even so, the Ivorian remains a force to be reckoned with, and strongly merits his place on the GFFN 100.

'In football, nobody is untouchable. But we must accept with the squads they have, we are underneath them.'

Salomon Kalou

On AS Monaco and PSG- 26th October 2013

DID YOU KNOW? Salomon Kalou tried on several occasions to obtain Dutch citizenship when at Feyenoord so that he could represent the Netherlands internationally, but was denied a fast-track by the Immigration department so he ended up representing Ivory Coast instead.

28. Grégory Sertic

Club: Girondins de Bordeaux

Date of Birth: 5th August 1989

Position: Midfielder

Bordeaux or sometimes more appropriately named 'Bore-deaux' were everybody's least favourite draw specialists in French football for the most part of 2013. As Les Girondins go through a period of transition, replacing some of the more experienced and complacent members of the squad with initially obscure, cost effective signings from South America or products of their very own youth academy. Although Sertic signed his first professional deal with Bordeaux over five years ago now, he certainly belongs to the latter category. At the age of 24, Sertic took advantage of the immense faith Bordeaux manager Francis Gillot placed upon his shoulders to fill the defensive midfield role, typically alongside either Landry N'Guemo or Lamine Sané. It is however important to note that Sertic remained the constant in the starting XI while the other defensive midfielders in the squad vied for a position alongside the Frenchman over the course of 2013.

While Sertic possesses the necessary talent to incisively and delicately carve out chances and distribute the ball wide to one of the designated Bordeaux wingers, his other defensive midfield partner in Francis Gillot's system tends to play the role of the 'ball-gatherer', disrupting the opposition's flow of play, even if they fail at times to fully win the ball back to start their own attacks. The 24 year old Franco-Croatian midfielder notably spent a season at France's most prestigious footballing academy, Clairefontaine, as well as with three other youth academies before integrating into Bordeaux's junior setup. This forced Sertic to adapt to changes in tactics, position and formation at a very tender age and the fact that he was exposed to as many different ways of teaching the game as possible can only have provided him with a greater amount of ammunition for when he reached the professional stage.

With just three assists in the league during this calendar year, many may be wondering why a midfielder that is ranked so highly in this year's GFFN 100 does not have more to his name. Accepting that Bordeaux's current game plan at the time of writing is one that heavily relies on its wingers can best dispel these doubts. Often, Sertic notches up the 'assist of the assist' by releasing the likes of Henri Saivet or Nicolas Maurice Belay into space with a delicate through ball, which they can then recover and deliver a cross in to target man Cheick Diabaté or cut inside and find Ludovic Obraniak on the edge of the area. This is perhaps the best way of explaining away Sertic's rather weak assist tally for 2013.



In terms of goals, the story is similar but different. Sertic is not renowned for scoring week-in, week-out but when he does find the back of the net, he provides precious moments for Bordeaux fans to savour for weeks after. Strikes in September and November against Lorient and OGC Nice respectively were nothing short of mouth-watering, the latter goal being especially impressive, with astonishing drive and accuracy behind the ball to score one of the very first goals for an opposition team in OGC Nice's brand new Allianz Riviera stadium.

Sertic's omnipresence in the Bordeaux side over the course of the year has been nothing short of impressive, as Mr Consistent made certain that Les Girondins were never completely overrun by opposition in league matches. He keeps a cool head among some colleagues with rather fiery personalities. This is evidenced by the fact that of all the games that Bordeaux played at a national level in 2013 when Sertic started, they have only lost one game by more than two goals, when they recently capitulated at home to a Nantais side in red-hot form in November.

As for an international career, Sertic is of dual-nationality, meaning he could represent either France or Croatia at international level. Although it currently remains unknown whether or not current Croatian manager Niko Kovač has an interest in introducing Sertic to the setup, he certainly has the ability to become a crucial asset for that country. Having represented France at U21 level on several occasions, there may yet be a part of Sertic that is holding on to an unlikely dream of playing for Les Bleus' senior side. This is not to say that Sertic lacks the ability, but simply that the defensive midfield position is one of the most highly contested areas of the field at present, with the likes of Blaise Matuidi, Paul Pogba, Yohan Cabaye, Étienne Capoue and many more all battling for those spaces.

To conclude, Sertic's 2013 was one of immense progression and success. Let us not forget that Bordeaux were this year's Coupe de France victors, edging out Evian TG FC in a closely contested 3-2 final matchup. It may be another season or two before the rest of Europe takes the notice which Sertic's play merits, but if any side can force through their interest early, they could well reap the rewards for seasons to come.

'That's what I want. To become a leader in this team.'

Grégory Sertic

On Bordeaux- 21st September 2013

DID YOU KNOW? Grégory Sertic has already won 5 major trophies in his career with Bordeaux, two Trophées des Champions (2008,2009), Ligue 1 (2008/09), Coupe de la Ligue (2008/09) and Coupe de France (2012/2013).

27. Steve Mandanda

Club: Olympique de Marseille

Date of Birth: 28th March 1985

Position: Goalkeeper



In 2013, Steve Mandanda's team, Olympique de Marseille, have had a turbulent time to say the least. However, the French goalkeeper has done everything he can to help the team stick together, playing every minute of every Ligue 1 game that Marseille have had in 2013. Many claim that, if it was not for the experienced Mandanda consistently playing in goal and controlling the Marseille defence, the fall from grace of his team would have been far more dramatic. Having said that, Mandanda has attracted some critics in the last calendar year, and his position as France's number 2 goalkeeper looks like it could be under threat. So, what is the real tale of Mandanda's 2013?

In the first half of the year, with the 2012/13 season was coming to a close, Mandanda was in inspired form. In the 19 Ligue 1 matches that he played, he conceded just 16 goals, which was the second least of any goalkeeper, beaten only by PSG's Salvatore Sirigu. In that time, he also kept 9 clean sheets, almost 1 every 2 games, of which 7 came in consecutive matches in a run that was only topped by Enyeama's heroics later in 2013. Overall, last year, Marseille's attack ranked as only the 14th best in Ligue 1, but Marseille ended up finishing in 2nd place in the league. Clearly, Marseille's defence, led by Mandanda, was a huge factor behind their admittedly surprising success last season.

This time around, in the latter half of 2013, both Mandanda and Marseille as a team have been far less effective. At the halfway stage of the season, Marseille are 6th in the Ligue 1 table, and Mandanda has kept just 5 clean sheets and conceded 20 goals. His form in this current season has drawn plenty of denigrators, who suggest that Mandanda's time at the peak of his game is coming to an end. However, Marseille's centre backs have been far less settled this season, mainly due to the injury and the adjudged decline in form of Lucas Mendes, so that may have more to do with Marseille's recent defensive slump rather than Mandanda's own failings.

So, what kind of a goalkeeper is Steve Mandanda? First and foremost, he is a great leader at the back. He commands his defensive players very well, which is a crucial skill for any goalkeeper, and was considered to have such great leadership skills that Elie Baup gave him the captaincy of the club. He is always vocal on the field, telling his defenders where to be.

In terms of his shot-stopping ability, he does not have the quickest reactions of any Ligue 1 goalkeepers, nor is he particularly quick off his line. However, his sense of positioning is right on point. When a shot comes towards goal Mandanda is very rarely flummoxed or caught out by what is flying towards him. His sense of anticipation, which has been refined and perfected as the seasons have gone by, means that goalkeeping howlers are rarely discussed when it comes to Marseille's number one. This therefore ensures Mandanda consistency to some extent, because, unlike some goalkeepers, he does not rely on making sharp reflex saves that may or may not come off. Positioning is something that does not necessarily ever go away, which has allowed Mandanda to have such a long and distinguished career.

Another very important part of Mandanda's game is the fact that he is explosive from a standing position. At his age, 29 years old, you would perhaps not expect Mandanda to have a particularly powerful standing dive, but by generating power from his legs he is able to spring off the ground and make some brilliant diving stops. This means that he is, at least to some extent, able to reduce the influence of his lack of height. Standing at 6ft 1, Mandanda is by no means exceedingly tall for a goalkeeper, but with a combination of his positioning skill and his jumping ability, he is able to be an extremely effective one nonetheless.

Lastly, although this is probably not the most important skill for a goalkeeper, Mandanda is quite good at saving penalties, and has shown this in 2013. He saved Mustapha Yatabaré's penalty in Marseille 3-1 win at Guingamp and, more recently, saved a Mesut Özil's spot kick against Arsenal in their Champions League group stage fixture.

To conclude, although Mandanda has perhaps not had an ideal end to 2013, he remains a very good goalkeeper that can do the job for France in the summer should Hugo Lloris becomes unavailable. His team, Olympique de Marseille, are struggling, but it would be better to get behind Mandanda, one of the only constants in the team, rather than to slate him. Whilst he has had a dip in form, he remains one of Ligue 1's top goalkeepers.

'I could not see myself leaving this club for PSG.'

Steve Mandanda

3rd October 2013

DID YOU KNOW? Steve Mandanda's brothers both play professional football. Parfait is also a goalkeeper, plying his trade in Belgium at Charleroi and Riffi also plays between the sticks at the youth setup at Caen.

26. Bruno Ecuele Manga

Club: FC Lorient

Date of Birth: 16th July 1988

Position: Defender

The next man to make this larger-than-life French football list is none other than Lorient centre back Bruno Ecuele Manga. The 25-year-old has impressed in 2013 being a crucial part of Lorient's recent mid-table stability. His form has helped Lorient keep a very tight defensive record, especially in the last few months of the year.

Ecuele Manga joined Lorient in 2010 as a long-term replacement for Laurent Koscielny, who of course joined Arsenal earlier in that year. At Lorient, Ecuele Manga soon began to flourish and secure his place at the heart of the defence. He has the ideal physical build to be a centre back – he carries a resilient build and stands at 6 ft 1, so he is able to use his strength when he needs to. However, his strength does not mean he lacks any pace. In fact, when compared to the average centre back, he is rather quick on his feet. This means that Ecuele Manga is not just another brutish Ligue 1 defender but is instead capable of successfully implementing his very unique style of play. He is unyielding in the air, convincing when taken on in a one-on-one dribble and alert enough to hurtle back to strikers who manage to run in behind Les Merlus' defence. In the first 17 games of the Ligue 1 2013/14 season, he only committed 10 fouls and received just one yellow card. This proves that he Ecuele Manga can aptly rely on his own abilities without the need to commit cynical fouls to get his side out of potential trouble.

Although Lorient made a very slow start to the 2013/2014 campaign, (they were 18th after 10 games), they have managed to recover since then to mid-table security in the weeks from November into December. This recovery has been based primarily around the mental vigour of the defence, of which Ecuele Manga is practically undeniably the heart and soul. From their game against Reims in early November, Lorient kept 5 consecutive clean sheets and won 4 games in a row. Ecuele Manga played in all of these games, and was one of the main reasons why Lorient were able to keep so many clean sheets.



We were shown how much Lorient missed their captain and leader in late 2012 to early 2013, a period in which Ecuele Manga was out injured for 6 months. At one point in that period, Lorient dropped as far as 12th in the table, but when Ecuele Manga returned Lorient's form picked up again, and they rose as high as 4th in the Ligue 1 table. What Ecuele Manga brought and still brings to the club is not only a brilliant defensive awareness, but also crucial leadership. He is an influential player, who puts his heart into everything he does on the pitch, and this inspires his teammates to do the same. A term that is probably over-used in football punditry these days is that of 'leading by example' but Ecuele Manga typifies it.

If you perform at a consistently high level like Ecuele Manga, you are bound to attract interest from other clubs, and that was no different in the Gabon international's case. It was rumoured that clubs such as Everton, Liverpool and Marseille themselves were in talks to sign the player, but it is a credit to the Lorient captain that he was able to resist such interest. He acknowledged the interest from Marseille, saying to RMC that 'It is always a pleasure to know that you are being courted.' However, he was keen to develop at Lorient for at least another season, and to see how it went from there.

There is no doubt that Bruno Ecuele Manga has a bright future ahead of him. At 25 years old he is not exactly very young in footballing terms, but one cannot help but think that his best days at a big club are still ahead of him. His muscular build should stand him in good stead to go a substantial distance in his career in terms of seasons played than most other footballers, and the experience he has gained by being made captain of Lorient will definitely help him in the future if he does decide to move on. As it stands though, Lorient have a top quality centre back in their ranks, and Ecuele Manga is going from strength to strength.

'I want to play in England!'

Bruno Ecuele Manga

26th June 2013

DID YOU KNOW? Bruno Ecuele Manga was snubbed of a new contract by former employers Girondins de Bordeaux earlier on in his career. Another one that got away from Bordeaux...

25. Franck Tabanou

Club: AS Saint Étienne

Date of Birth: 16th July 1988

Position: Midfielder



Franck Tabanou is not quite the type of player that you would first imagine when you are told to think of a winger. He is not particularly quick, nor does he have magical feet, but he remains an extremely effective force in Ligue 1, something he has proven consistently over the course of the past calendar year. He has a fantastic work rate, and will do anything to help his team, including being played out of position, which he has done with success in the past.

When defenders come up against Tabanou, they know they have to be wary. He is a creative player, and will punish defenders who are not concentrating fully. Tabanou relies on knowing exactly where to be to finish a chance, and if his marker is caught ball watching or wondering off, Tabanou will occupy the empty space immediately and look to be found by his teammates. In fact, of the 4 Ligue 1 goals he scored in the calendar year of 2013, 3 of them came from deliveries to the back post, in which he made a run across his opposite full back to finish past the goalkeeper. Tabanou is one of the cleverest player's in the French league, and will make clever runs to beat defenders rather than relying on his technical skill to pass them.

Another one of Tabanou's greatest strengths is once again something that is not often associated with a winger. Defensively, Tabanou is accomplished, and is never afraid to cover his full back when the team needs him to do so. Some wide players hate defending, and will refuse to come back and help out even when their team is already in front. Tabanou is the exact opposite – he is a workaholic who is never afraid to put his body on the line for his team, and is a real box-to-box flank midfielder. His ability to defend is a massive bonus for managers, since they know that their left flank will be well covered whenever Tabanou is playing. In fact, he is so strong at the back that he has even been used as a left back in the past when teams have been affected by injuries.

In goal scoring terms, Tabanou has had a relatively average 2013, having scored just 4 goals in Ligue 1 in the calendar year. However, his game brings much more than just goals, so perhaps that is to be expected. Even so, Tabanou's best performances have come in Europe, where, unlike in the French leagues, less focus is on pace and power, and it is a little more about guile and craft, two things which Tabanou has in abundance. In the two Europa League qualifiers that St Étienne played, Tabanou scored a goal and made an outstanding 5 assists. The foreign teams struggled to contain the hard-working Tabanou, as he made incisive pass after incisive pass. Perhaps the defenders did not quite realise how different Tabanou's playing style was to some other wingers.

However, that is not to say that Tabanou has poor control or skill on the ball. In fact, it is quite the opposite. Although he does not often rely on it, he definitely has the ability to pass players down the wing, as he has demonstrated on many occasions this calendar year. The most memorable moment in which Tabanou produced a moment of skill to score a goal was against Nancy earlier in 2013. He picked up the ball on the left wing, performed a series of step overs and passed his marker, and then smashed a bullet of a shot into the near post past the goalkeeper. Far from being one-dimensional, Tabanou has a technical side to his game as well.

So, then, which areas of his game can Tabanou improve? Well, to start off with 4 goals in a calendar year is not really as many as one would like from a player of Tabanou's standard playing at a club as big as St Etienne. To score more goals, which has to be his aim for this young, driven winger, he should focus on improving his shooting ability. Often, because he is so clever with the positions he takes up, he gets a lot of chances, but he really needs to up his conversion rate. If he improves his shooting, he could make the step up to the elite level of wingers.

To conclude, Tabanou has had an impressive 2013 by all accounts. Although his goal tally perhaps leaves something to be desired, his commitment is second to none, and he is invaluable to whichever team he plays in. He has shown sparks of brilliance, especially in European games, and if he can find that level consistently, 2014 could be a great year for the 25 year old Frenchman.

'At St Étienne, the formation asks me to change a lot. I had to change everything, far from my friends.'

Franck Tabanou

On a difficult transition to St Étienne- 21st December 2013

DID YOU KNOW? Franck Tabanou has represented France at U21 and U20 levels.

24. Maxime Gonalons

Club: Olympique Lyonnais

Date of Birth: 10th March 1989

Position: Midfielder

It has to be said that 2013 has not been as big a success for Maxime Gonalons as his previous two years at Lyon were in 2011 and 2012. The Lyon team as a whole has had a poor 2013 with a slight break down at the end of last campaign, including beatings by Bastia amongst others, and a dreadful start to this season, with at least five losses before Christmas. Gonalons has nevertheless remained a strong presence in the middle of the park for Lyon, but is in the GFFN 100 mainly for his performances at the back end of last season than so far this year.

At the beginning of the calendar year, Gonalons was given the captain's armband by coach Remi Garde as a reward for his services the club thus far when it became clear in January that Lisandro Lopez was on his way out. However, it does appear that Gonalons has maybe focused more on this new level of responsibility than developing his own game and his performances have tended to suffer, most notably during the 2013/2014 campaign. As Gonalons himself has put it, 'Captaincy comes with great responsibility.' To be frank, there is little evidence to suggest that Gonalons has been a great captain with poor performances from his team on the pitch this season. Nevertheless, however, we are being very harsh. Gonalons' partnership with Grenier towards the back end of last season was brilliant to watch, whereas this season, the 24 year has been forced to sit a little deeper in order to protect a sometimes fragile defence.

When the player has moved to a more central midfield role, he has been able to control the tempo of the game better. We have still seen glimpses of brilliance from Gonalons this year despite the dip in form; the player has broken down countless attacks and despite a fairly poor defensive record, he is the main reason as to why Lyon have not conceded more goals. The midfielder is extremely good at picking the ball up and out of danger and then distributing it to start attacks, with his passing one of his major strong-suits. Gonalons' aerial presence is also notable as a skill that has been improved in recent times and this is maybe another reason why he is sitting deeper in order to cut off attacks this season.

The French international has put in some good performances this season and does appear to be improving every game, as have Lyon since September-time. A recent man of the match performance in a disappointing home draw to Valenciennes showed the true incline of his climb from the start of this season and he is looking to regain that form of 2012.



In the Europa League, it has been a different story, it appears. Gonalons was impressive in last season's competition at the start of 2013, putting in two inspiring performances at home and away in an aggregate loss to Tottenham Hotspur. The midfielder has tended to play slightly further forward in his few games in the competition this season and was rewarded with a goal recently against Portuguese side Vitoria de Guimaraes.

One main reason why Gonalons' standard of performance may have dropped is due to the constant speculation surrounding his future. The 24 year old has been constantly linked with Arsenal in the Premier League amongst others, but no concrete action has been taken. A firmer link, however, has been with Napoli, who made a number of unsuccessful bids for the player in the summer and do look set to return for him, possibly this winter. However, Gonalons himself has announced that he will not be going anywhere until the end of the season, saying: '*I will not be leaving this Winter.*', but a move to Napoli at the end of the season does seem possible, with the player admitting that he is in contact with the Italian side: 'Yes I am in contact with Napoli. Yes, it is interesting for next summer.' Thus perhaps Gonalons is being distracted. His slightly lower level of performance may have been caused by that slight lack of desire, although that does not appear to have put Benitez's team off, as the fact remains that despite being off form, Gonalons is still churning out performances level with some good players in Ligue 1 and the Napoli manager will know from glimpses this season that the player can do so much better on his day.

Gonalons has failed in his bid to represent the national team this year, last representing them at the end of 2012. This may be due to his drop in form or merely the good form of the likes of Paul Pogba and Blaise Matuidi, who are managing to keep other good French players out of the side, such as Yann M'Vila, to give an example.

Overall, we are probably being harsh on Gonalons in this GFFN 100 piece. He is playing in a team not performing and sometimes it is easy to single out the key players for blame. He is still one of Lyon's better players and indeed one of the best in Ligue 1 in that midfield role. He has shown glimpses of his brilliance this season, and despite not perhaps hitting the heights of 2012, he has the talent to establish himself firmly near the top of this year's GFFN 100.

'It is going to be difficult for me to go to Brazil. I am consistent but there are only 23 places.'

Maxime Gonalons

30th November 2013

DID YOU KNOW? Maxime Gonalons is of Iranian descent.

23. Grzegorz Krychowiak

Club: Stade de Reims

Date of Birth: 29th January 1990

Position: Midfielder



Bordeaux rid of a Polish midfielder who was destined to become one of the most impressive commanders of the centre of the park five years on in 2013. Not for Bordeaux but for newly promoted side Stade de Reims, a team that everybody predicted would crash and burn in the top tier of French football.

Just as Reims have been proving their doubters wrong throughout 2013, so to has Krychowiak to his former employers. When Les Girondins shipped him out on loan for the first time in 2008, the then Polish U21 international was forced to start from the very bottom of the French footballing ladder, working hard to win a trial at the then third division battling Champagne-Ardenne located side before securing a loan deal which was later extended by a year after a stellar set of performances secured Krychowiak the support of the Reims faithful at a very early stage in his Rémois career.

Fast-forward another year when Krychowiak was loaned to FC Nantes this time as Bordeaux tried to see if the player was truly able to adapt to different surroundings and that he had not become accustomed to Reims life so much so that FCGB may lose a player with on a permanent basis, if his love for SDR became too strong. Either way, it didn't matter as Bordeaux decided in 2012 that they were not interested in keeping the powerful deep-lying midfielder, despite the glimpses of quality he had shown over this three year period away on loan.

At 6 ft 1, Krychowiak is a strong and coordinated footballer who's lanky legs act allow him to propel himself into challenges with relative calm and this certainly contributes to the fact that the defensive midfielder rarely ever picks up red cards. Most defensive midfielders are more adept to one side of the game than the other. Some are more able in terms of breaking up opposition's attacks and others are better at kick-starting attacks for their own team. Well, Krychowiak is accomplished in both of the aforementioned areas. His distribution has been one of the secrets to Reims' unexpected Ligue 1 successes this calendar year. Not only have Reims staved off the threat of relegation, but, since the 2013/2014 campaign has begun, they have been flirting with the possibility of finishing in a continental qualification position- extraordinarily rapid progress for Hubert Fournier's men.

Krychowiak is very much at the forefront of where the plaudits should be directed to in congratulating Reims on their achievements. His reliable right foot allows him to direct lengthy passes out to tricky wingers including the likes of Floyd Ayité who are then able to take defenders on with their impressive speed and agility.

Krychowiak has two main sources of goalmouth action. The first is from the penalty spot. Four of his six Ligue 1 goals in 2013 were notched up thorough his successful execution of a spot-kick. He has a tendency to hit driven shots into the middle extreme right or left corners of the goal, making it very difficult for opposing goalkeepers to stop his efforts, even if they manage to guess the direction of his penalty, because of the sheer pace which he puts behind them.

Krychowiak's secondary source of goals is through his intelligent positioning in the box at the far post. The Polish international will generally tend to float into the right far post especially to tidy up the pieces should the corner or free kick delivery elude every other player in the box. This was a notably effective tactic, which he deployed against PSG in Reims' famous victory over Les Parisiens at the Stade Auguste Delaune in March of 2013.

In terms of his future, Krychowiak has a gentleman's agreement with Reims President Jean-Pierre Calliot that he can leave the club next summer after rejected approaches from the Bundesliga, Lyon and St Étienne in July and August. Wherever Krychowiak's next adventure takes him, we wish him well. Ligue 1 will certainly be a poorer place devoid of the Pole's defensive midfield majesty.

'It is a really nice region. There a nice houses wherever you go. The Rémois are very proud of that, I understand.'

Grzegorz Krychowiak

10th August 2013

#GFFN recommends: @LaurensJulien: BT Sport's resident Ligue 1 expert can be found putting his French football knowledge to use across the globe for various media outlets. One of the best French football analysts.

22. Geoffrey Kondogbia

Club: AS Monaco

Date of Birth: 15th February 1993

Position: Midfielder



Geoffrey Kondogbia has made a quiet, conscientious start to Ligue 1 life in AS Monaco colours. Before the 2012/13 season, he had made just a handful of appearances for French club RC Lens, and was very much an unfamiliar talent. However, an opportunity arose for the youngster when Spanish club Sevilla took a gamble in acquiring him from the team nicknamed "Sang-et-Or", and what followed surprised virtually ever follower of French football.

From January of 2013 onwards, Kondogbia exploded on the La Liga scene, impressing with his level of maturity and sheer power in the deep-lying midfield role. He played in 17 out of 18 of Sevilla's La Liga games at the backend of the 2012/2013 campaign, and helped them to a respectable 9th place, bringing the club European football in the form of the Europa League. In addition, the 20 year old was critical in Sevilla's Copa del Rey run, in which they narrowly lost out to Atletico Madrid in the semi-finals.

After such a stellar season in Spain, the summer that followed was full of rumours about Kondogbia's next destination, where he would next look to prove himself. Clubs from all over Europe were after his signature, including teams like Arsenal, Juventus and Real Madrid, but he ultimately decided that to take a step forward in his career, he would have take a step back by returning to the country where it had all started: France. AS Monaco met Sevilla's release clause of around €20 million, and Kondogbia thus agreed to join Claudio Ranieri's ambitious side in their objective of qualifying for the Champions League.

However, things have not quite gone to plan for the tall Frenchman so far this season. Up until the winter break, he had only played a full 90 Ligue 1 minutes for Monaco on one occasion. Such is the talent of the squad, especially in midfield, that Kondogbia is finding it difficult to earn consistent game time. However, at just 20 years of age, with so many prosperous seasons ahead of him, he should not be overly concerned that it is taking him some months to settle in another league, with another team. Despite his lack of consistent game time, Kondogbia has provided Monaco with another midfield dimension, when he is substituted on, helping ASM to a current league position of 2nd place behind PSG.

So, what was it about Kondogbia that brought him to the attention of so many top European sides in summer? Standing at 6 ft 2 inches and already of a monstrous build, Kondogbia has a very dominating physical presence in defensive midfield. His height helps him win the aerial battles, which are becoming increasingly vital in a league that relies on brute force in defence, and also enables him to be a threat in the opposition box during set pieces.

Kondogbia's best asset is by far his ability to break up play. Using his strength, he is often able to muscle lighter attacking midfielders off the ball. If he needs to, he will make a sliding challenge, but this is somewhat of a rare occurrence, such is Kondogbia's strength on his feet. He is one of those players that opposing midfielders must hate coming up against, as they know they will not get away without taking a physical hit of some sort from the towering defensive midfielder.

While Kondogbia has the defensive framework that gives him the necessary grounding as a defensive midfielder, those characteristics alone were not enough to make him the distinguished player that he was in Spain. The way in which Kondogbia is able to distribute the ball gave Sevilla and gives Monaco a root where their attacks can begin. When he picks up the ball with space to run into in midfield, he will stride into it right away. His powerful runs, akin to those made by Yaya Touré in the Premier League, are often explosive. His game is, in essence, is so well rounded that he is becoming the midfield powerhouse that was so sought after in the summer.

Geoffrey Kondogbia's decision-making in the final third does however often let him down. When he played for Sevilla during the 2012/13 season, his runs often put him in a position in which he was leading his team's attack, with options either side of him. However, in these types of situations, he often choses the wrong option, whether that is to continue himself or just picking out the wrong pass. Having said that, decision-making often comes with experience, and for a player who is just 20 years old, and with only one full season in a top European League under his belt, he has ample time to rectify that. If he pays attention to the attack-minded players in Monaco in training, he will certainly pick up some useful tips.

Overall, Geoffrey Kondogbia is one of the most promising youngsters in Ligue 1 at the moment. He already has strengths in his game that certain older players in his position will never possess, and if he continues to develop at the rate that he did in 2013, we could have a very special talent on our hands.

'I don't think I realised how difficult the transition would be at the age of 20.'

Geoffrey Kondogbia

30th November 2013

#GFFN recommends: @mattspiro: France based football writer who is responsible for worldwide Ligue 1 coverage and has played an essential role in widening the Ligue 1 audience.

21. Clement Grenier

Club: Olympique Lyonnais

Date of Birth: 15th February 1993

Position: Midfielder



It was the beginning of the 2011/12 season, and Grenier knew it had to be his breakthrough year. There were, of course, doubters. After all, Grenier was just 20 years of age at the time, and unproven at Ligue 1 level, having made just 10 career appearances in the competition. It was of course risk for a club like Lyon, one of France's top sides, to put their faith in this young, raw talent, but Grenier was determined to succeed. Two and a half years later, it appears that the gamble paid off. The young Grenier has developed into one of the most exciting French attacking midfielders, and is now almost an irreplaceable part of Lyon's attacking threat.

2013 has been yet another year of impressive development for the young French international. In statistical terms, this has been without doubt the most prolific calendar year of his career. Over the course of 2013, Grenier managed to score 9 goals and make 5 assists in the league, which is an awfully good rate for a midfielder. He has, in particular, developed his goal scoring instincts throughout 2013. Though he scored 9 league goals in 2013, he had only scored 1 previous league goal until the end of 2012. Nowadays, Grenier can be relied upon to chip in with a couple of goals as well as assists over the course of a season.

It is also true that Grenier's presence is vital for the overall result of the team, and this is especially clear if one analyses the matches in which Grenier has played less than 45 minutes. This has happened just 6 times in all competitions so far this season, but Lyon have only managed to win one of those games, a 2-1 Europa League victory against Guimaraes, losing 2 and drawing the remaining 3 matches. They also managed 6 goals, at a rate of exactly one per game, which is comfortably lower than Lyon's overall league average of about 1.5 goals every match. It is clearly evident that Grenier's presence has a positive impact on the team.

But, I hear you say, Lyon are having a poor season by their standards, aren't they? Surely Grenier can't be that impressive if he is part of an underachieving team? Well, as ever, the statistics don't lie; 10th place is no success for Lyon. However, to blame that on the attacking side of their game, the side with which Grenier is almost exclusively involved, would be completely misguided.

At the halfway stage of the Ligue 1 season, Lyon have scored 28 goals in the league. This places them an impressive third in the league if we compare the goals scored so far. The reason behind Lyon's low league position is largely because of their leaky defence. Lyon currently lie in 16th place in Ligue 1 in terms of goals conceded and this, not their attacking force, appears to be the reason behind their slump in the current season.

So, what in Grenier's game allows him to be both a goal-scorer and assist maker? First of all, standing at 6ft 1 inch tall, Grenier is tall and strong enough to be able to come out of 50-50 challenges with the ball, which is a vital skill when playing in midfield. His biggest strength is undoubtedly his passing ability, both short and long distance. Grenier is capable of playing short, sharp passes with team mates that take defenders out of the game, as well as long, cross field diagonal balls to switch play to the side of the field with most space. Grenier's range of passing is one of the most important aspects of his game,

As we have seen, one aspect of Grenier's game that has improved immensely in 2013 is his ability to score goals, and this all comes from his powerful, accurate shot. Grenier can trouble top class goalkeepers with his shot even from long distances, which is why he is one of the club's regular free kick takers. In the last season and a half, Grenier has scored 12 league goals, many of which were brilliant strikes from outside the box. Two spectacular goals from free kicks immediately spring to mind, against Rennes and Nice, and these strikes highlight just how far Grenier's game has come over the course of the last calendar year.

As is clear by his high ranking in the GFFN 100, Grenier has had a brilliant 2013. His passing game remains as strong as it has been throughout his career, but last year he managed to develop an extremely useful ability to pop up with goals himself too. Grenier is only 22 years of age, and it is clear that his future, whether it be with Lyon or elsewhere, will be bright.

'Football is above everything, a pressure. Not a job.'

Clement Grenier

3rd April 2013

#GFFN recommends: @Philby1976: Writer at French Football Weekly, who produces some of the most useful statistical graphics and data collection pieces concerning French football in English.

GFFN 100: 40-21 RECAP:

| | | |
|-----|---------------------|--------------------------|
| #40 | Aymen Abdennour | (Toulouse FC) |
| #39 | Alaixys Romao | (Olympique de Marseille) |
| #38 | Thiago Motta | (Paris Saint Germain) |
| #37 | Saber Khalifa | (Olympique de Marseille) |
| #36 | Sébastien Corchia | (FC Sochaux) |
| #35 | Romain Hamouma | (AS Saint Étienne) |
| #34 | Lucas Moura | (Paris Saint Germain) |
| #33 | Vincent Enyeama | (LOSC Lille) |
| #32 | Lucas Digne | (Paris Saint Germain) |
| #31 | Gianelli Imbula | (Olympique de Marseille) |
| #30 | Maxwell | (Paris Saint Germain) |
| #29 | Salomon Kalou | (LOSC Lille) |
| #28 | Grégory Sertic | (Girondins de Bordeaux) |
| #27 | Steve Mandanda | (Olympique de Marseille) |
| #26 | Bruno Ecuele Manga | (FC Lorient) |
| #25 | Franck Tabanou | (AS Saint Étienne) |
| #24 | Maxime Gonalons | (Olympique Lyonnais) |
| #23 | Grzegorz Krychowiak | (Stade de Reims) |
| #22 | Geoffrey Kondogbia | (AS Monaco) |
| #21 | Clement Grenier | (Olympique Lyonnais) |

20. Remy Cabella

Club: Montpellier HSC

Date of Birth: 8th March 1990

Position: Midfielder



The euphoria of winning the Ligue 1 title had died down. Olivier Giroud, the club's top scorer, had left to English club Arsenal. Montpellier needed a new talisman, a new player to lead their attack. Somebody needed to stand up and be counted. The pressure fell on the shoulders of a young 22 year old Frenchman: Remy Cabella. And boy did he deliver.

The previous year had been an unprecedented one for Montpellier. Against all the odds, facing 'bigger' teams like Lyon and Marseille, they managed to win the Ligue 1 title. It was a breakthrough year for the club, but not quite so ground-breaking for the young Frenchman. Many saw the potential he had but, even though his club achieved great things that season, personally Cabella only managed 3 goals, the same as the previous year, and 2 assists from 29 games. He had established himself as a key first team player for Montpellier, but not yet as a match winner. So, little did people expect that Cabella would have such an explosive next 1 and a half years.

Montpellier, in general, declined after their Ligue 1 triumph. This is due to a variety of factors, not least of all the departures of key players like Olivier Giroud, but one player shone above all during the days of darkness. Remy Cabella finally found his footballing self at the club, and began displaying some brilliant form. He began completely outwitting the opposition's defensive players in his attacking midfield role, both scoring goals and making assists. It would always be difficult to help replace a prolific striker such as Giroud, who scored 21 goals and made 12 assists in their championship-winning season, but Cabella's form went some way towards doing just that.

Last season, Cabella managed to score 7 goals, more than in the rest of his Ligue 1 career combined, and make 7 assists, which was comfortably a more impressive total than any of his teammates; involving himself in a total of 14 goals. The 22-year-old dealt with the expectation on his shoulders as if he was an experienced veteran. He was like a man possessed over the course of that season.

Cabella must have thought that the odds were against him in replicating another season of personal prowess, but he would have been wrong. The 2013-2014 campaign began, and Cabella began to top his outstanding exploits of the previous season. He was on the radar of some big clubs in the summer, but clearly Cabella felt that he had unfinished business with Montpellier, and he was proved right.

Just halfway into the season, with Montpellier still struggling for form, Cabella has once again presented himself as what is commonly referred to as the silver lining. He already has 6 goals and 5 assists from the first 18 games, which places him third in the ranking for Ligue 1's most creative player. Cabella is no longer only making waves in Montpellier with his creative, attacking play; he is raising eyebrows all over France. When one begins to consider that he is just 23 years old, you begin to realise why Cabella has broken into the top twenty talents in the GFFN 100.

So how has he managed it? Well, Cabella clearly has a style of play that causes considerable tribulations for opposition defenders, especially in the past calendar year. When he faces up to defenders during 1 on 1 situations, he is difficult to contend with. One of his much-loved skills is the step-over, which he arguably uses more frequently and with more propensity than anyone else in the league, which adds a layer of complication for the opposing defender, giving Cabella the upper-hand psychologically in these types of situations. Cabella also shows maturity beyond his years in terms of his ability to read the game. This, paralleled with the buoyancy he possesses to vary his distribution makes him the most potent of creative midfielders. Last of all, perhaps Cabella's most telling improvement I'm 2013, is that he is scoring goals, many of which are spectacular. Chips from distance against Kazakhstan and Chile immediately spring to mind from his performances for France, both of which were stunning finishes. Over the past year, he has gained the confidence to attempt such strikes, and it is paying off for him.

2013 has been a fantastic year for the pint-sized Frenchman, nothing short of that breakthrough year that he had so been craving. His eye for a pass and serenity in front of goal is currently the only thing stopping Montpellier from being in serious trouble, Cabella looks like he is enjoying the fight. If he does move, in January or in the summer, whoever signs him will be a much better team for it. If he stays, Montpellier have a real gem on their hands, perhaps the last remaining key to the heights they once reached almost 2 years ago.

'Manchester United? Too early to talk about it!'

Remy Cabella

2nd November 2013

#GFFN recommends: @LaureJames: Often found at the Daily Mail or Sky Sports, this multilingual football journalist is a Montpellier specialist and French football connoisseur also.

19. Kurt Zouma

Club: AS Saint Étienne

Date of Birth: 27th October 1994

Position: Defender

There are some individuals, who, after just five minutes of watching them, are already, clearly something special. At the insanely young age of 19, Kurt Zouma has done what many will never do – establish himself as a starter in a club challenging for major honours at the top level. Zouma is a versatile defender, who can play at centre back or full back with ease, and who has been courted across the continent as we approach the January transfer window, with some big European clubs vying for his signature. So, why does Kurt Zouma deserve this amount of attention?

Still just 19 years old, Kurt Zouma has not quite yet filled into his physical shape. He remains quite lean, and needs a little more time to develop the physical strength that is generally required to play at centre back at the top level. This slight lack of physicality is one of the main reasons why manager Christophe Galtier sometimes prefers to play Zouma at right back when the opposing forwards are particularly corporeal. Having said that, Zouma stands at a towering 6ft 3, so in the air he is a formidable prospect, due to a combination of his agility and his height.

Zouma is also blessed with a considerable amount of pace, which is not necessarily essential at centre back, but it is always a welcome bonus. His speed means that he makes the transition to full back when required relatively painlessly, whereas most modern centre backs would certainly struggle to remain as versatile. In addition, he is already a great reader of the game, despite his lack of experience, and is extremely comfortable on the ball. He will tend not to play long balls from defence; instead favouring the higher-percentage short passes into his midfielders. Whilst his confidence on the ball can occasionally backfire, he generally puts his ability on the ball to good use.

Having said that, Zouma has on occasion in 2013 showed that he is still very much a raw talent, and needs more years in the game to truly develop. In November of 2013, just a few months ago, he went into a full-blooded challenge on Sochaux's Thomas Guerber, which left his opponent with a broken leg and dislocated ankle.



The punishment from the governing body was swift and severe – a ten match ban which Zouma is currently serving. However, it is these kind of experiences from which strong characters are made, and the onus is now on Zouma to respond in the correct way. His challenge was typical of a player still finding their feet in the footballing world, but he must be mature enough to learn from his mistakes.

Generally, Kurt Zouma's 2013 has been a little stop and start, but he has still done enough to convince even the most respected minds that he is one of Europe's biggest up and coming stars. An ankle injury ruled him out for the first few games of the calendar year, but he was soon back at the heart of the St Etienne defence and was a crucial player in their run in at the end of last season. The highlight of those run of games was when Zouma started at centre back in the Coupe de la Ligue final against Rennes, which St Etienne won, whilst also keeping a clean sheet. It was one of Zouma's most impressive performances during his time at St Etienne as a professional footballer.

However, Kurt Zouma's 2013 truly peaked in the summer, when most other players were away from football. He was a crucial member of France's winning U20 team, who were crowned World Champions in July of 2013. He played every single minute of each of the knockout round matches, ensuring that France conceded just 3 goals in 4 matches, and even scored a goal himself in France's quarter final clash against Uzbekistan. He was one of the standout players in that France squad, and drew praise from most who watched him.

Overall, Kurt Zouma is one of French football's hottest properties. Even if he does leave the French league, which is looking increasingly likely, he will be a major player in France's future ambitions on a European or World Cup stage. The tall defender has been touted as one of the most exciting young players on a global level, and anyone who has watched him over the last calendar year can see why.

'That tackle was useless for all involved. I hope the sanction is just.'

Thomas Guerber

On Kurt Zouma's horror tackle- 7th November 2013

DID YOU KNOW? Kurt Zouma has a older brother called Lionel, who plays as a centre-back for Sochaux.

18. André Ayew

Club: Olympique de Marseille

Date of Birth: 17th December 1989

Position: Midfielder

André Ayew is forming a somewhat distinguished career in French football, and his performances during the calendar year have certainly aided the Ghanaian international in adding to that. He is closing in on 150 Ligue 1 appearances, and is still just 24 years old, which is hard to believe considering his wide-ranging consistency and apparent Ligue 1 longevity. In 2013, he came close to reaching the heights he hit in the 2010/11 season, which was undoubtedly the best of his career to date, as he helped Marseille to finish a very respectable 2nd in Ligue 1, behind Champions PSG, in the 2012/13 season. In the current season, Marseille have not done as well, which can partially be attributed to the fact that Ayew was injured for Marseille's last 8 games of the calendar year.

André Ayew is a player that will trouble even the best of Ligue 1's full backs. As a left-footed left winger, rather than cutting inside and shooting, he prefers to take on his opposing full back down the line and provide crosses for his teammates, which is the main source of his assists. However, when he is looking to score goals, hugging the left touchline does little to help. As a result, Ayew often drifts into a slightly more central role, and will make runs in between the right centre back and the right back to have a better chance of being put through on goal. He has scored goals from those types of runs in the last calendar year, most notably against Rennes last season.

However, somewhat surprisingly, this is not from where Ayew marks the back of the net the most. Although, at 5ft 9 inches, he is by no means tall and imposing, he scores an outrageous amount of headers. In the 2012/13 Ligue 1 season, 5 of his 9 goals came from headers. He manages to score these headed goals because very often he is lurking at the far post from crosses from the right hand side, and he manages to lose his marker, who perhaps is generally not aware of Ayew's heading prowess. When the ball arrives, Ayew has a decent leap, as you would expect from an agile winger, and places his headers to perfection past the goalkeeper. The fact that Ayew can hurt you both with his head and his left foot makes him all the more difficult to deal with for defenders, as it adds a layer of unpredictability to his game.

So, how has Ayew's calendar year been? Well, he scored a very impressive 9 goals in the 2012/13 season, to add to his 4 assists, helping his team Marseille to a 2nd place finish in Ligue 1.



His tally of 9 goals was only topped by Andre-Pierre Gignac within Marseille, and was the third highest total in Ligue 1 by midfielders. Andre Ayew was an integral part of the Marseille team that finished runners up, playing 35 of the 38 Ligue 1 games – only Mathieu Valbuena (37) and Nicolas Nkoulou (38) played more from outfield positions. André, alongside his younger brother Jordan, gave that Marseille team the pace to trouble the majority of opposition defences.

The beginning of the 2013/2014 campaign saw a little dip in form for Ayew. He managed just 2 goals and 1 assist in the first 10 matches of the season, before an injury cut his 2013 short. However, during the games in which Ayew was either injured or suspended, it was evident as to how Marseille sorely missed their attacking engine. Even when Ayew is not directly affecting the score line through a goal or an assist, the never-ending impetus that he adds to OM's game not only spurs his teammates forward but also ensures that Marseille produce a greater quantity of clear-cut chances. In the 10 Ligue 1 games in which Ayew played in the second half of 2013, Marseille had a win percentage of 50%. Without him, that figure dropped to 33%. It is clear that Marseille were missing the injured Ayew in the back end of the calendar year of 2013.

As we have now established, André Ayew is a key segment of Marseille's current setup. There are talks that certain clubs, including a few from the Premier League, are after his signature. If a move does go through, it will heap even more misery on a Marseille team that has seen enough agony in the last 6 months. Ayew is an extremely exciting prospect, who is developing into a very well-rounded winger, so for the sake of Ligue 1 we should hope he can stay.

Overall, Andre Ayew is one of the more exciting players to have made the GFFN 100. He is never afraid to take players on and, as we have seen, is a big goal threat, whether that is from the ground or in the air. He is still young, at just 24 years of age, and will undoubtedly continue to develop in Ligue 1 with Marseille. If Ayew can keep improving, he can become a regally special player.

'He's not my idol.'

André Ayew

On David Beckham · 19th February 2013

DID YOU KNOW? André Ayew is a Liverpool fan.

17. Marquinhos

Club: Paris Saint Germain

Date of Birth: 14 May 1994

Position: Defender

2013 was a year in which 'barely-an-adult' centre-back Marquinhos achieved many personal, football firsts. He won his first international cap for Brazil, putting to bed the debate of which senior international setup he would align with, Portugal or the Seleção Brasileira. Luis Filipe Scolari convinced Marquinhos to join the latter and he earned his first call up in late October 2013.

The next outstanding event that occurred for the 19 year old was his big-money summer move to Qatari-owned giants of French football, Paris Saint Germain. This deal was done for a staggering 35 million euros, a fee that is testament to the Brazilian's dazzling rise through the ranks of European football, having joined AS Roma just twelve months earlier for ten times less that amount (€3m) from Brazilian leviathans Corinthians.

One can therefore assume that the teenager must have something special about him, with many touting Marquinhos to become the next Thiago Silva. If that is indeed the case, then PSG have done some pretty spectacular business in terms of Brazilian central defenders in the past 2 seasons.

Marquinhos' style of play very much typifies that of the modern central defender. A player built to deal with every situation; Marquinhos possesses great technical ability with the ball at his feet, which enables him to calmly diffuse what would otherwise appear to be chaotic defensive situations. This is highlighted by the 88.9% pass completion rate that he amassed during the 2012-2013 season in Serie A with the Italian capital club.

The Brazilian's approach to defending is not to use power and strength to dispossess attackers but instead to assess the run of play and to make intelligent decisions by understanding where the ball is going to be played next. As a result, his sliding challenges are almost always clean and timed to perfection, meaning that the defender rarely commits fouls, because of the way in which he defends guarantees that he seldom comes into any contact at all with an opposing attacker.

While this furnishes his game with uniqueness, it also points at the current failings present in Marquinhos' game. At 6ft, he is neither the tallest nor one of Ligue 1's most imposing centre-backs and likely struggles in training when faced with the aerial challenge that a player like Zlatan Ibrahimovic poses him.



Marquinhos has played just nine Ligue 1 matches in 2013 and has admittedly struggled to break the centre back pairing of Alex and Thiago Silva, especially because of how personally close the two more experienced Brazilian centre backs have become in recent months, with the former rumoured to be insisting to the PSG board that they extend the ex-Chelsea man's contract which is set to expire at the end of the season. Marquinhos has therefore played about half of his games filling in at the heart of the defence and the other half at right-back when Gregory van der Wiel was out of action in November/December time.

In both positions, he has quietly excelled, but the lack of consistency in terms of game time has made it problematic for him in terms of producing a string of notable performances together.

The player's pace and athleticism allows him to cut out danger when defending but also to create problems for the opposition from attacking set pieces. Although his often-wayward heading is not advantageous, his ability to react first in a penalty area scramble is. This is incidentally how he was able to score his first ever Ligue 1 goal in September 2013 against Toulouse. With his initial effort being blocked, Marquinhos reacted first to Toulouse goalkeeper Ali Ahamada's stop to force the ball into the back of the net.

Marquinhos has also produced several sparkling Champions League performances, playing a part in every group game, but most poignantly against Benfica, when an injury to Thiago Silva allowed his compatriot protégé the chance to perform impressively and with poise as PSG eased to a 3-0 victory. A reason for this is most likely the less physical nature of the Champions League compared to Ligue 1 and this suits Marquinhos game style better.

With the aforementioned accomplishments in mind, it is difficult to fathom that this central defensive starlet is just 19 years old and with his whole career ahead of him. PSG and Brazil are fortunate to have arguably the most talented young centre back on the planet representing them.

'With PSG, what is happening is magical.'
Marquinhos

14th October 2013

#GFFN recommends: @jeromepugmire: An AFP journalist with sensical French football views and analysis.

16. Loïc Perrin

Club: AS Saint Étienne

Date of Birth: 7th August 1985

Position: Defender



It was the summer of 2012, the end of the 2011/12 season, and a period of relaxation and joy was consequently supposed to occur, a time to look back at the past season with pride. Not so, though, for Loïc Perrin. The previous season had been disappointing, to say the least. Perrin was out for more than two-thirds of the season with a crucible ligament injury and, in the games that he did play; he was often played out at right back, which was not his favoured position. He knew that 2012/13 had to be better and, as it turns out it was one of the most successful seasons of his career. Now, in 2014, we look back at a revolutionary year in Loïc Perrin's career, in which he has answered fans and critics alike with a series of impressive performances at his new position: centre back.

After the initial two matches of the 2012/13 season, Loïc Perrin was pushed from the right back position to the heart of the defence at centre back. He shone so exceptionally in his new-fangled role that he became a consistent starter there for his side Saint-Étienne. He soon became an invaluable player for his club, and he was sorely missed whenever he was incapable of playing for one reason or another. Last season, Perrin did not play at centre back in just 7 games in all competitions. During these 7 games, Saint-Etienne's record read as follows: 1 victory, 2 draws and 4 losses. It is clear that from the results of the matches whereby Perrin did not play at the heart of the defence that he is a vital ingredient to his side's success.

The 2012/13 season, the first season in which Perrin played at centre back regularly for Saint-Etienne, ended with a big success for the club. Although they were beaten to 4th spot by Nice, Saint-Etienne finished the season with the 2nd best defensive record out of all the Ligue 1 clubs, an achievement that Perrin was rightfully credited for. Perhaps more significantly, Saint-Etienne additionally managed to win the Coupe de la Ligue after a thrilling cup run that saw them edge past PSG and Lille on the way to a 1-0 victory over Rennes in the final. For Perrin, it was exactly the year that he had been striving for to follow the most disappointing season of his career. A constant in a side that produced some of the most watchable Ligue 1 football that season, that was of course spearheaded by Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang.

Perrin's impressive form has continued into the current season. Saint-Etienne currently lie 5th at the halfway stage of the season, with a game in hand over 4th-placed Bordeaux, but the statistics suggest that they could have been even higher if their captain Perrin had been able to play all of their league games. For injury reasons, Perrin has only been able to play the full 90 minutes in 13 of the 18 league games so far. In these 13 games, Saint-Etienne's record is: 9 wins, 2 draws and 2 losses.

In the remaining 5 games, the record stands at: 0 victories, 1 draw and 4 losses. With Perrin, Saint-Etienne's record resembles that of a title winning side. Without him, the record is comfortably worse than any of the relegation candidates. The impact of Loïc Perrin on this Saint-Etienne team could not be clearer.

So, what in Perrin's game has made him such a successful defender over the course of the past calendar year? At just around 5ft 11 inches tall, Perrin is by no means the tallest centre back you will see, but he is still very strong in the air. This is due to his leap; he can often out jump taller strikers to win his aerial duels. In fact, Perrin managed to score 5 goals in the last calendar year, 4 of which were headers.

Perrin's stature and experience as a full back also guarantees that he is faster than the majority of central defenders in Ligue 1. This is an added benefit when playing at the heart of the defence. It is by no means necessary to be particularly rapid to play in that position, but it can be extremely beneficial, especially when facing quick, agile strikers that are increasingly manifesting themselves in Ligue 1.

Last of all, Perrin has boundless leadership skills, which emanate from spending a vast period of time with the club and playing in a variety of positions, and therefore gaining more and more experience. In fact, Perrin is such a strong leader that he is the current captain of Saint-Etienne, and leads his team from the heart of the defence.

After the disappointment that followed the 2011/12 season, Perrin's conversion to a centre back utterly transformed his fortunes. Over the past calendar year, he has become a leader. He led Saint-Étienne to their historic Coupe de la Ligue victory, and has become an irreplaceable member of the team. If injuries are kind to him, Perrin's 2014 will be just as successful.

'I feel better here.'

Loïc Perrin

On playing at centre-back- 13th March 2013

DID YOU KNOW? Loïc Perrin has played over 200 Ligue 1 matches for Saint Étienne and Les Verts are the only club he has ever played for professionally.

15. Ezequiel Lavezzi

Club: Paris Saint Germain

Date of Birth: 3rd May 1985

Position: Attacker

It was the second game of the 2012/13 season, the second game of Ezequiel Lavezzi's PSG career. His side were up against a resolute Ajaccio defence, and frustration was beginning to build. Lavezzi picked up possession, initially beating two men, before taking a heavy touch. He lost control of the ball and, in an attempt to win it back jumped into a two-footed tackle. Red card. Lavezzi was sent off in only his second game for the club, the wickedest possible start. It instigated a run of 9 league games in which Lavezzi did not play. When he returned, he knew he had to deliver. And deliver he did.

Lavezzi played all of the remaining 27 games in the league on the way to helping PSG win their historic Ligue 1 trophy. He played primarily on the left wing, but also had small spells as a right-winger or second striker, and his versatility was crucial in balancing PSG's star-studded attacking line-up. Lavezzi's tally of 11 goals in all competitions in the 2012/13 season was only topped by the prolific Zlatan Ibrahimovic, so it is clear that Lavezzi was a crucial contributor to PSG's attacking force.

Arguably Lavezzi's biggest success last season was in the Champions League, in which he was one of the club's most unfailing performers. Lavezzi managed a very impressive 5 goals in the competition, including a goal in each of the legs during the club's last 16 duel with Valencia. After PSG's eventual victory over two legs against Valencia, Ezequiel Lavezzi was the highest goal scorer in that competition for Les Parisiens at that time (5), even outscoring the prodigious Zlatan Ibrahimovic (3). Although Lavezzi was in noble form in the league too, Europe is where he excelled the most.

This season, under Blanc's management, Lavezzi is having less success, because he has been used largely as a substitute by the French manager. In fact, including every competition in which PSG have played, Lavezzi is yet to play a full 90 minutes for the club, and we are already halfway through the season. His two Ligue 1 goals, though, have come at a goal every 382 minutes, almost twice as good as last season's (698 mins per goal). Although Lavezzi has been deprived playing time, it appears his goal scoring form has not suffered as much as one might expect for a man receiving such disjointed game time.



Rumours began to fly over the Argentinian attacker's future, with many linking Lavezzi to a move back to Italy, but Blanc's was quick to quell the rapidly escalating speculation, stating in December that 'Lavezzi has not talked to me (regarding a transfer).'

So, why is Lavezzi such a difficult player for defenders to deal with? Lavezzi has the two attributes that are the most useful for a wide player in abundance: pace and dribbling. First of all, Lavezzi is an extremely quick player, and if he passes a defender there is very little chance that he will be caught. Secondly, his brilliant dribbling means that the ball sticks to his feet when he dribbles, which makes Lavezzi both brilliant to watch and very difficult to play against. The combination of his dribbling and his surprising strength means that Lavezzi very much resembles fellow Argentine Lionel Messi when on the ball. Aside from these two key attributes, Lavezzi also demonstrates precise passing, which allows him to either split the opponents' defence with a through ball or deliver an accurate cross from out wide. With all of these strengths in his game, it is not hard to see why Lavezzi has been a success at Ligue 1 level.

The player also brings the fun factor to France's capital club and is the self-proclaimed prankster of the squad. Whether he is ruffling the hair of the President of the LFP Frédéric Thiriez during PSG's 2013 title celebrations, tripping over a camera man by lying by the unwitting media worker's feet or feeling up Blaise Matuidi's behind, Lavezzi is always making his colleagues laugh and what is probably most assuring for the PSG board about these harmless antics is that it suggests that Lavezzi himself feels at home and in a state of contentment in Paris.

Overall, 2013 has been a very successful year for PSG's enigmatic Argentinian. Although, in the later stages of the calendar year, Lavezzi was given less playing time than in the previous season, his quality is still there for all to see and, whether it is with PSG or elsewhere, judging by his last year in the French capital, 2014 looks set to be just as impressive for Ezequiel Lavezzi.

'I have always been a bit of a rebel.'

Ezequiel Lavezzi

1st February 2013

#GFFN recommends: @Sam_Crock, @salimosaid and @MezahiMaher. All previously #GFFN guest writers, three very apt journalists successfully carving their way, specialising in African football.

14. James Rodríguez

Club: AS Monaco

Date of Birth: 22nd July 1991

Position: Attacker

Having joined Monaco for €45,000,000 in the summer of 2013, Rodríguez was another big name who had a point to prove in Ligue 1. The Colombian international has since shown his class in France and appears to have purely continued his great form from his seasons with FC Porto in Portugal.

One of the qualities that make the 22 year old world class is his versatility. Already this season, the player has started in four different positions for Monaco; central midfield, right midfield, further up on the right hand side, and in attacking midfield. It is fair to say that the Colombian has excelled in each of them and his elegance on the ball at such a young age shows pronounced maturity, which is ultimately a gift. A footballer can train long hours but one cannot simply learn to be effortless in the manner in which Rodríguez is. The midfielder has, however, tended to play much better down the right hand side instead of behind the striker and this is where he has been able to cross to find the front men and provide assists for his team. Rodríguez has received all of his man of the match awards so far this season when playing on the right hand side. Rodríguez can also play on the left hand side, but is yet to play here, presumably due to the wholesome form he has been displaying in other areas across the pitch.

One may go as far to say that Rodríguez, or “James” as he is affectionately known at Monaco has been their standout performer to date this season. He has linked up with fellow Colombians and former teammates João Moutinho and Radamel Falcao and together, they have helped to propel the big spenders into the title race. Rodríguez himself has been described as ‘El Nuevo Pibe’, ‘the new kid’, as he is seen by many as the successor to Colombian legend Carlos Valderrama. The 22 year old is not just compared to the MLS record assist maker for his ability to put the ball in the box, but for his expert dribbling and ability to run at the defence and consequently cause them problems. Rodríguez showed these qualities in arguably his best performance yet, where he provided two assists and caused the opposition a whole host of problems in a 2-1 win against St Étienne.

The Colombian international is also a self-confessed free-kick specialist and has scored one so far this season against Rennes. The midfielder struck the ball cleanly to the left of the wall from the edge of the area, and it travelled right, into the far corner. It was a wonderful strike and showed that Rodríguez can be a goal threat as well whilst providing his teammates with opportunities. One determining factor regarding James, which separates himself from the majority of attacking players, is that he is able to make a strong defensive contribution and has indeed been important in protecting Monaco’s weak and aging defence against skilful wingers. Rodríguez is also improving at delivering the defence-splitting passes which only the best of creative football talent can produce consistently. He has split defences with some raking through balls so far this season.



Despite the array of positives, however, Rodríguez is by no means the finished package. The player’s attacking sequence is often obvious and palpable as he cuts inside more often than not instead of going down the line. Rodríguez has also been slightly wasteful from range. The 22 year old loves to take efforts from outside of the area, but has rarely hit the target, only putting his effort on course for the net on a third of shots during 2013. However, these are areas that, at the age of 22, Rodríguez will be able to refine and succeed in.

During the first six months of the year, Rodríguez was of course at Porto where he built up a great partnership with the likes of João Moutinho and helped his side to win the league. One limitation in James’s game in Portugal was the dependability of his assist making as James was unable to provide an assist at all for FC Porto in 2013. Nevertheless, his ability to run at players with pace paralleled with the natural technical ability he possesses often left defenders in Portugal incapable of prohibiting him and the rest of Europe ultimately took notice, which earned him the big money move to France.

Internationally, Rodríguez has played an important part for Colombia in their qualification for the World Cup and has helped to keep his side in the top ten in terms of FIFA’s ranking system. This upcoming summer, Rodríguez will really be able to show himself against the best in the world in Brazil.

Overall, for a 22 year old, Rodriguez shows extraordinary class and composure on the ball and has the capacity to terrorise the opposition defence and score, as well as create goals. He has a unique versatility for a midfielder, and has been one of the stars of the 2013/2014 Ligue 1 season thus far.

‘I am crazy with joy to be with Falcao at Monaco.’

James Rodriguez

28th May 2013

DID YOU KNOW? At the age of 22, James Rodriguez has already won 10 professional titles.

13. Ludovic Obraniak

Club: Girondins de Bordeaux

Date of Birth: 22nd July 1991

Position: Midfielder



Looking for one of the most underrated Ligue 1 constants in 2013? Search no further than Bordeaux's accomplished Polish international and attacking midfielder Ludovic Obraniak.

The exigent Pole goes a long way to explaining the attacking impetus that Bordeaux possessed in 2013. When Cheick Diabaté was struggling, when Henri Saivet was lacking composure or when Nicolas Maurice Belay's deliveries from the right hand side were wayward, there was one man that the Girondins faithful knew that they could rely on. The very man that sat behind the main striker; be that Rolan, Diabaté or another. They knew that they could count on Obraniak.

At 29 years of age, Obraniak has, if he follows the general trend of attacking midfielders, just another 3 seasons where he can be assured that he will perform to the best of his ability. The Metz youth product may be of Polish nationality, but his experiences at the time of writing are limited solely to French football. Five seasons with Les Grenats were followed with a pronounced stint with Les Dogues, where he became an integral part of the starting XI that included the likes of Michel Bastos. His highlight with Lille was undoubtedly being involved in the side that duelled with Manchester United in the Champions League of the course of two legs.

By joining Bordeaux in 2012, Obraniak was giving his prime years to the Girondins' cause. His technical ability far surmounts easily any other player that Bordeaux have at their disposal, and, as a result, Obraniak is relied upon to bring the club success in almost every area of their creative and attacking play. Although the player's favoured position is as an out-and-out attacking midfielder, just in behind the main striker, Obraniak's versatility has served him well throughout his career. He can play down either wing or in a more neutral-minded midfield flank role. The player's mesmeric dribbling ability is one of the main reasons for him being able to do so. No matter where exactly he is positioned on the pitch, the confidence and skill that Obraniak has to beat opponents guarantees that he represents a threat from across the field of play.

His technical mastery extends further from just having a delicate touch of the football; his delivery is also excellent. This is why he has been the principle free kick and corner taker for Les Girondins over the course of this calendar year. This paralleled with his tendency to pepper the opposition goal with several lethal shots from off of his left foot have resulted in him not only scoring some particularly stunning goals in 2013, but also creating them for teammates.

The utterly authoritarian nature about his offensive play is what ultimately makes Ludovic Obraniak so special. Rarely does one discover a player who can cover all the necessary facets of the attacking game, and with such grace. His goal in November 2013 against OGC Nice, a typical left-footed pile driver resulted after excellent close control by the Pole after an seemingly high and wayward pass before jinking left and right until he found a metre's length of room to hit one from outside the area, was illustrative of all of Obraniak's finest qualities.

Admittedly, six league goals over the last twelve months is not a particularly impressive statistic, but when one considers the mundane, unadventurous style of football that Bordeaux manager Francis Gillot has been promoting in 2013, it is difficult to argue that Obraniak should have done better. The aforementioned point also further explains the mere three assists that Obraniak has mustered during the calendar year in the league.

Obraniak arguably shone brightest in 2013 over the course of Bordeaux's Coupe de France run, a competition in which they finished as the overall victors. In a competition in which 7,656 teams enter, Bordeaux ended a 36-year wait to beat Evian in the final 3-2. Ludovic Obraniak played down the left hand side in that final fixture and his role throughout the tournament was one of leadership in attack whilst also delivering personally under pressure.

What the future may hold for the Pole is however difficult to tell. Bordeaux are seemingly stuck in a sort of rut of mid-table mediocrity throughout 2013 and frankly Obraniak deserves better. Whether or not a club is willing to buy the 29 year old outright is another matter. He is a special player, and one who deserves far more credit than he is currently receiving.

'In the league we have made a bad start, The aim is to fight our way back up.'

Ludovic Obraniak

16th October 2013

DID YOU KNOW? Ludovic Obraniak speaks English and German but is not fluent in Polish, the country that he represents internationally.

12. Salvatore Sirigu

Club: Paris Saint Germain

Date of Birth: 12th January 1987

Position: Goalkeeper

Often, the first name on the manager's team sheet is that of his goalkeeper. The reliant pillar, forming the backbone of the defence. How accomplished the side that a manager is managing usually determines the strength of that pillar. After 2013, Paris Saint Germain can have no doubts about the fortitude of their pillar, Salvatore Sirigu, as the club looks to become the best in Europe.

With an amazing 16 league clean sheets this year, including nine already this season, Salvatore Sirigu has proved this year that, despite the amazing run by Vincent Enyeama, he is quite possibly the best goalkeeper in Ligue 1. One would be forgiven for presuming that the majority of these were due more to a proficient defence with the likes of Thiago Silva contained within it, but the fact remains that Sirigu has produced countless match winning saves and kept the opposition at bay on many occasions. Sirigu started this year in wonderful fashion as he did not concede a goal from mid-November to the start of February 2013 in the league.

Have signed from Palermo in 2011, Sirigu has gone on to become a key player for the French club, and rather unbelievably, is one of the club's longest servants due to the arrival of many new faces in recent years. Sirigu's highlight of the year will undoubtedly be lifting the coveted Ligue 1 trophy in summer after winning the league with PSG, as it was his first major honour in his professional career, and one which he played a terrific part in. PSG have the best defensive record in Ligue 1 this calendar year and without Sirigu, one wonders whether this would still be the case. At the back end of last season, when Sirigu was rested for certain fixtures, PSG conceded a goal a game, and this is a distinctly higher figure than when the Italian has been between the sticks.

Sirigu has proved himself to be very athletic despite his 6 ft 4 stature. Due to this towering height, Sirigu is an intense presence in the air and is often able to claim the ball from the air in order to avert danger from set pieces. Sirigu's positioning, most notably in open play, has also improved momentarily this year, proving that despite being 27 year old, his reading of the game and therefore his general play continues to improve season after season. Effective positioning was something that the Italian was perhaps lacking during his first season with PSG in the 2011/12 season and has now been addressed, highlighting his development over the course of the last twelve months.



The Italian will be delighted with PSG's form this year and especially as they enter 2014 in divine form in both the league and the Champions League. The entire side seems to have made a step up from last season and Sirigu is of course personally included in this. They look unbeatable in the league and could have an outside chance in achieving the ultimate goal of winning the Champions League if they are able to maintain this newfound direct style of play, whilst continuing to protect Sirigu and his goal in defence. Sirigu's position does not seem in any way under threat and so one would expect him to be heavily involved in the upcoming battles ahead.

Sirigu's ability to focus during long periods of a match, whereby Paris Saint Germain's dominance may mean that he is rarely involved at times, is one of his main strengths and like the best keepers. He has also yet to replicate some of the handling howlers, which we saw from Sirigu during the 2012/2013 campaign, and has proved to be a fantastic acquisition for the French side.

Like every player, there are still aspects of Sirigu's game that could do with further refinement and addressing. There are still instances, often during crucial games, where Sirigu's unstable footing becomes an unwelcome hindrance. When the ball is played back to him by a defender in open play, he does can appear nervous and a little clumsy, often tending to boot the ball out of play and thus, giving the possession back to the opposition, which only causes a further build-up of pressure on the Italian's shoulders. At the age of 27, Sirigu, for a goalkeeper, this failing may yet to be rectified.

Internationally, the Italian has played scarcely for coach Prandelli, most recently against Nigeria, and still remains behind Buffon in the pecking order for the national side. He does appear to be the keeper for his country's international future, as when Buffon retires, he will surely step in to fill the gap. In his performances for Italy this year, however, he has looked calm and assured and will go to Rio as an understudy this summer.

Overall, therefore, it has been a wonderful year for the Italian, where he has won major honours and has shown himself to be Ligue 1's best goalkeeper, evidenced by his winning of the 2013 UNFP award as the best player in that position.

'I will celebrate this with my teammates first and foremost.'

Salvatore Sirigu

On his UNFP award- 19th May 2013

#GFFN recommends: @tomwfootball. Journalist at the AFP who now works in English football, leaving the French scene when things were just getting good. Produces a fantastic annual "Best French Football Quotes of the Year" article.

11. Darío Cvitanich

Club: OGC Nice

Date of Birth: 16th May 1984

Position: Attacker



A football match can often be a tale of two halves. Darío Cvitanich had a year of two halves: from being arguably Ligue 1's most reliable striker to falling into mediocre form from the commencement of the 2013/2014 season right up until the end of the calendar year.

While seven league goals is not a tally that should be sniffed at as we conclude the year, the contrast with last season's tally of twenty is particularly difficult for OGC Nice fans to take. In the early months of 2013, as Ligue 1's most surprising package, Les Aiglons were on a most unassuming road to securing a form of continental qualification for the first time since the 2001/2002 season and it all centred on the man that is affectionately known as 'Super Dario'. He was an unshakeable, infallible and wholly committed sharp-shooter and finisher who's invention in front of goal would have at times made the assumed "King" of present French football goal-scorers, Zlatan Ibrahimovic, proud.

The fire he, and indeed many of his teammates, possessed in their bellies to achieve their aim qualifying to represent their club in a continental fashion in 2013/2014, an aim they went on to achieve but then execute poorly in early August when they were kicked out of the Europa League at the hands of Chornomorets Odessa in the qualification rounds, inspired Les Aiglons to some of the most tantalising counter-attacking football that the Stade du Ray has certainly ever seen from the home team.

Fundamentally, in order for a counter-attacking system to work, the manager needs to know that when his side is presented with a sort of goal scoring opportunity, there is somebody who can adequately add the vital finishing touch to the swift move. In the second match of the 2013/2014 campaign, Nice beat Rennes 2-1, with Cvitanich bagging the decisive strike to bring Les Aiglons their first league win of the season. At that point, Darío Cvitanich had a better shots to goals ratio than anybody playing in Ligue 1, solely looking at performances over the course of the calendar year: 2.7.

Not only was he efficient, but, when motivated, makes zigzag runs across the opposition back four which are often far too well thought out and intelligent for Ligue 1's burly defenders to understand or for that matter impede. At 5 ft 7, runs behind defences make up a crucial part of Cvitanich's game, as he has little chance of being able to win aerial duels or hold the ball up effectively.

Once one understands the integrality of Darío Cvitanich in the system that manager Claude Puel deployed in the 2012/2013 season and continued with this term, and the success the Argentinian had within it previously, one has to wonder what changed to cause the former Ajax man's downturn from August onwards.

Once one understands the integrality of Dario Cvitanich in the system that manager Claude Puel deployed in the 2012/2013 season and continued with this term, and the success the Argentinian had within it previously, one has to wonder what changed to cause the former Ajax man's downturn in form August onwards.

With the transfer market being as it currently is, it is becoming increasingly difficult for the middle-sized European clubs to find themselves affordable strikers. OGC Nice paid just 350 thousand Euros for the player in the summer of 2012. Naturally, when a player scores twenty goals plus in one season for a team residing in a league that is generally accepted to be within the top five in Europe, heads are going to turn. Interest in the Argentinian front man skyrocketed this summer, with AS Roma making some serious headway in the negotiation stage before being promptly turned away by OGC Nice's rather resolute President Jean-Pierre Rivère.

Darío Cvitanich is quite an interesting 'tweeter' on the social media platform Twitter. He often subtly laments about returning to Boca Juniors, the club that he freely calls him home, where he spent a season-long loan spell during the 2011-2012 season, and has hinted that the club would like to bring him back.

His temperament is however one of his least desirable characteristics and that has come across especially during the latter end of 2013. Week in, week out he cuts a disinterested and frustrated figure at the front of OGC Nice attack and this will certainly contribute to his overall ability to score goals as he causes himself psychological stress.

Either way, that passion and fire that Cvitanich harboured in the 2012/2013 season was something extraordinarily special and perhaps Les Aiglons should have let the player leave this summer, undoubtedly recouping a sizeable transfer fee in the process. Since then, that fire has extinguished somewhat and consequently so have Nice's performances. In 2012/2013, Nice were continental football qualifiers but in the first half of 2013/2014 they are firmly submerged below that mid-table divide.

Barring the summer departure of former captain Renato Civelli, the OGC Nice team has remained broadly the same, and the impact on their performances that Cvitanich's changed form has had evidences just how formidable a player he was in the first six months of this year.

The GFFN 100 celebrates some of Cvitanich's best months as a professional footballer. One cannot help but wonder where he may have finished in terms of rankings had he only started in August where he left off in May.

'I feel at ease, I feel at home here at Nice.'

Darío Cvitanich

23rd September 2013

DID YOU KNOW? Darío Cvitanich became a father in April 2013 with a girl called Lupe. A factor in his downturn in form? Most likely not. Either way, Lupe has her own official Twitter account at the age of 1. Impressive.

GFFN 100: 20-11 RECAP:

- #20 Remy Cabella (Montpellier HSC)
- #19 Kurt Zouma (AS Saint-Étienne)
- #18 André Ayew (Olympique de Marseille)
- #17 Marquinhos (Paris Saint Germain)
- #16 Loïc Perrin (AS Saint-Étienne)
- #15 Ezequiel Lavezzi (Paris Saint Germain)
- #14 James Rodriguez (AS Monaco)
- #13 Ludovic Obraniak (Girondins de Bordeaux)
- #12 Salvatore Sirigu (Paris Saint Germain)
- #11 Darío Cvitanich (OGC Nice)

10. Florian Thauvin

The 2012-13 campaign was an incredible success for Florian Thauvin, but also one wrapped in controversy surrounding his transfer window manoeuvres and is fast earning the rather maligned reputation as one of French football's greatest troublemakers. His transformation in just two and a half seasons on the pitch is however venerable. Thauvin accomplished in converting himself from a bit part performer grappling in Ligue 2 during the 2011-2012 campaign, to SC Bastia's best player in Ligue 1 in a period of 6 months from August 2012 until January of the following year. This earned "Flo-Thauv", as he has started to refer to himself on social networking platform Twitter, a move to Ligue 1 heavyweights Lille from the Corsican club in January 2013. Thauvin was then loaned back to the Corsicans for the remainder of the season, but glittering performances on the pitch in the first six months of this year made the player personally confident that he should be playing in the Champions League, Europe's top-tier competition, and thus when Lille failed to qualify for the competition, he forced through a move to Marseille. This move on deadline day of the summer window was amid interest from the likes of Arsenal and Newcastle, but the player did not think he was old enough to make the move away from his homeland as of yet. This episode from the 20 year old midfielder has dented his reputation in France and beyond, with many now referring to him as the 'brat' of French football with Lille boss Rene Girard adding that he felt the France U21's international should have been banned for his 'appalling' actions.

Thauvin's controversial actions over the course of 2013 were not merely limited to transfer activities. During the U20's World Cup in Turkey during the summer, Thauvin scored and then proceeded to celebrate by mimicking somebody shooting a gun. This was amid the treacherous internal problems that the country and others around it were facing and caused a particular backlash of abuse against Thauvin from the locals throughout the rest of the tournament, which France of course went on to win.

Back to Thauvin's actual footballing performances meanwhile, the year began at Bastia with the player in exhilarating form. Thauvin added 8 goals to his 2012/13 season count, with two of these coming in a famous 4-1 victory over Lyon, where centre back Dejan Lovren was simply unable to cope with the pace and panache of the youngster, who left him for dead on many more than just one occasion. It was not only the Frenchman's form in front of goal that impressed during the first six months of this year, however. Thauvin appeared to form a fantastic partnership with Wahbi Khazri at the Corsican club and the pair of them split defences on the counter attack for the most part of the second half of the 2012/2013 campaign. Such performances meant that Thauvin beat the likes of Lucas Digne, Marco Verratti and Remy Cabella to the UNFP Ligue 1 Young Player of the Year Award 2013. However, despite the obvious success at Bastia, criticisms were still made of Florian's imperfect performances; Thauvin can be a little selfish at times and this can be demonstrated by the fact that despite the ten goals, he only provided one assist in 2012-2013, which occurred in a 3-1 win over Montpellier. Nevertheless, he has already contributed double that amount this campaign, showing signs of improvement. This is likely because Thauvin respects and admires his teammates at Marseille more than his former Bastia counterparts. Furthermore, the 20 year old must also improve his decision-making when in the final third as he likes to cut inside and shoot probably a little too much.

Arguably, Thauvin's greatest asset is his movement off the ball. He works tirelessly to provide options for his central midfielders, even if they decide not to play the ball that he is offering. It is this expressly, which makes him cut out for future success. Marseille are plainly regarding the player as somebody who is maybe not mature enough to make a sufficient impact during the big, crucial games at the time of writing, however. The player will be disappointed with the club's effort in the Champions League, despite a very tough group, and will be upset that he was left on the bench for many of the key games, including Arsenal at home. Thauvin will also be frustrated that he was unable to make a strong introduction into the competition, as he failed to perform at any great level when featuring in this year's competition, although he did score in a 3-2 away defeat to Napoli. In the league, he didn't play in the match against Monaco and played less than 15 minutes in games against PSG and St Étienne, once again showing Elie Baup's reluctance to start him in the vital fixtures. Since then, however, he has become a regular part of the team and has started to provide goals for the team, scoring four goals in five games in November.

Another feat that Florian Thauvin can be exceptionally proud of is assisting his nation to win the U20 World Cup this summer and it was a place where the Frenchman highlighted his ability to a worldwide audience. The player contributed three goals to his team on the way to glory, which included a wonderful individual performance with two goals in a 2-1 against Ghana in the semi-finals. Thauvin will hope that it is not long before a full international call up. He has stated that he wants to make Didier Deschamps' World Cup squad for next summer but this does seem very unlikely. Arsène Wenger, however, has backed the youngster's cause saying that the player has the talent to go. There is a lot of competition for places though, so how Thauvin performs in the coming months will be fundamentally important if he is to fulfil his dream.

Club: Olympique de Marseille
Date of Birth: 26th January 1993
Position: Attacker



Overall, 2013 has been a wonderful year for Florian Thauvin and one within which he has eclipsed all expectation. If it was not for his handling of his future in the summer, where he appeared to temporarily go on strike at Lille before his dream move was granted, he could have perhaps finished even higher in this year's GFFN 100. As it is, however, Florian Thauvin can certainly be proud of his tenth placed finish here.

9. Dimitri Payet

Simply put, 2013 has been an outstanding year for Dimitri Payet who has finally found his footing as one of Ligue 1's most ingenious creative talents and earned himself a dream move to Marseille. The player has added both goals and assists to his game and was the standout performer for Lille during the first half of the calendar year.

In terms of goals, Payet has bagged ten in Ligue 1 this year, which is exceptional for a midfielder. This catalogue has provided some beltiers and it has become evident, arguably more this season than ever that Payet has a penchant for the long range strike. In fact, the majority of his goals have come from distance, with Payet's trademark being to cut inside and curl the ball into the corner. His mazy runs and movement, paralleled with his ability to shoot powerfully make him a threat for any team and Payet has proved his efficacy in front of goal in both the colours of red and white, for Lille and then Marseille respectively, over the course of the year. In terms of an English comparison, one could probably compare his playing style to that of Ashley Young. Payet amours running at defenders as well as charging through the middle when playing balls wide to the flanks.

For Lille, in the first six months of the season, Payet almost played as a third striker on the left hand side, because his average position was so high up the field. Thus, the 26 year old often found himself in advantageous positions which allowed him to add goals to his game. In terms of goal scoring form, the player's Marseille career got off to a prodigious start, as he scored a brace on his debut against Guingamp.

Payet has also provided six league assists this year and will be disappointed that only one of these has come for Marseille. Nevertheless, Payet is apt at beating defenders with his prominent pace and delivering the ball into the box. At Lille, where he was almost undisputedly their attacking maestro, He was able to roam the attacking half of the field and often came out of position to create a chance, because he had the confidence to do so. Maybe at his new club, with the likes of Valbuena and Thauvin who like to play in the equivalent manner, Payet is unable to express himself fully as he does not receive the lion's share of the possession. Payet is additionally a dead ball specialist and has notched up the majority of his assists through his balls into the box. He has taken corners for both Lille and Marseille over the last year.

The Frenchman is also a through ball aficionado and likes to impose that side of his game where possible, even if his distribution in this regard still leaves a little to be desired for. This has been demonstrated frequently this year and is one of the reasons why Payet led the assists chart last season.

Payet's principal frustration over the whole year must be his Champions League form. Last season, Payet was unable to make an impact in the competition in 2012 as Lille got knocked out in the group stage and performed torridly throughout. This year, Marseille failed to pick up a single point in during their group stage and Payet was often invisible in the face of frankly higher quality sides such as Arsenal and Napoli. Due to Payet's rather repetitive attacking sequences, he necessitates a number of chances before producing a clear-cut goal scoring opportunity, something he is simply not going to be given against Europe's best.

Payet's main weakness, however, appears to be his inability to track back and contribute in the defensive third. As much as he has been a colossal presence in the attacking third and contributed towards 40% of Lille's goals during the 2012-2013 campaign, goals were conceded as he, alongside other attacking players, have left the defence overexposed. This may be why the winger has not played in some of Marseille's bigger games recently, as he simply does not provide the same defensive option as some of his teammates.

Internationally, it has been a good year for the Frenchman who has been put back into Didier Deschamps' squad this year due to his bright form. The player now has a truly great a chance at playing a part in France's Brazilian adventure next summer and his form last season and indeed this year has made that possible. Payet is maybe yet to perform at a great standard for France this year, and will need to prove his uniqueness compared to other attacking midfield options at Deschamps' disposal. The player has also admitted that one of the reasons as to why he joined Marseille was to help his career with the national side:

Club: Olympique de Marseille

Date of Birth: 22nd July 1991

Position: Attacker



"The prospect of the 2014 World Cup was a key element in my thinking, but not the only one. I wanted to stay in France, but with OM it's also about playing in the Champions League, the chance to evolve in a quality group of players and to achieve high goals in the league. The challenge is raised, it is already exciting. Marseille's history speaks for itself; it is full of titles and emotions. The club is a monument in French sport."

8. Stéphane Ruffier

There were 23 different sides that played in Ligue 1 over the course of 2013, and out of them all, one goalkeeper stood out. That man, as you may have guessed, is St Étienne's Stéphane Ruffier, who has had a remarkable last 12 months and is ranking higher than any other goalkeeper in the GFFN 100.

Stéphane Ruffier has an appropriate build, which is conditioned as well as any of Europe's top goalkeepers. Standing at 6 ft 2 inches, he is about the regular height for a player between the sticks. Well built, sturdy and very powerful, Ruffier's physique is emblematic of the modern goalkeeper, with the nature of the position having become so much more physically demanding in recent decades. With these characteristics, Ruffier's core is of the dependable infrastructure for him to demonstrate a commanding presence in the air, which evidently aids a goalkeeper in dealing effectively with the cannonball corners and free-kicks by laying claim to the ball or putting enough weight behind it to produce an operative punch away from danger.

On top of his rock-solid stature, Ruffier is exceedingly mobile. For a man of his height and size, he manoeuvres around his penalty area deftly, enabling him to fathom diving saves that another goalkeeper of his build would be physically incapable of making. It is the combination of physical strength with reactions and agility that is one of the attributes that sets Ruffier apart from other Ligue 1 goalkeepers. Whilst some may be particularly apt at making reflex saves, and others very capable at commanding their area, it is very rare that a goalkeeper can do both, to a consistently excellent level. As a result, it is very difficult to find flaws in Ruffier's game. His shot-stopping ability is first-rate, he deals with crosses with simplicity, and his positioning has improved considerably over the last twelve months. He is by far the most consistent goalkeeper in Ligue 1, and is reaching the level that top European goalkeepers have reached, when they make very difficult saves look easy. The likes of Manuel Neuer and Gianluigi Buffon are sometimes underwhelming to watch, simply because they are so unyielding that they do not need to dive around frantically, making flying saves – they deal with incoming shots with minimum fuss. Stéphane Ruffier is now reaching that standard of performance.

In the first half of the calendar year, while Ligue 1 was in its 2012/13 season, Ruffier kept 8 clean sheets in 19 matches as his St Étienne side lost just once in the entire second half of the season – a surprise 3-1 defeat to Lorient. In those 19 games, he conceded just 18 goals, which is below the 'goal a game' mark that typically separates the best from the rest. Ruffier's dazzling league form inspired St Étienne to make a late charge for the European spots, but they ended up falling just short, finishing 5th.

However, Ruffier's best form undoubtedly was displayed during St Étienne's Coupe de la Ligue run, a title that they of course concluded by winning. Ruffier played the full 90 minutes of every encounter (five in total), even playing the full 120 once, when St Étienne's semi-final against Lille went to extra time and then penalties. During those 480 minutes of consecutive 'League Cup' action, Ruffier did not concede a single goal, aside from within the penalty shootout with Lille. He kept clean sheets in each of the 5 matches, propelling St Étienne to overall victory in the tournament. Ruffier was the star man in St Étienne's most difficult fixture in their cup run, the aforementioned victory over Lille in a penalty shootout. Deep into injury time, Ruffier saved from Rodelin, who was through on goal, to take the match to penalties. St Etienne eventually triumphed 7-6 in a heart-stopping shootout where both sets of players threw caution to the wind.

The warm summer in the Loire region brought with it rumours of Ruffier's departure, as you would perhaps expect, given his form in the previous season. Roma in Serie A were touted as potential buyers, while Ruffier's own agent came out and said that a Premier League club were after him. However, as a result of both Ruffier's loyalty to St Étienne and perhaps the lack of acceptable offers, he decided to remain at the club for at least another season.

The start of the 2013/14 season brought substantially less success for both Ruffier and St Étienne. After qualifying for the Europa League prerequisite rounds thanks to their Coupe de la Ligue win, St Étienne were eliminated over two legs by Esbjerg in what was a shock result. They were also knocked out in the first match they played in both the Coupe de France and the Coupe de la Ligue, signifying that their failure to defend their title from the previous season. However, these cup disappointments allowed them to focus more readily on their league form, and, heading into the winter break, St Etienne sit 4th in Ligue 1, lying in a Europa League qualifying spot. Ruffier has, despite his team's drop in form, still been a standout performer.

Club: AS Saint Étienne

Date of Birth: 27th September 1986

Position: Goalkeeper



Overall, Stéphane Ruffier has had a fantastical twelve months. He has developed into an assured shot-stopper, improving in every single major aspect of his goalkeeping game. His consistency truly sets him apart from the rest – in fact Ruffier has played every Ligue 1 minute for St-Etienne since the beginning of the 2011/12 season, an amazing run that covers almost 100 consecutive games. If Ruffier continues in this brilliant vein of form, expect him to be a very strong challenger to Steve Mandanda's position as France's number two goalkeeper. In fact, it would be no surprise at all if Didier Deschamps were to whisk Ruffier off to Brazil come summertime. It seems like the sky is the limit for St Etienne's star man. Although I am sure that as long as Ruffier travels the skies with France to Brazil in June 2014, he will be more than content.

7. Marco Verratti

The first of a host of PSG players to make the GFFN 100 top ten category, Italian defensive midfielder maestro Marco Verratti has flourished in 2013. Throughout the calendar year, he has been an unswerving fixture in the Paris Saint Germain side that are currently boisterously dominating the French football scene. If one adds the fact that Verratti is still just 21 years of age, you begin to picture the true level of both his current brilliance and potential. With the realisation that Verratti's part in this title-winning squad is in fact key, with him playing the vital role of the second hand to Thiago Motta that helps the PSG midfield clock tick, you have the crucial third element, which further shines a favourable light on the former Pescara man.

Following his move from Italian side Pescara in the summer before the 2012/13 season began, Verratti, barely 19 at the time, was not expected to claim a first team spot in a PSG team that was filled with an abundance of talent. However, the dogged Italian took no prisoners, showing an unwavering commitment to the cause, and nailed down a spot in the first XI within his first few games at the club, ahead of his older, more experienced teammates. Over the course of 2013, Verratti's game has developed immeasurably, thanks in no small part to the playing time given to him by both Ancelotti and Blanc and the advice and coaching that have provided him. An in-depth glance at Verratti's style of play certainly makes a strong case for the pint-sized defensive midfielder as being the most prominent, young player in the aforementioned position that Ligue 1 can be proud to say that it has in its ranks. Verratti is perhaps just what one would expect when one considers the attributes that a young, feisty Italian defensive midfielder may possess. Although he is small, especially for a player whose role involves a large amount of physicality, he is never afraid to put himself about, and often dominates opponents of considerably bigger and bulkier build. Verratti is never one to shy away from a physical battle, in fact it often appears as if this is what he takes the most pleasure out of. Put it this way, Ligue 1 opponents have learnt to give the petite man a wider berth in 2013. Verratti is an enormously convincing tackler, with his leading role in the PSG set-up being that of a ball-winning midfielder, a man who will roam the middle third of the pitch to close down opposition attacks before they become advanced. Verratti's positioning in front of members of the opposition who have the ball, is rather unique, and certainly worth mentioning. Verratti will often lead with his arm, and then wrap his feet around the ball and, if this does not yield a successful interception, he will consequently wrap himself around the opposition player, so that his opposite man is unable to progress. A master of tactical fouling, he will not hesitate in taking a yellow card in order to stop an opposition attack.

The aspect of Marco Verratti's game that has arguably seen the most amount of amelioration over the last twelve months is his ability on the ball. Previously, Verratti was able to win the ball back, and would then look to offload to his more creative teammates to instigate an attack. Nowadays, though, he has the necessary self-assurance on the ball, and is no longer afraid to drive and dribble towards the opposition goal himself. The increased completeness of Verratti's game amplify his importance to the PSG setup, as he is no longer restricted to a set central midfield role, should manager Laurent Blanc decide to alter Les Parisiens' formation or tactics during a match. To highlight the improvement in his attacking play, Verratti already has 5 assists at the halfway stage of the 2013/14 season, more than he made in the whole of the previous campaign. Verratti has been fortunate in the sense that he has been exposed to top-flight football at an early age, but one cannot fail to be captivated by how swiftly he is picking things up and refining his game. Ultimately, the loyalty and trust that Ancelotti, and subsequently Blanc, have placed in the Italian seems to be paying in dividends. However, as you would expect for a player as juvenile and raw as Verratti, they are certainly edges to his game that need smoothening. The most profound area of weakness emanates from Verratti's style of play – his lack of discipline. In the 2012/13 season, Verratti picked up 12 yellow cards in 27 games, two of which came in the same match and led to a red card. His tally of yellow cards was comfortably the highest in the PSG team, with Ibrahimovic (believe it or not!) the player with the next highest number of yellows. This season, he has already picked up 5 in his 16 games, and looks on course to enter into double digits again come May.

One would be right to encourage Verratti to rectify this indiscipline by proceeding with greater caution, after all picking up yellow cards not only means that he runs the risk of picking up a red, but also means that he is often banned for receiving too many cards, which can break up a sparkling run of form at just the wrong moment. However, Verratti must, if possible, find a solution whilst staying true to his style of play. PSG require Verratti to continue to disrupt the opposition's play, but perhaps he just needs to use his brain a little more, and judge which fouls are really that necessary to give away. Judgement in football is a difficult skill to inherit and an even more difficult one to master, but one that Verratti will be able to grapple with as he gains maturity.

Club: Paris Saint Germain
Date of Birth: 5th November 1992
Position: Midfielder



Over the course of 2013, another part of Verratti's game that needs cultivating has been highlighted. He often overplays the ball, especially against the better teams, whose midfielders are aware of Verratti's perceived overconfidence. When he does lose the ball, it can often be fatal for his team, as the PSG back four are criminally exposed without Verratti to protect them, and PSG have conceded multiple goals like this in the last 12 months. Verratti needs to judge when to hold on to the ball and when to release it. The quality of his distribution will of course grow with experience.

At 21 years of age, he is just beginning to embark on his journey in the footballing world. The fact that he already has major honours to his name suggests that we could be witnessing something truly special and, if he fashions the correct amendments to his game, in all honesty, Verratti's potential knows no bounds. Expect huge things from this fiery Italian midfielder. That abhorrent tag of 'the next Pirlo' could indeed be fulfilled.

6. Mathieu Valbuena

Although Olympique de Marseille's calendar year has been very much up and down, one player plying his trade at France's supposed most popular club has reached the upper echelons of the GFFN 100. He is without doubt the smallest player on this list, but also one of the craftiest, most skilful players currently in Ligue 1. Yes, it is of course the magician known as Mathieu Valbuena, or 'Valby', if you chose to call him by his affable nickname. In a year in which his team have had highs and impeccable lows, his excellent performances have been one of the only constants at the club.

Over the course of the first six months of 2013, when the Ligue 1 season of 2012/13 was coming to a climax, Mathieu Valbuena was in topmost form. He played in all but one of Marseille's games during the run in, and provided 6 assists and a goal in to ensure that Marseille finished a very impressive 2nd, only to money-rich Parisian outfit PSG. It was a just reward for his excellent performances throughout the season, in which he bagged 3 goals and 12 assists, with a place in the Ligue 1 Team of the Year of 2012/13, being one of just two Marseille players who received the honour. During the first half of 2013, he was also an integral part of the French national team, scoring a goal and making 5 assists during the World Cup Qualification campaign, which was to go right to the wire after a nervy playoff with Ukraine.

As the 2012/13 season drew to a close and the transfer market opened, there was strong interest in Valbuena across Europe, as there seems to be year after year. However, the Frenchman stayed loyal to Marseille, deciding to stay on once again with the team he has been part of since 2006. Unfortunately, Marseille did not enjoy the same level of success in the 2013/14 season as they had done in the previous campaign. Despite losing few players, Marseille began to stumble. As we head into the mid-season winter break, they lie in 6th place, a whole 15 points behind leaders PSG. However, regardless of Marseille's drop in form, the statistics suggest that Valbuena has remained as effective as ever...

In the first 16 games of the current Ligue 1 season, Valbuena made 5 assists and scored one goal in the league. When you compare this to his form in the run-in of the previous season, it is indeed very similar. While some slated him for his performances, Valbuena is one of the only players in Marseille who have performed at the same level as they did last year in the current campaign. He is an integral part of this Marseille side, and without him, their struggles this year would have been even more evident and damaging to the club's reputation.

So, what makes Valbuena such an effective and important player, both for club and country? Standing at 5 ft 6 inches tall (or short), he is obviously by no means of a strong physical presence, and therefore carries a non-existent threat aerially. However, his height, or lack thereof, does give him some tangible advantages, especially for an attacking midfielder. His low centre of gravity allows him to change direction extremely quickly and, while he is not blessed with the pace of some other Ligue 1 players, his alterations in direction are often enough to allow him to get past his opposing defenders. Players who can eliminate opposition defenders with pieces of skill are highly valued, and Valbuena most certainly falls under this category. However, Valbuena's most effectual attacking weapon is his range of passing. As is evident by the number of assists he consistently provides, Valbuena is the by far Marseille's best player when it comes to picking out a pass. He can make short, delicate passes into feet or long through balls, cutting apart the opposition defence. In addition, whereas other player may be able to formulate the same passes, it is as if Valbuena always chooses the correct option when he is going forward. At his best, he will simply dictate the attacking play of his side.

As a result of this combination of talents, Valbuena can play in almost any attacking position behind the striker. He is often seen in the hole behind Gignac for Marseille, but has also played on both wings for his club. In the national team, where a 4-3-3 formation seems to be preferred by Deschamps, he is predominantly a right-sided winger whenever he plays. This ability to switch seamlessly between positions gives his manager more possibilities than is customary in terms of where to place Valby and it is another strength in Valbuena's game and also why his versatility will serve him well if he ever decides to join another club.

If there is a criticism that is to be levelled at Valbuena, it is that he does not quite score enough goals for a player in his position. In the last 57 Ligue 1 games that he has played, he has just the 4 goals, a somewhat minimal return from a player who seems to always be in and around the opposition box. Whilst it is Valbuena's style to be unselfish when it comes to final third, if he was to just add a goal scoring touch to his game, he could lift his game up into the elite level. At the age of 29, it is unlikely that his footballing style will be severely altered, but if he combines his technical game with a little more hunger for goals, he could become an even better player than he already is.

Club: Olympique de Marseille
Date of Birth: 28th September 1984
Position: Midfielder



Overall, 2013 has been yet another successful calendar year for the charismatic Valbuena. He has been a class above most of his teammates, and without his performances, Marseille would more likely than not be struggling even more so than they are currently. With players like Valbuena, who seem to have an exclusive ability that few others do, one must enjoy watching them while they grace French football. Let us all just hope that Mathieu Valbuena has many more dazzling years left.

5. Edinson Cavani

The time had come. It was time to move on. 2012/2013 had been the best of his career, but the Uruguayan knew needed a change of scenery. Napoli had been brilliant to Edinson Cavani, but he knew it was time to make that next step up in his career. After all, the French Champions were calling, and they are becoming increasingly, notoriously hard to refuse...

Cavani's goal scoring proficiency has been evident for a while now. Ever since the 2010/11 season, in which Cavani scored a brilliant 26 goals for Napoli, top clubs all over Europe have been after him. It has in fact been particularly surprising that the Serie A side had been able to keep him for so long, in fact at the beginning of the 2012/13 season Napoli unveiled him as if he was a new signing after he decided to stay! It was a sign of the recent rise of French football, and PSG in particular, that Cavani chose his next destination as the French capital.

As far as calendar years go, it is difficult to top Edinson Cavani's 2013. In his time with Napoli and PSG, Cavani has scored a staggering 28 league goals over the course of the calendar year in two of Europe's top leagues, Serie A and Ligue 1. Of course, his calendar year began outside of Ligue 1, in Serie A, but such was his success that it is worth examining further. In the 19 Serie A games that he played a part in during 2013, Cavani managed 16 goals and three assists, meaning he was involved in, on average, a goal in every single game. The combination of Cavani's technical prowess and his irresistible heading and finishing ability was clearly too brilliant to contend with for even the renowned Italian defences, so perhaps what the shockwaves that he has sent through French football since his arrival should not surprise us...

Cavani's goal scoring form this season has been nothing short of prolific, and it has taken him no time at all to adapt to the French league. At the halfway stage of the season, he already has 12 league goals, second only to fellow team mate Zlatan Ibrahimovic. If we discount goals from penalties, Cavani and Ibrahimovic are tied with regards to goals scored. Cavani also lies second in Ligue 1 in terms of minutes per goal, where he, at the time of writing, stands at 103 minutes per goal. Once again, it is Ibrahimovic (102) who tops the charts. To be losing out by such narrow margins to a world-class player who has already had ample time to settle at the club is a clear sign that Cavani has adapted to his surroundings exceptionally quickly.

This season, Cavani has also been a marvellous performer for PSG in the other competitions that the club takes part in. In the Champions League, Cavani already has a stirring 4 goals from 5 games. He also scored both goals, including a thrilling last minute winner, against Saint-Etienne in the Coupe de la Ligue. Wherever you look, in whichever competition, Cavani has delivered, chiefly in goal scoring terms.

Why is Edinson Cavani so proficient in front of goal? Well, the vast majority of strikers generally have one or two parts of their game that clearly outdo the rest of their attributes. They will play on these strengths to score the majority of their goals. However, with these types of players, defenders can strategise prior to their matchup on how exactly to inhibit them making an impact on the game. For example, if a striker is renowned for being strong in the air, the tallest of the centre backs can man mark him, thereby nullifying the threat. What makes Cavani spectacular is that he has a multitude of strengths in his game. If an opposing manager attempts to implicate a man-marking strategy by putting a tall defender on Cavani to stop his aerial threat, he has the pace and tactical trickery to slip in behind and score with his feet. Not to mention his 6 ft 4 attacking partner who will no doubt be chomping at the bit too. Cavani's aerial prowess is one of his more prominent features, but since his arrival in France, it has become apparent that Cavani

is in fact multitalented. He is quick enough to make runs in behind the defence, has a good enough shot to score spectacular goals from distance and has the strength to compete with even the strongest of central defenders. If you used a defender to man mark each of Cavani's goal scoring threats, you would need at least the whole back four.

Club: Paris Saint Germain
Date of Birth: 14th February 1987
Position: Striker



Especially recently, we have seen his relationship with Zlatan Ibrahimovic blossom, and although these two characters prefer to play on as a lone striker and have yet to be forced to share the limelight until this moment, when perfected, those two as a joint strike force will strike fear into any defence in the whole of Europe. Cavani has consistently scored a stunning amount of goals in each of the last four seasons, so there can be little doubt that 2014 will be another prolific year for the powerful Uruguayan.

4. Thiago Silva

“Overweight ladyboy”. An insult that Thiago Silva would most certainly never use to describe another person, let alone another footballer, but one that he was instead at the receiving end of from former Marseille loanee Joey Barton. There are distinct differences between a player like Silva and another like Barton. Thiago Silva shows all signs of having understood the concept of footballing responsibility, and that he is able to let his supreme talent speak out for him against the few critics he has. Barton does not have enough footballing confidence to let his performances do the talking, and, as a result, foolishly lashed out at the Brazilian whom Barton had every right to be jealous of.

Thiago Silva’s lack of a response to Barton’s onslaught in May 2013 was emblematic of his demeanour on and off the pitch. The term ‘class’ is one that is frankly overused when describing footballers, but Thiago Silva categorically embodies it.

After a €42m move to the current French champions in 2012, Thiago Silva was under extreme pressure to perform to the best of his reported abilities. If that was not enough weight on the already undisputed leader of the Brazilian national team’s shoulders, he was then made captain of Paris Saint Germain, a role that he fulfilled throughout 2013 as a calendar year. A period of adjustment was indeed necessary, but the brief length of that period before Thiago Silva appeared truly at ease with his new surroundings was testament to a skill that distinguishes the player from other household name central defenders in the football world: the ability to adapt rapidly to a different environment.

As 2013 began, Thiago Silva’s increased physicality, both in terms of towards his defensive duties but also when in Ligue 1 compared to his time at AC Milan was finely apparent. A defensive player is often best judged by using the counter-factual, and the fact that Thiago Silva picked up one single card for indiscipline in the league throughout the entire calendar year is evidence that proves the density and refinement of his tackling ability, the attribute which is most often brandished about when discussing the player’s case for the best central defender in world football.

In the art of defending, consistency is undisputedly king. Thiago Silva matches his mastery of the aforementioned skill with equal aptitude both in possession and with regards to ball distribution. This enables both Brazil and Paris Saint Germain to construct attacks from the very depths of their defensive line. With the tactic of pressing becoming increasingly prevalent in the modern game, central defenders generally have limited time to both control and distribute the ball efficiently. Thiago Silva’s athleticism and close technical control ensure that not only does he satisfy the increased demand for centre backs to harbour a more diverse footballing skillset, but also he perhaps surpasses those requirements.

At the age of 29, Thiago Silva’s game is unlikely to become more comprehensive in terms of its standing, even if his performances continue to warrant increased praise. Frankly, the way in which Thiago Silva has simply dominated opposing forwards with an obscene calmness and consummate ease in Ligue 1 over the course of this calendar year almost suggests that the true majesty of his talents are underused in a division where the player is rarely tested throughout ninety minutes. This is no disrespect to French football’s top-flight division, which is growing in both stature and quality month-on-month, but more so testament to Thiago Silva’s insanelly comprehensive skill-set. Furthermore, his role as a father figure to the other members of the PSG squad will become of increased importance, as the club looks to progress to the upper echelons of the continental football scene and ultimately, Champions League glory.

Alongside Zlatan Ibrahimovic, Thiago Silva was undoubtedly the marquee signing, with the new owners’ intention of sending a message to rest of the European footballing world regarding Paris Saint Germain’s intentions to domineer. Thiago Silva has consequently been able to use the influence that he has with President Nasser Al Khelaifi especially to surround himself with compatriots such as Marquinhos and Lucas Moura in 2013, which have certainly aided the defender to feel more at home in Paris. Arguably, without these additions, Thiago Silva would have considered, much like Ibrahimovic, to suggest that he was interested in leaving the club.

Club: Paris Saint Germain
Date of Birth: 14th February 1987
Position: Defender



Despite a brief summer flirtation with Spanish giants FC Barcelona, who made a concrete approach to prise Brazil’s captain away from France, Thiago Silva stood firmly loyal to what is his seventh club side in his career. Recognition must be given to PSG for making the appropriate steps to ensure their consistent central defender and, more crucially, their unflinching leader remain. He was handed a one-year contract extension in August 2013 until 2018, almost as a warning shot to any other potential suitors to ward off.

3. Radamel Falcao

2013 has been an exceptional year for the Colombian and is one that has seen him grow and perform even better for both club and country. Falcao started the year at Spanish side Atletico Madrid, but has since moved to French big spenders Monaco. Here he has continued to thrive, although it could be argued that he is playing against weaker defences than before.

At Atletico Madrid, Falcao was the star man and allowed the side to finish third in La Liga and thus qualify for the Champions League. Despite a slow start for Falcao due to injury, with the Colombian missing most of the opening month of 2013, the player put in a string of individually brilliant performances along the way for his team. For the vast majority of the time, Falcao played as an out and out striker, alongside or in front of Diego Costa and the Spanish side reaped the rewards due to his goals. Falcao reached his 200th career goal during this calendar year with his second of the game in a comfortable 5-0 victory against Granada. Falcao's last goal for the side came in a 2-1 loss to Barcelona.

The manner in which Falcao completed his career with Atletico is the moment, which he will most probably look back on as his fondest memory of 2013. The 27 year old turned provider in the Copa del Rey final against Real Madrid and appeared to play deeper than usual rather than in his orthodox target man position. Ultimately, Atletico triumphed over bitter rivals Real Madrid in a closely fought 2-1 win. Falcao will undoubtedly be delighted by the way that he was able to finish his career with the Spanish side and it was a fitting way to end for someone who had scored seventy goals in ninety-one appearances for the club. About winning the competition, Falcao had this to say:

"It's an unbelievable feeling. Now we have to enjoy it. This win feels awesome. We're happy with the effort we put in and that we can celebrate this win like the people wanted."

Falcao ended the 2012/2013 season with 28 goals, beaten in the scoring charts by only Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo. Falcao epitomises the role of a goal-scoring poacher with ease and celebrate success, which makes him one of the most sought after forward men that world football currently has to offer. Despite not actually being markedly tall, the Colombian possesses an implausible leap and, uses a suitable run-up to muscle his way in front of the ball before the standing defenders can react appropriately. Evidently, the player poses a real aerial threat. Secondly, the player appears to be almost ambidextrous with his feet as he can hit the ball with remarkable power and accuracy with either his left or his right leg and thus is very difficult to defend against as defenders cannot show him onto one particular side as he will still be pose a significant threat.

Both of these qualities have been demonstrated during his time at Monaco, where Falcao has clocked up nine goals in fifteen starts in 2014. The player signed for a remarkable sum of around sixty million euros in July, despite being heavily linked with a move to the Premier League. At one point, *Marca* even claimed that Manchester United had an agreement in place for the player, although this soon proved not to be the case, and Chelsea as well as other clubs were said to be vying for the Colombian's signature. Nevertheless, Falcao came to France, but the validity of the purchase was soon brought into question as the player's old primary school in Colombia soon claimed to have birth records that stated that Falcao was lying about his age and he was actually 29 rather than 27, which would crucially decrease his value in terms of transfer. This has since been proved false by the player, but it was not the start that he desired at his new club.

On the pitch, however, Falcao started his Monaco career in fantastic fashion and despite a quiet opening game against Bordeaux, managed to tuck hope the ball after a few scrappy bounces to record his first goal on his competitive debut for the club in the last minute of the match. The player scored a penalty again a week later against Montpellier, where he had a better all round game and the link up play with notable team-mates James Rodriguez and João Moutinho began impressed, considering their time apart from each other. Falcao also formed a strong partnership with Emmanuel Rivière in this match and helped the Frenchman to get two goals of his own.

Despite still hammering in the goals for his new club, the majority of these have been where the player has been in the right place and the right time and have not required any genius finishes. Thus this shows that the Colombian's movement and reading of the game is of the highest quality, as his special awareness ensures that he places himself in the most advantageous positions in order to score. The quality of finishing has all changed for the better in recent weeks, with the player's last two goals. Firstly, the player produced an audacious clip over Anthony Lopes in a 2-1 win against Lyon and this was followed up by a wonderful effort into the far corner in a 1-1 draw with Evian.

Despite the positives, it has not been all plain sailing for Radamel Falcao since his arrival at Monaco. The player was on a four game goal drought before the chip against Lyon and has been out injured for most of December with a thigh injury. The player's return to action did not go to plan as he missed a penalty in a shocking 2-1 defeat to Valenciennes. This meant that the club lost ground on PSG in the title race. One fault which has come clear throughout Falcao's career, and one which has been displayed a few times this year, is that the player does take a while to return to form when coming back from injury.

Club: AS Monaco

Date of Birth: 10th February 1986

Position: Attacker



Overall, therefore, in the colours of both Atletico Madrid and AS Monaco it has been a very impressive year full of goals for the Colombian. Internationally, it has been a similar story. Falcao has been key, alongside teammate James Rodriguez, in allowing the side to qualify for the World Cup finals in Brazil this coming summer. Falcao converted two penalties in a 3-3 draw with Chile, despite being 3-0 down, in order to claim qualification, proving his ability to cope under pressure. The player has five goals in ten games for his national side this year and despite playing as an out and out striker, he has still provided important assists for his team. Colombia have been drawn in a group alongside Ivory Coast, Japan and Greece and Falcao, as well as his team-mates will be quietly confident that his side will progress past the group stage.

The big question is, when the finals come around, which club will Falcao be playing for? Ever since his arrival at Monaco, tabloids have suggested that the player is only in France for a short stay, but more reliable sources of late claim that José Mourinho sees Falcao as his main target for this coming year. A move this January does seem unlikely, but there does appear to be increasing evidence that the player will only spend one season at the French club before moving to one of Europe's elite.

2. Blaise Matuidi

Blaise Matuidi is the definition of the twenty-first century footballer. His athleticism, pace and power combined make him into a truly unstoppable midfield engine. Over the course of the calendar year, Matuidi has gone from playing a more conservative role under Carlo Ancelotti, to one with more freedom under former Bordeaux manager Laurent Blanc, which has been synonymous with the superior quality of football that Paris Saint Germain have been executing since their new took the reins in the summer of 2013.

Matuidi is the only player in Paris Saint Germain's generally accepted starting XI to have been part of the Les Parisiens' setup before the assets of the Al Khelaifi and his Qatari crew were pumped into the capital club, as he joined on a €7.5m deal in 2011. The fact that he remains an integral part of the team, despite the high-profile arrivals of Marco Verratti and Thiago Motta, is testament to his raw talent but also the extent of his progression in the two and a half seasons that have followed since he first set foot in the Parc des Princes, wearing PSG colours.

Matuidi's story is one that ultimately proves the theory that hard-fought work, and effort pays in the end. He went largely unnoticed by the French national system until the age of 19 when Guy Ferrer first selected him in 2005 for the U19 setup. Now, Matuidi has become an integral part of the French national team at the most senior level and has become one of manager Didier Deschamps' linchpins in terms of his integrality on the pitch but also due to his buoyant and amiable character which further strengthens the bond between players in L'Equipe de France. If France are to at all succeed in Brazil next summer, they are going to need to be assured of a close-knit atmosphere which will dissuade the possibility of disciplinary dramas infamously seen at previous major tournaments. Matuidi's consistency on the pitch similarly exists off of it and his importance in the squad is generally understated.

A late bloomer on the international scene therefore, many still make a case that Blaise Matuidi is the best defensive midfielder on the planet as we near the end of 2013. The statistics, as usual, are utterly telling. The ball winning midfielder's role is both tiresome and repetitive, requiring discipline and sufficient poise to carry it out effectively. Over the course of the calendar year, Matuidi picked up just two yellow cards in league action. For a player whose role is simply to disrupt the opposition at every opportunity, his efficacy at doing so is highlighted by the aforementioned statistic. Generally in Ligue 1, Paris Saint Germain enjoy a clear majority of the overall possession during a match, which actually makes Matuidi's defensive role more difficult, as it becomes harder to maintain focus. There are elongated periods of time whereby Matuidi is involved instead in prying open opposition defences, with his passing accuracy averaging at 93% over the course of the calendar year in all competitions, one begins to appreciate that Matuidi is a multifaceted player with the ability to perform consummately in various seemingly unlike aspects of the game of football.

Not only does Matuidi possess a measured and reliable passing radar, but, with the help from Claude Makélélé and Laurent Blanc specifically, Matuidi's movement on the ball has improved markedly in the last six months. Matuidi is one of those footballers, who, when you take a glance at him, you do not immediately expect strength, but perhaps more endurance. Matuidi has worked hard to make the former characteristic more pronounced in his game and this is best shown by his boisterous runs into the opposition box, often from as far back as the centre circle, brushing off a couple of opponents, before looking to provide a teammate with an obliging cross. This action has become emblematic of Matuidi's more noticeable box-to-box nature that he did not necessarily act on to the same extent beforehand.

Matuidi is very much a player who relishes the big occasions, perhaps quite simply because, unlike his continental football-cultured PSG counterparts, Matuidi has never been part of a title-winning side before his time in the French capital. This was both noticeable throughout PSG's Champions League group stage encounters during their 2013/2014 campaign, with an especially sparkling performance against Benfica at home, where he was the standout performer in a game that Les Parisiens eased through, finishing 3-0 winners against arguably the most challenging opponents that their group had presented them with.

Club: Paris Saint Germain
Date of Birth: 9th April 1987
Position: Midfielder



Call him PSG's 'Duracell-bunny' or any number of other appropriate nicknames; Matuidi's most enviable statistic is arguably his level of endurance, which truly sets him apart. Simplistically speaking, Matuidi can simply perform better than most and longer than most. There is this unerringly robotic nature about his enactments that creates this sense of inevitability when watching Blaise Matuidi pull the strings. As an opponent, eventually, the French international will wear you down.

When writing this piece it became increasingly obvious when searching for appropriate comparisons to Matuidi that there simply weren't any which would do him justice. One cannot help but feel that PSG's defensive midfielder, who will sign a contract extension with the club imminently, is the first of an entirely new mould of player whose astonishing perpetuation and brute force, paralleled with the voracious technical skill he possesses may well make him a near-perfect footballer. Either way, neither Blaise Matuidi's importance to French football nor his brilliance can be understated.

1. Zlatan Ibrahimovic

Every so often somebody changes the game, moving the goalposts or singlehandedly raising the level of excellence, all on their own. When Zlatan Ibrahimovic made the decision to come to Ligue 1 and play for Paris Saint Germain in the summer of 2012, he was branded as a 'money-grabber', with claims that Ibrahimovic was moving to the supposed sub-par French football division simply to earn €14m a year in wages.

18 months onwards and Ibrahimovic-led Paris Saint Germain have played the major role in projecting Ligue 1 to a global audience, enticing world-class footballing individuals to try their hand in France's first division, which has subsequently seen the arrival of oligarch-backed AS Monaco into the Ligue 1 stratosphere, not to mention the arrivals of Edinson Cavani, Falcao and David Beckham.

PSG's mission is relatively simple: dominate Europe and thus world football. Such ambition at board level must be matched by that of their star players and not only do Thiago Silva and 'Zlatan' both embody and believe in the project, but they act as figureheads for Les Parisiens' European revolution to take shape. Regardless of the occasions during interviews when 'Ibra' has cast doubt over his future, most notably during the period of time in which Carlo Ancelotti's future at the club was questioned, Zlatan has always claimed to 'believe in the project.'

His unique character, purposefully arrogant but with a subtle softer side, also helps to promote QSI's football project. For whatever reason, be it is style, relationship with the media, raw talent or general effortlessness, people idolise over Ibrahimovic in a way that few other footballers are obsessed over. Zlatan Ibrahimovic is indeed an icon, because he stands up for himself whilst remaining distinctly professional, in his own admittedly roundabout way. One merely has to look at the very verb that he was given, which was officially introduced into the Swedish language "zlatanera", which means to dominate; or the series of Swedish stamps which were produced that had depictions of Ibra's face printed on them. Football fans love Zlatan, and so does his own country. Beyond the bravado and the on-pitch individual genius, there is another side to Zlatan that sets him apart from the Mario Balotelli's of the footballing community. Ibra stands for responsibility.

Ask any of his Paris Saint Germain teammates and they all reply in more-or-less the same manner: Zlatan is always there to help me. Ibrahimovic is not a hard-hitting celebrity who can be seen every evening at one of Paris' most renowned clubs or bars; instead, he is a family man and a father to two young boys. Sure, he has had his 'Balotelli' moments, including his infamous self-boycott with regards to the Swedish national team in 2007, but all the signs suggest that, at the age of 32, Ibrahimovic has become more level-headed if not on the pitch, then certainly off it.

The player's genius on the pitch seemingly knows no bounds. 27. The number of league goals that Ibrahimovic scored over the course of the calendar year. Admittedly, to a certain extent, a lone striker is only as accomplished as the teammates surrounding him. If Ibrahimovic were not as well served by the likes of Blaise Matuidi and Thiago Motta in particular, then he would simply not have scored as many goals as he has mustered in 2013. The individual brilliance, improvisation and brute strength that the player demonstrates from fixture to fixture is however not due to anybody else other than Zlatan. The back-heeled scorpion kick that he fashioned in October against SC Bastia in Ligue 1 was extraterrestrial and further reminded French football of Zlatan's extraordinariness, harking back to memories in particular of THAT goal against England.

His critics will argue that his ability is overstated because of his often outrageous character, that he failed to deliver for Paris Saint Germain in their big games, notably during their Champions League two-legged affair with Barcelona and that there is a darker, more angry side to his character which often results in him lashing out, be it at the referee, the opposition or, most often, his own teammates. It is undeniable that Ibrahimovic is frustrated exceedingly easily, regardless of whether his team happens to be winning or not. What is clear is that he sets tremendously high standards for himself, and all it takes is a couple of loose touches of the ball, and Ibrahimovic's initial mood being one of perseverance turns into a disenchanted one, where he will take his anger out on others. Lucas Moura and Edinson Cavani have admitted to tensions with the 6 ft 5 Swede in 2013 and one merely has to look at Ibrahimovic's abhorrent disciplinary record to see that he is not a huge favourite among French football's officials either.

In 2013 in Ligue 1 alone, Zlatan was yellow carded ten times and a confounding five of those were for disrespect towards officials, either through provocative gestures or words. As for criticisms regarding his habit of failing to shine during the encounters where PSG desperately needed an attacking talisman to make the crucial difference, he ultimately failed. In their Champions League duel with Barcelona, PSG were only knocked out on the away goals rule. Lionel Messi came back from injury in the second leg to make a decisive contribution to Barcelona earning a draw that consequently saw them through to the next round. Zlatan Ibrahimovic did not produce a similar piece of brilliance that would have seen Les Parisiens through against one of the most established sides on the European footballing scene. Extraordinary footballers are called upon to complete extraordinary actions at timely moments.

Club: Paris Saint Germain
Date of Birth: 3rd October 1981
Position: Striker



The negatives aside, Zlatan Ibrahimovic's character and performances have begun to make Ligue 1 important in football again. If anything, Ibrahimovic has become more lethal in front of goal and, on his own admission he is improving with age, 'like fine wine'. His importance as a role model, as the figurehead of Paris Saint Germain's ambitious project and his ability to wow footballing audiences make him the most worthy individual to take the highest ranking in this year's Get French Football News 100.

The GFFN 100 Team:

C. Nourry

N. Barbakadze

J. Martland

J. Lambert

O. Morgan

N. Staples

S. Scutt

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