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42





LYON

MAXENCE CAQUERET

GUSTO

MENDES

LUKEBA

TAGLIAFICO

TOLISSO

CAQUERET

PAQUETA

TETE

LACAZETTE

TOKO-EKAMBI

4-3-3

Key Man - Maxence Caqueret

Having extended his contract to 2027, there's an overwhelming feeling that Maxence Caqueret is central to a new era at Lyon and his performances over the last couple of years prove why. Last season, OL were a noticeably stronger side with Caqueret at the heart of midfield. The 21-year-old's importance can be overlooked when the likes of Lucas Paquetá catch the eye but, without Caqueret, it's unlikely Paquetá would be able to hit such highs. Comfortable featuring in a two or three man set-up, the Venissieux-born midfielder is responsible for the majority of defensive interventions in midfield and is a vital cog in ball progression, completing 25 pressures and over 5.5 tackles and interceptions per 90 minutes last season. Partnered with Bruno Guimarães before Christmas, ball progression wasn't a key task for Caqueret but after the Brazilian's departure he expertly adapted his role to launch attacks with impressive dribbling numbers and progressive pass totals. Caqueret's all-seeing, all-doing midfield performances could be key to any return to European football for OL this season.

Signing to Watch - Alexandre Lacazette

The General is back after scoring 129 goals for the club before he switched the Rhone-Alpes region for North London. Lacazette's record in Ligue 1 of 100 goals and 32 assists in 203 games speaks for itself and his arrival significantly improves Lyon's attacking powers. Having lost his shooting boots at Arsenal towards the end of his time in London, spending time in a number ten role – which is something Bosz hasn't ruled out at OL, it will be interesting to see how the 31-year-old works in tandem with, or in competition with, last season's top scorer Moussa Dembélé and if the French international can rediscover his best scoring form in Ligue 1.

Squad Analysis

After an eighth place finish last season, this transfer

window is pivotal if the club are to recover and look towards European qualification once more. So far, OL's summer business has been smart. Returning heroes Lacazette and Corentin Tolisso offer much-needed experience, quality and leadership to a young team built upon the success of the club's youth system. The academy will continue to play a key role with graduates such as Caqueret, right-back Malo Gusto and centre-back Castello Lukeba all set to take on more responsibility. With a range of experience and talent, the task of building cohesion and consistency lies with coach Peter Bosz. The Dutchman trialled his preferred 4-3-3 at times last season before switching to a 4-2-3-1 due to his side's quality in attacking midfield, but there was a lack of style and direction at times. Balancing his keenness to press, attacking intent and defensive security will be key if Bosz is to be a success in France.

Strengths

OL's strength lies in an array of attacking options. With Lacazette returning and Dembélé remaining for now, Lyon boast two high-quality strikers. Brazilian forward Tetê re-signing on loan also adds another option on the wing with the likes of Romain Faivre expected to be more settled after some inconsistent from following his January move from Brest and teenager Rayan Cherki predicted to finally have a breakout year. Karl Toko-Ekambi also remains a genuine threat. Lyon's midfield has been acclaimed as Ligue 1's best in the past and the attacking options of Paquetá and Jeff Reine-Adelaide, who returns from long-term injury, alongside more all-round midfielders such as the returning Tolisso, youngster Johan Lepenant, who joined from Caen this summer, and Caqueret paint a pretty picture in that area of the pitch for Les Gones.

Weaknesses

During pre-season, Bosz expressed his concern over the lack of a natural and experienced number six who will aid

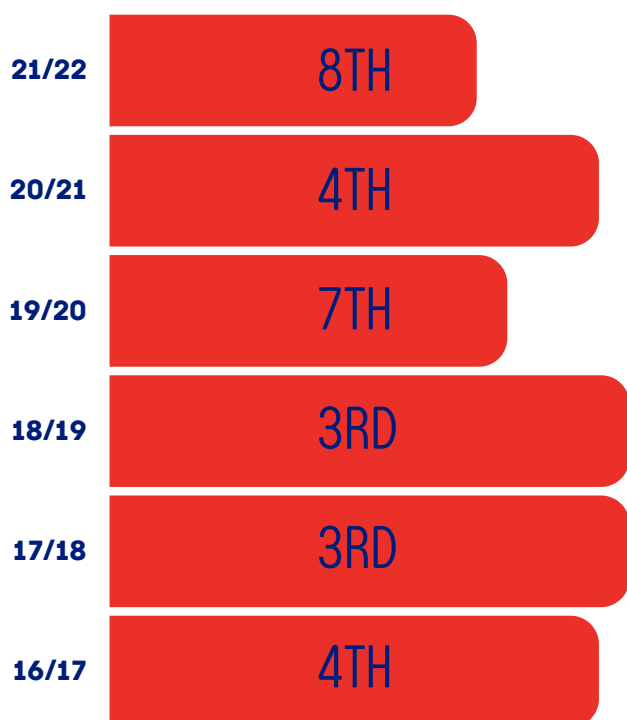
Caqueret and help dictate tempo. Unconvinced over giving 19-year-old Lepenant such responsibility and Tolisso's suitability for the role, this could be a potential stumbling block as Bosz looks to build his ideal midfield. Nicolas Tagliafico solves issues at left-back but gaps still exist across the defence, particularly in the centre. With Jason Denayer gone, Jérôme Boateng out of favour and Damien Da Silva looking to move on, Lyon are left with two natural centre-backs in Lukeba and Sinaly Diomandé plus converted midfielder Thiago Mendes. The departure of club captain Léo Dubois to Galatasary also leaves just one recognised right-back. As it stands, Lyon head into the season more than a little top-heavy.

Verdict

Lyon have improved this summer overall and the arrival of new owners has brought renewed optimism around the club. It could be a case of hometown glory for OL if the academy graduates and the returning duo of Lacazette and Tolisso are able to find their feet early. It remains to be seen, though, if Bosz can get the best out of this squad, with last season becoming a rather underwhelming first campaign for the former Leverkusen boss, who was fortunate to keep his job. Bosz has to find a balance and cohesion if he wants to avoid a repeat and renewed pressure over his position at the Groupama Stadium. Impressive attacking quality will surely see Lyon compete for the podium but defensive insecurities could be their downfall and mean they could just miss out.

Liam Wraith

FORM



KEY

- + CORENTIN TOLISSO, CM, 28
- LUCAS PAQUETÁ, AM, 24
- MAXENCE CAQUERET, CM, 22
- + ALEXANDRE LACAZETTE, ST, 31

IMPORTANT

- ANTHONY LOPES, GK, 31
- MOUSSA DEMBÉLÉ, ST, 26
- + NICOLÁS TAGLIAFICO, LB, 29
- CASTELLO LUKEBA, CB, 19
- KARL TOKO-EKAMBI, FW, 29

REGULAR

- HOUSSEM AOUAR, AM, 24
- ROMAIN FAIVRE, AM, 24
- RAYAN CHERKI, AM, 18
- JEFF REINE-ADÉLAÏDE, AM, 24
- TETÉ, FW, 22
- THIAGO MENDES, DM/CB, 30
- MALO GUSTO, RB, 19

OPTION

- SINALY DIOMANDE, CB, 21
- JULIAN POLLERSBECK, GK, 27
- + JOHANN LEPENANT, CM, 19
- + RÉMY RIOU, GK, 34
- TINO KADEWERE, ST, 26
- HENRIQUE, LB, 28
- JÉRÔME BOATENG, CB, 33
- DAMIEN DA SILVA, CB, 34

DEVELOPMENT

- BRADLEY BARCOLA, FW, 19

HEAD COACH

PETER BOSZ



LENS

SEKO FOFANA

SAMBA

GRADIT

DANSO

MEDINA

CABOT

ABDUL-SAMED

FOFANA

FRANKOWSKI

SOTOCA

KAKUTA

OPENDA

3-4-1-2

Key Man - Seko Fofana

Having become the first non-PSG player to win the GFFN 100 earlier this year, if Lens were reliant on any one player it would be Seko Fofana. The driving force behind the recent success of the Sang et Or, Fofana will have to step up once again after the departure of his midfield partner Cheick Doucouré, who Fofana often lauded in interviews, to Crystal Palace this summer. Last season was fruitful for Fofana, who finished within L'Équipe's top 10 rated players and was named in the Ligue 1 Team of the Season after starting a total of 41 games and scoring 10 goals from central midfield. The Ivorian is often decisive for Lens and favours dribbling and longshots to apply his potent attacking threat but this season will be more challenging after the loss of Doucouré as well as right-wing-back Jonathan Clauss to Marseille, another key Lieutenant. The 27-year-old will find himself stretched between his defensive and attacking responsibilities after he struggled in the latter stages of last season, noticeably fatigued after the pressure of being Lens' all-rounder so long. If new midfield signings can support Fofana's attacking presence with enough defensive cover then the Ivorian could replicate his 2021 form this season, although, as it stands, that's not a certainty.

Signing To Watch - Loïs Openda

As Arnaud Kalimuendo returns to his parent club after a successful two-year loan spell, the signing of Belgian forward Loïs Openda is designed to fill the PSG man's boots. The 22-year-old was sent out on loan to Dutch club Vitesse Arnhem from Club Brugge and managed 28 goals in 66 Eredivisie games over the last two seasons, hitting the back of the net on 37 occasions over 88 appearances in all competitions while adding 11 assists. Openda is a potent poacher with quick reactions and a deadly striker's instinct as well as an ability to carry the ball and be a threat from set-pieces. His last-minute finish to beat Inter Milan in pre-season will have been a confidence-booster

for the Belgian and Franck Haise as Lens prepare for life after Kalimuendo.

Squad Analysis

An unbeaten pre-season has maintained positivity around the club ahead of the new season, and Lens have more than one reason to be feeling confident ahead of their opener against Brest. Unlike nearly every other French club, RCL got their summer recruitment sorted early, signing proven Ligue 1 experience as well as managing to lure away Nottingham Forest's promotion-winning goalkeeper Brice Samba, who should guarantee solidity. The signing of Jimmy Cabot from Angers provides a steady replacement for French international Clauss on the right wing, while fellow arrival, former Clermont man Salis Abdul Samed, also proved his quality at Ligue 1 level last season. The side still have solid foundations and have enough fighting spirit and tenacity to keep their successful 3-4-1-2 set-up dynamic enough for a third shot at a European spot after two consecutive seventh-placed finishes following their return to Ligue 1.

Strengths

Whilst Lens' success last season was built upon an unstoppable midfield partnership between Doucouré and Fofana, their success was enabled by Frank Haise's adventurous system which maximises his squad's talent. They will be notably weaker in midfield without Doucouré, but the foundations of success are still there, coupled with a strong mentality and an enterprising style of play that Ligue 1 sides are yet to shut down regularly.

Weaknesses

Kalimuendo's return to Lens for last season proved crucial to an otherwise bare-looking strike force. Although more of a facilitator, 31-year-old Florian Sotoca still has the quality to threaten in Ligue 1 but will be gladly aided by the arrival of Openda, who offers an element of pace up-

front. The big question is in midfield and whether any Lens midfielder can replicate Doucouré's vital defensive work – can Abdul Samed slot seamlessly into that position? He performed well against Inter Milan and West Ham in pre-season but translating those positive performances consistently at the top end of Ligue 1 is a different prospect entirely. Crucially, Fofana's ability to charge forward will be greatly affected by Abdul-Samed's performances, one way or the other.

Verdict

After missing out on European football on the final day last season, Lens will be hoping to build upon their swashbuckling seventh-placed finishes in the last two years. However, with the departure of some key players and European rivals strengthening further, Haise's first priority must be stability, but Lens will likely again have the potential to kick on and finish in and around those European places once more.

George Boxall

FORM

21/22

7TH

20/21

7TH

19/20

2ND (L2)

18/19

5TH (L2)

17/18

14TH (L2)

16/17

4TH (L2)

KEY

SEKO FOFANA, CM, 27

JONATHAN GRADIT, CB, 29

IMPORTANT

KEVIN DANSO, CB, 23

+ LOÏS OPENDA, FW, 22

+ JIMMY CABOT, RWB, 28

GAËL KAKUTA, AM, 31

FLORIAN SOTOCA, AM, 31

REGULAR

DEIVER MACHADO, LB, 28

FACUNDO MEDINA, CB, 23

+ ADAM BUKSA, ST, 26

+ BRICE SAMBA, GK, 28

+ SALIS ABDUL SAMED, DM, 22

WESLEY SAÏD, FW, 27

PRZEMYSŁAW FRANKOWSKI, WB, 27

DAVID COSTA, CM, 21

MASSADIO HAÏDARA, DF, 29

OPTION

WUILKER FARÍÑEZ, GK, 24

CHRISTOPHER WOON, CB, 20

PATRICK BERG, CM, 24

+ ŁUKASZ POREBA, DM, 22

ISMAËL BOURA, DF, 22

IGNATIUS GANAGO, ST, 23

JEAN-LOUIS LECA, GK, 36

DEVELOPMENT

IBRAHIMA BALDÉ, FW, 19

ADRIEN LOUVEAU, DF, 22

HEAD COACH

FRANCK HAISE



MONTPELLIER

TEJI SAVANIER

LIKELY XI

SACKO

ESTEVE

OMLIN

SAKHO

MAOUASSA

CHOTARD

SAVANIER

FERRI

NORDIN

KHAZRI

MAVIDIDI

4-2-3-1

Key player - Téji Savanier

As club captain, Téji Savanier is the cog in the Montpellier machine that makes everything tick, both on and off the pitch. As far as Ligue 1 midfielders go, there aren't much more exciting than the 30-year-old. Whether it be scoring imperious free-kicks or gracefully linking midfield and attack with a breath-taking pass or piece of sublime skill, Savanier is crucial to Montpellier's whole style and it's hard to see how they would function without the Frenchman's brilliance. Rather than being particularly reliant on physical attributes, it's the technical side of Savanier's game that catches the eye. With an eye for a defense-splitting ball, often attempting passes that others wouldn't even dream of, there aren't many midfielders in Europe who can be compared to Savanier. This is shown by his 5.85 progressive passes per 90 minutes, his success rate may not be the highest but it's the Frenchman's risk-taking nature that makes him so unpredictable and creative. Savanier is effective in the final third too, both via goals and chance creation, and nobody contributed to more goals for Montpellier last season than Savanier's 15 – eight goals and seven assists. Unafraid of shooting from distance, Savanier can score from almost anywhere. If he can come up with more moments of brilliance and stay the same influential figure in the final third, Montpellier will, again, likely owe any successes to Savanier's brilliance.

Signing To Watch - Wahbi Khazri

Since Wahbi Khazri made the switch from Sunderland back to France, he's been vital to both Saint-Etienne and Rennes. With ASSE relegated, the forward has switched Les Verts for the orange of Montpellier and it will be interesting to see what sort of influence he holds under coach Olivier Dall'Oglio. Scoring 10 goals for a bottom three side last season shows that the Khazri will add firepower for La Pallaide, who struggled in front of goal towards the back end of last season. However, with youngster Elye Wahi coming into the new season after his

best scoring year, Dall'Oglio has key decisions to make over how to use Khazri in tandem with his plethora of other attacking options such as Englishman Stephy Mavididi. However, considering the influence Khazri held at Saint Etienne and his solid Ligue 1 scoring record of 69 goals and 37 assists in 237 games – many of which were as an attacking midfielder, the 31-year-old's arrival on a free transfer he could become one of the signings of the season if he's deployed correctly.

Squad Analysis

Montpellier have held the mantle of being the league's entertainers in previous years before becoming goal-shy towards the end of last season as they struggled to overcome the losses of front pair Andy Delort and Gaëtan Laborde. After making some neat signings, MHSC's squad is well-rounded and carries a youthful look, particularly in midfield, where Dall'Oglio will need to find a balance between using the experience of his seasoned veterans alongside some exciting youngsters who will be looking for more first-team opportunities. Again using pacey attacking talents like Wahi and Mavididi to execute his free-flowing style, which received plaudits at Brest, will be key if Dall'Oglio is to improve MHSC's fortunes after a post-Christmas slump. Montpellier eventually finished 13th having challenged for the European places before the winter break.

Strengths

With the additions of forwards Aranud Nordin and Khazri on free transfers from relegated ASSE, Montpellier are at their strongest in attack since the departures of Laborde and Delort. There was a lack of grit in their performances at the end of the season and they often lacked a clinical edge in front of goal but with Wahi likely to continue improving and Khazri renowned for being a handful for opposing defences and clinical when at his best as well as Mavididi's graceful finishing and slight-of-foot, MHSC are

much more of a threat than last season. Nordin isn't the most prolific but offers dynamism and speed while adding depth to what could be an imposing front three. The reliable Ligue 1 stalwart Valère Germain offers a useful bench option too.

Weaknesses

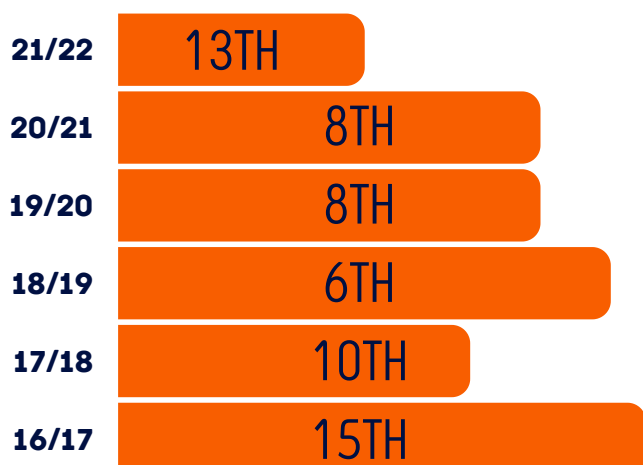
Whilst Montpellier look more settled in forward areas, the rest of the pitch creates questions. Jonas Omlin is a brilliant keeper but those in front of him didn't cover themselves in glory last season. Former Liverpool and PSG man Mamadou Sakho is experienced but has so lacked the gumption to cope with Ligue 1's best and it is yet to be seen who will form the central defensive partnership with Pedro Mendes, Nicolas Cozza and talented but inexperienced Maxime Estève to choose from. A consistent and complementary partnership will be needed if Montpellier want to create the defensive steel that they've been missing. Solid reinforcements in both full-back positions will have a big part to play with former Rennes man Faitout Maouassa and Falaye Sacko, after a successful loan with Saint-Etienne, both arriving with points to prove.

Verdict

Finding their feet early will be key. The end-of-season form last time out became a major concern and, with four teams being relegated this season, MHSC can't afford a continued slump. Dall'Oglio needs to find consistency with one philosophy compared to constantly changing formations and approaches. If he can rediscover the expansive, free-flowing play that made him a prime candidate for the job at the Stade de la Mosson, Montpellier could pull up a few trees and become a fixture in the top half of the table, but if he continues to tinker without success, Montpellier could yet be pulled into a relegation battle.

Liam Wraith

FORM



KEY

JONAS OMLIN, GK, 28
 STEPHY MAVIDIDI, FW, 24
 TÉJI SAVANIER, AM, 30
 WAHBI KHAZRI, FW, 31

IMPORTANT

JORDAN FERRI, CM, 30
 FAITOUT MAOUASSA, LB, 24
 MAMADOU SAKHO, CB, 32
 FALAYE SACKO, RB, 27

REGULAR

ARNAUD SOUQUET, RB, 30
 PEDRO MENDES, CB, 31
 ARNAUD NORDIN, FW, 24
 VALÈRE GERMAIN, ST, 32
 JORIS CHOTARD, CM, 20
 MAXIME ESTÈVE, CB, 20
 ELYE WAHI, ST, 19
 NICOLAS COZZA, CB, 23

OPTION

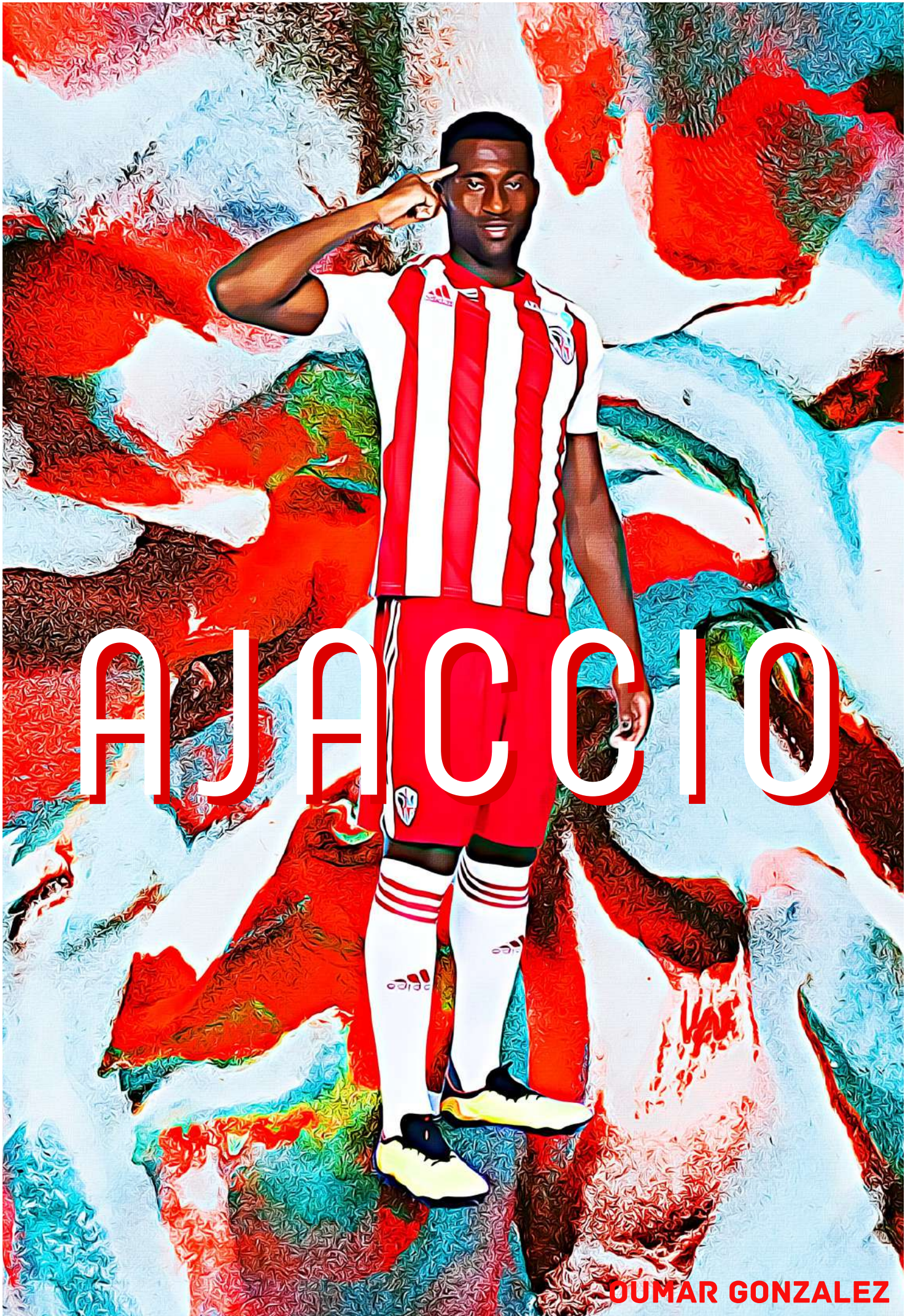
DIMITRY BERTAUD, GK, 24
 THÉO SAINTE-LUCE, LB, 23
 LÉO LEROY, AM, 22
 SACHA DELAYE, CM, 20
 BÉNI MAKOUANA, FW, 19
 MATHÍAS SUÁREZ, RB, 26

DEVELOPMENT

KHALID FAYAD, AM, 18
 ENZO TCHATO, CB, 19
 MATTÉO LOUBATIÈRES, CM, 18

HEAD COACH

OLIVIER DALL'OGGIO



AJACCIO

OUMAR GONZALEZ



Key Man - Oumar Gonzalez

Ajaccio will be looking to combative centre-half Oumar Gonzalez to repeat the performances that saw him keep most of Ligue 2's attacks quiet last year. He appeared in 34 matches across the season and even chipped in with three goals, in what was his first season at the club after arriving from Chambly. However, he will have to make do without the equally impressive Gédéon Kalulu by his side, the DR Congo international having joined Lorient. Fellow defenders Fernand Mayembo and Clément Vidal have arrived from Le Havre and Montpellier respectively, while Mickaël Alphonse's signing from Maccabi Haifa provides a reliable option at right-back. Whether this is enough to mount a defense-oriented survival campaign remains to be seen, though.

Signing To Watch - Thomas Mangani

Translating the club's pugnacious style to Ligue 1 will be no easy task, and bolstering a relatively threadbare squad will have been the priority this summer. Opting for league experience to guide them to safety, the club have made Saint-Étienne hero Romain Hamouma and ex-Angers man Thomas Mangani their marquee summer signings, who have a combined age of 70. The latter, who returns after a loan spell at the club in 2007/08, will provide stability in midfield having become a reliable, and high-quality at one stage, Ligue 1 midfielder during Angers seven Ligue 1 seasons. For Hamouma, though, leading the line will be a tough ask with much of his explosiveness gone and a litany of injury issues in the past few years.

Squad Analysis

Such was the surprise when Ajaccio finished last year's Ligue 2 campaign in second place, that this summer has seen a race against time to bring the stadium facilities up to a top flight standard. Returning to the top flight after nearly eight years away was not necessarily the target for a club that didn't even crack the second tier's top ten

budgets. Their rise – secured with a final-day win over champions Toulouse – is a testament to the streamlined, cohesive set-up that long-serving cult manager Olivier Pantaloni instilled, seconded by Jordan Galtier, son of PSG coach Christophe.

Strengths

Their unlikely promotion campaign was built off the back of a spectacular defensive record, conceding just 19 goal, that's one goal every two games. Nevertheless, a turnover in personnel and the leap in calibre of centre-forwards that goalkeeper Benjamin Leroy and his defence will be facing will make holding down the fort in Ligue 1 a different proposition altogether. In any case, the likes of Kylian Mbappé and Lionel Messi will be in for a tough contest when they come down to a boisterous Corsica.

Weaknesses

As may be expected, Pantaloni's rigidity has brought with it stunted attacking potential, and their tally of 39 goals scored was less than half that of title winners Toulouse. Ajaccio were overly reliant on versatile winger Riad Nouri, now 37, who was involved in over two thirds of the Corsicans' goals last season, with nine strikes and four assists. Nouri is gearing up for his first ever season in the top flight after spending the entirety of his career in Ligue 2 so far. Their other main attacking asset from last season, Jean-Philippe Krasso, stayed behind in the second tier as he returned to his parent club Saint-Étienne who were relegated from Ligue 1.

Verdict

Ajaccio kick off their comeback season away to a renascent Lyon side before going on to face Lens and Rennes – something of a baptism of fire for their first few weeks back in the top flight. Even if survival hopes look slim, a cash injection – Ajaccio are arriving just as the CVC deal takes effect – and infrastructure upgrade will make

future promotion campaigns much less of a surprise. The Île de Beauté finally has a team in Ligue 1 again, and French football is all the richer for it but, in a season that will see four teams automatically go down, survival will be a tough ask for Pantaloni's men. Making the Stade François-Coty as tough a place to go to as possible will be key in giving them a chance, as they look to cook up an atmosphere that can be cagey (quite literally in the case of the claustrophobia-inducing away end) and imposing, to let visitors know that Corsican football is well and truly back.

Raphaël Jucobin

FORM



KEY

ROMAIN HAMOUMA, FW, 35
 BENJAMIN LEROY, GK, 33
 THOMAS MANGANI, CM, 35
 OUMAR GONZALEZ, CB, 24

IMPORTANT

RIAD NOURI, FW, 37
 VINCENT MARCHETTI, AM, 25
 MATHIEU COUTADEUR, CM, 36

REGULAR

ISMAËL DIALLO, DF, 25
 KEVIN SPADANUDA, FW, 25
 FERNAND MAYEMBO, CB, 26
 CÉDRIC AVINEL, CB, 35
 QAZIM LAÇI, CM, 26
 MOHAMED YOUSOUF, RB, 34
 MICKAËL ALPHONSE, RB, 33
 CYRILLE BAYALA, FW, 25
 YANIS CIMIGNANI, FW, 20
 GAËTAN COURTET, ST, 33
 CLÉMENT VIDAL, DF, 22
 BEVIC MOUSSITI-OKO, FW, 27
 MICKAËL BARRETO, AM, 31
 MOUNAÏM EL IDRISY, ST, 23

OPTION

TAÏRYK ARCONTE, FW, 18
 ALASSANE N'DIAYE, FW, 31
 KOUAMÉ BOTUÉ, FW, 19
 FLORIAN CHABROLLE, CM, 24
 CHAKER ALHADHUR, DF, 30
 FRANÇOIS SOLLACARO, GK, 28

HEAD COACH

OLIVIER PANTALONI



NANTES

LUDOVIC BLAS

LIKELY XI

LAFONT

CASTELLETTO

GIROTTO

PALLOIS

COCO

SISSOKO

CHIRIVELLA

MERLIN

BLAS

GUESSAND

SIMON

3-4-3

Key Man - Ludovic Blas

No player has shone more brightly in Antoine Kombouaré's resurgent Nantes side than Ludovic Blas. The playmaker ended the season as Les Canaris' top scorer with fifteen in all competitions, including the winner from the penalty spot in May's Coupe de France final over OGC Nice. The quick-thinking midfielder has more than just the finishing touch though, as he orchestrates the team's lightning-quick counters with poise and vision while an ability to squirm out of tight situations will make him the team's key asset once again as they take on the Europe League. That is, if he stays – a move to Lille is reportedly in the offing, in what would be a major blow to the team on the eve of the season's start.

Signing To Watch - Moussa Sissoko

Les Canaris have, for now, managed to hold on to two of their most important assets in goalkeeper Alban Lafont and Blas. The addition of experienced France international Moussa Sissoko from Watford will also prove vital to guide a relatively young squad through a hectic European campaign. Most importantly, though, Kombouaré was just about convinced to stay on as manager, but this year will likely be his last on the banks of the Loire. With that in mind, Les Canaris will be hoping that, if anything, their European campaign can serve to establish a sustainable platform for success going forward.

Squad Analysis

For Antoine Kombouaré to have dragged a downtrodden Nantes from the brink of relegation to European football within a year is nothing short of a miracle. The journeyman coach arrived midway through the 2020/21 campaign in the wake of Raymond Domenech's disastrous spell in charge, becoming the club's fourth manager of the season. Although the team still finished 18th, the change in mentality and approach instilled by Kombouaré would result in a brilliant win at the Parc des Princes before a

play-off win over Toulouse secured an unlikely survival. The following campaign was Kombouaré's redemption year, as the groundwork he laid the previous half-season bore fruit via an impressive mid-table finish. May's cup win was a vindication of Kombouaré's oft-derided tactical nous.

Strengths

Last season was peppered with bombastic attacking bonanzas, led by the triple threat of Blas and forwards Moses Simon and Randal Kolo Muani. The team hit four past Angers and Lorient and beat Bordeaux 5-3, but the highlight of the league season was once again a defeat of PSG, as the eventual champions were blown away in a match that saw Nantes go into half-time 3-0 up.

Weakness

These results did admittedly paper over the cracks of some less flattering results as the team struggled with consistency, consecutive losses to Troyes and Lille came just as it looked like they could challenge for a spot in Europe via the league. That said, despite not replicating the famous jeu à la nantaise style that won the 1995 title, the Stade de la Beaujoire faithful finally have reason to be cheerful again. The clear weakness this season is in the attacking department, though. With Kolo-Muani having left on a free for Eintracht Frankfurt, and both Blas' and Simon's futures still up in the air, the club have sought to replace their attacking output by drafting in Egypt forward Mostafa Mohamed and a loanee in Evann Guessand from Nice. They have also offered a lifeline out of Ligue 2 for Bordeaux's Hwang Ui-jo, who is said to be Kombouaré priority for the position. Even with the South Korean's arrival, the squad will, admittedly, likely still be too threadbare to sustain a league and European campaign.

Verdict

The 4-0 loss to a resurgent PSG in the Trophée des

Champions laid bare the gulf that separates Nantes and the upper echelons of the league, despite giving an acceptable account of themselves in Tel-Aviv. Fighting on both fronts will be impossible, but the top-level experience and the opportunity to put players in the shop window will be valuable for a historic club that finally looks to be back on the up.

Raphaël Jucobin

FORM

21/22

9TH

20/21

18TH

19/20

13TH

18/19

12TH

17/18

9TH

16/17

7TH

SQUAD

KEY

ALBAN LAFONT, GK, 23

LUDOVIC BLAS, AM, 24

+ MOUSSA SISSOKO, CM, 32

MOSES SIMON, WIG, 27

IMPORTANT

ANDREI GIROTTO, CB, 30

NICOLAS PALLOIS, CB, 34

PEDRO CHIRIVELLA, DM, 25

REGULAR

FÁBIO DA SILVA, DF, 32

+ EVANN GUESSAND, ST, 21

SAMUEL MOUTOUSSAMY, CM, 25

MARCUS COCO, MF, 26

+ MOSTAFA MOHAMED, ST, 24

DENNIS APPIAH, DF, 30

JEAN-CHARLES CASTELLETTO, CB, 27

SÉBASTIEN CORCHIA, RB, 32

QUENTIN MERLIN, LWB, 20

OPTION

RÉMY DESCAMPS, GK, 26

DENIS PETRIC, GK, 34

KADER BAMBA, FW, 28

CHARLES TRAORÉ, DF, 30

DEVELOPMENT

SAMUEL YEPIÉ YEPIÉ, FW, 19

MOHAMED ACHI, CM, 20

LOHANN DOUCET, FB, 20

ROBIN VOISINE, CB, 20

GOR MANVELYAN, ST, 20

HEAD COACH

ANTOINE KOMBOUARÉ



TROYES

ROMINIGUE KOUAMÉ

LIKELY XI



3-5-2

Key Man - Rominigue Kouamé

As part of Ligue 1's most under-the-radar team, central midfielder Rominigue Kouamé's performances went largely unnoticed outside the Stade de l'Aube last season. However, few Ligue 1 midfielders offer the calm dynamism, neat technical ability and considered passing of the Malian international midfielder. Having failed to break through at Lille, Kouamé is something of a late bloomer by today's standards after failing to settle on loan with Paris FC and in Belgium too. But, at 25, he's finally found a home and his best form. Summer interest has been largely absent, but another season of the same consistent, effective style and Kouamé won't be sticking around at ESTAC much longer.

Signing To Watch - Andreas Bruus

Having lost Giulian Biancone, who impressed under Batlles in the first half of last season as a wing-back before oddly losing his place under Irles who moved him to centre-back, reinforcements at wing-back were desperately needed. Dane Andreas Bruus fills the gap left by Biancone's €9m move to Nottingham Forest. A Danish youth international, the 23-year-old right-back, who can play anywhere on the right-hand side, has already amassed some considerable European experience and recently became first choice at Brøndby, who finished fourth in Denmark last season, where he tallied 85 senior appearances. Following a group of exits in this area of the team, he'll need support however.

Squad Analysis

Backed by the City Group of football clubs, led by Manchester City, Troyes have access to resources and players their rivals don't. Although the Champagne club's signings have been hit and miss over the last 18 months, what was once a huge squad has been trimmed neatly in the last two transfer windows leaving a well-balanced and surprisingly deep group in certain areas for a club at this

end of the league. However, if coach Bruno Irles persists with a three-at-the-back system, over his favoured four, he'll need at least one more established centre-back and another right-back to support new man Bruus from Brøndby. With everyone fit, however, there is significant competition for midfield and forward slots. Former Chelsea striker Ike Ugbo's return from Genk is a low-key win after his solid start to life in Ligue 1 last season, with more experienced incumbent strikers Renaud Ripart and Mama Balde now under pressure.

Strengths

While Troyes are less reliable in attack than some of their rivals at the bottom end of the table, the quality of the supply to their forwards is some of the best in Ligue 1's relegation fight. A fight which could include up to ten teams this season with four clubs automatically dropping to Ligue 2 as the league cuts to 18 teams. Assured, passing midfielder Xavier Chavalerin's arrival from Champagne rivals Reims last year was something of a coup while the stabilising, technical sentinel Florian Tardieu has long been underrated in the second tier and he adapted well to top-flight football last season. Key man Kouamé is the best of the bunch and, as something of an all-rounder by comparison, he's the glue that holds the ESTAC engine room together. Although Chavalerin may play further forward on occasion, Troyes' rivals will be making envious glances at Irles' midfielder trio.

Weaknesses

Irles' attempts to move to his favoured four-man defence proved fruitless last season as he inherited a squad built for a 3-5-2 setup by his predecessor, Laurent Batlles, who was surprisingly removed mid-way through the campaign despite his team keeping their heads above water following promotion. Either way, it's an area of the side that could be exposed at his level. World Cup winner Adil Rami agreed a new deal at 36 but is continuing to slow.

American international Erik Palmer-Brown's suitability to Ligue 1 remains in doubt after some shaky displays last season, despite becoming first choice, while new centre-back signing Jackson Porozo from Boavista is also unproven at this level. Only the workmanlike Yoann Salmier can be truly relied upon at this stage. Such uncertainty is likely the reason Irles has stuck to a trio of defenders as all of the above look more comfortable with more support around them.

Verdict

Having traditionally struggled to survive in Ligue 1, yo-yoing between the top two tiers of French football in the last two decades, ESTAC eased to safety with surprising aplomb last season, despite Irles being dropped in unexpectedly in place of promising young coach Batlles, who joined Saint-Etienne this summer. Although signings have been thin overall, Troyes have kept much of the same quality in midfield and attack, making them a solid, if unremarkable, outfit in the bottom third of Ligue 1. Although the four automatic relegation spots will be a concern, much like last season, Irles and friends should have just enough to quietly edge to safety.

GFFN

FORM

21/22

15TH

20/21

1ST (L2)

19/20

4TH (L2)

18/19

3RD (L2)

17/18

19TH

16/17

3RD (L2)

KEY

ROMINIGUE KOUAMÉ, CM, 26
FLORIAN TARDIEU, CM, 30

IMPORTANT

YOANN SALMIER, CB, 29
RENAUD RIPART, FW, 29
MAMA BALDÉ, FW, 26
GAUTHIER GALLON, GK, 28
ADIL RAMI, CB, 36
XAVIER CHAVALERIN, CM, 31

REGULAR

ERIK PALMER-BROWN, CB, 25
ABDU CONTÉ, DF, 24
IKÉ UGBO, ST, 23
+ JACKSON POROZO, CB, 22
+ ANDREAS BRUUS, RB, 23
KARIM AZAMOUM, CM, 32
YASSER LAROUCI, LB, 21

OPTION

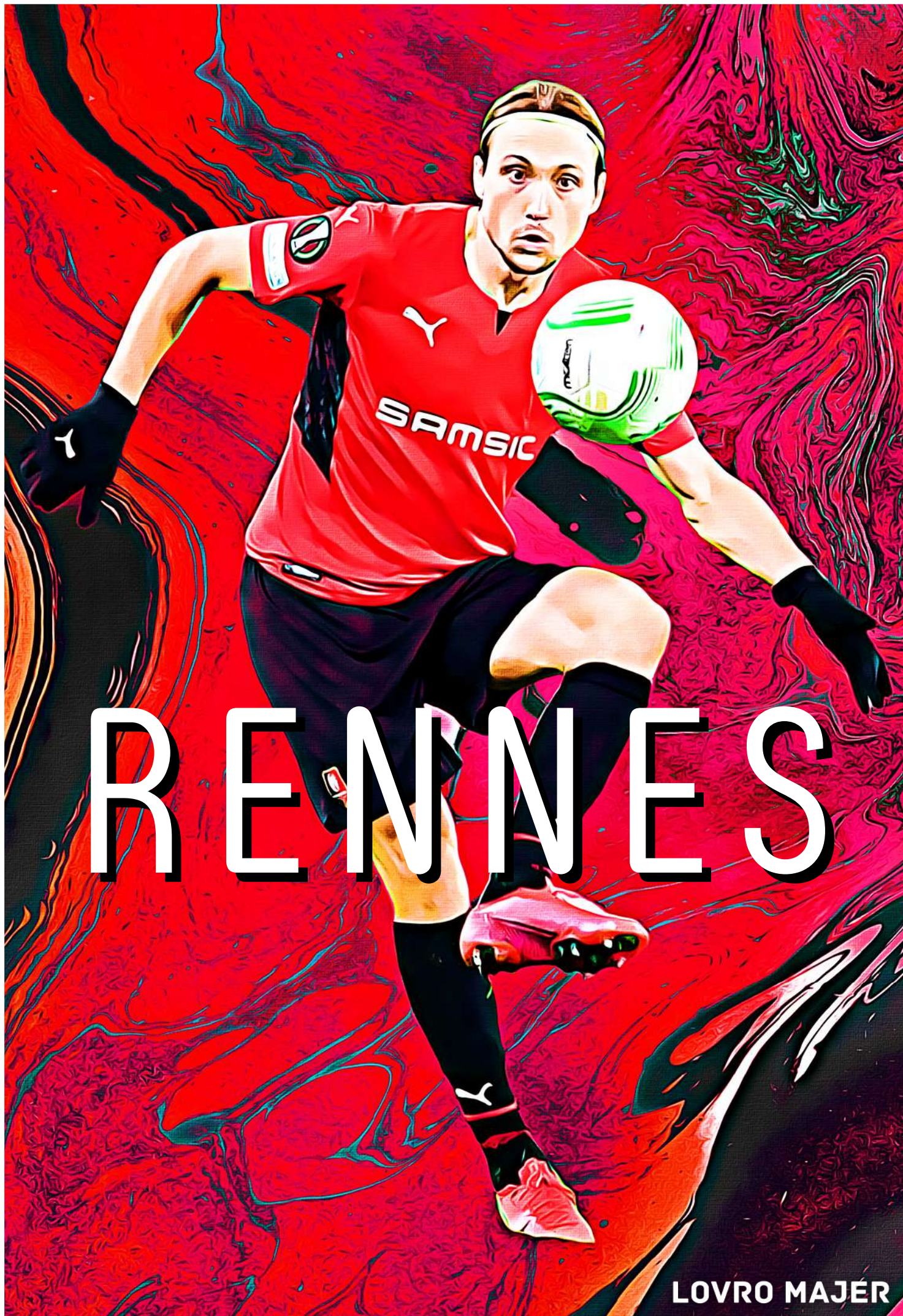
TRISTAN DINGOMÉ, AM, 31
LUKA ILIC, AM, 23
LEVI LUMEKA, FW, 23
MAHAMADOU DEMBÉLÉ, CB, 23
+ WILSON ODOBERT, FW, 17
JESSY MOULIN, GK, 36
BRANDON DOMINGUES, AM, 22

DEVELOPMENT

DEREK MAZOU-SACKO, DM, 17
ALEXIS LEFEBVRE, FW, 20
DANEL DONGMO, DM, 21

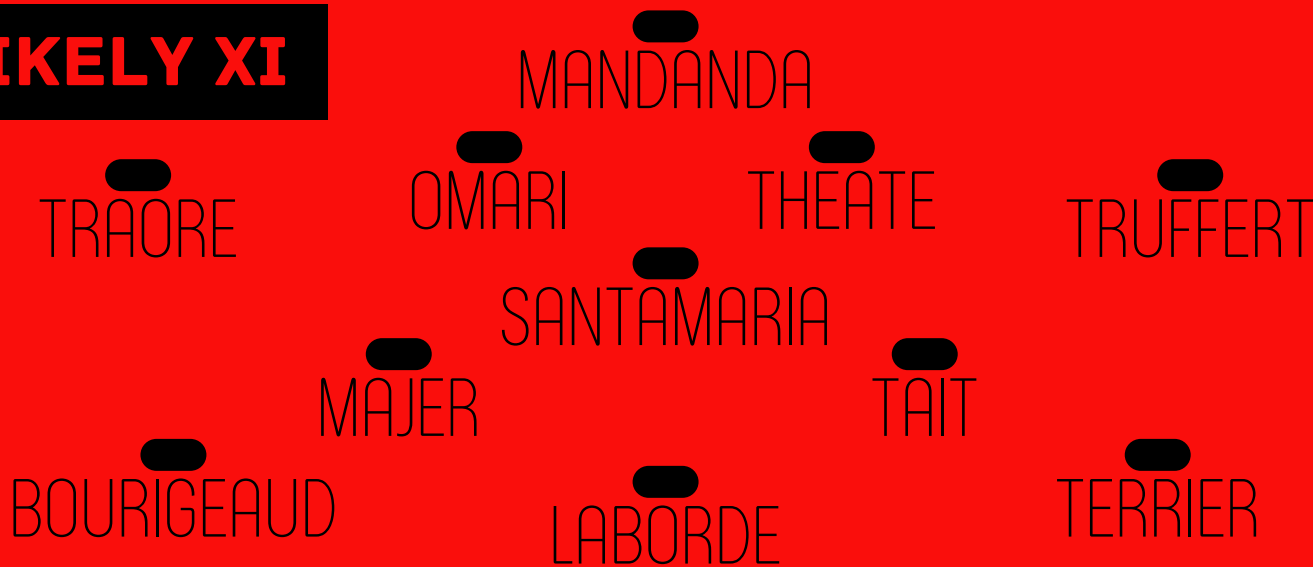
HEAD COACH

BRUNO IRLES



RENNES

LOVRO MAJER



4-3-3

Key Man - Lovro Majer

With the attacking options at Bruno Genesio's disposal, it's key that a central, creative figurehead step-up to take charge within the team. For the majority of last season that drive was provided by Benjamin Bourigeaud, however, with his future at the club still up in the air, Genesio may look to his Croatian playmaker, Majer, to take on more responsibility. Six goals and nine assists represented a more than adequate return for his first season in Ligue 1 and more of the same will be expected. His smooth, calm demeanour on the ball works well for a team who do go out all guns blazing at times. Majer's likeness to compatriot Luka Modrić goes beyond just physical similarities, as Majer brings an excellent array of passes, clever movement around the edge of the penalty area and is becoming increasingly influential at set pieces. Last season was a great start but, with more eyes on Majer, his ability to cope with the extra pressure and responsibility will be tested.

Signing To Watch - Arthur Theate

Rennes have been unusually quiet in this summer transfer window, seeing only three signings being made so far. Whilst experienced goalkeeper Steve Mandanda arrived on a free transfer and Joe Rodon joined on loan from Tottenham, the club splashed out around £13m on 22-year-old Belgian centre-back Theate, who arrived from Serie A side Bologna. With defensive lynchpin Nayef Aguerd having moved to West Ham earlier in the summer, centre-back options were becoming threadbare, with the inexperienced pair of Loïc Badé and Warmed Omari the squad's only recognised centre-backs. Omari undergoing groin surgery back in June, which will keep him out of action until towards the end of September, only made matters worse. After a protracted effort, being linked with a number of players, it was Theate who Rennes finally brought in. It's unlikely he will be the last defender to arrive, but with experience in both Italy and Belgium

already, his signing was warmly received.

Squad Analysis

Last season's great entertainers have not seen a huge amount of change over the summer so far. With the error-prone goalkeeper Alfred Gomis proving a liability at times and the alternative being the young Turk Doğan Alemdar, it was deemed reliable experience was needed, enter 37-year-old Marseille 'keeper Steve Mandanda. The addition of Theate at least gives the team a fit centre-back pairing but more will need to be brought in. Not a huge amount of change was needed at full-back or in midfield, although that does depend on Bourigeaud staying. In attack, Matthis Abline returns from a successful loan spell with Le Havre, whilst fellow academy graduate Mathys Tel completed a big money move to Bayern Munich. Martin Terrier and Gaëtan Laborde should continue to provide plenty of goals once more, but the club are also being linked heavily with PSG forward Arnaud Kalimuendo after his impressive performances on loan at Lens in the last two seasons. Last season's injury victims, young wingers Jérémy Doku and Kamaldeen Sulemana, will be hoping for a healthy 2022/23. If the exciting pair can stay fit, there's considerable pace and skill available out wide.

Strengths

Quite simply, goals. With strong returns from Terrier, Laborde, Serhou Guirassy, Bourigeaud and Majer, many will be expecting Rennes to retain the entertaining style of play that served them so well last season. Add to that a fit Doku and Sulemana, a more experienced Abline, a settled Majer, and potentially one or two recruits, and there are many reasons to believe the thrilling football will continue to grace Roazhon Park.

Weaknesses

As with last season, it's likely to be the defence which poses Rennes their biggest problems. The addition of

Mandanda does bring experience, however question marks over his fading quality have been raised for a couple of seasons now as he lost the number one spot at Marseille. The alternatives are the talented, but still raw in Alemdar, or Gomis, who looks to be on his way out of the club. Rennes lack recognised defensive cover, a concern compounded by Badé experiencing a tricky first season with the club and Theate being new to the league. Genesisio will be keen for further additions, especially with Omari still weeks away from a return to fitness. Whilst holding midfielder Baptiste Santamaria was used as an emergency centre-back at the end of last season, if Rennes want to improve, they need to ensure they have reliable depth available.

Verdict

Question marks will remain over Rennes' defensive depth and quality, until it's fully dealt with, while the attacking bar was set very high last season, but Genesisio should have little doubt his players will be up for it again. If they can keep hold of Bourigeaud, then the same options going forward will be available this season plus the addition of the exciting Abline. If, and it is a big 'if', both Doku and Sulemana can remain fit, the unpredictability they only fleetingly offered last season will give Rennes even more threat going forward.

Rich Allen

FORM



KEY

MARTIN TERRIER, FW, 25
 BENJAMIN BOURIGEAUD, AM, 28
 LOVRO MAJER, AM, 24

IMPORTANT

BAPTISTE SANTAMARIA, DM, 27
 JÉRÉMY DOKU, WG, 20
 FLAVIEN TAIT, AM, 29
 GAËTAN LABORDE, ST, 28
 HAMARI TRAORÉ, RB, 30
 + STEVE MANDANDA, GK, 37

REGULAR

ADRIEN TRUFFERT, LB, 20
 LOÏC BADÉ, CB, 22
 + ARTHUR THEATE, CB, 22
 SERHOU GUIRASSY, ST, 26
 KAMALDEEN SULEMANA, WG, 20
 WARMED OMARI, CB, 22
 BIRGER MELING, LB, 27
 + JOE RODON, CB, 24

OPTION

ROMAIN SALIN, GK, 37
 ALFRED GOMIS, GK, 28
 LORENZ ASSIGNON, RB, 22

DEVELOPMENT

LOUM TCHAOUNA, FW, 18
 MATTHIS ABLINE, ST, 19
 DOGAN ALEMDAR, GK, 19
 JEANUËL BELOCIAN, CB, 17
 LESLEY UGOCHUKWU, CM, 18

HEAD COACH

BRUNO GENESIO



TOULOUSE

RHYS HEALEY

DESLER

NICOLAISEN

ROUAULT

SYLLA

BOOMEN

DEJAEGERE

SPIERINGS

RATAO

HEALEY

NGOUMOU

4-3-3

Key Man - Rhys Healey

Becoming Ligue 2's leading scorer last season was, until now, the culmination of an unlikely journey for English striker Rhys Healey. Costing just £500,000, Healey unexpectedly arrived in France two years ago from League One MK Dons after 11 goals in 18 games during the 2019/20 season. Healey had struggled for form across six loan spells away from Cardiff City, taking in Dundee, Torquay and Colchester. Now 27, Healey's 35 Ligue 2 goals in 65 games, including 20 last term, suggest he's finally found a home. A poacher with a keenness to think outside the box while usually playing within it, Healey's eye for space and controlled finishing has made him a menace for Ligue 2 defences. Although he's clinical in the classical sense, Healey is capable of manufacturing goals his rival couldn't via a series of flicks and shimmies - he even scored while sitting on the turf. Having already played in the top five English divisions as well as the Scottish and Welsh top flights, in large part thanks to his precise finishing Healey count now add both Ligue 2 and Ligue 1 to his list. More goals will be needed if he's to avoid another change of divisions.

Signing To Watch - Zakaria Aboukhilal

Although left-back Oliver Zanden (20) has been brought in from Swedish club Elfsborg alongside Dutch second tier Excelsior's forward Thijs Dallinga (22), both are likely to be little more than cover. As a result, Moroccan international forward Zakaria Aboukhilal is TFC's only major addition this summer so far. Typically a wide forward, the 22-year-old managed nine league goals in 69 games for AZ Alkmaar who finished fifth in the Eredivisie last season after he graduated PSV's youth system in 2019. Despite some good European experience and 11 Morocco caps, including four at January's AFCON, considering the lack of options in the rest of the squad, Aboukhilal's signing seems odd given he'll face stiff competition from a host of in-form forwards in the deepest area of the group.

However, while it's likely coach Philippe Montanier intends to strengthen other areas in time too, the Moroccan's arrival suggests the coach is considering switching to a 4-2-3-1.

Squad Analysis

Toulouse enter the new campaign with an almost identical squad to their promotion season. Although TFC were comfortably the second tier's most effective side, they won a weak division and Montanier had less to work with than Patrice Garande, who's incarnation finished third the year before. As such, cover for a stable back four is almost non-existent while Australian international Denis Genreau is the only reliable option off the bench in midfield. There's more attacking versatility in the forward positions that support striker Healey but Montanier's squad is precariously thin overall. Unless TFC plan to trust a raft of promising but largely untested youngsters, like 20-year-old high-regarded Cameroonian midfielder Steve Mvoué, signings are desperately needed before September to add depth. However, an eleven which almost picks itself has poise, vision and skill throughout, although holes could quickly start to appear.

Strengths

Despite Healey's importance as a goal threat for Montanier, three others made double figures in the league last season. Free-kick specialist, technical midfielder and the second tier's standout player, Branco van den Boomen managed 12, while wide forwards Rafael Ratão and Ado Onaiwu managed 11 and 10 respectively. Rapidly developing winger Nathan N'Goumou (22), who supplanted the skilful pair as Healey's first choice support act at the end of the campaign, managed eight and will be one to watch this season. Montanier's fluid and positive 4-3-3 allows for plenty of chance creation via a trio of midfielders with vision and intelligence. Van den Boomen is joined by fellow Dutchman Stijn Spierings and Belgian

Brecht Dejaegere, who can be swapped out for another forward or play further up himself. With goal threat and creativity provided by so many sources, Toulouse will be a fun watch this season.

Weaknesses

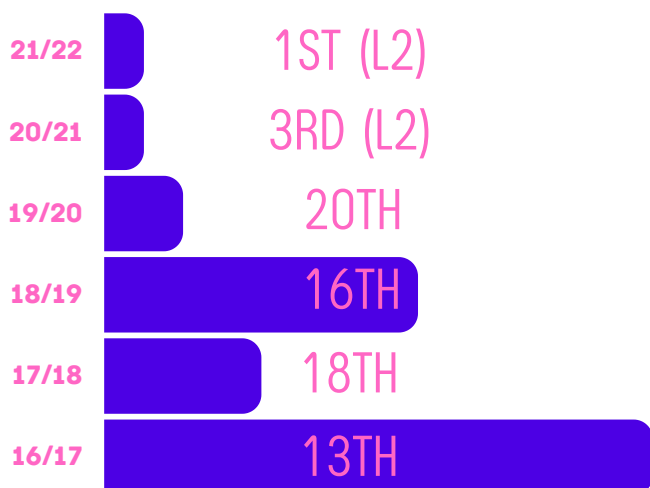
So few signings means that this TFC squad is largely devoid of Ligue 1 experience which could be exposed defensively at this level. Left-back Issiaga Sylla carries the majority of the squad's top flight appearances but he's proven a liability for TFC in Ligue 1 previously, while a loan with Lens also didn't work out. Goalkeeper Maxime Dupé has seen notable first team action with Nantes but Toulouse were reportedly worried about his suitability for Ligue 1, despite another solid season, and were looking to replace him. Valerenga goalkeeper Kjetil Haug has been added as competition. Toulouse's eclectic recruitment (they'll likely pick 11 different nationalities at one point this season) has proven deft in recent years, adding starters from Danish football, the J-League and Slovakia to consistent success. However, whether those players are ready for such a jump in quality of opposition is uncertain.

Verdict

If Montanier can replicate his expansive, attractive style of last season, few will be as fun to watch as Toulouse in France. Led by Healey, Ngoumou and van den Boomen, they have goals, ingenuity and skill but the party could be ended by even a moderate injury crisis due to lack of depth, while even their talented first eleven is almost completely unproven at this level. However, much of the bottom half of the table is in a similar position with three promoted sides replacing the underachieving Bordeaux and Saint-Etienne this year. Within that group of clubs, few have the guile or boldness of TFC and, despite the four relegation places, Montanier will be confident of survival.

GFFN

FORM



KEY

BRANCO VAN DEN BOOMEN, CM, 27
RHYS HEALEY, ST, 27

IMPORTANT

NATHAN NGOUMOU, FW, 22
ANTHONY ROUAULT, CB, 21
RAFAEL RATÃO, FW, 26
STIJN SPIERINGS, CM, 26
ADO ONAIJU, FW, 26
BRECHT DEJAEGERE, MF, 31

REGULAR

+ ZAKARIA ABOUKHLAL, FW, 22
+ THIJS DALLINGA, ST, 22
ISSIAGA SYLLA, LB, 29
RASMUS NICOLAISEN, CB, 25
MIKKEL DESLER, RB, 27
MAXIME DUPÉ, GK, 29

OPTION

DENIS GENREAU, CM, 23
+ OLIVER ZANDÉN, LB, 20
LOGAN COSTA, DF, 21
KALIDOU SIDIBÉ, DM, 23
STÈVE MVOUÉ, AM, 20
MOUSSA DIARRA, DF, 20
+ KJETIL HAUG, GK, 24
NAATAN SKYTTÄ, AM, 20
KLÉRI SERBER, CM, 23
YANIS BEGRAOUI, FW, 21
JUNIOR FLEMMINGS, FW, 26

DEVELOPMENT

TOM RAPNOUIL, CB, 21

HEAD COACH

PHILIPPE MONTANIER



actual

ANGERS

SOFIANE BOUFAL

LIKELY XI

BERNARDONI

SABANOVIC

BLAZIC

HOUNTONDJI

DOUMBIA

MENDY

BENTALEB

OUNAHI

BOUFAL

HUNOU

CAPELLE

4-3-3

Key Man - Nabil Bentaleb

Having trained with Angers during the latter part of 2021, Nabil Bentaleb signed a contract with Le SCO until 2025. From then on, he played more minutes than any of his teammates bar captain, Ismaël Traoré. Despite a disappointing run for his new side, the former Tottenham midfielder showed glimpses of the talent displayed in his younger years. However, on occasion, his extended period away from top-flight football became clear amid the pace and physicality of Ligue 1. Now taking the armband from the departing Traoré, standards are set high for the Algerian who finds himself as one of the elders in a very different group of players. The midfield of this new look Angers is undoubtedly strong, combining power and guile with youthful exuberance via Azzedine Ounahi, Himad Abdelli and Batista Mendy. The former Schalke midfielder will either play at the base of midfield or as part of a double pivot. Either way, he has a chance to become a new pillar in this team and guide Angers into a new era.

Signing To Watch - Yahia Fofana

One of the main reasons for Angers' dreadful run during the second half of last season was a goalkeeping fiasco. Three keepers played similar minutes over the season and switching from Paul Bernardoni to Danijel Petković in the new year factored heavily in the club's downturn. Anthony Mandrea's performances in the final few months helped secure Ligue 1 status before he left on a free transfer to Caen. However, Angers were busy snapping up young talents from Ligue 2 on pre-contract agreements last winter, including goalkeeper Yahia Fofana, who enjoyed a superb breakout campaign for Le Havre. Despite his lack of top-flight experience, Le Havre have serious pedigree in developing stars of the future, from Paul Pogba to Steve Mandanda. In pre-season, the young keeper hasn't convinced, however, which could lead to a battle with Bernardoni for a starting place. Les Scoïstes will be hoping that Fofana continues to develop and becomes the

answer to a problem position that Angers that have struggled with for far too long.

Squad Analysis

After the departure of iconic head coach, Stéphane Moulin, and several key staff last summer, many questioned Angers' Ligue 1 safety. Now, after saying goodbye to four of the five veterans who made up the core of the side over the last seven seasons, doubts have intensified, especially with four teams being relegated this season. Significant turnover within the playing staff means that only eight of the 20-man squad who featured on the final day of last season remain. A major overhaul targeted promising youth talents alongside the experience of Clermont defender Cédric Hountondji and Miha Blažič of Ferencvaros in an attempt to replace the character of the departing veterans and continue the club's values. All this took place while operating on a tiny transfer budget, with many new signings arriving for free. Re-configuring and solidifying the first team successfully will be incredibly important if Angers are to survive in Ligue 1 in this new era.

Strengths

Ligue 1 games often centre around the midfield battle and the midfield stability of this new-look Angers outfit is likely to be the focus this season. The experience of a now fully prepared Bentaleb alongside Ounahi and Mendy, who produced solid first seasons in top-flight football and attracted the attention of Lille and Lens, will be complemented by the versatility of new signing Himad Abdelli from Le Havre and the last remaining veteran, Pierrick Capelle. With a lack of options after inheriting Moulin's aging side last summer, new coach Gérald Baticle attempted to craft a setup that he stated wasn't his preference but one which most suited the players at his disposal. This time around, Baticle has the opportunity to develop his preferred setup with a rejuvenated squad.

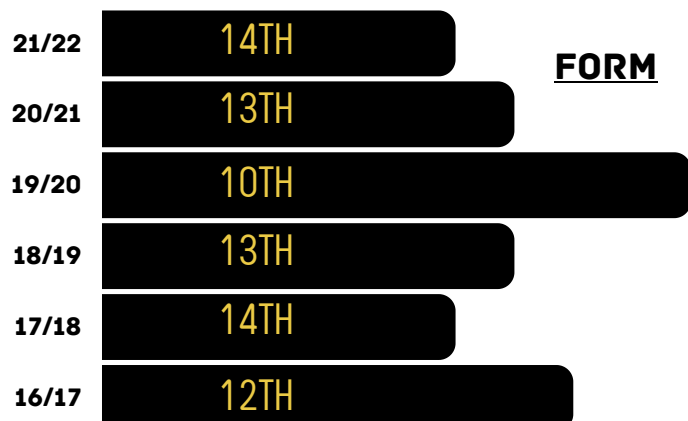
Weaknesses

Such broad change raises questions over the quality of those tasked with replacing a proven and reliable group of players. While recruitment has been in full swing this summer, there are still areas of concern, with no discernible third-choice central defender added after the departure of Enzo Ebosse to Udinese, for example, and Baticle has made a point by playing players wildly out of position in pre-season games to cover holes in defence. Without talisman Sofiane Boufal, who's still recovering from injury, until late August, attacking options look weak. Angers will hope that Adrien Hunou can make an impactful return to France and loan signing Abdallah Sima continues his good pre-season form. However, the quality of options then takes a nose dive with Lois Diony and Marin Jakoliš struggling. Angers' sporting director, Laurent Boissier, has confirmed the club are chasing another attacking signing but, with minimal financial resources, Boissier will need to be shrewd, and fortunate, to pick up a strong alternative before the end of the window.

Verdict

In previous years, Angers relied on Stéphane Moulin to guide them to a comfortable position in Ligue 1, alongside the performances of their experienced elders. Now, without either, this side will have to forge a new identity as they head into what could be their toughest season since returning to France's top flight. The club is banking on a lot of tricky decisions working out for the best and a strong start to the campaign. However, unlike many previous years, the Angevin strength may lie in the second portion of the season as this squad begins to gel. Baticle's performances also carry a huge weight. Last season he was criticised for his perceived stubbornness in sticking with the same formation, despite a poor run of form, and his passive touchline presence that cost his side points. In the 21/22 season Angers averaged 1.84 points after taking the lead in games, the lowest of their seven years in Ligue 1. While the big story for Angers heading into the season is their squad overhaul, Baticle improving is just as crucial.

Thomas Wiseman



FORM

KEY

- + MIHA BLAZIC, CB, 29
- NABIL BENTALEB, CM, 27
- SOFIANE BOUFAL, FW, 28

IMPORTANT

- + CÉDRIC HOUNTONDI, CB, 28
- + ADRIEN HUNOU, FW, 28

REGULAR

- PAUL BERNARDONI, GK, 25
- SOULEYMAN DOUMBIA, LB, 25
- BATISTA MENDY, DM, 22
- + HALID ŠABANOVIC, RB, 22
- AZZEDINE OUNAH, CM, 22
- SADA THIOUB, WJG, 27
- PIERRICK CAPELLE, AM, 35
- + ABDALLAH SIMA, FW, 19
- + YAHIA FOFANA, GK, 21
- MARIN JAKOLIŠ, FW, 25

OPTION

- LOIS DIONY, ST, 29
- + ILYES CHETTI, 27, LB
- FARID EL MELALI, FW, 25
- + ALI KALLA, LB, 24
- ABDOULAYE BAMBA, RB, 32
- ANTONIN BOBICHON, AM, 26
- + HIMAD ABDELLI, AM, 22
- + AMINE SALAMA, FW, 19

DEVELOPMENT

- ZINÉDINE OULD KHALED, DM, 22
- WANISS TAÏBI, DM, 20

HEAD COACH

GÉRALD BATICLE



REIMS

YUNIS ABDELHAMID

LIKELY XI

PENTZ

GRAVILLON

AGBADOU

ABDELHAMID

FOKET

CAJUSTE

MATUSIWA

MUNETSI

LOCKO

ITO

TOURE

3-5-2

Key Man - Yunis Abdelhamid

A pivot towards the academy meant many of the club's more established players were moved on last year but 34-year-old captain Yunis Abdelhamid has proven far too important to be sacrificed in the name of youth development. Under David Guion, as Reims finished 8th and 5th in 18/19 and 19/20 respectively following promotion, the Moroccan international became one of the league's most reliable centre-backs. In the 2019 GFFN 100, Abdelhamid finished 19th, the highest placed defender not to play for PSG. Although his form has plateaued since, as a physical, intelligent and considered presence, he's helped nurture his young partners through difficult moments and been a key Lieutenant for coach Oscar Garcia. With his impressive partner Wout Faes (24), who's shouldered much defensive responsibility of late, moving on this summer, Abdelhamid will be more important than ever as he trains a new apprentice, possibly his last for the club.

Signing To Watch: Junya Ito

As Reims' president Jean-Pierre Caillot pointed out, the signing of the 29-year-old Japanese international Junya Ito from Belgian club Genk was an unusual one. Having almost exclusively focused on youth, both from the academy and in their recruitment, of late, the arrival of Ito adds much-needed experience and attacking verve to Reims' forward line. Although the Champagne club have produced a group of skilful young forwards, their attack hasn't seen the same success as other areas of the squad and Ito will hopefully provide a reliable source of creativity after the winger managed 21 assists in 49 games last season.

Squad Analysis

Having built a well balanced squad, Reims's success this season will be broadly based on two key aspects of their philosophy. Firstly, a continued ability to identify low-key,

cost-effective talent, often from Belgium or Holland, capable of handling the physicality and quality of Ligue 1. Last summer's signing of Azor Matusiwa, a 24-year-old technically gifted, mobile and efficient defensive midfielder from Groningen, cost just €4m and he quietly became one of Ligue 1's leading sentinels. The club's scouting department needs similar successes from Patrick Pentz, who's joined from Austria Vienna to replace the safe hands of Predrag Rajković in goal, and Faes' successor at the back, Emmanuel Agbadou, formerly of Eupen in Belgium. Secondly, Garcia will be hoping his academy talents are ready for more responsibility. Despite the youth policy's success, Hugo Ekitike aside, few grads played a leading role last season and, as they grow, Reims will be looking to fill gaps in their typical eleven with their youngsters. For example, 20-year-old left-back Bradley Locko will be expected to replace the solid Ligue 1 stalwart Ghislain Konan who left for the Middle East this summer. Only part of the rotation last year, are he and others ready?

Strengths

Garcia's arrival as coach last summer signalled a switch in philosophy. Experienced players were marginalised or sold as Garcia delved into the club's modern academy set-up. Trusting a group of unproven teenagers was a sizeable risk that paid off with various low-key success stories alongside headliner Ekitike who drew €30m bids from England as early as January before leaving for PSG. That policy will continue to compliment the first team this season with midfielder Kamory Doumbia, who impressed at the end of last season, and the technical Martin Adeline two teenagers looking to break through while large sections of the squad are still 22 or under and developing fast. More breakthroughs like Ekitike's seem likely.

Weaknesses

Having lost Ekitike, who scored ten times in the league

PREDICTION | 12TH

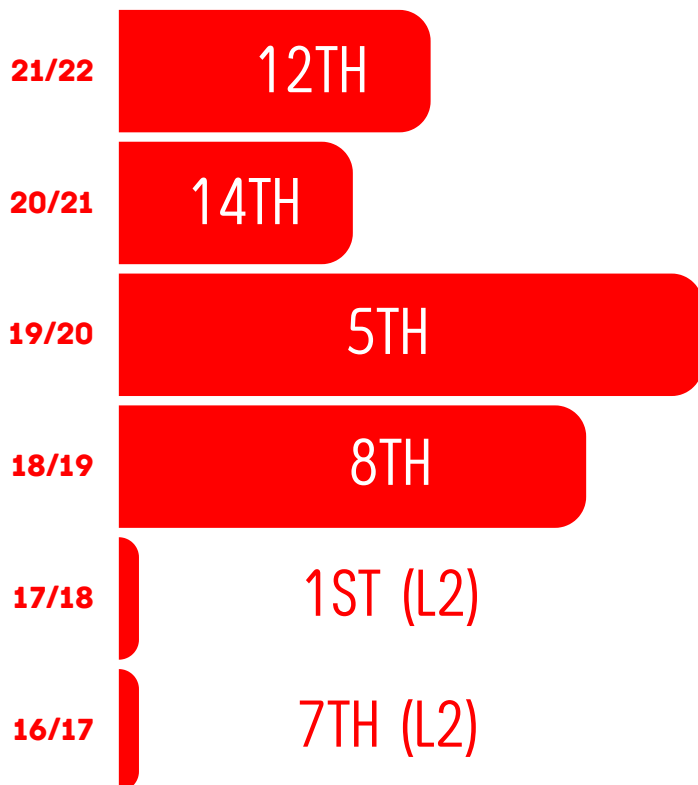
despite being in and out of the team last season, Reims lack goals. Although their youth system has produced a group of exciting young attackers, none have truly cemented a place in the eleven and, behind Ekitike, the second top scoring forward only managed two goals. Ito's addition is promising after eight goals for Genk in Belgian last season but Ligue 1 is a far more stoic and physical division and the Japanese international can't be relied upon to score the goals to keep Reims up. Baring new signings, in theory, that responsibility should fall to talented 20-year-old striker El Bilal Touré. However, having impressed before the pandemic, Touré has struggled for form since, scoring just six in the last two seasons combined. Garcia will be hoping Touré can finally have a breakout year as goals by committee may not be enough.

Verdict

Given their apparent lack of quality at the start of last season, surviving to 22/23 at all was a major achievement for Reims – doing so in midtable mediocrity was a minor miracle. With his youngsters a year further along the development path, Garcia will be expecting similar results from his stoic yet dynamic side – and he's likely to get them. However, the success of more experienced signings to complement those talents remains key and, with four teams being relegated this year, Reims could be looking down rather than up if everything doesn't go to plan.

GFFN

FORM



SQUAD

KEY

+ JUNYA ITO, FW, 29

YUNIS ABDELHAMID, CB, 34

AZOR MATUSIWA, DM, 24

IMPORTANT

EL BILAL TOURÉ, ST, 20

THOMAS FOKET, RB, 27

JENS CAJUSTE, CM, 22

ARBËR ZENELI, AM, 27

MARSHALL MUNETSI, DM, 26

+ PATRICK PENTZ, GK, 25

+ EMMANUEL AGBADOU, CB, 25

REGULAR

ANDREAU GRAVILLON, CB, 24

NATHANAËL MBUKU, FW, 20

+ FOLARIN BALOGUN, ST, 21

VALON BERISHA, AM, 29

MITCHELL VAN BERGEN, WG, 22

ILAN KEBBAL, FW, 24

ALEXIS FLIPS, AM, 22

DION LOPY, CM, 20

BRADLEY LOCKO, LB, 20

OPTION

MAXIME BUSI, FB, 22

MORETO CASSAMÁ, CM, 24

ANASTASIOS DONIS, FW, 25

DEVELOPMENT

KAMORY DOUMBIA, CM, 19

YEHVANN DIOUF, GK, 22

MARTIN ADELINÉ, CM, 18

N'DRI PHILIPPE KOFFI, ST, 20

HEAD COACH

ÓSCAR GARCÍA



LORIENT

TEREM MOFFI

LIKELY XI



Key Man - Terem Moffi

Between Christmas 2020 and the end of the 2020/21 season, Lorient mustered 30 points, the fifth most in Ligue 1 over that period. Last season, however, much changed. Christophe Pélissier's side managed just 16 more points in 2021 and endured a 15-game winless run into 2022. That undulating form largely correlates with the goal record of Terem Moffi. The Nigerian striker's power, eye for goal and pace made him one of France's most unpredictable and deadly forwards in the 20/21 campaign, managing 14 goals for a bottom-half promoted side. However, the now 23-year-old added just three more between August and March the following season, including a baron spell of 15 league games. Moffi looked overawed and lost as his confidence and precise finishing disappeared with Lorient slipping toward relegation. Despite barely making it to 36 points, Lorient and Moffi showed signs of improvement this spring, however. Moffi's brace in a 6-2 mauling of Saint-Etienne was a turning point for both player and club as the fire in his eye seemed to rekindle and the striker ended the season with eight league goals. In a congested bottom half, Moffi's goals could determine if Lorient survive in Ligue 1 for another year.

Signing To Watch - Gedeon Kalulu

At 24, right-back Gedeon Kalulu's arrival in Ligue 1 is a little overdue. Having caught the eye for some time in the second tier, he's been linked with several top-flight sides over three years with Ajaccio, despite his team's wild inconsistency. An intelligent, skilful and composed full-back, both defensively and when overlapping, the powerful defender is ready-made for Ligue 1 but his best performances slowed to a trickle last season. He was even dropped briefly in the spring by Ajaccio coach Olivier Pantaloni, despite his team edging towards promotion. As a result, Lorient's poaching of Kalulu is something of a coup, with bigger clubs likely put off by his recent inconsistency but, considering his talent, Kalulu remains

an exciting prospect and may not be around long at the Moustoir if he returns to his best.

Squad Analysis

In desperate need of a new goalkeeper, Lorient snapped up RB Leipzig reserve Yvon Mvogo after a season as PSV's second choice on loan. However, after a mixed year in Holland, it remains to be seen if the Swiss can move away from the erratic goalkeeping displays posed by Paul Nardi and Mathieu Dreyer of late. The loss of four senior defenders, including the hapless Houboulang Mendes and veteran Jérémy Morel, means much of untested coach Régis Le Bris' back line, outside the starting full-backs, looks shaky and lacking in depth. However, midfield general Laurent Abergel leads a much more adept area of the squad with sentinel Bonke Innocent impressing after his winter arrival from Malmo while both Thomas Monconduit and Quentin Boisgard are useful reserves at this end of the league. Le Bris has a variety of attacking options, many of whom have threatened to offer consistent threat and creativity, but only Armand Laurienté, who could leave, can be relied upon.

Strengths

Enzo Le Fée may be Lorient's best hope of surviving the season. A graceful, technical creator, Le Fée was expected to adapt far quicker to top-flight football following FCL's 2020 promotion, but the slight attacking midfielder has been engulfed by an uncompromising league, out-muscled and outplayed. However, a bolder, more persistent Le Fée, now 22, produced some of his balletic best to help keep his team in the division at the end of last season. Playing with more intensity and a willingness to take responsibility, the new focused Le Fée could finally be ready to lead Lorient as was previously hoped.

Weaknesses

Lorient were fortunate not to be relegated last season,

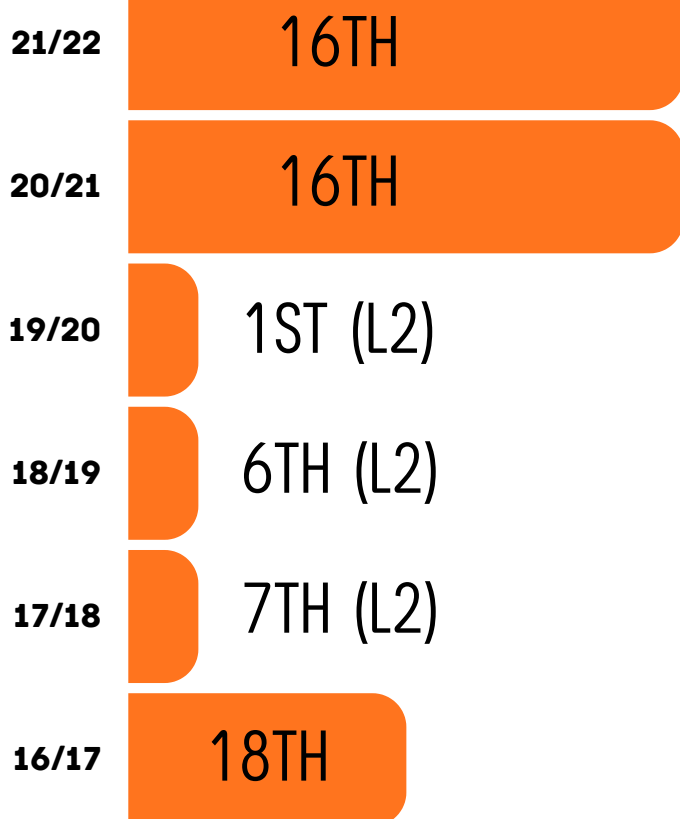
but Pélissier's side were saved (even if Pélissier's job wasn't) by the woefully underachieving Bordeaux and Saint-Etienne. Other than cajoling the best possible form from Moffi, a tally of 63 goals against can't be repeated if FCL are to survive the culling of four teams this season. New coach Le Bris will likely move to four at the back which will suit a pair of adept full-backs in Kalulu and the reliable Vincent Le Goff. However, having improved in a three-man set-up, leading centre-back Julien Laporte has never been assured as part of a pair and, with the unproven Montassar Talbi joining from Russian football, Lorient could suffer with a soft centre.

Verdict

This is new coach Le Bris' first senior head coaching role after he was promoted from managing the reserve and youth setups at the club. It's a risky move considering how reliable Pélissier has proven here and at Amiens, but FCL are hoping that fresh ideas from a young, innovative coach will revitalise a flagging club. However, with Moffi wildly inconsistent, little quality at centre-back and key creator Laurienté likely to leave, Le Bris has received something of a hospital pass from Pélissier and president Loïc Fery.

GFFN

FORM



KEY

LAURENT ABERGEL, CM, 29
 ENZO LE FÉE, AM, 22
 ARMAND LAURIENTÉ, FW, 23

IMPORTANT

BONKE INNOCENT, DM, 26
 TEREM MOFFI, ST, 23
 GÉDÉON KALULU, RB, 24
 VINCENT LE GOFF, LB, 32
 JULIEN LAPORTE, CB, 28

REGULAR

STÉPHANE DIARRA, FW, 23
 IBRAHIMA KONÉ, ST, 23
 YVON MVOGO, GK, 28
 MONTASSAR TALBI, CB, 24
 QUENTIN BOISGARD, AM, 25
 LÉO PÉTROU, CB, 25
 THOMAS MONCONDUIT, CM, 31

OPTION

MATTHIEU DREYER, GK, 28
 IGOR SILVA, RB, 25
 DARLIN YONGWA, LB, 22
 JULIEN PONCEAU, CM, 21
 PAUL NARDI, GK, 28
 ADRIAN GRBIC, ST, 26
 UMUT BOZOK, ST, 25
 SAMUEL LORIC, LB, 22
 SAMBOU SOUMANO, ST, 22
 LORIS MOUYOKOLO, CB, 21

DEVELOPMENT

THÉO LE BRIS, RB, 19

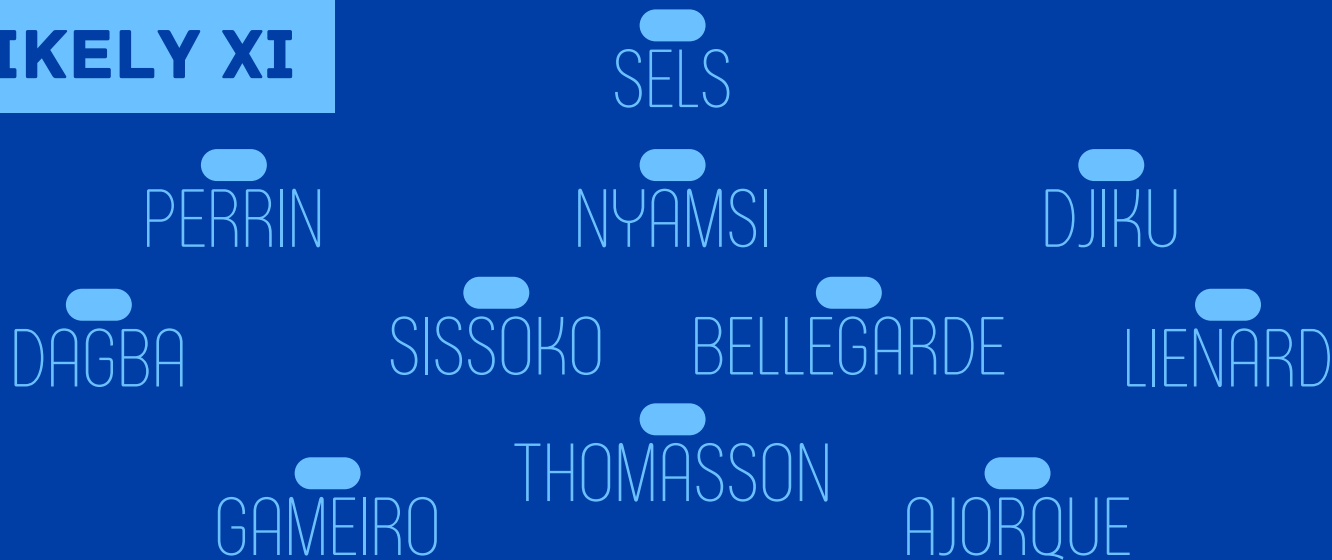
HEAD COACH

RÉGIS LE BRIS



STRASBOURG

JEAN-RICNER BELLGARDE



3-5-2

Key Man - Jean-Ricner Bellegarde

With the departure of Ludovic Ajorque likely, Strasbourg will look to attack-minded midfielder Jean-Ricner Bellegarde to become the player he promised to be when he joined the club back in 2019. Despite having arrived to some fanfare from Lens as a member of the French under 21 squad, due to lack of game time and former coach Thierry Laurey's tactics not quite suiting him, Bellegarde failed to blossom as was hoped. However, having been afforded more game time last season, the now-24-year-old began to show glimpses of real quality. Over the last year, he's managed 1.47 dribbles completed per 90 minutes, ranking him in the top 7% of Europe's midfielders, while contributing two goals and three assists from 26 starts last season. This season is his chance to break out of his shell and become the main creative outlet for this Strasbourg team, who will be looking to put last season's final day disappointment behind them and push on for a European place once more after a frustrating defeat to Marseille on last season's final day.

Signing To Watch - Colin Dagba

In a similar vein to Bellegarde, after once looking like one of the hottest prospects in French football when he burst onto the scene as a 19-year-old at PSG, the Colin Dagba hype train seems to have been derailed slightly of late. After just two Ligue 1 starts last campaign in Paris, Dagba will be excited to play regular first-team football for the first time since his days in the PSG youth setup. Dagba has the big boots of Frédéric Guilbert to fill who enjoyed two successful seasons on loan in Alsace from Aston Villa. Guilbert has now returned to his parent club, however, and will be a massive loss for the Alsatian club having become a key man in the attacking phase, used to overload the right side. If Dagba can get anywhere near the success that Guilbert enjoyed in coach Julien Stéphan's right-wing-back role, his season on the banks of the Rhine will be seen as a notable success.

Squad Analysis

Strasbourg have a fairly large first-team squad but lack quality in depth across certain positions. With the departure of Anthony Caci to Mainz, Metz's Thomas Delaine has arrived to play at left-wing-back but, behind him, there are no other natural left-backs. In recent years, aging club legend Dimitri Liénard has expertly filled in on the left but, at 35, he's unlikely to keep up such good form for much longer. New loan signing Ronaël Pierre-Gabriel can play there but he's naturally right-footed. Excitingly however, Strasbourg have a lot of younger talent coming through too with 20-year-old French attacking midfielder Nordine Kandil and 18-year-old Senegalese defensive midfielder Habib Diarra the leading lights this season.

Strengths

In goal, Strasbourg have real quality. Matz Sels asserted himself as one of the best 'keepers in the league last season, finishing runner-up in the race for the golden glove with 13 clean sheets. In front of him, Strasbourg's midfield looks strong and deep, with Adrien Thomasson, Bellegarde, Sanjin Prcić and Ibrahima Sissoko all either in or close to their prime years. In Stéphan, Strasbourg have one of the most exciting young managers in European football and, with the way he got Racing playing last season, they are in a great position to build upon a superb sixth-place finish, the club's best since the 1979/80 season.

Weaknesses

Besides problems at left-back, if Ajorque were to leave, Strasbourg would look a little light up front, although there's no doubt the Strasbourg recruitment department have their eye on a replacement with Lyon's Tino Kadewere linked of late. South African striker Lebo Mothiba, after a few years of horrible injuries, no longer looks Ligue 1 quality after an unsuccessful loan spell with Troyes last season while, his quality and experience

notwithstanding, Kévin Gameiro recently turned 35. That leaves only Habib Diallo and youngster Moïse Sahi-Dion, the latter preferring to play behind a main centre-forward in the space between the midfield and forward line.

Verdict

Strasbourg, in their sixth consecutive top-flight season, are a solid side that will no longer be looking to just stay afloat above the relegation scrap. The Alsatians will be aiming to push for Europe once again, as they did last season. Whether they actually can make it into the European places this season is another matter entirely and, after a slow but steady transfer window so far, and Ajourque likely to depart, it's likely they'll again miss out by a hair's breadth.

James Evans

FORM



KEY

MATZ SELS, GK, 30
 IBRAHIMA SISSOKO, CM, 24
 ADRIEN THOMASSON, AM, 28
 LUDOVIC AJORQUE, ST, 28
 GERZINO NYAMSI, CB, 25
 JEAN-RICNER BELLEGARDE, CM, 24

IMPORTANT

KEVIN GAMEIRO, ST, 35
 DIMITRI LIÉNARD, LWB, 34
 SANJIN PRČIĆ, DM, 28
 ALEXANDER DJIKU, CB, 27

REGULAR

+ COLIN DAGBA, RB, 23
 THOMAS DELAINE, LB, 30
 LUCAS PERRIN, CB, 23
 JEAN-EUDES AHOLOU, CM, 28
 + RONAËL PIERRE-GABRIEL, RB, 24
 HABIB DIALLO, ST, 27
 MAXIME LE MARCHAND, CB, 32

OPTION

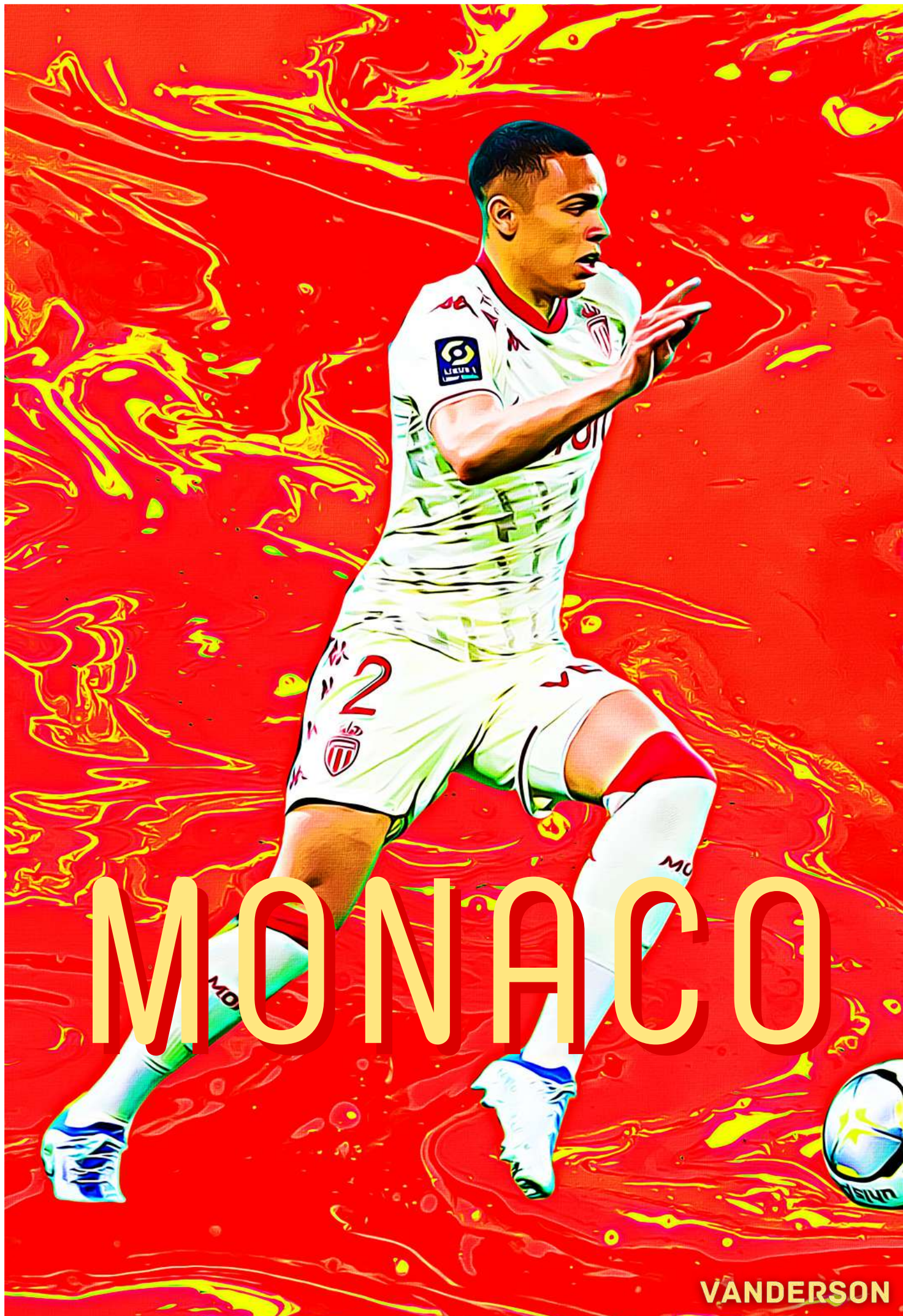
KAROL FILA, RB, 24
 LEBO MOTHIBA, ST, 26
 EIJI KAWASHIMA, GK, 39
 MARVIN SENAYA, RB, 21

DEVELOPMENT

MOÏSE SAHI, ST, 20
 NORDINE KANDIL, AM, 20
 ISMAËL DOUKOURÉ, DM, 19
 HABIB DIARRA, DM, 18

HEAD COACH

JULIEN STÉPHAN



MONACO

VANDERSON

LIKELY XI

NUBEL

DISASI

BADIASHILE

MARIPAN

VANDERSON

FOFANA

MATAZO

HENRIQUE

GOLOVIN

BEN YEDDER

VOLLAND

3-4-3

Key Man - Youssouf Fofana

Monaco have gone some way to dispelling the notion that they've become a volatile club with two consistent seasons, both ending in podium finishes. To keep that streak going they'll have to do it without Aurélien Tchouaméni, the crucial cog in the Monégasque machine. Although coach Philippe Clement stated the French international midfielder is "irreplaceable," whilst Monaco look for a new number six, there's a tacit acceptance that the club's current crop of midfielders will have to bridge the gap. The inexperienced duo of Eliot Matazo and Félix Lemarechal won't be expected to fill Tchouaméni's shoes and nor will Jean Lucas, who plays in a more advanced role. That leaves Youssouf Fofana, Monaco's most experienced midfielder at the age of just 23, to shoulder the burden. How he handles that responsibility will likely dictate Monaco's fate in the 2022/23 season. Although crucial to Monaco's end-of-season run, his previous performances were largely anonymous and the key for Fofana will be reaching his best, which saw Clement call for his first France cap, consistently. If he doesn't, Monaco's major strength from the last campaign, their midfield, could become their weakness.

Signing To Watch - Takumi Minamino

Takumi Minamino arrives at Monaco with a point to prove. Having shown great promise at RB Salzburg, he had to settle for a bit part role at Liverpool. Although he excelled, he's keen to take on more responsibility. Monaco, meanwhile, were looking to add experience to their squad and this looks like the right transfer at the right time for both parties. In today's market, €15m represents good value, and, having arrived at the beginning of the window, he's had time to adapt, featuring in three of Monaco's pre-season fixtures. Clement bemoaned the lack of a number ten at times last season as he struggled to break down some of Ligue 1's infamously stubborn low-blocks but Minamino could provide the key to unlock defences.

Squad Analysis

Fourth-highest scorers last season, Monaco boast a threatening forward line. With the additions of Minamino and Breel Embolo, it's difficult to see anyone but PSG outscoring Les Monégasques this time around. Further back, the options aren't quite as plentiful, although there is an expectation that there will be more incomings before the end of the window. In defensive midfield, currently, a youngster, potentially in the shape of Matazo, looks set to line up alongside Fofana if Clement elects to deploy a 4-2-3-1. In defence, both full-backs will be looking to build upon good seasons and, in Ismail Jakobs and Ruben Aguilar, starters Vanderson and Caio Henrique are well supported. The centre-back position looks lighter. Guillermo Maripán, Axel Disasi and Benoît Badiashile are the experienced options, although the latter continues to be linked with a move away with the centre-back carousel still turning.

Strengths

Monaco's attack is their most obvious asset but their experience can't be underestimated either. Before the end-of-season revival, their campaign might have been derailed by a difficult start as they were knocked out of the Champions League before having to play catch up in Ligue 1. That failure has largely been attributed to a late start, but they've learnt from that experience and began pre-season earlier than anyone else this year. The opening seven weeks of Monaco's campaign will be brutal but their experiences last year will be priceless heading into it.

Weaknesses

Whilst a defensive midfielder is more urgent, the lack of depth at centre-back is slipping under the radar. Monaco can't count on Badiashile remaining and, although the academy product is in no rush to leave, his exit would leave just Maripán and Disasi. Do they represent

Champions League level quality? Can they play every game in such a condensed schedule? The answer isn't equivocally 'yes' to either question and, given Monaco's ambitions, that isn't good enough.

Verdict

Clement eventually impressed last season and, with a full pre-season behind him, signs are again promising. The club's transfer dealings have been shrewd and, with a gaping Tchouaméni-sized hole in midfield, more recruits are still needed, but few will score goals more than Monaco. A tough opening to the campaign has the capacity to (again) make or break their season but thorough preparations should help avoid repeating last year's slow start. PSG will likely have too much for Monaco but Clement's men are certainly capable of being the best of the rest.

Luke Entwistle

FORM



KEY

VANDERSON, RB, 21
 WISSAM BEN YEDDER, ST, 31
 YOUSOUF FOFANA, CM, 23

IMPORTANT

GUILLERMO MARIPÁN, CB, 28
 BENOÎT BADIASHILE, CB, 21
 AXEL DISASI, CB, 24
 CAIO HENRIQUE, LB, 25
 ALEKSANDR GOLOVIN, AM, 26
 + TAKUMI MINAMINO, FW, 27
 KEVIN VOLLAND, FW, 30
 + BREEL EMBOLO, FW, 25

REGULAR

ELIOT MATAZO, DM, 20
 ALEXANDER NÜBEL, GK, 25
 RUBEN AGUILAR, RB, 29
 GELSON MARTINS, WG, 27

OPTION

SOFIANE DIOP, AM, 22
 MYRON BOADU, ST, 21
 JEAN LUCAS, CM, 24
 ISMAIL JAKOBS, LB, 22
 KRÉPIN DIATTA, WG, 23
 + THOMAS DIDILLON, GK, 26

DEVELOPMENT

MAGHNES AKLIOUCHE, AM, 20
 FÉLIX LEMARÉCHAL, AM, 20
 CHRISLAIN MATSIMA, CB, 20

HEAD COACH

PHILIPPE CLEMENT



MARSEILLE

MATTÉO GUENDOUZI

LIKELY XI

LOPEZ

MBEMBA

GIGOT

TOURE

CLAUSS

VERETOUT

GUENDOUZI

TAVARES

GERSON

MILIK

PAYET

3-4-3

Key Man - Mattéo Guendouzi

Last year GFFN named Dimitri Payet as Marseille's key player for the 21/22 season and, after he contributed to 22 Ligue 1 goals, it may come as a surprise that Mattéo Guendouzi has surpassed him as Les Phocéens' key man this year. However, the 23-year-old played more league minutes for OM than anyone else bar his former Arsenal teammate, William Saliba, and 600 more than Payet, quickly established himself as a leading figure in the dressing room. Marseille president Pablo Longoria made the midfielder's move permanent for £10m this summer, a steal considering the former PSG youngster contributed to 10 league goals and topped the squad for various metrics such as progressive passes per 90 according to FBRef. He played at both ends of midfield but excelled positioned closer to the attack. Payet will always provide his magic in big moments and, in a squad that was the sixth youngest in France last season, the oldest player in the dressing room will need to continue providing leadership. Guendouzi may lack Payet's experience but his ego was well-directed by former coach Jorge Sampaoli and he also offers leadership and creativity that could help boost the attack under Igor Tudor.

Signing To Watch - Jonathan Clauss

Linked to many clubs over the past three months, right-wing-back Jonathan Clauss was somehow captured by Marseille for just €7.9m despite Transfermarkt valuing him at double that. Even a valuation of €15m feels too low for a player who finished 15th in Europe for assists with 11 in the league last season. The 29-year-old was also capped by France for the first-time in March after an endearing reaction to Didier Deschamps' announcement was captured on film by his teammates. He has a real shot of starting at the World Cup in November and could benefit from the tactics under new coach Igor Tudor, who inspired his first-choice wing-backs at Hellas Verona to 17 Serie A goals last season. With the speed, accurate

crossing and underrated defending the Frenchman provides, Clauss' stock looks set to continue rising in southern France.

Squad Analysis

If last season's summer transfer window was seen as busy for Marseille, this year's has simply been frantic although not entirely successful. It got off to a good start after a transfer ban imposed in January was postponed until at least October. All was, and is continuing to be, done to see Arsenal defender William Saliba return in some form, even though he looks set to star in north London, while loans for Pau López, Cengiz Ünder and Arkadiusz Milik were all made permanent. Central defence was reinforced by young prospect Isaak Touré (19) from Le Havre as well as experienced heads Samuel Gigot and Chancel Mbemba, but that wasn't enough to keep Sampaoli from resigning in frustration over the lack of ambition. Since his departure and Tudor's arrival, Spanish striker Luis Suárez arrived from Granada before Clauss and Mbemba's free transfer from Porto. Despite all that, Boubacar Kamara hasn't been replaced at the base of midfield while key targets like Axel Witsel and Mohamed-Ali Cho slipped through OM's fingers, but Jordan Veretout's arrival is an improvement.

Strengths

Last season, neither Marseille's attack or defence stood out amongst Europe's big five leagues, but what mattered was their points haul. They finished 11th in the big five league table, and they only sacrificed a lead for a draw or a loss on four occasions. They were helped by their squad depth, which should serve them well in the Champions League. With the likes of Suárez and Cedric Bakambu ready to provide in attack behind Ünder, Milik and others, OM are well armed to better their 63 goal tally of last year.

Weaknesses

After a second placed finish, Marseille looked to have

finally got past the turbulent final days of Andre Villas-Boas' reign and accompanying training ground invasions by ultras. In Sampaoli, they had a chaotic coach who embodied the spirit of the club and build a squad that, bar a few bumps, seemed harmonious. The enforced change of coach has dramatically raised tensions, especially with the disastrous Champions League campaign of 2020/21 in mind, when they finished bottom of their group. Defeats to Middlesbrough and Norwich in pre-season haven't done much to calm nerves.

Verdict

It's hard not to feel like history is repeating itself and that this tumultuous club is set on another self-destructive path but Tudor arrived at Hellas Verona last season tasked with replacing the fantastic Ivan Jurić, another Croatian coach who had taken newly-promoted Verona to ninth and tenth placed finishes. Tudor hit bigger points tallies than in either of Jurić's and the 44-year-old's broad coaching experience, ranging from Hajduk Split to Udinese, means he isn't a rookie either. Marseille may yet turn out to be in safer hands than some fear.

Alex Barker

FORM



KEY

MATTEO GUENDOUZI, CM, 23
DIMITRI PAYET, AM, 35

IMPORTANT

+ JONATHAN CLAUSS, WB, 29
GERSON, AM, 25

+ JORDAN VERETOUT, CM, 29
ARKADIUSZ MILIK, ST, 28
CENGİZ ÜNDER, WG, 25

+ CHANCEL MBEMBA, CB, 27

REGULAR

+ SAMUEL GIGOT, CB, 28

+ NUNO TAVARES, LB, 22

VALENTIN RONGIER, CM, 27

POL LIROLA, RB, 24

+ LUIS SUÁREZ, FW, 24

CÉDRIC BAKAMBU, ST, 31

DUJE CALETA-CAR, CB, 25

PAU LÓPEZ, GK, 27

+ ISAAK TOURÉ, CB, 19

PAPE GUEYE, DM, 23

OPTION

LEONARDO BALERDI, CB, 23

BAMBA DIENG, ST, 22

JORDAN AMAVI, LB, 28

KONRAD DE LA FUENTE, WG, 21

SEAD KOLAŠINAC, DF, 29

+ RUBÉN BLANCO, GK, 27

DEVELOPMENT

SALIM BEN SEGHIR, FW, 19

HEAD COACH

IGOR TUDOR



OGGC NICE

AMINE GOURI

ATAL

TODIBO

DANTE

BARD

THURAM

ROSARIO

RAMSEY

CLAUDE-MAURICE

DELORT

GOUIRI

4-3-3

Key Man - Amine Gouiri

Amine Gouiri makes Nice tick. While others, notably Khéphren Thuram, shone towards the end of last season, no one was as influential as Gouiri in the first half of the campaign. When fully firing, Gouiri is Nice's go-to man to unlock defences. Although he prefers to occupy a more central role, he also drifts wide to a similarly incisive effect. All 10 of his Ligue 1 goals last season came before January as the new year brought a change in fortunes for the France youth international as he grew increasingly ineffective, shackled by coach Christophe Galtier's rigid system. By the end of the season, he was running into dead ends and being marked out of games while finding himself devoid of passing options. However, much of that wasn't his fault and, with Galtier gone, if Gouiri can maintain the standard that he showed from August until January, Nice will have a reliable source of creativity in the final third. Whilst Gouiri could be the differentiating factor in improving on last season's goal tally, the likes of Thuram and centre-back Jean-Clair Todibo, who together form the spine of the team, need to also maintain their levels if Nice are to improve on last season's showing.

Signing To Watch - Aaron Ramsey

Prior to this week, Nice's transfer window activity had been minimal at best. Marcin Bulka, who made his loan permanent, and youth prospects Badredine Bouanani and Rares Ilie were the Riviera club's only signings. Out of those, Ilie was the most exciting but also the most unknown, arriving from the Romanian top flight without appearing for the Romanian national team. However, it now seems that Nice have overcome the damage that former sporting director Julien Fournier's departure caused after three signings in three days altered perceptions of Nice's window. The most intriguing was Aaron Ramsey. The Welshman has been dogged by injuries since joining Juventus on a free in 2019 and only made 69 appearances for the club, scoring six times and

registering six assists. A loan spell at Rangers last season didn't go to plan and he consequently saw his Juventus contract terminated upon his return to Turin. He therefore arrives at the Allianz Riviera without a fee, but with a big point to prove. There's also the small matter of the upcoming World Cup in Qatar and, if dispelling his yesterday's man tag isn't enough to motivate Ramsey, the Welsh international will want to be in top form by the time the tournament comes round. At just 31, Ramsey still has a lot to give and, should the move work out, he has the capacity to help take the club to the next level.

Squad Analysis

Nice are looking light in all departments and, with many linked with departures, their situation could worsen before improving. Kasper Dolberg could move to the Premier League with Brentford interested and Morgan Schneiderlin doesn't seem to feature in the club's plans. Walter Benitez left the club upon the expiry of his contract, leaving the inexperienced Marcin Bulka as first choice by default, although Schmeichel could soon arrive. For a Conference League side, just three experienced centre-backs won't suffice and there's no cover for Malvin Bard at left-back. Dolberg's exit would leave just Andy Delort and Gouiri as options up front. The midfield, however, looks nicely balanced. Thuram finished the season strongly and, should he pick up where he left off, he'll link things nicely in the centre of the park. Pablo Rosario also proved his worth last campaign and Mario Lemina adds some much-needed depth.

Strengths

The arrival of Lucien Favre has signalled a mood change. While also re-energising fans, his influence on the pitch will be felt most. Too much talent looked lost in Galtier's rigid 4-4-2 system but the freedom that Favre will bring should work to the benefit of many of those players, especially Gouiri and Thuram. Hindsight adjudges his spell

in Dortmund to be nowhere near as bad as was first perceived and coming back to Ligue 1, to the club where he shone brightest, could take this group to the next level.

Weaknesses

Where are the goals going to come from? Currently, Nice don't possess a serial goalscorer, whilst clubs around them have invested smartly in the attacking department – Alexander Lacazette's Lyon return and Lille's signing of Mohamed Bayo from Clermont immediately spring to mind, whilst Monaco, PSG and Marseille already possess potent attacking options. Delort finished as the club's top scorer last season with 16 goals in the league, including two hat-tricks in the final three games of the campaign. Gouiri began the campaign brightly but tailed off in the back end of the season, and Dolberg only scored 6. The attacking line certainly needs strengthening.

Verdict

It feels as though almost anything could happen at OGC Nice this season. While it's entirely possible they could challenge for the Champions League places, as they did for the vast majority of last season, mid-table mediocrity also feels like a genuine prospect. Favre will likely get more out of this current crop of players than Galtier did, at least in an attacking sense, but as simple as it may sound, Nice's season may be determined by their remaining transfer business. Should few reinforcements arrive, it's easy to see them struggling with two games a week. However, if they add some much-needed depth and quality, they'll be much better equipped to tackle those Thursday nights and challenge for a higher level of European competition.

Luke Entwistle

FORM



KEY

AMINE GOUIRI, FW, 22
JEAN-CLAIR TODIBO, CB, 22

IMPORTANT

DANTE, CB, 38
+ KASPER SCHMEICHEL, GK, 35
ANDY DELORT, ST, 30
PABLO ROSARIO, DM, 25
KHÉPHREN THURAM, CM, 21
YOUCEF ATAL, RB, 26
+ AARON RAMSEY, AM, 31

REGULAR

KASPER DOLBERG, ST, 24
ALEXIS CLAUDE-AURICE, AM, 24
MARIO LEMINA, DM, 28
MELVIN BARD, LB, 21
+ ALEXIS BEKA BEKA, CM, 21

OPTION

MARCIN BUŁKA, GK, 22
FLAVIUS DANILIUC, CB, 21
+ MATTIA VITI, CB, 20
MORGAN SCHNEIDERLIN, CM, 32
BILLAL BRAHIMI, WG, 22
CALVIN STENGs, AM, 23
JORDAN LOTOMBA, RB, 23
HICHAM BOUDAOU, AM, 22
+ RARES ILIE, AM, 19
ALEXIS TROUILLET, CM, 21

DEVELOPMENT

ANTOINE MENDY, DF, 18

HEAD COACH

+ LUCIEN FAVRE



LILLE

JONATHAN DAVID

LIKELY XI

ZEDADKA

FONTE

DJALO

GUDMUNDSSON

CABELLA

ANDRE

MARTIN

BAMBA

BAYO

DAVID

4-4-2

Key Man - Jonathan David

If Jonathan David had sustained his goal-scoring form of late 2021, when he was averaging 0.66 goals-per-game then he would've finished last season with around 25 goals. Instead, the Canadian got caught in a dry spell which saw him register just three goals from Christmas onwards, a main reason why Lille's form collapsed and why the 22-year-old wasn't sold for big money this summer. Having seemed certain to make a major move this off-season after scoring 12 before the winter break, it's a little awkward seeing David back in a Lille shirt, especially considering his agent had 'confirmed' 21/22 would be "his last season" in northern France. Still, there's room to be optimistic. After all, in two seasons at Roma new Lille manager Paulo Fonseca mined 21 goals from Edin Džeko, and David definitely has the quality to hit double figures once more. After all, not even Kylian Mbappé beat David for goals in 2021 and the fact those goals came from his head and both feet shows how lethal he is. The former Gent striker also registered the fifth most pressures per 90 minutes for Les Dogues last season, according to FBRef. Fonseca will be counting on David to pull his team up the table this year.

Signing To Watch - Mohamed Bayo

The €14.5m Lille paid for Mohamed Bayo in July was Clermont's record sale and the sixth-highest Lille have paid in their history. It's entirely justified, though, as, unlike David, the 24-year-old Guinean international Bayo was a regular scorer throughout last season, with his longest dry spell between any of his 14 league goals being six matches in March and April. Even then, the 6'2 striker was limited by his weak side's poor form in that period, something Bayo will have to deal with less at Lille. He's a clear upgrade on the ageing Burak Yilmaz and is able to offer physicality and pace alongside Jonathan David, assuming Fonseca adopts a two-striker system. There's no excuse for a lack of goals at Stade Pierre-Mauroy.

Squad Analysis

Les Dogues had a poor season last year, falling from champions to 10th, that's despite many expecting a bigger exodus last summer than just midfielder Boubakary Soumaré and goalkeeper Mike Maignan. This summer's transfer window has been more taxing, as president Oliver Létang let go of key starters Sven Botman, Yilmaz, Zeki Celik and Renato Sanches plus left-back Domagoj Bradaric. That's almost their entire defence while a first-choice goalkeeper is yet to arrive to replace departing loanee Ivo Grbić with talented Valenciennes loanee 'keeper Lucas Chevalier's position uncertain upon his return. Arriving alongside Bayo is prospect Alessandro from Chaves, Jonas Martin from Rennes and Rémy Cabella from Montpellier. Although Lille's crop of young talent in defender Tiago Djaló and forwards Timothy Weah and Angel Gomes have all grown a year older while Yusuf Yazıcı seems ready to reintegrate into the side after a loan spell at CSKA Moscow, this squad is undeniably weaker than 12 months ago, and presents a daunting task for Fonseca.

Strengths

The biggest strength Lille have going into the new season is incoming coach Fonseca's experience and need to prove himself. Despite reaching a Europa League semi-final at Roma, the Mozambican left Italy with his reputation damaged, but his penchant for being tactically flexible could be exactly what his new side need to be competitive this season. He'll also be happy to count on the leadership and influence of José Fonte, after the 38-year-old centre-back extended his contract for another year.

Weaknesses

Amongst Lille's reconstruction lies a glaring hole, the position of goalkeeper. While Maignan saved eight goals more than FBRef's post-shot expected-goals model

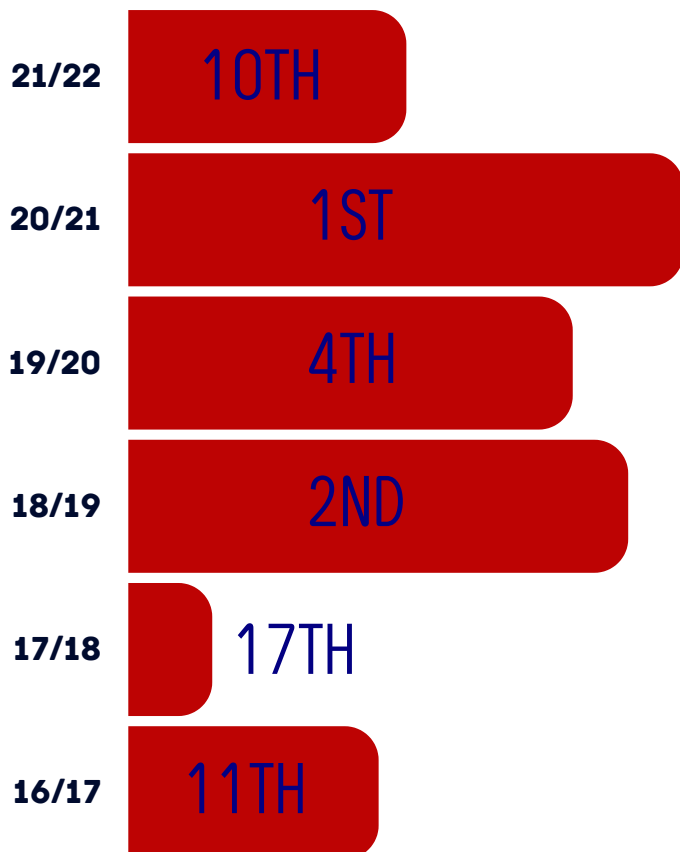
suggested he should have conceded last season, Lille's men in between the sticks Grbić and Léo Jardim saved 2.8 fewer goals than expected. With the Croatian returning to Spain, Lille's most senior keeper remains Jardim. With just two seasons of first-team football in Portugal to his name, further pressure could be placed on Fonte and his defence this season. Having impressed on loan with Valenciennes in Ligue 2 last year, 20-year-old Chevalier may be Fonseca's best option.

Verdict

It's difficult to understate the damage caused by the financial fallout of Gérard Lopez's ownership of the club that ended in late 2020. The title-winning eleven of 20/21 is almost completely gone, but at least, in Fonseca, LOSC have a coach who's able to replicate the successes of other recent foreign managers who recently moved to top French sides like Jorge Sampaoli and Philippe Clement. Fonseca can count on two of the best strikers in the league and a midfield which contains the ever-consistent Benjamin André and hotshot Premier League target Andre Onana, which should be enough to propel this side up the table without the distraction of European football.

Alex Barker

FORM



KEY

JOSÉ FONTE, CB, 38
 BENJAMIN ANDRÉ, CM, 32
 + MOHAMED BAYO, ST, 24

IMPORTANT

TIAGO DJALÓ, DF, 22
 AMADOU ONANA, DM, 20
 + JONAS MARTIN, CM, 32
 JONATHAN DAVID, ST, 22
 + AKIM ZEDADKA, RB, 27
 + RÉMY CABELLA, AM, 32

REGULAR

LÉO JARDIM, GK, 27
 GABRIEL GUDMUNDSSON, LB, 23
 JONATHAN BAMBA, WG, 26
 YUSUF YAZICI, AM, 25
 ANGEL GOMES, AM, 21
 TIMOTHY WEAH, FW, 22
 EDON ZHEGROVA, WG, 23
 LUCAS CHEVALIER, GK, 20

OPTION

+ ALEKSANDRO, CB, 22
 ADAM JAKUBECH, GK, 25
 ISAAC LIHADJI, WG, 20

DEVELOPMENT

VINCENT BURLET, LB, 16
 LENY YORO, CB, 16
 CARLOS BELEBA, CM, 18
 JOFFREY BAZIE, FW, 18
 SIMON RAMET, RB, 19

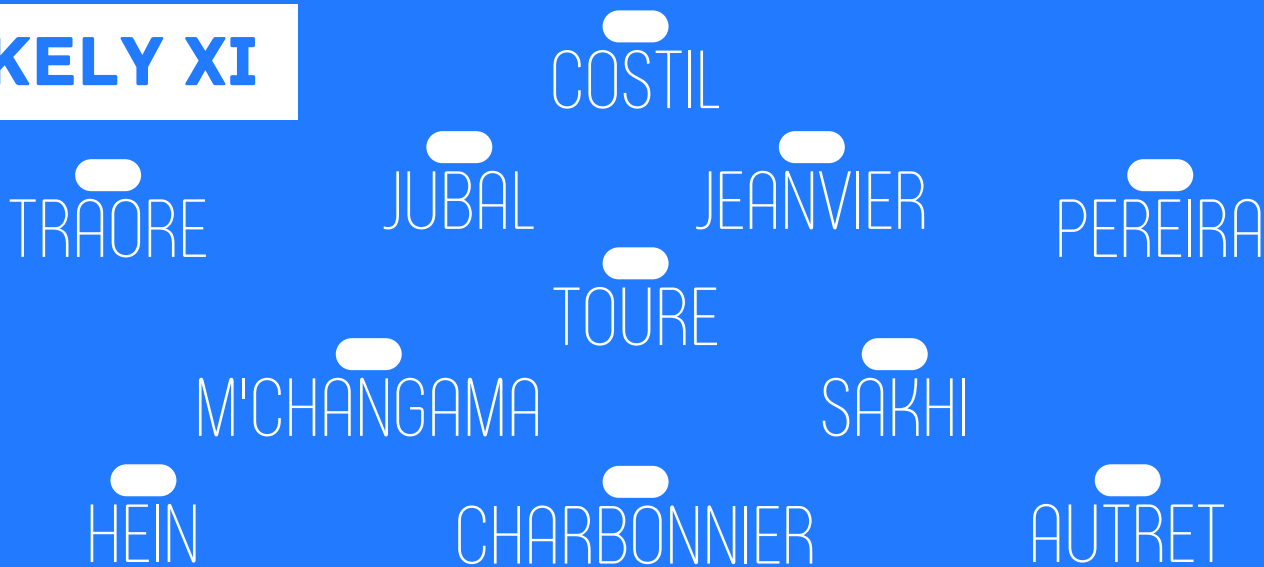
HEAD COACH

PAULO FONSECA



AUXERRE

GAUTHIER HEIN



4-3-3

Key Man - Gaëtan Charbonnier

Gaëtan Charbonnier was Ligue 2 top scorer last season, just behind Toulouse's English forward Rhys Healey, and Auxerre will be banking on their striker to score the goals to keep them in the top flight this year. His 17 strikes amounted to Charbonnier's second-best league campaign, behind the 27 goals he managed during the 2018/19 Ligue 2 season. Back then, Charbonnier was at Brest, the fifth club of his career, and it was hoped he could continue such prolific form against stiffer opposition upon promotion. However, as at Montpellier and Reims before, the 6'3 striker failed to score more than six Ligue 1 goals the following year. That's worrying Auxerre fans, but Charbonnier has improved with age. The former PSG man excels at bringing others into play and holding off France's most physical defenders. Of course, unlike in the second division where Auxerre were dominant in possession, AJA will likely be forced to sit back more often this year and the now 33-year-old may struggle with being further away from goal. His heading ability should remain an asset, however, after he hit five from crosses and corners last season.

Signing To Watch - Kays Ruiz-Atil

Arriving on a free from Barcelona, after the club terminated his contract in May, the French-Moroccan Kays Ruiz-Atil is the latest former 'Titit' (PSG academy player) to look to build a career away from Paris, in Ligue 1 and overseas. He'll hope to replicate the success of Mattéo Guendouzi and avoid the fate of Adil Aouchiche, who gambled on joining a struggling side in Saint Etienne in 2020 – aside from lacking form and game time, the 20-year-old now faces a year in Ligue 2. Ruiz-Atil may not have been prolific at youth level for PSG or Barcelona but he's a highly-regarded, talented youngster who carries the ball forward effectively while adding creativity and skill. Unlike many a PSG youth product, the 19-year-old was seen briefly in Paris' first team under Thomas Tuchel,

playing seven games in the 20/21 season, showing his quality on the ball and looking at home alongside Paris' stars.

Squad Analysis

Incredibly, despite letting go of six players and signing five others, Auxerre haven't officially spent or received a single euro in the 2022 summer transfer window so far. Ruiz-Atil joins alongside 35-year-old Ligue 1 stalwart goalkeeper Benoît Costil, midfielder Youssouf M'Changama from Guingamp and defender Dénys Bain from Brest. Between the latter pair plus full-back Brayann Pereira, who joins from Lens, those three signings have just 19 career appearances in Ligue 1. Recent arrivals Rayan Raveloson and Julian Jeanvier are in similar positions. That inexperience is a more general concern too, especially considering the losses of marauding right-back Carlens Arcus to Vitesse and 26-year-old centre-back Gautier Lloris who joined Le Havre. As a result, Ligue 2 specialist coach Jean-Marc Furlan will have to make do with what is effectively a second division squad.

Strengths

Despite their lack of proven Ligue 1 quality, Auxerre's midfield boasts significant creativity and vision. The technical but explosive M'Changama has long been one of Ligue 2's premier creative midfielders while forward Mathias Autret deserves another chance in Ligue 1 after an underwhelming season at Best in 19/20 having become prolific in Ligue 2, providing 25 assists in his last three seasons as well as 21 goals. Both ensure that Charbonnier, another second-tier specialist, is likely to get sufficient service. But perhaps AJA's biggest strength is their supporter base. This historic club return to the top flight for the first time since 2012, a period in which legendary coach Guy Roux led the club to the 1996 Ligue 1 title as well as two Coupe de France wins in the mid-2000s. AJA were the fourth-best supported club by

PREDICTION | 16TH

attendance in the second tier last season, and Stade de l'Abbé-Deschamps' 18,500 capacity will hopefully be jam-packed this season.

Weaknesses

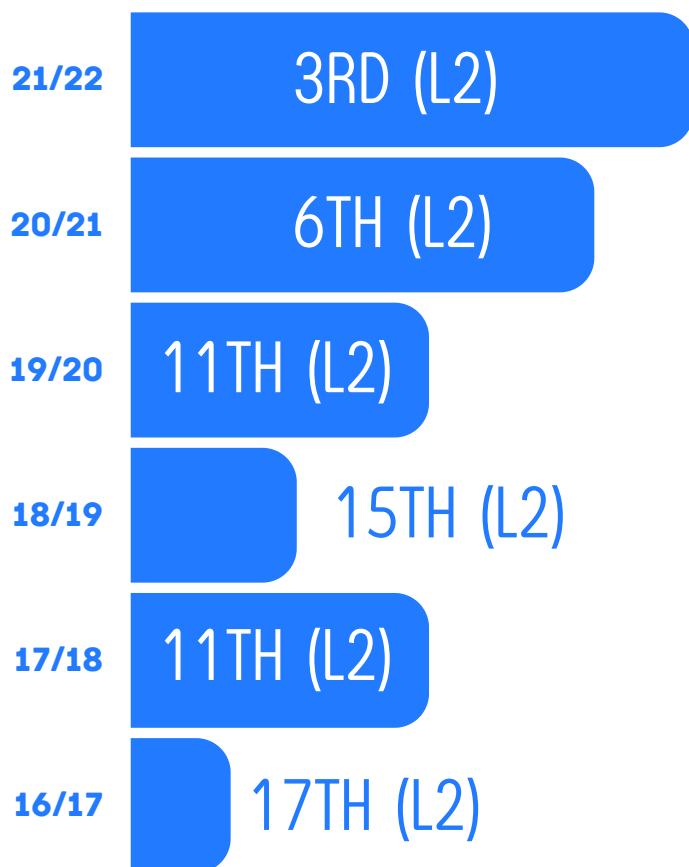
Auxerre were one of the biggest long-range-shooters in the second tier last season, just two sides attempted more shots from outside of the box, and that's a tactic that is less likely to lead to goals against higher-quality keepers in Ligue 1. Meanwhile, in joining a league famed for producing young players, Auxerre are relying heavily on their experience and pragmatism. They were the third-oldest side in Ligue 2 last season and nine regulars are already into their thirties. Even if Furlan and his team were to avoid one of the four automatic relegation places this season, this squad is built for the very short term.

Verdict

It's hard to place Furlan's side anywhere above the bottom five. Ligue 1 has improved significantly since the last time Auxerre resided in the top flight, with bottom half teams Reims and Clermont boasting notable quality. The best this side can hope for is hard-fought survival but, with a raft of teams in similar positions in the bottom half of the table, they stand more than a fighting chance.

Alex Barker

FORM



SQUAD

KEY

- + BENOÎT COSTIL, GK, 35
- JUBAL, CB, 28
- MATHIAS AUTRET, FW, 31
- GAËTAN CHARBONNIER, ST, 33
- + YOUSOUF M'CHANGAMA, CM, 31

IMPORTANT

- GAUTHIER HEIN, AM, 25
- + RAYAN RAVELOSON, MF, 25
- BIRAMA TOURÉ, DM, 30
- HAMZA SAKHI, CM, 26
- + JULIAN JEANVIER, CB, 30

REGULAR

- + BRAYANN PEREIRA, RB, 19
- + NUNO DA COSTA, FW, 31
- QUENTIN BERNARD, LB, 33
- THÉO PELLEARD, DF, 28
- GAËTAN PERRIN, FW, 26
- ALEXANDRE COEFF, DF, 30
- + KAYS RUIZ-ATIL, FW, 19
- LASSINE SINAYOKO, FW, 22
- RÉMY DUGIMONT, AM, 36

OPTION

- OUSOUMANE CAMARA, DM, 23
- ALEC GEORGEN, RB, 23
- PAUL JOLY, DF, 22
- KENJI-VAN BOTO, LB, 26
- DONOVAN LÉON, GK, 30

DEVELOPMENT

- KÉVIN DANOIS, AM, 18

HEAD COACH

JEAN-MARC FURLAN



BREST

FRANCK HONORAT

DUVERNE

CHARDONNET

BIZOT

HERELLE

BRASSIER

LEES-MELOU

BELKEBLA

BELAILI

MOUNIE

DEL CASTILLO

HONORAT

4-4-2

Key Man - Franck Honorat

In a league that famously describes itself as the 'League of Talents', Franck Honorat is the league's biggest talent to remain a secret. Still just 25, the versatile French forward has quietly and authoritatively carried the unfashionable Brest for close to two years. Last season, fellow attacking midfielder, the more skilful but also more flaky, Romain Faivre, now 24, undeservedly grabbed much of the attention from those outside the Stade Francis-Le Blé. When Faivre left for Lyon in January and struggled to find form, Honorat and Brest continued on their way as a solid and efficient midtable side capable of causing an upset while happily keeping a low profile. Honorat is an old-fashioned nuts and bolts attacker stylistically, lacking the grace and vision of the balletic Faivre, but his intensity, directness, intelligence and precise technical ability make him just as effective, if not more so. Playing for a lower-midtable side, his 27-goal contributions over the last two seasons makes for impressive reading.

Signing To Watch: Mathias Pereira-Lage

Much of the club's off-season focus will be on the signing of relegated Premier League side Norwich City's midfielder Pierre Lees-Melou. However, having been a surprise pick-up for an English side after he largely underwhelmed at Nice, a mid-table Ligue 1 club like Brest represents the right level for the 29-year-old water-carrier. Mathias Pereira-Lage's arrival from Angers, however, could be significantly more useful. Having spent three seasons in Ligue 1 with Le SCO, Pereira-Lage oddly struggled to secure a consistent starting berth, despite his technical quality, particularly from crosses, and an ability to be equally useful across the midfield or attack. This snappy Brest team under Michel Der Zakarian, who often play with four overtly attacking players, will suit Pereira-Lage's neat interplay, eye for a pass and whipped deliveries. Despite being a low-key arrival at a low-key club, Pereira-Lage's signing should be seen as an astute piece of

business come next May.

Squad Analysis

Although lacking stars beyond Honorat, Der Zakarian has build a well-balanced, if increasingly small, squad at Brest. After a shaky start, Dutch international goalkeeper Marco Bizot has finally found the consistency to support a physical back four that could use a little more guile and depth, with only three largely untested options for the support this season. Lees-Melou strengthens an even, if uninspiring, midfield group while Der Zakarian's variety of attacking options remain his team's strength, even if the imposing Mounie lacks an obvious understudy.

Strengths

As is the case for all bottom-half Ligue 1 sides, finding a reliable source of goals is crucial for stability season-on-season. Brest, however, are unusual in that, beyond Honorat's exacting finishing which produced 11 league strikes last season, they are home to a variety of genuine threats besides. Although in and out of form last season, the bulky former Huddersfield and Montpellier striker Steve Mounie added nine goals while Jérémy Le Douaron (5), Youcef Belaïli (3, in half a season) and Irvin Cardona (4) all ably assisted too. Der Zakarian boasts a group of waspish, skilful, pacey forwards who can interchange sharply behind Mounie, providing a variety of setup options. Romain Del Castillo and the returning Romain Philippoteaux both also fit nicely with that intensity. Top scorers amongst the bottom 11 sides last year, other than the bottom club, Bordeaux, Brest will be a serious attacking threat once more.

Weaknesses

As one of the bottom half's more expansive teams, Brest can be exposed defensively in a largely pragmatic division otherwise. Despite finishing eleventh last season, only the bottom five teams conceded more than Brest's 57 goals

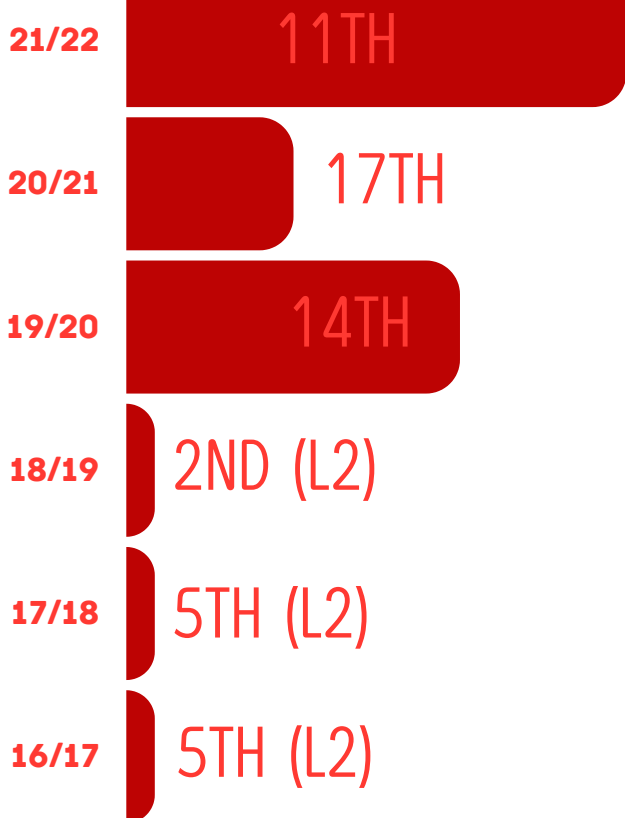
and, with the departure of Ronaël Pierre-Gabriel for Strasbourg and Finnish international left-back Jere Uronen a little out of his depth in Ligue 1, Brest's back four is looking increasingly agricultural. Having successfully converted central defenders Jean-Kévin Duverne and Lillian Brassier to full-backs last season, Der Zakarian is likely to effectively line up with four centre-backs. Although that has advantages defensively and physically, and centre-back pairing Brendan Chardonnet and Christophe Hérelle are often underrated, technical quality, outside Hérelle, is thin. As a result, Brest could be pinned back as they struggle to play their way out of trouble or overlap their wide forwards effectively this season.

Verdict

Largely swapping like-for-like in the transfer market, little has changed at Brest over the summer. Der Zakarian will be hoping that such consistency extends to his team maintaining at least the same middle-of-the-road form until next off-season. With a largely workmanlike but useful and experienced squad, that seems likely. As a host of weaker sides (on paper) fight over the four relegation places, Brest are likely to be one the few, if not only, Ligue 1 club not to threaten either end of the table at any stage this season.

GFFN

FORM



KEY

BRENDAN CHARDONNET, CB, 27
FRANCK HONORAT, FW, 25

IMPORTANT

+ PIERRE LEES-MELOU, CM, 29
YOUCEF BELAÏLI, AM, 30
MARCO BIZOT, GK, 31
CHRISTOPHE HÉRELLE, CB, 29

REGULAR

JEAN-KÉVIN DUVERNE, DF, 25
HARIS BELKEBLA, CM, 28
+ MATHIAS PEREIRA LAGE, MF, 25
JÉRÉMY LE DOUARON, FW, 24
JERE URONEN, LB, 28
LILIAN BRASSIER, DF, 22
IRVIN CARDONA, FW, 24
HUGO MAGNETTI, CM, 24

OPTION

+ ACHRAF DARI, CB, 23
+ NOAH FADIGA, RB, 22
+ JOAQUÍN BLÁZQUEZ, GK, 21
GRÉGOIRE COUDERT, GK, 23
HIANG'A MBOCK, DM, 22
RAFIKI SAÏD, FW, 22
+ KARAMOKO DEMBÉLÉ, FW, 19
ROMAIN PHILIPPOTEAUX, FW, 34

DEVELOPMENT

AXEL CAMBLAN, FW, 19
JOSUÉ ESCARTIN, CB, 19
TEVA LOSSEC, LB, 19

HEAD COACH

MICHEL DER ZAKARIAN



P S G

KYLIAN MBAPPÉ

DONNARUMMA

RAMOS

MARQUINHOS

KIMPEMBE

HAKIMI

VERRATTI

VITINHA

MENDES

MBAPPE

MESSI

NEYMAR

3-4-1-2

Key Man - Christophe Galtier

No other man is more important this forthcoming season for PSG than the ex-Marseille player and former Saint-Etienne, Lille and Nice coach, Christophe Galtier. Galtier's arrival may have been delayed compared to the club's new sporting director Luis Campos, who was working on recruitment at the end of last season, but, make no mistake, he very much came in the Portuguese director's suitcase. Having worked together at Lille, building the basis of the 2021 title winning side, Galtier is essential to the project Campos wants to run and is currently moulding. Never has so much pressure been placed on the PSG squad as a whole to start behaving like true professionals. Galtier now has to handle a world-class side with Kylian Mbappé finally extending his stay in Paris and, despite reports that Campos would like him gone, Neymar seemingly staying. Campos, not Galtier, has instigated a change in formation towards a 3-4-1-2 and away from last season's 4-3-3 under Mauricio Pochettino – PSG's traditional formation during the QSI era. Galtier will be under an obscene amount of pressure as early as the Champions League group stages, given his lack of experience at that level and poor record with Lille in Europe, most notably from the club's management. Can he succeed where more decorated managers like Carlo Ancelotti and Thomas Tuchel have failed? Luck will play its part, but he has most of the tools needed to succeed.

Signing To Watch - Vitinha

PSG have long been guilty of not having enough ball-players in midfield. Indeed, Marco Verratti aside, the squad is filled with players better equipped for defensive work, which is a problem in the usually pragmatic Ligue 1 where most of Paris' 19 opponents will play with 10 men behind the ball at home and away. Joining from Porto for €40m as Campos' first signing, the 22-year-old Portuguese international Vitinha will bring the skilful ball control, ball retention and forward-passing between the lines that only

Verratti has seemed capable of for some time. His arrival is an exciting one and looked upon by PSG observers as a step in the right direction.

Squad Analysis

La liste des indésirables! Such hardball tactics from the PSG leadership towards those deemed surplus to requirements is rare under QSI. The club have often tried to offload overpaid benchwarmers during transfer windows before, without succeeding, under previous sporting director Leonardo. Although the Brazilian was criticised, it would take a gifted negotiator to convince a player with several years left on a weighty contract to move on for less money. Effectively publicly pointing out players who are not welcome and demanding that they train with the reserves, such as Julien Draxler, Ander Herrera, Thilo Kehrer, Layvin Kurzawa, Rafinha and Georginio Wijnaldum, is another sign that things are getting serious at the club while reported attempts to offload Neymar may have been more of a strategic ploy to motivate the Brazilian. The new additions are solid performers like Vitinha, former Montpellier wing-back Nordi Mukiele, who will compete with Achraf Hakimi at right-wing-back, and Hugo Ekitike, a bright centre-forward prospect from Reims, all will add balance to the group.

Strengths

Having finally agreed a new three-year contract after months of media intrigue concerning his future, Mbappé's surprise decision to stay in Paris, rather than join Real Madrid this summer, was arguably the biggest win for the club this year, both sporting and politically, perhaps more so than the 2021 title itself. Mbappé's triumphant 'unveiling' before the demolition of Metz at the end of last season seemed to re-energise a club that had been drifting for some time, reeling from the disastrous Champions League exit at the hands of Karim Benzema and Real Madrid in last season's last 16. Having ended last

season as a strong contender, Mbappé enters the new campaign with a chance to become the continent's leading player.

Weaknesses

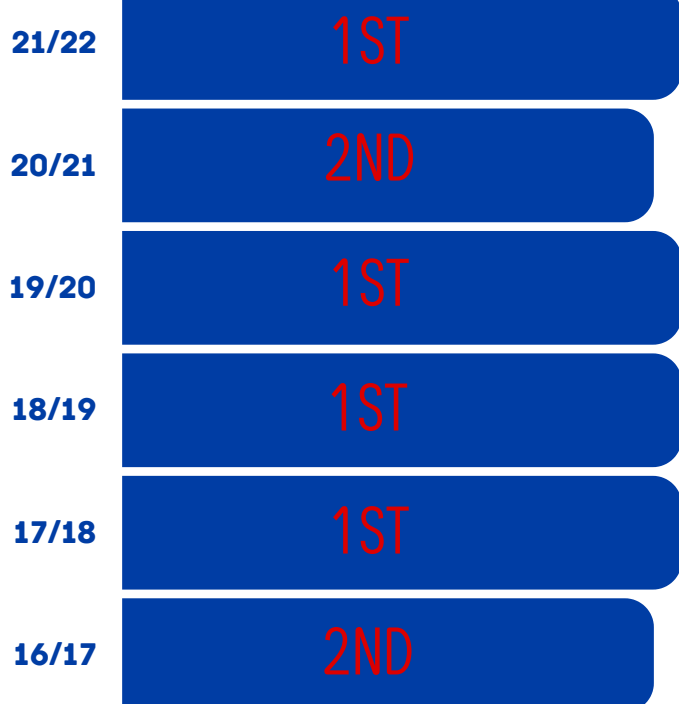
The big drawback of having a such famously wealthy owners is that players rest on their laurels and take things for granted. which has been the case at PSG ever since Zlatan Ibrahimović left. Overpaid players have been willing to coast on long contracts with other clubs not willing to match their salaries, meaning the squad, and the wage bill, have continued to grow. Campos' arrival and his more authoritative approach seems to have changed that but, while there will always some dressing room unrest, it remains to be seen if a tougher and more pragmatic management of the club will translate to mental strength at key moments on the pitch.

Verdict

Winning the league seems a given even if, like last season under Pochettino, the players aren't performing at their best or coasting through most Ligue 1 games as the evenly matched group of half a dozen sides chasing the champions repeatedly taking points off each other, not allowing one challenger to emerge, as Monaco did in 2017. Europe is all that really matters for the club and the PSG's season will again be defined by Champions League progress.

Philip Bargiel

FORM



KEY

MARCO VERRATTI, CM, 29
 KYLIAN MBAPPÉ, FW, 23
 LIONEL MESSI, FW, 35

IMPORTANT

MARQUINHOS, CB, 28
 NEYMAR, FW, 30

REGULAR

ACHRAF HAKIMI, RWB, 23
 + RENATO SANCHES, CM, 24
 GIANLUIGI DONNARUMMA, GK, 23
 PRESNEL KIMPEMBE, CB, 26
 SERGIO RAMOS, CB, 36
 + VITINHA, CM, 22
 NUNO MENDES, LB, 20
 JUAN BERNAT, LB, 29
 PABLO SARABIA, FW, 30

OPTION

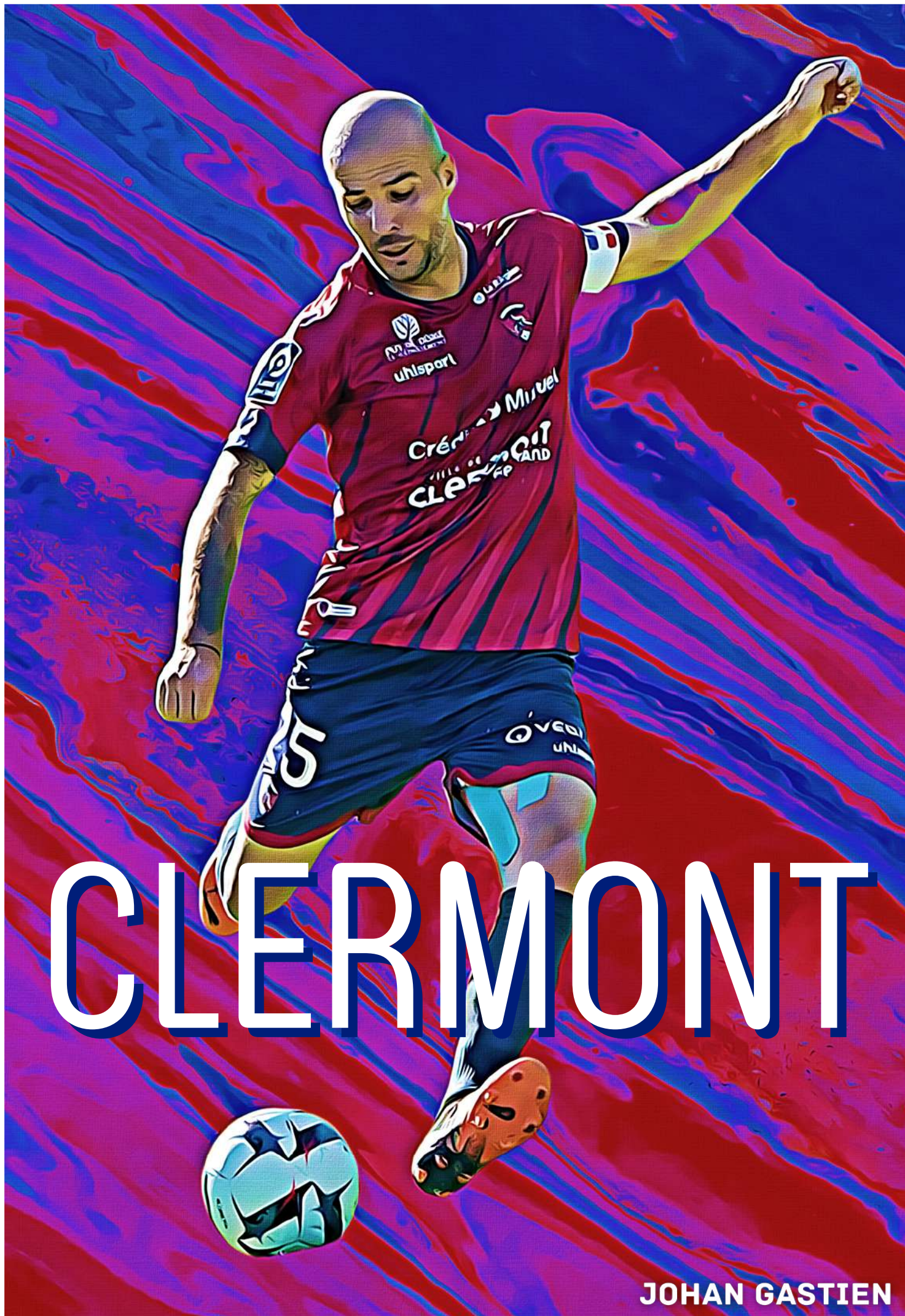
KEYLOR NAVAS, GK, 35
 + HUGO EKITIKE, ST, 20
 ARNAUD KALIMUENDO, ST, 20
 LEANDRO PAREDES, CM, 28
 + NORDI MUKIELE, DF, 24
 MAURO ICARDI, ST, 29
 ÉRIC DINA EBIMBE, CM, 21
 DANILLO PEREIRA, DM, 30
 ABDOU DIALLO, DF, 26

DEVELOPMENT

WARREN ZAÏRE-EMERY, CM, 16
 EDOUARD MICHUT, CM, 19

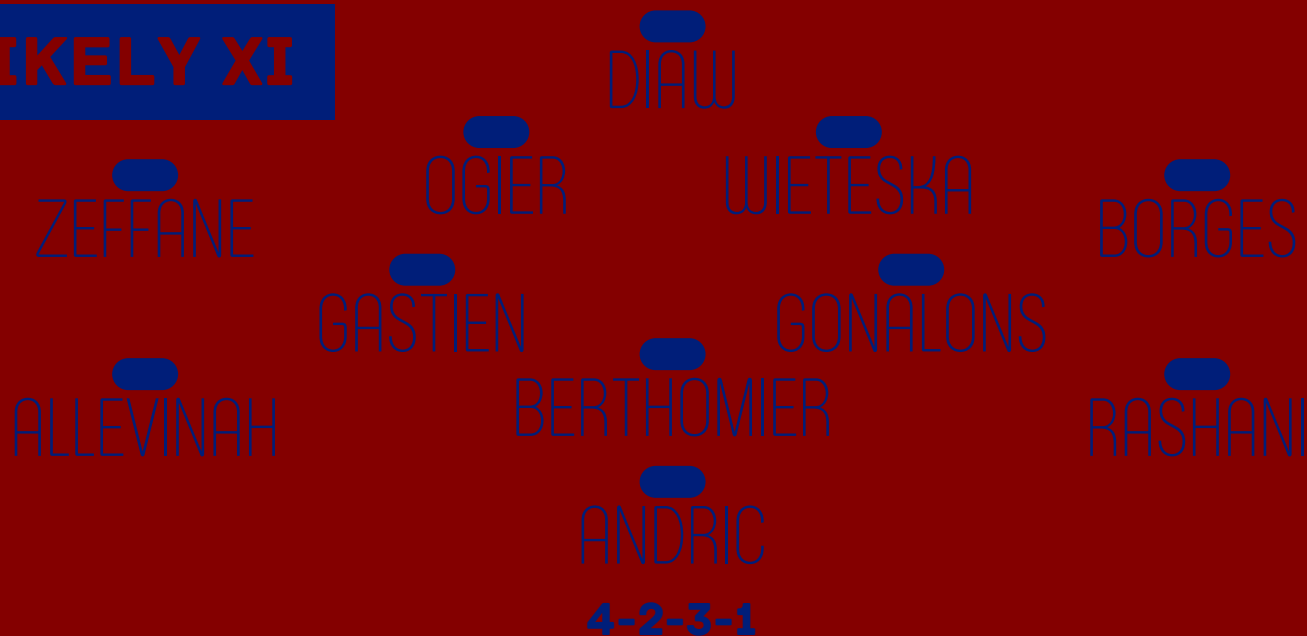
HEAD COACH

CHRISTOPHE GALTIER



CLERMONT

JOHAN GASTIEN



Key Man: Florent Ogier

Aside from 33-year-old veteran defender Florent Ogier, Clermont start the season with a completely reconstituted defence. Last season's flying full-backs, the now departed Vital N'Simba (Bordeaux) and Akim Zedadka (Lille) became a low-key yet impressive success story last season, but this area of the team is now largely under construction and something of an unknown. Ogier, a streetwise, solid if one-dimensional defender by Ligue 1 standards will have to direct three newcomers. New right-back Mehdi Zeffane at least has Ligue 1 know-how but he's meandered his way around Russia and Turkey since leaving his fringe role at Rennes in 2019. New goalkeeper Mory Diaw, a PSG youth graduate, was relegated with Lausanne in Switzerland last season, as was new left-back Neto Borges with Tondela in Portugal. Ogier's new centre-back partner, Mateusz Wieteska, at least has handy European experience with Legia Warsaw and a Poland cap. Ogier, meanwhile, will be tasked with finding cohesion within this eclectic new group despite various language barriers. Although a wiley campaigner, as with many of the team's senior players, coach Pascal Gastien is likely asking far too much of Ogier. If Clermont stay up, it'll be because Ogier succeeded.

Signing To Watch: Maxime Gonalons

Having lost top scorer Mohamed Bayo's 14 goals to Lille, Clermont will need to improve defensively if Gastien's side are to stand any chance of survival. Now 33, after a tour of Europe via Roma, Sevilla and Granada, former Lyon midfielder Maxime Gonalons will be crucial to the effort. With the coach's son Yohan an able partner at the base of midfield, the expansive Clermont of last season will likely have to be reigned in significantly due to decreasingly quality and Gonalons' calming influence and technical ability will be needed to tighten and pacify a previously porous back line that conceded 69 goals last term. His is Clermont's sole major signing this summer, a concern for

a team that only mustered 36 points last year, and his 242 Ligue 1 appearances represent a sizeable chunk of Les Lanciers' top-flight experience. It's a tall order for the Frenchman, however, as, despite his quality, he's noticeably slowed in recent times and he'll need more support to arrive before the end of the window if his club are to have a realistic chance of staying up.

Squad Analysis

Despite keeping largely the same squad that won promotion to Ligue 1 for the first time in the club's history two seasons ago, Clermont enter this season even weaker than they started the last. After a strong start, they narrowly avoided relegation – although their 17th place finish would mean automatic demotion this time around – as they were quickly found and picked part. In a completely overhauled, and increasingly questionable-looking, defence, they lack depth and experience. Although their midfield has been strengthened by Gonalons, replacing the assured Salis Abdel Hamid who left for Lens, many of his partners like Saif-Eddine Khaoui and Yohan Magnin lack Ligue 1 quality. There are pacey, skilful if flaky options in the wider forward areas via Jim Allevinah, Jodel Dossou and Elbasan Rashani, all of whom had their moments last season, but such a weak team behind them will make it difficult to provide the same consistent stream of openings. Despite a handful of highlights, Gastien's group resembles a Ligue 2 squad, and an average one at that.

Strengths

Gastien was credited with sticking to his guns last season, continuing with the same style that carried Clermont to promotion to Ligue 1. His side were usually bold and always unfazed by the league's more illustrious actors, imposing themselves in midfield and using the ball neatly, progressively and precisely, especially out wide. The main components of that move construction remain and the

intelligence and technical wherewithal of Gastien (the player), Allevinah, Dossou, attacking midfielder Jason Berthomier and Rashani suggests that Clermont are capable of creating chances and keeping possession better than their direct rivals, despite losing their base from which to build. Meanwhile, taking any chances that arrival is another matter.

Weaknesses

Without Bayo, who was responsible for many of the club's more memorable moments last term, Gastien's attacking options are thinning. Although Allevinah and friends are capable of creating moments, replacing the 14 goals Bayo managed last season – the most in the bottom half of the table – seems impossible as things stand. Andric Komnen joined from Dinamo Zagreb as a replacement but his 12 goals in 42 games there doesn't inspire confidence.

Verdict

Clermont were fortunate to stay up last season. If the season had been a couple of games longer they likely would have continued their inexorable slide down the table and through the Ligue 2 trapdoor. A smash and grab start of two wins and two draws from their opening four games effectively kept them up. This year, however, the element of surprise has gone and four automatic relegation spots seems to make an even weaker squad's task close to impossible. First up: Lionel Messi, Neymar and PSG.

GFFN

FORM

21/22

17TH

20/21

2ND (L2)

19/20

5TH (L2)

18/19

10TH (L2)

17/18

6TH (L2)

16/17

12TH (L2)

KEY

MAXIME GONALONS, DM, 33

JOHAN GASTIEN, DM, 34

FLORENT OGIER, CB, 33

IMPORTANT

+ MEHDI ZEFFANE, RB, 30

JIM ALLEVINAH, FW, 27

JODEL DOSSOU, FW, 30

JASON BERTHOMIER, AM, 32

ELBASAN RASHANI, FW, 29

+ MATEUSZ WIETESKA, CB, 25

REGULAR

+ NETO BORGES, LB, 25

+ MORY DIAW, GK, 29

YOHANN MAGNIN, DM, 25

GREJOHN KYEI, ST, 26

+ MUHAMMED CHAM, AM, 21

+ KOMNEN ANDRIC, ST, 27

ALIDU SEIDU, CB, 22

SAÏF-EDDINE KHAOUI, AM, 27

OPTION

JEAN-CLAUDE BILLONG, CB, 28

ARIAL MENDY, LB, 27

+ JÉRÉMIE BELA, FW, 29

SOFYAN CHADER, FW, 22

OUPARINE DJOCO, GK, 24

BRANDON BAIYE, CM, 21

DEVELOPMENT

OLIVIER KAMDEM, RB, 19

BAILA DIALLO, LB, 20

SOULEYMANE CISSÉ, CB, 19

HEAD COACH

PASCAL GASTIEN



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