

GFFN



2018

THE GFFN 100: AN INTRODUCTION

Welcome to another edition of the Get French Football News 100. Published at the end of every year by GFFN, the guide you are reading is as detailed and comprehensive a set of player profiles as one is likely to find, especially in English. Some of these players are well-known, even to the casual fan, and though they have been the subjects of countless profiles, we hope that you can gain a bit more depth in knowledge of their stories. This is especially true with the likes of Neymar and his Paris Saint-Germain team-mate Kylian Mbappé. In 2018, neither was ever far from the limelight in a year in which France won the World Cup, thanks in large part to the teenage sensation. Neymar may have garnered the odd headline for less positive reasons, but both remain as compelling off the pitch as they do on it.

It is thus no surprise to see Mbappé top the rankings again; it does not take much objectivity to realise his immense talent and potential, but the present document is much more than a narrative driven by celebrity. We have watched the matches that do not generate headlines, seen the teams that are rarely on television, especially internationally, and artfully blended statistical analysis with old-fashioned scouting to create what we feel is a definitive guide to the professionals currently plying their trade in France. If some rankings seem high, or low, read the profiles before making a snap decision as to our choices; this is a meritocracy. Do we think Florian Thauvin is a better player than Neymar? Decidedly not, but in the year 2018, it is hard to argue the Frenchman's impact has not outweighed that of the Brazilian star, especially in light of the latter's injury.

To wit, to be eligible for the GFFN 100, the player must have been a registered squad member of a Ligue 1 or a Ligue 2 club on the 31st December 2018. For example, Thomas Lemar, despite his World Cup success and play with Monaco, is ineligible despite playing half of the calendar year in the Principality, on the 31st of December 2018 he was plying his trade in Madrid. However, Moussa Dembélé is eligible for the GFFN 100 despite having only joined Lyon from Celtic in the summer of 2018 because on the aforementioned date he was a registered squad member of theirs. Players that are eligible are judged on all their professional appearances in 2018, regardless of whether or not they were playing abroad for a part of the calendar year. This applies to the international appearances they might have accumulated, during the World Cup, or the UEFA Nations League, for example. Players are ranked in descending order: with the highest-rated talent ranked 1st and the 100th highest-rated talent ranked 100th.

The selection process involved a nomination stage whereby the GFFN 100 contributors chose their favoured list of one hundred, alongside the use of statistical data to rank players according to a range of over 50 distinct parameters across different playing positions. We have also included our "Ten to Watch", a guide to ten young players whom we think will make a big impact on next year's guide. Seeing the placement in the current edition of the likes of Houssem Aouar, we like to think that given the seemingly endless churn of fantastic young talent to have emerged from France in the last few years, that we have spotted some players with bright futures who may not yet be highly touted, but are clearly promising talents. From all of us at Get French Football News, we sincerely hope this guide provides a hearty dose of information while also generating no small share of debate, as any set of rankings would do.

— **Eric Devin, Chief Features Writer**



BORN: 1983/05/06 | JUAZEIRO
CLUB: PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN
POSITION: DEFENDER
AT CLUB SINCE: 2017
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 16

DANI ALVES

(-83)

100

When Dani Alves looks back on his career as a whole, it is unlikely he will remember 2018 with great fondness. Despite a natural fulfilment in the accumulation of a treble of domestic honours, the second half of his maiden season with the Parisians was disrupted by patchy form that – in addition to injuries and suspensions - ultimately resulted in losing his place to Belgian right-back Thomas Meunier.

Casting back to the Parc des Princes in July 2017, Alves was undoubtedly seeking a fourth Champions' League winners' medal to add to an already dazzling CV in what may or may not be his final major European move when he decided to make the move to Ligue 1. For PSG, the arrival of the accomplished former Barcelona and Juventus man signalled their intentions to court the highest profile of global names - a transfer policy that was only further confirmed with the striking world-record signing of Brazilian compatriot Neymar from Barcelona just a month later. The Brazilian's first season in the French capital showed that he was a player who was defying his age and his five goals in 41 appearances – across all competitions – served notice that he was making a significant contribution on the pitch to a club who were going all out on all fronts to earn the prestigious Champions' League honour.

His year was defined though, by one of the very moments of the game that would decide their last-16 Champions' League tie against Real Madrid. Following a 3-1 reverse in the Spanish capital, five minutes into the second period of the return leg with the game goalless, Alves was directly at fault for the concession of possession that led to Zinedine Zidane's side securing the next goal to all but end the tie. It was a fatal moment of negligence on the Brazilian's part to inadvertently present the ball to Marco Asensio, who swiftly played in the advancing Lucas Vázquez. The Spanish winger's accurate cross was pin-point for Cristiano Ronaldo to swoop home with a powerful header to give Unai Emery's side a mountain to climb.

The 35-year-old was to suffer a major setback in May when, in PSG's Coupe de France Final victory over third tier minnows Les Herbiers, Alves limped off four minutes from time with a knee injury that would not only ruin his chances of a third career World Cup appearance for Brazil, but would rule him out of football entirely for six months. In Alves' absence, Meunier has often been deployed as Thomas Tuchel's trusted option as a wing-back in the German's preferred system that predominantly employs a three-man defence.

A role that permits the full-back to equally contribute offensively as well as defensively is certainly tailor-made to a player of Alves' profile and experience. The Brazilian recently made his return in two substitute appearances during PSG's domestic and Champions' League home wins over Toulouse and Liverpool respectively, but the question lingers whether he will remain Meunier's understudy in the New Year or if Tuchel will be under pressure from the club hierarchy to bring the 35-year-old back into the first team picture for the remainder of the campaign.



BORN: 1997/10/27 | MEAUX
CLUB: RACING STRASBOURG
POSITION: MIDFIELD
AT CLUB SINCE: 2018
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 25

IBRAHIMA SISSOKO

(*)

99

Brought in this summer to replace Jean-Eudes Aholou in the heart of Strasbourg's midfield like the Ivory Coast international Ibrahima Sissoko is also a product of the second division, having joined Thierry Laurey's side from Brest in July. He, is however, a much more heralded presence, having been regularly capped for France's various youth sides, and seems a steal for the Eastern club at a mere €2m. He recently made his debut with *Les Espoirs*, France's U-21 side, and with the likely continued involvement of Tanguy N'Dombélé in the senior team, seems set to become a fixture for Sylvain Ripoll as the U21s continue their preparations for this summer's European Championships.

He is not as gifted in his eye for a pass as the Lyon midfielder is (although few players in Ligue 1 are), but he is certainly blessed with a great deal of ability on the ball, ranking second for his club in dribbles completed. Though nominally a defensive midfielder, especially when playing alongside Jonas Martin, Sissoko's pace and power has been a key element in allowing the club's early switch to a three-man back line to flourish, with Kenny Lala and Lionel Carole being afforded a great deal more space in wide areas. Too, with Strasbourg playing such an expansive style, Sissoko's range of passing has also improved, something which had not readily been on display at Brest.

His best asset, though, is surely his ability to act as a screen in front of the defence, breaking up play and starting Strasbourg's counter-attacks. A lanky presence and strong in the air, his long stride allows him to move about the pitch with consummate ease, even if his tackling could perhaps do with some refinement. It is clear from the number of bookings that he has earned this season and last that his technique can certainly be improved, but that is hardly a massive knock on a player who has only recently turned 21 and is playing his first season in the top flight.

Too, Sissoko must be lauded for his willingness to join Strasbourg, where, particularly prior to the sale of Aholou, competition for places looked to be fierce, with Jérémy Grimm, Martin, Dimitri Liénard and Anthony Gonçalves all staking claims for a starting berth. Sissoko has played every match save one, a 3-2 loss to Marseille, which was, not coincidentally, Strasbourg's poorest defensive performance of the campaign. The arrivals of Carole and goalkeeper Matz Sels, and the continued strong play of Lebo Mothiba have been key elements to Strasbourg's early good form, but Sissoko's signing has perhaps been the most decisive.

Speaking in an interview with *France Football* earlier this season, not only has Sissoko started the season well, he is also more than aware of the areas in which he needs to improve to reach a higher level: *"I have to improve my technical ability, because everything is faster in Ligue 1. One has to see the game more quickly, play more quickly, to know where to play the ball, and at what moment."* With such a comprehensive and objective understanding of the challenges of moving up a division, Sissoko's blend of humility and talent should see him continue to improve in the months and years to come, perhaps even following Aholou's path into a club playing Champions' League football.



BORN: 1992/08/22 | NICE
CLUB: OGC NICE
POSITION: DEFENDER
AT CLUB SINCE: 2018
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 32

CHRISTOPHE HERELLE

(*)

98

Christophe Hérelle almost did not appear in this year's edition of the GFFN 100. Last December, Troyes were approached by Porto, who were looking to replace another Frenchman, Willy Boly, who was off to Wolverhampton Wanderers, now of the Premier League. Bordeaux were also examining the centre-back's profile. But an injury in early January, ironically obtained against les *Girondins*, in part contributed to the Sochaux academy graduate staying in the Champagne region for the rest of the season.

In his remaining 14 matches, the ex-Créteil player could not save his team from relegation. They only kept two clean sheets in that time, while suffering several big losses (namely against Guingamp, Lyon & Monaco). Yet even for his first season in the top-flight, the defender impressed considerably and stood as the undisputed, if soft-spoken, leader for ESTAC, and the number of goals that his side conceded does not reflect on his courage and quality, rather more on the limitations of those around him.

Troyes' relegation accelerated the race to sign the 25-year old, with Huddersfield Town and Anderlecht amongst the reported suitors. In the end, he was transferred to his hometown of Nice for €5m, in a deal that had been long-coming. There, he was to play and progress under the orders of French legend Patrick Vieira, a newcomer manager to Ligue 1. His debut was hardly ideal, as *Les Aiglons* suffered a disappointing home loss to promoted Reims (0-1). After a draw with Caen, Vieira switched to a back three, which initially failed against Dijon (0-4), but earned a win and a first clean sheet at Lyon in the following week (1-0). This formula stuck and as the manager's project gained momentum, Nice have shown remarkable defensive solidity. Hérelle now regularly starts on the right of Dante and Malang Sarr. At the time of writing, the team is on a run of six straight clean sheets, during which Hérelle has started five matches.

Hérelle, whose older brother is an international for Martinique, has won 71% of his duels in Ligue 1 at the time of writing, comfortably placing him as one of the division's best defenders in this domain. It is undoubtedly a specialty of his, be it in the air or on the ground. His height, an impressive 1.88m, and strength are a considerable advantage when confronting the league's strikers. Despite his aerial prowess, he is yet to score a goal in Ligue 1. This season, however, he finds himself less often in situations where he is forced to battle it out one-on-one, with Vieira's Nice enjoying possession and generally carrying play. Of course, as an integral part of a possession-based outfit, Hérelle will be looking to further progress in short and long passing in 2019.

This is only his second season in the top-flight, but Hérelle looks set to prove to be yet another canny signing by Nice General Manager Julien Fournier. With Dante already 35 and sometimes no longer able to cope with the speed of Ligue 1, Hérelle is being groomed to become the future leader of Nice's back-line. Soon, the responsibility of accompanying young players like Youcef Atal or Sarr will be his. *Le Gym* have been trying for several years to close the gap with the league's best (excluding PSG of course), and investments like Hérelle aim to bring stability and growth to President Jean-Pierre Rivère's project. The bonus of Hérelle being a born and bred Niçois adds even greater value to the defender's arrival and undoubted future success.



BORN: 1988/08/01 | ROUEN
CLUB: SM CAEN
POSITION: MIDFIELD
AT CLUB SINCE: 2018
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 35

FAYCAL FAJR

(*)

97

Fayçal Fajr may not be a household name of French football, but the Moroccan international, born and raised in Rouen, has seamlessly reintegrated himself to Ligue 1 six years after his last appearance at the very same level in France. Previously, Fajr had been a regular for SM Caen in their last stint in Ligue 2, from 2012 to 2014. But with his playing time under threat from a young man called N'Golo Kanté, the Moroccan international turned to his dream of La Liga and signed for Elche. In four years in Spain, he also played for Deportivo de la Coruña and most recently Getafe, the latter of which where he made 33 appearances last season, producing one goal and four assists in that time. In the summer of 2018, Malherbe brought back one their own for the sum of €1.5m.

Before that, Fajr was a substitute in Morocco's heroic, but ultimately unrewarded, efforts to qualifying from a tough group at the 2018 World Cup in Russia. He came off the bench against Portugal and Spain to make a combined total of 30 minutes played in football's most prestigious tournament. From a corner, he assisted Youssef En-Neystri with ten minutes to go to give his country the lead against La Roja, in what would have been one of his Morocco's greatest ever victories, before Iago Aspas dramatically made it 2-2 in added time. In October, Fajr scored a 97th minute penalty to beat Comoros as Morocco secured qualification for the upcoming African Cup of Nations, his third international goal in 30 caps.

Back at Caen, the 30-year old immediately became a key player in the line-up of Ligue 1 debuting manager Fabien Mercadal, missing only one match. As the Normans struggle to find a successful formation, he has played in every position of midfield, as he undoubtedly possesses the technique, intelligence, and aggressiveness required to succeed in the French top flight. He shares these qualities with his usual partner in midfield, Prince Oniangue, despite the latter having a vastly more physical profile. Most recently, the two have played in front of holding midfielder Ismaël Diomandé, to have greater freedom in attack.

Fajr has scored twice, against Saint-Étienne and Strasbourg, admittedly both times in part thanks to the goalkeeping mistakes, even if each strike demonstrated his determined and precise technique. More importantly he has delivered four assists, including two from set pieces, one of his key strengths and an asset for any side fighting to stay up. His pinpoint passing, perfected during his time in La Liga, is however still adapting to the less precise and more direct style of a Ligue 1 team in difficulty for points, but remains an important attribute.

Caen are not a big club but they have suffered because of their underperforming talents, especially in attack. For now, Fajr is one of the few keeping the ship afloat. As a leader, he will have to find ways to inspire those who are struggling, and he has the keys to do so on the pitch, as a playmaker. At the moment relegation looks dangerously likely for the Normandy club and it is crucial for the #10 not to become disenfranchised, as can happen to talented players put in this situation.



BORN: 1994/11/10 | PAREDES
CLUB: LILLE OSC
POSITION: MIDFIELD
AT CLUB SINCE: 2017
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 22

XEKA

(*)

96

When a player gets sent out on loan, it usually boils down to one or two main reasons. The first, that the individual in question is of a young age and needs regular first team football to gain experience, which his parent club is not currently able to provide, and the second, that the player in question is no longer needed at the club and is using the loan to perform at a standard high enough to earn a move elsewhere. In the case of 24-year-old Xeka at Lille, the first reason applies to him much more than the latter, with his campaign-long loan out at Dijon last season providing him with a strong basis for 2018/19. Frozen out by Marcelo Bielsa, LOSC were so desperate to bring Xeka back early, in January, that they tried to pay DFCO for the privilege. With no recall clause in sight, Dijon rejected this – a testament to the extent to which Lille felt they had made a mistake.

Signed from Braga for a total of €5m in 2017 following a loan with Lille, Xeka's loan spell was nowhere near as impressive as Lille's actions in January might have suggested. Time at Dijon was supposed to break him in to the physicality of Ligue 1 football. Having played the majority of the first half of 2017/18 season for the club from the Mustard-famed town, Xeka would only make five appearances in 2018 for Dijon, a disappointing return and to add insult to injury, his first appearance of the year came away at PSG in an 8-0 demolition where he was hauled off before the 75th minute. Xeka is understood to have reacted angrily to not being allowed to return to Lille and through a mixture of injury and a fall-out with Dijon, his playing time was insignificant.

After the rout at the hands of the Paris club, he returned the following week to play the entire 90 minutes in yet another loss, this time away at Strasbourg. It would get somewhat better for Xeka and Dijon as he performed well in the 2-1 home win against Rennes, controlling the midfield in an important victory. Those were however his last appearances until the middle of March and his final start until the end of that month, when he was involved in a hapless 3-1 loss to Marseille. As much promise as the first half of his loan spell at Dijon had warranted, in the end the Ligue 1 side would have been better advised to allow Xeka to return to Lille. Since the end of his loan with DFCO, he has become an integral, and occasionally understated, part of a Lille side that has enjoyed an inspired start to the 2018/2019 season, as Christophe Galtier embarks upon his first full campaign as the club's manager.

15 league appearances for Lille at the time of writing - ironically missing just one game against his former club Dijon - and even adding a goal to his resumé at home against Guingamp in a comprehensive 3-0 win – a technically excellent, drilled effort. Xeka has failed to complete the full 90 minutes in two games that he started this season (in losses against Bordeaux and PSG), and has been ferocious in the midfield. He loves going in for an old school, hard tackle but very rarely is he dangerously reckless. His role as the midfield playmaker has been disrupted by the lack of continuity he has enjoyed vis-à-vis a consistent midfield partner, and thus he has been tasked with a greater deal of ball-winning duties than his primary competencies align with. Lille are in with a shout for Champions' League football – Xeka must complete his first consistently excellent Ligue 1 campaign in 2019.



BORN: 1988/05/17 | **TALENCE**
CLUB: STADE RENNAIS
POSITION: DEFENDER
AT CLUB SINCE: 2018
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 32

DAMIEN DA SILVA

(-24) **95**

For Damien Da Silva in 2018, it has been a case of a chapter closing at one club and starting afresh at a new one. The 30-year-old Frenchman came to a crossroads in his career after four seasons with SM Caen and with his contract coincidentally expiring in the summer, he decided the time was right to move when Rennes came knocking. It is nothing short of incredible that Da Silva has been able to be in the predicament in which he found himself in, being sought after by a club of Rennes' standing, considering that he started out in the lowly third tier of French football, working his way up the leagues via Ligue 2 outfits like Clermont Foot, before securing a move to Normandy club Caen.

There is no question that his four seasons with SMC have been a success: 131 appearances in all. The latter half of the 2017/18 season for Caen was however a complicated one - like the season before - as they only had survival confirmed after an unlikely draw pulled out of the bag against PSG on the final day of the season. Caen lost 11 times from January to May, including a string of heavy defeats. Yet Da Silva still shone: quick, excellent in duels, a powerful header of the ball and always counted on to produce a last ditch block, it was understandable why he was a reliable fixture in the SM Caen's back four. He even bagged a brace in a memorable win against Nantes in February.

Coinciding with his Portuguese paternal heritage, he started attracting some attention, firstly from giants Benfica and Sporting Lisbon, such were the consistency of his performances. The Caen executives, keenly aware of their asset, tried all they could to tie him down but the writing was on the wall for some time and Caen were resigned to losing him. Once his contract expired and he was a free agent, the no-nonsense defender confirmed at the end of the season he would not be renewing his contract. Much to the sadness of the Stade Malherbe fans, he said he was looking for a new challenge.

That challenge was offered to Da Silva by fellow north-western side Rennes, a team, in his own words, on a slightly higher level than Caen; so clearly his reason for departure was seeking career progression, and he duly signed on a two-year deal. For the Brittany side, it was a no-brainer to bring him in: experienced in the top flight, hardworking and contract-less, not to mention a player who is rarely injured.

It is clear that he has been a shrewd acquisition for the Red and Blacks, starting in almost all of the opening Ligue 1 fixtures - even getting his first goal against Monaco. Indeed the opportunity to play in Europe was something that was an attractive element for Da Silva when he decided to sign for Rennes, and although back-to-back defeats to Dynamo Kiev almost extinguished any hope of this continuing after the Europa League group stage, the introduction of new boss Julien Stéphan has not only qualified Rennes for the knockouts, but seen Da Silva cemented as one of the first names on the team sheet.

His mentality, combativeness and never-say-die approach on the pitch has been exactly what Rennes have needed, and above all, his reliability in games and consistency over a longer period, with the club finishing 2018 by winning their last five games. Coming through humble beginnings has clearly reinforced his attributes and forged Da Silva to be able to operate at Ligue 1 level. His attitude will very much be a plus for Rennes and he will serve as a role model for younger defenders like Jérémy Gelin, who he will hope to help develop.



BORN: 1994/08/09 | MONTPELLIER
CLUB: SM CAEN
POSITION: DEFENDER
AT CLUB SINCE: 2017
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 32

ALEXANDER DJIKU

(+6)

94

Rightly or wrongly, SC Bastia has always had a reputation for being a fiery club and, in recent years, that carefully nurtured “no one likes us, we don’t care” attitude has sometimes gone too far. Many players seem to get caught up in the atmosphere, and struggle successfully to readjust to another club, when they move on. Alexander Djiku, however, is well on the way to moving on to great things after playing his formative footballing years with the Corsican club. It was while representing his local amateur club AS Perpignan-Méditerranée in an inter-regional tournament that he was spotted by Bastia youth team coach Ghislain Printant, who brought him over to Corsica’s academy.

Djiku was given his first team debut in December 2013, a seven-minute cameo against Evian in the Coupe de la Ligue. Frustratingly, he had to wait a full year before making his first Bastia start, under new coach Printant, ironically also against Evian. It was only the following season, 2015/16, that Djiku, filling in in his secondary role of right-back, began to establish himself. He made 19 starts during the Ligue 1 campaign, a figure which would have been higher, but for an ankle injury which kept him out for a dozen games, and a two-match suspension following the first sending-off of his career, four minutes into a match against Saint-Étienne.

2016/17 followed in a similar vein, as Djiku began to establish himself as one of the club’s stars, this time in his preferred central defensive role. He made 23 appearances and was always a starter when available, his time limited again by an 11-match lay-off for a broken arm, along with suspensions for two more red cards – for a rake down Mathieu Deplagne’s shin (worth watching for the slo-mo of Deplagne’s sock disintegrating) and a high boot on Nantes’ Adrien Thomasson. Despite his best efforts, Bastia were relegated at the end of the season and, desperate for funds to attempt to save themselves from administration, sold Djiku to Caen in a €2m deal.

His first season up north was an impressive one, playing 28 matches and for the most part beginning to rein in his Corsican aggression (no red cards; but 10 yellows...). Another seven-game lay-off for an Achilles injury) affected the beginning of his season (although he still made *France Football*’s half-season pleasant surprise XI) but he missed only two matches in the first half of 2018, helping keep a clean sheet in the final day 0-0 draw with PSG that secured Caen’s Ligue 1 survival. He also played in four of five matches as SMC reached the Coupe de France semi-final.

His performances attracted the summer interest of Lyon, Marseille and Sevilla, but he remained at Caen, where he continues to excel. SMC have conceded only 17 goals when he has played (15 starts – he missed two matches after another sending-off, for a high boot on Nabil Fekir), placing Caen among the top 10 defences in Ligue 1 – and considering their non-prolific attack, a mean defence could be key in a likely relegation dogfight. Good in the air, an excellent tackler, comfortable with the ball at his feet and still only 24, Djiku has all the tools to become a top quality defender if he continues his rate of progress. He still has some of that Corsican fire in him, saying “*off the pitch I’m very calm but on it – well you need to get stuck in and put everything into your job*”. But if he can harness that part of his game, he has the potential to go far.



BORN: 1994/09/14 | **SEGRE**
CLUB: LYON
POSITION: DEFENDER
AT CLUB SINCE: 2018
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 23

LEO DUBOIS

(-11) **93**

Léo Dubois rescuing what proved to be a vital Champions' League point for Olympique Lyonnais with a timely late run and finish in the second half of a 2-2 draw with Shakhtar Donetsk was largely symbolic of his early career: smart, savvy and understated. He worked tirelessly from the right-back position, wearing down the visiting side before rescuing the point with an incisive run. Dubois has done what he did all game in Ukraine that day, work tirelessly. Now, he has made his run and is hoping to gain his big moment.

The 24-year-old signed after a much-lauded spell as captain of FC Nantes where his wide-ranging skill-set was used wherever and whenever possible. The Segre-native is most associated with his role as a right-back but showed remarkable technical ability with both feet in stints at left-back. When Claudio Ranieri guided the Loire-Atlantique club to a top half finish in 2017/18, the Nantes skipper even took up a left-midfield role. The season under Ranieri came with the most responsibilities of his career to date. He played multiple positions, took a large portion of set pieces and achieved his most prolific attacking season with three goals and four assists in Ligue 1. According to *WhoScored*, he turned in six man of the match performances under the Premier League-winning Italian.

A splendid long-range effort to earn all three points away at Strasbourg last season was yet another sign of his well-rounded skill set. While he gained much acclaim for his attacking plaudits, Dubois did not shirk his defensive duties for a side that conceded the third-least goals in Ligue 1 in 2017/18. He averaged nearly 2.5 clearances per game and averaged 1.5 tackles and interceptions all while contributing to the attack. His industry and vision in attack saw him average nearly three completed long balls per game and his average of nearly two crosses per game were key to feeding the aerial threat of Emiliano Sala. With his capacity to fill so many different roles for his club, Dubois has seemingly matured at much faster rate than most first team players of his age. His maturity and experience even saw him captain his new side Lyon against Inter Milan during their pre-season participation in the International Champions Cup.

Dubois has already grown into a proficient player in many different positions. Now he will be challenged to fulfil one or two roles at a higher level in a Lyon squad littered with individuals that match or exceed his own abilities. Since Bruno Génésio's tactical set up does not allow for an individual to fill a wide midfield position like the one he occupied occasionally at Nantes, he will have the opportunity to cultivate his attacking full-back abilities in a back-five system that still affords him influence higher up the pitch. Dubois' technical ability had enabled him to play left-back at Nantes, but the mercurial rise of Ferland Mendy on the left for Lyon will limit his opportunities on that flank. He faces stiff competition from Kenny Tete and Rafael for minutes in the right-back/right-wing back position, with the latter admitting Dubois' impending arrival had boosted him ahead of a match vs Nantes in April of 2018.

He faces a more refined defensive role and stiffer competition than ever, but a Léo Dubois perfecting a few specific duties at Lyon rather than juggling many different roles could be the key to him reaching the full extent of his potential in 2019.



BORN: 1990/08/12 | PALERMO
CLUB: OGC NICE
POSITION: FORWARD
AT CLUB SINCE: 2016
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 25

MARIO BALOTELLI

(-60)

92

Nice, after some early-season stumbles under Patrick Vieira, have quietly become one of Ligue 1's better sides. After some tactical mis-steps, the former Arsenal player settled on a 3-5-2 and has gotten the best out of recent signings such as Christophe Hérelle, Adrien Tameze, and in particular young wing-back Youcef Attal. In terms of getting players already with the club to move up a level, not everything has been quite as successful, with Mario Balotelli being the prime example. The Italian will surely have been distracted by Marseille's quixotic pursuit of him in the summer, given that a club of higher ambitions, offering the chance to play European football, was a suitor, but his performances on the pitch have been so abject that *L'OM* may feel they have dodged a bullet.

After managing an impressive 33 goals over the course of his first two seasons at the Allianz Riviera, Balotelli is yet to find the back of the net in the current campaign, but Vieira's persistence in starting him in attack has meant that *Les Aiglons'* profligacy has undermined some truly impressive possession-based football. Some of the blame for this lack of scoring punch can also be ascribed to the summer's big-money signing, former Lyon academy player Myziane Maolida, but given Balotelli is nearly ten years the Frenchman's senior and that Maolida has contributed three assists, it is hard to not look at the table with a healthy dose of what-aboutism vis-à-vis Nice as a contender for European football and indeed the Champions' League.

It is hard to ascertain what has given Balotelli's form so much reason to dip; Vieira's tactical rejigging may have unsettled him, as the switch to a 5-3-2 from a 4-3-3 may be frustrating him, but to posit this would be to ignore the good work that he did in the same formation under Lucien Favre two years ago. The manager is clearly cognisant of this as well, expressing his frustrations with the player in a recent interview with *L'Équipe*. *"I'd like to respond to him, to push him up against a wall, or a locker, but I'm no longer a player and I must reflect on doing so because these things can have an impact; I risk losing a player and regretting it. I have to try to be constructive."*

Vieira's judgment in this matter is of course sound, navigating the divide he has recently crossed between being a manager and a player and a former team-mate of Balotelli's for a single season at Manchester City. That said, might he not be correct in taking a more demonstrative effect with Balotelli, whose arrogance and frustration with his team-mates has been a continual battle? Eight goals in the first half of the calendar year have earned Balotelli his placement in this publication, but given his current play, it is hard to envision him appearing in subsequent issues if he cannot subvert his selfishness for what remains an intriguing project at OGC Nice.



BORN: 1983/12/22 | PENAFIEL
CLUB: LILLE OSC
POSITION: DEFENDER
AT CLUB SINCE: 2018
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 24

JOSE FONTE

(*)

91

After a number of puzzling moves, one from Southampton to West Ham and the other from West Ham to Chinese side DL Yifang, 34-year-old José Fonte seems to have found a more suitable home in France's fourth largest city: Lille. Fonte was a member of the myriad of signings Lille completed this summer, alongside other now first-team regulars like Jonathan Bamba and Zeki Çelik.

Fonte's impact - on a club that just months ago was engulfed in chaos and disarray - has been nothing short of extraordinary. The centre-back has impressed fans and staff alike with his professionalism and experience, but it is perhaps the palpable impact that he has on his team-mates that is most important.

This impact was evident in a joint interview with 19-year-old Portuguese attacker Rafael Leão following Lille's 1-0 victory over Caen on the 27th of October. On the subject of his young compatriot Fonte said, *"He's very young and has a lot of talent, but he has to do the basics first. The basics is to run for your team, make the movement, make the runs, and to create the space, sometimes for other players. The main thing is that he improves every day, and when you work hard for your team you get your rewards and you score goals."* Moving from childhood club Sporting CP to Lille at such a young age was never going to be easy for Leão, but having a fellow countryman, especially one as experienced and mature as José Fonte, has certainly helped his adjustment.

The value that Fonte's presence brings is not only applicable off the pitch, but on it, too. At the time of writing, the 34-year-old has started and completed 14 of Lille's 16 Ligue 1 matches, and even captained the squad during their impressive 3-0 victory over Marseille. Much has been made of Lille's dynamic, electrifying attack, and deservedly so, but one should not overlook Fonte and Lille's defensive acumen. *Les Dogues* have kept their opponents to just 14 goals in 16 matches, the third best defensive record in the league. Lille's back four, usually comprised of right-back Zeki Çelik, left-back Fode Ballo-Touré, and centre-back Adama Soumaoro, has benefited significantly from the solidity that Fonte brings. The Portuguese international was in fact voted player of November by Lille supporters, such is the magnitude of the defensive turnaround that he has helped enact.

The summer decision to prioritise the acquisition of more experienced players like Fonte, Loïc Rémy, and Jérémy Pied has proven to be successful. Lille president Gérard Lopez was pleased with the business his club had completed over the summer, especially when compared with the type of business completed 12 months before, when under the management of Marcelo Bielsa, *Les Dogues* focused primarily on younger talent. Speaking on French TV programme *Téléfoot*, Lopez remarked, *"It's true that with players like José Fonte we have made some adjustments. It's making a big difference."*

Looking forward, Fonte will be seeking to improve on what has already been an excellent adjustment to life in France. If Lille can build on their impressive start and qualify for Europe, it will be a well-deserved return for both Fonte and *Les Dogues*.



BORN: 1997/12/02 | ODIENNE
CLUB: TOULOUSE
POSITION: MIDFIELD
AT CLUB SINCE: 2016
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 25

IBRAHIM SANGARE

(*)

90

Ibrahim Sangaré's football odyssey has been a winding one, but there is no question that 2018 has been the best year of the young Ivorian's career. Despite a recent lengthy spell on the sidelines due to an unfortunate slip and fall in the club dressing room, the midfielder has been an unsung hero for a Toulouse side that has little about which to be cheerful, and also earned a first call-up for his country, no small achievement given he had not even been a first team regular until the beginning of the calendar year.

Coming from a Toulouse side which has a history of producing more prosaic midfield players (think Étienne Capoue or Moussa Sissoko), Sangaré is a canny footballer in front of the defence, but there is undoubtedly more to his play than that. A rangy presence in midfield at 1.91m, Sangaré certainly does perform as his frame would have one think. His long stride allows him to break up play easily, as evidenced by his ranking second in Ligue 1 in tackles, and comfortably ahead of all others in his position. His technique could admittedly use some improvement, as could his positional awareness, but he more than makes up for that with a superb range of passing.

With Toulouse's full-backs (or wing-backs, as Alain Casanova has experimented with three at the back at various times this season), never the most attack-minded, some of this passing nous has gone begging, but it is surely no coincidence that the pacey Max Alain-Gradel's strong start to the season has much to do with his countryman's ability to find him in the flat. More than being a conduit for the counter-attack with his passing, though and surprisingly quick and agile for his size, he is able to keep up with attacking players, allowing the likes of Yannick Cahuzac or fellow youngster Kalidou Sidibé to sit deeper. As he is also strong in the air, he has earned comparisons in some quarters to Fabinho. While not as disciplined as the Brazilian, there is something to be said for Sangaré's potential in that direction.

Unlike Fabinho, however, Sangaré is also excellent with the ball at his feet, even preternaturally so. In the current campaign, he has averaged more than two successful dribbles per match, far and away the best figure in Ligue 1 among central midfielders. Again, not everything that he tries comes off, but the elements that are lacking in Sangaré's game are often those that come with time and experience. For a player so young, and relatively inexperienced, the impression that he has made already in his brief career has been impressive.

A potential transfer to a club with more focus on the attacking phase of play would surely do him some good; he could be an ideal solution for the likes of Lyon were Tanguy N'Dombélé to move on, for example, flourishing with a side better suited to making use of his ability. Putting future ambitions to one side, however, Sangaré remains firmly one to watch, controlling midfield with aplomb and evincing growth in his play even within the current season.



BORN: 1985/12/27 | BASTIA
CLUB: MARSEILLE
POSITION: DEFENDER
AT CLUB SINCE: 2017
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 28

ADIL RAMI

(*)

89

A lucky moustache, a televised martial arts bout with French World Judo Champion Teddy Riner, a bizarre episode at the French team hotel in Russia involving a fire extinguisher, and an extraordinarily high-profile and much-publicised relationship with Pamela Anderson must tell you something about Adil Rami. He certainly is not averse to the limelight or the odd off-pitch headline. Since the 32-year-old signed for €6m from Sevilla in July 2017, the Corsican-born defender's fluctuating form has somewhat mirrored his club's inconsistent results that have more often than not been as a result of a beleaguered and incoherent backline. A generally smoother second half to the 2017/18 campaign was accelerated by the club's journey to the Europa League final, which included a semi-final extra-time 3-2 victory over Red Bull Salzburg, only to be curtailed by a 3-0 defeat in the final to a rugged Atletico Madrid side – both games that Rami played every minute of.

The day following the final defeat, his disappointment was to be tempered by the news of a call-up to Didier Deschamps' 23-man France squad for Russia 2018: a tournament that will eternally remain in the hearts of *Les Bleus* for achieving their second ever World Cup trophy. Rami was not to play a role on the pitch, but his involvement behind the scenes will instead be remembered for managing to evacuate the team hotel following their last-16 success against Argentina, after letting off a fire extinguisher for fear of his team-mates causing a disturbance in his room. Rami subsequently retired from international football following France's final victory over Croatia after not playing a single minute in the tournament, only to come back out of it two months later for UEFA Nations League action.

The former Lille and AC Milan defender has been less than convincing this season, proving a liability on numerous occasions in a defensive backline that has struggled for solidity and lacked any sort of leadership - a predicament that has so frequently triggered manager Rudi Garcia into deploying experienced defensive midfielder Luiz Gustavo at centre-back, either with or in Rami's place. The precedent was set in Marseille's away encounter at Monaco in their fourth league game of the season, with two calamitous Rami errors that, thankfully for Marseille and the player, did not prove costly in terms of the eventual result.

Rami's name has become a regular feature in the French gossip columns' thanks to his ongoing on-off relationship with American celebrity Pamela Anderson, who has been spotted in attendance this season at the Stade Vélodrome. Being quizzed on the subject in a pre-match press conference before Marseille's home encounter with Caen in October, Rami did not entertain the matter: *"This does not interest me. I am here to talk about Caen. I am not here to talk about that. If you want to sell gossip magazines that is your problem."* Whilst live television show appearances and celebrity relationships may do wonders for the marketability of Adil Rami post-football-career, the distractions are undoubtedly counterintuitive to any hopes of prolonging his career at the top level, and his priority must be on the pitch to find some form and consistency to aid a defence that are frequently failing the aspirations for a club looking to qualify for the top three in Ligue 1.



BORN: 1994/07/11 | **QUILMES**
CLUB: MARSEILLE
POSITION: FORWARD
AT CLUB SINCE: 2015
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 32

LUCAS OCAMPOS

(*)

88

Lucas Ocampos has had a stellar 2018 by all accounts. Long on the periphery at Marseille in his four years at the club, it seemed that Rudi Garcia's decision to keep the energetic winger at the expense of the more precocious Rémy Cabella had finally paid off.

At the start of the year, OM were in comfortable surroundings, having qualified for the last 32 of the Europa League and sitting in fourth place in the league. Ocampos' year started somewhat sluggishly, though performances for OM never wavered. Instead, Garcia was unsure as to the player's worth in a front four which required the rotation of Dimitri Payet, Maxime Lopez, Morgan Sanson and Clinton Njie among the others. Garcia's indecision as to whether to shuttle Payet on the left wing, or at number 10 impacted Ocampos' playing time in the early stages of the 2018 – indeed the Argentine only started and finished one league game between January and March. However, he had two strong plusses going for him.

One was that Marseille never lost a league game in which he played in 2017/18, bar one. A curious indicator in his effectiveness within the side. Second, every chance he was given by Garcia, Ocampos had repaid with aplomb. That was definitely apparent in the cups. A record 9-0 win at Bourg en Bresse in the Coupe de France which brought about a hat-trick was impressive enough, but the Europa League tie against Athletic Bilbao was Ocampos' shining moment. His three goals over two legs put OM in a commanding position in a tie many thought they would lose.

Ocampos was hailed by many within the side for his determination or "grinta" - becoming a highly industrious player who embodied Marseille's new "never say die attitude" which served them incredibly well over the course of last season. Indeed, it even won over a hard to please fanbase. The former River Plate man ran up a commanding presence on the left which kept Payet at number ten and relegated Sanson to the bench. To this day, he has maintained his spot in the side. In May's Europa League final, Ocampos was rated as OM's best player, though was curiously withdrawn early by Garcia in the second half, much to the bewilderment of the fans.

A final tally of 16 goals last season, 12 of which came in 2018 underlined Ocampos' new found importance at OM, but as the side wavered in the second half of the year, so have his performance levels. Gone is the "grinta" phase – there remains the industrious and energetic nature of his play, but the end product has significantly been left wanting particularly in comparison to the Ocampos of earlier on in 2018 as OM rely on the other wing – primarily Florian Thauvin – for goals and creative ability.

Ocampos has seemingly been re-trained by Garcia to a left wing-back in recent weeks, in much the same guise that Bouna Sarr was repositioned to great success last season on the opposite flank. It remains too early to know how this move will play out, though the winger can look back with some satisfaction on a wild 2018 at Marseille.



BORN: 1990/02/13 | RIDDERKERK
CLUB: MARSEILLE
POSITION: MIDFIELD
AT CLUB SINCE: 2018
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 30

KEVIN STROOTMAN

(*)

87

Marseille's acquisition of 28-year-old Kevin Strootman was the fourth most expensive Ligue 1 transfer this summer, coming in at a reported €25m. Despite the expensive price tag however, the Dutch international's time in southern France has been mixed thus far. OM have struggled to establish real consistency across Ligue 1 and the Europa League, resulting in an ever-changing environment that has proved difficult for Strootman to get settled into. Nevertheless, many have expected more from Marseille's priciest signing since Dimitri Payet.

Under the tutelage of OM manager Rudi Garcia, Strootman is often deployed in his most comfortable position - centrally, at the heart of his team's midfield. From there, the Dutchman has provided two assists to date but has also contributed significantly in defence through his ability to break-up play and win the ball back.

September 16th's match between Guingamp and Marseille exhibited this diverse midfield package. Strootman was key to his side's third goal of the night, regaining possession just in front of his own box before driving forward and playing a well-weighted through ball into the path of Florian Thauvin, who cut inside from the right and curled a beautiful shot past Guingamp keeper Karl-Johan Johnsson. The central midfielder's defensive contributions could not be missed either, as his tireless efforts prevented Guingamp from creating any real chances from midfield. Throughout the match, Strootman completed eight tackles and 60 passes, his two highest tallies in both categories at the time of writing in a single match.

Before his arrival in Marseille, Strootman was plying his trade in another historic European city: Rome. From the summer of 2013 to the summer of 2018 the Dutchman wore the iconic red and yellow of AS Roma, making over 130 appearances over his five years with the club. Strootman's time in Rome was largely successful, with a particularly impressive tally of 11 total goal contributions coming in both the 2013/14 and 2016/17 seasons. What hindered Strootman were his now infamous knee injuries, which resulted in the midfielder missing 90 matches over the span of two years.

That being said, Strootman has been just about healthy for all of 2018. While in Rome from January to August the 28-year-old only missed four matches, the most notable being the second leg of Roma's Champions' League semi-final against Liverpool. Despite an improved health record in 2018, Strootman's overall performances dropped, producing just one goal or assist in all competitions. It is perhaps because of this that Roma were willing to sell their midfielder.

At 28, Strootman is in theory in the prime of his career. With 42 caps for the Netherlands national team and a proven track record in a number of Europe's finest competitions, Strootman has an abundance of experience. What he perhaps had not seen until this season, though, was a football club as unique as Olympique de Marseille. If the Dutchman can stay healthy then it is likely that he will be able to return to form, but this renaissance is dependent on increased consistency on the part of both his manager (tactically) and his team-mates.



BORN: 1996/05/30 | KALTAN
CLUB: AS MONACO
POSITION: MIDFIELD
AT CLUB SINCE: 2018
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 20

ALEKSANDR GOLOVIN

(*)

86

The tendency for Europe's biggest spenders to plunder Ligue 1's clubs for their brightest talents was also always going to make the arrival of highly-sought Russian playmaker Aleksander Sergeyevich Golovin to AS Monaco notable, even without his sparkling performances at the 2018 World Cup in his home country. The 22-year old's 2018 has been scattered with "wow moments", from stunning Arsenal supporters at the Emirates with a sublime free-kick in a 2018 Europa League quarter-final leg to capping off another timeless opening match of a World Cup with a staple, sumptuous dead-ball delivery against Saudi Arabia.

After his appearances during Russia's failed EURO 2016 campaign, Golovin has made the journey from a small, south Siberian town to a national hero that has generated European interest around a Russian attacker not seen since Andrei Arshavin. In years past, Russia's most exciting attacking talents would too often fall victim to their own abilities, the very quality that set them apart from so many in the Russian Premier League rendering them unable to function within the confines of a European mainland team filled with similar quality players. Golovin is different.

He is not the first Russian player with sublime dribbling ability or a knack for eye-popping goals. However, his brilliance is augmented in the presence of top players, rather than serving to diminish his utility. Some might expect a young player to struggle when an injury to the team's experienced goal-scorer forces them into a positional switch. Golovin flourished when moved behind the striker following an injury to Alan Dzagoev in the World Cup's opening half. He played a vital part in one of the signature moments of the tournament when Russia pulled a shocking quarter-final upset over dark horse favourites Spain, in a match that went the distance and saw Golovin convert a crucial penalty against the vaunted David De Gea. His central role with Russia, where experience and physicality are so highly-regarded only speaks to his level of composure and creativity so seldom seen from a Russian player on the world stage.

Golovin's silky technique and lack of fear in the face of the enormous pressure that comes with representing the World Cup host nation made him a fan favourite and hot button topic whilst so much of the international media discussion was on the eventual young player of the tournament award winner, Kylian Mbappé, Russian football fans and local outlets only had one name on their lips and it ended in "in". He turned down the rumoured advances of Barcelona, Chelsea and Juventus in hopes of emulating Mbappé's rise at the Principality-based club under the tutelage of Leonardo Jardim. Whilst he is now under the orders of Thierry Henry, his 2018-19 campaign has yet to get off the ground following a late return to club action after the World Cup and a string of minor injuries. It is clear that "Titi" is yet to determine the best role in which to deploy Monaco's €30m signing. He has played in both an attacking midfield role as well as on the right flank thus far. He will continue to get plenty of opportunities in both positions for club and country as Russia begins their EURO 2020 qualification campaign.

Lyon fans, who watched him orchestrate CSKA's come-from-behind aggregate win in their 2018 Europa League quarter-final, are painfully aware of why Golovin is not only considered one of the best young prospects in Ligue 1, but all of Europe. In 2019, we back him to show it.



BORN: 1998/05/02 | BONDY
CLUB: LILLE OSC
POSITION: MIDFIELD
AT CLUB SINCE: 2018
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 29

JONATHAN IKONÉ

(*)

85

Lille have three flying musketeers in their attacking arsenal that have lit up Ligue 1 this season as they surge into an unlikely challenge for the Champions' League places. All three have drawn praise but the one who has had the least amount of the limelight shone upon them is Jonathan Ikoné, a man with bundles of potential to become a real stalwart within Ligue 1. His 2018 started where the entirety of 2017 was spent, as a bit-part presence on loan with Montpellier. While he saw much more game-time in the second half of the campaign, he was consistently the first one substituted and managed to only create one assist for a side desperate for a creative spark.

In the summer, it became clear that he would be surplus to requirements at Paris Saint-Germain, with a growing list of promising youngsters coming through the academy, disposing the need for any loanees to return to the 1st team set-up in the board's eyes. In came the newly-ambitious Lille, who were looking to make slightly less of a transfer splash this campaign. It was an opportunity that the 20-year-old grabbed with both hands, with his pace and ingenuity seamlessly combining with those around him to create one of Ligue 1's most exciting young front lines.

What really benefits Ikoné in Christophe Galtier's team so far is his ability to play across the forward line. Whether it be out left in a front three or behind the striker in a 4-2-3-1, he can find pockets of space that either give him opportunities to be creative or pull defenders away from his more sharp-shooting team-mates. His ability to fill in the gaps when Nicolas Pépé drifts inwards or they require a focal point really just highlights his quiet importance to this team. To give those quality players the chance to express themselves, they need someone like Ikoné who is willing to do the hard yards and go unheralded.

The knock on the France U21 international remains the same as it has been throughout his young career, he does not get involved in enough goals. Some may say he gets the so-called hockey assist but with just one goal and two assists at the time of writing this season, he needs to be a greater threat in the opponent's box and add more refined creativity as he continues to receive time in the number 10 role.

Sometimes he is holding on to the ball for too long and sometimes he is shooting wastefully from distance. While *Les Dogues* are not exactly struggling in front of goal at present, if he can be more of a presence then they will have a real shot of maintaining their Champions' League push. It is important to remember at times that he is still only 20, the youngest of a trio of forwards completed by Jonathan Bamba, but if he truly wants to hit the next level, he will need to take a page from those around him. They may not stick around for long and when the mantle of carrying the team is passed to him, Ikoné has to be ready to grab it with both hands.



BORN: 1998/11/12 | PARIS
CLUB: BORDEAUX
POSITION: DEFENDER
AT CLUB SINCE: 2018
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 35

JULES KOUNDE

(*)

84

At the start of the calendar year, Bordeaux were looking like they were heading for another relegation battle. With the team a disjointed mess and senior players not performing, manager Jocelyn Gourvennec was desperate to breathe new life into a team that was trudging through their matches. It is in this context that young defender Jules Koundé was thrown into the fray for his first start in professional football, against Troyes on the 13th of January. The Parisian native would hand in a reasonably solid performance resulting in a rare clean sheet for the *Girondins*, earning him plaudits from his manager and fans alike. There was a sense that Koundé's arrival in the first team could signal a change in fortunes for the team. Nevertheless, a week later, Gourvennec has been sacked. Koundé, though, would never leave the starting eleven again.

The man who would replace the coach from Brittany was Gustavo Poyet – an appointment that would turn out to be the ideal one for the defender's development. The Uruguayan, seeking to rejuvenate the starting eleven and clear the slate, saw the young centre back as a crucial component of his new-look Bordeaux. Koundé went on to impose himself as a crucial part of the Bordeaux starting eleven, having formed a strong central defensive partnership with Pablo since the Brazilian's return to the club in January.

At the age of 20, he started every league game for the rest of the campaign and has rarely missed one in the second half of last year. He may have had a shaky start to 2018/19, with a few mistakes ultimately coming down to taking too many risks in possession, namely during a 3-1 loss to Guingamp back in September. Nevertheless, these are faults in his game which will inevitably be ironed out with experience. His game is defined by a strong aerial presence and a high interception rate. He is a defender who manages to marry a dominating physical presence with an eye for a pass. More often than not, he will come out on top in a 50-50 challenge, and then be able to kickstart an attack.

His performances have impressed many in the French football media, not least former international defender Patrick Battiston, who has lauded the young centre back's excellent reading of the game, anticipation and technical skill on the ball. He has even shown himself to have an eye for goal, netting crucial efforts in Bordeaux's Europa League qualification campaign against Latvian outfit Ventspils.

It has become increasingly evident that Koundé is already one of the leaders in the team, ready to step up and take charge of a situation. His becoming a revelation will have been one of the few positives the Marine et Blanc can look back on as a tumultuous 2018 comes to an end. As Bordeaux sit at the start of a potential new era with the investment of new American owners, Koundé will likely play a key role in defining the changed team and be a fixture in starting lineups for years to come.



BORN: 1991/12/22 | MONTPELLIER
CLUB: NIMES
POSITION: MIDFIELD
AT CLUB SINCE: 2015
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 30

TEJI SAVANIER

(*)

83

A short walk from the centre of Montpellier lies Figuerolles, a less than affluent suburb, dusty and a little frayed around the edges with plain buildings and narrow streets. It is here that the Savanier family calls home. When most footballers would have extracted themselves from Figuerolles after a rise as dramatic as Nîmes' humble yet bullish midfield creator and general, Téji Savanier comes home from training every evening to his wife, children, parents and siblings in Figuerolles. For now, at least.

"Our tradition is to stay together." Savanier told *L'Équipe* in April, *"It would make me sick to leave the neighbourhood but life is difficult there. I play for my family, and if I have to shelter everyone or get them out of there, I'll do it."* Having started his career with Nîmes' fierce Languedoc rivals Montpellier, Savanier moved up the Rhône to Arles-Avignon in 2011. Despite being just an hour's journey home, the midfielder rented a flat in Avignon, but because his mother agreed to come too. Having been a Ligue 2 regular, firstly with Arles before joining Nîmes in 2015, Savanier, now 26, enjoyed a breakthrough campaign last term as *Les Crocs* were promoted back to Ligue 1 for the first time since 1993. Although Téji boasts a thunderous shot, eight assists and five goals from central midfield in Ligue 2 remains impressive. Savanier's true influence comes via his vision and proactive passing from deep, paired with a ferocious, all-action style - a true leader, intimidated by no one.

An altercation with Kylian Mbappé as PSG visited Stade des Costières in September halted Savanier's superb start in Ligue 1. As a tumultuous encounter became stretched, with Savanier's penalty having drawn Nîmes level at 2-2, he tripped Mbappé to prevent a dangerous counter. Expecting little more than the standard yellow card, Savanier found himself harshly sent off as Mbappé reacted to shove Savanier to the turf. Bewilderingly furious at his treatment, Mbappé stated, if he could, *"he would do it again"* and amidst the furor Savanier, who pointed out his tackle would be typical of the attention the teenager will now receive, was handed a ludicrous five-game ban.

His attitude and influence are perhaps best encapsulated by his form since returning from suspension; Savanier's desire to prove himself in the top flight has been untamable. Having been the game's standout player in defeat at Lyon, he dominated midfield in a home draw with Saint-Étienne before orchestrating a 4-0 thrashing of Dijon - a delightful free-kick underlining Savanier's exacting ability from a dead ball. Upon his return, Nîmes were winless in seven games. However, with Savanier back, Bernard Blaquart's men won four of their next seven and jumped from a point above the bottom three into the top eight.

While Savanier may be reluctant to move out of Figuerolles, his game and stature have evolved dramatically in 2018. Originally something of a box-to-box marauder in a 4-4-2, Blaquart has recently deployed Savanier in the centre of a midfield three, almost as a number six, a role in which Savanier is thriving. Continue like this and the *"second best player in Europe"* this December, according to *WhoScored*, will be soon whisked away from his family home in Figuerolles. His mum better start packing.



BORN: 1993/01/19
GENERAL SAN MARTIN
CLUB: OGC NICE
POSITION: GOALKEEPER
AT CLUB SINCE: 2016
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 34

WALTER BENITEZ

(*)

82

Walter Benitez had to be patient to establish himself at OGC Nice under Lucien Favre and, again once Patrick Vieira arrived at the Mediterranean club, but it has got to be said that he is now the undisputed number one choice between the sticks for the Côte d'Azur team.

By the time January 2018 arrived, the 25-year-old Argentine had already taken over from Yoan Cardinale as Favre's preferred choice, to the point that he not only played all Ligue 1 games in the second half of the 2017/18 season, but also in the League Cup. It was an understandable decision for the Swiss manager to deploy Benitez, given the reassurance that he provides his defence with his aerial prowess and clear commanding of his box, not to mention the consistency of his shot-stopping.

However, with Favre moving on and a new high-profile manager taking up the helm, change was on the horizon. In late August, at the close of the transfer period, it was reported that new boss Patrick Vieira was sounding out the possibility of taking PSG's Kevin Trapp on loan, basically inferring that present goalkeeping options were insufficient. A new manager coming in can always be a hold-your-breath moment for any player, as there is the inevitable stamping of new authority. This could have played out badly for Benitez, especially as Cardinale, who could have very well left in the summer, was eventually given the nod in the opening 2018/19 fixtures.

Which does beg the question: seeing that Trapp was not signed, why did Vieira not continue on with Benitez at the start of the 2018/19 season? Perhaps it was because the Frenchman has always been mooted to be destined for great things and Vieira was handing Cardinale a lifeline, at the expense of Benitez?

Whatever the reason, Benitez was back to biding his time but did not have to wait long in what was a nightmare start to the 2018/19 season for Nice, the Argentine came back into the fray and ended up being the difference maker as OGC went on to get their first win of the season: an impressive scalp - and clean sheet thanks to Benitez - away to Lyon. It could not have been easy for Benitez to see Cardinale receive the nod ahead of him at the start of the season but it is a testament to his mentality that when he was turned to, he turned up. He stayed positive and took full advantage, even pulling off a spectacular double-save against Tanguy N'Dombélé and Nabil Fékir to keep the clean sheet.

Quiet away from the pitch, he has clearly let his performances do the talking. Recently, it has been recorded that in Europe's top five leagues only two goalkeepers have better shots saved percentages than Benitez: Hugo Lloris and Alphonse Areola. Argentina are not exactly gifted in the goalkeeper department and so if Walter Benitez carries on in this vein, it will not be too long before he realises his ultimate dream, to be called up by his national team; and he will surely eventually emerge as number one for the Albiceleste like he has done for OGC Nice. Benitez is an incredibly under-rated talent and the only bright spot so far in an otherwise unremarkable first half of the 2018/19 campaign from Patrick Vieira's charges.



BORN: 1995/03/09
SAINT-DOULCHARD
CLUB: ANGERS SCO
POSITION: MIDFIELD
AT CLUB SINCE: 2016
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 36

BAPTISTE SANTAMARIA

(*)

81

The key to any reliable midfield player in any top league is consistency. You can have all the talent in the world, be as skillful as you like but if you are not able to perform at the highest level you can week in, week out, then your career at the top will not last long. If your team needs you, you have to be on call and ready to help the cause and in the particular case of Baptiste Santamaria, his biggest attribute is his consistency, as he has slowly taken over from Thomas Mangani over the last 12 months to become the lynchpin in the Angers midfield.

2018 has not been as kind to Angers as they perhaps would have liked. They managed to stave off relegation last campaign by a hair and have started the 2018/19 season in patchy form, picking up just four wins and losing six at the time of writing, Santamaria has always been there for Angers to provide a reliable midfield presence, even at the young age of 23. After just six wins in the 2018 half of last season, Santamaria played every game from January up until the final fixture in May and only failed to complete the full 90 minutes on five occasions, showcasing his reliability, fitness and importance to his club. The level that Santamaria inhabited last season carried over into the current one and again, while Angers have not been as good as they might have wished, despite the rise to prominence of Flavien Tait and the permanent signing of Jeff Reine-Adélaïde from Arsenal, Santamaria has never dropped his level.

The start of this campaign was an absolute disaster for the club on the pitch, to put it bluntly. Three games, three loses, eight goals conceded. Losing 3-1 away at PSG was no disaster, granted, but the previous two at home to Nîmes on the opening day and away to Rennes were games that should definitely have been targeted as matches where points were eminently gettable. They ended their poor run with two strong wins against Lille and Dijon, with Santamaria playing an important part in this mini revival. He was a core element of the midfield keeping their balance against Lille, in a 1-0 home win, and popped up with a goal in the first-half away at Dijon to score the strike that would seal the victory, capping off a quality performance at the base of a midfield three. With Santamaria sitting deeper than Pierrick Capelle and Cheick N'Doye, he was able to dictate the tempo of the game with his passing and proved to be deceptively strong in the tackle, a constantly overlooked trait of his.

Maturity is a big element to Santamaria's game and while his side have not won twice in a row since that Lille and Dijon double header, he has never, ever let himself or his club down. While other players pride themselves on goals, saves or tackles, Santamaria prides himself on consistency and professionalism. Long may it continue.



BORN: 1995/06/28 | BRUSSELS
CLUB: LYON
POSITION: DEFENDER
AT CLUB SINCE: 2018
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 23

JASON DENAYER

(*)

80

Eight caps for the Belgian senior side – a team brimming with top-class talent – at the age of 23, is indicative of Jason Denayer's undeniable talent, but one thing the defender had always yearned for was a consistent first-team run of games at a club where he could settle for the long term. Following a €6.5m transfer from Man City in late August, Denayer has not only reaped the rewards of consistently playing as the right sided centre-back in initially a pairing, but now the preferred back three deployed by Lyon manager Bruno Génésio, but he has settled into an environment where he is expected to develop and flourish, unlike the lack of anticipation of his talent that he received at previous clubs during various unsettling loan spells from the Citizens.

Before joining the Man City academy in 2013, Denayer spent periods at various Belgian academies, finally ending up at Anderlecht. After his relocation to Manchester, he soon became a regular in their UEFA Youth League side and also played a major role in their run to the U21 Premier League Cup. Denayer's reputation was burgeoning and coaches thought him worthy enough of a professional five-year deal in the summer of 2015.

The year before, the young Belgian had enjoyed a promising loan spell at Celtic, where he formed a formidable partnership with Virgil Van Dijk, crowning the season with not only a League and Cup double, but earning the PFA Scotland Young Player of the Year award in 2014/15. Subsequent loan spells followed, with mixed success, experiencing relegation from the Premier League with Sunderland, sandwiched in between two separate campaigns with Galatasaray, where he won the Turkish Süper Lig title last season.

Denayer has wholly benefitted from breaking away from the first club that installed faith in him as a professional; enabling him to shake off the cycle of instability and continuing loop of short-termism that had clouded his four years at Manchester City. An ever-present in Génésio's first XI this season, Denayer's pace combined with a balanced sense of robustness and agility has helped engender a sense of stability in the Lyon backline. His ease on the ball and ability to keep possession when his team are under pressure was particularly evident in their recent two Champions' League encounters against Man City – the first of which *Les Gones* emerged with a 2-1 victory in Manchester.

The 23-year-old could not have picked a better game in which to notch his first Lyon goal either: grabbing the crucial solitary strike in the 62nd minute of the Derby Rhône-Alpes at home to Saint-Étienne, OL's fiercest rivals, reacting quickest to Memphis Depay's corner to power a header home past the helpless goalkeeper Stéphane Ruffier at the near-post. Denayer will recall 2018 as an important, career-defining year, and will be eager to maintain the pace of his development by playing regular football at the Parc OL.



BORN: 1992/03/01
MONTIVILLIERS
CLUB: STADE DE REIMS
POSITION: GOALKEEPER
AT CLUB SINCE: 2016
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 34

ÉDOUARD MENDY

(*)

79

Montivilliers-born Édouard Mendy's career has been a slow burn; 27 in March, he came through with Cherbourg in France's third tier, having briefly spent time on the books of Le Havre as a youngster. Despite showing promise in the National, Mendy had not made any real impact with a professional club until joining Reims from Marseille's reserves in 2016, and even then needed to bide his time behind Johann Carrasso. Given his chance ahead of the veteran last season by David Guion, Mendy has been a revelation this year, keeping the Champagne club not only afloat in the early-going of this Ligue 1 campaign, but on the fringes of the European places despite, having, as of this writing, the division's poorest attack. It is true that Reims have hardly been at the races going forward in the French top flight, with Jordan Siebatcheu's departure to Reims and reigning Ligue 2 Player of the Year, Diego Rigonato, having decamped to the UAE, but in Mendy, Guion has a player whose play far exceeds his humble reputation.

With eight clean sheets from his first fourteen matches in the top flight, Mendy has continued the good form that saw him both top Ligue 2 in that category last season and become shortlisted for the division's best goalkeeper award in 2017/18, an honour that ultimately went to Paul Bernardoni (Clermont). While Mendy has, to date, kept clean sheets in exactly half his matches for Reims, in a record that spans parts of three seasons, the reliability of the statistic as a metric by which to judge goalkeeper's performance has its flaws. Some will be quick to point out that Mendy played behind the centre back partnership of Yunis Abdelhamid and Julian Jeanvier, both of whom were named in the most recent Ligue 2 Team of the Year, and that he is perhaps the undue beneficiary of their ability.

It is true that Mendy may have been aided by playing behind that accomplished duo, but following Jeanvier's move to Brentford in the summer, he has had to adjust to Abdelhamid playing alongside a combination of Bjorn Engels and Thomas Fontaine and his strong play has continued unabated. Currently, besides topping the league in clean sheets, he also ranks near the top of the division in saves per 90 minutes, with those above him customarily facing far more shots per match than him. Beyond the statistics, though, Mendy shows all the hallmarks of an impressive goalkeeper. Despite being nearly two metres tall, he is agile and has pulled off more than his fair share of impressive saves this season, and is one of the league's best in the air as well. His distribution is somewhat lacking, but with Reims playing Pablo Chavarria as a centre forward, he is often without a suitable target.

Born to parents from Guinea-Bissau and Senegal, Mendy, who had never been capped for any of France's youth sides, recently earned his first cap for the latter African nation, keeping a clean sheet against Equatorial Guinea with previous #1 Abdoulaye Diallo sidelined. If Reims continue to battle for Europe, and he takes further advantage of Diallo's fitness issues in this summer's Africa Cup of Nations, Mendy's stock will only continue to rise, and deservedly so.



BORN: 1985/03/28 | KINSHASA
CLUB: MARSEILLE
POSITION: GOALKEEPER
AT CLUB SINCE: 2017
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 25

STEVE MANDANDA

(-3) **78**

If 2017 was the year of the return of the prodigal son, 2018 was the one where Mandanda confirmed his number one status between the Marseille sticks, which suited both the club and the player excellently: Marseille are lucky in the fact that they were able to bring a goalkeeper of Mandanda's quality back to the club, with a strong degree of probability that he will end his career there. The custodian himself can be happy to have found first team football again, playing in front of a crowd that adores him (specifically his loyalty) and in the biggest club in France no less, after a sticky spell at Crystal Palace.

The second half of the 2017/18 season began with two straight clean sheets in early January, but that did not last as Mandanda ended the season with more goals conceded (37) than games played (31). Still, he can be proud of his spring time, with a journey to the Europa League final confirming the team's strong spirit.

This robust team spirit was also present in the French camp who went on to win their second World Cup. Mandanda understood that he was destined to remain France's number two and accepted it a while ago, fulfilling his role as an experienced head in a very young squad. Hugo Lloris might not have had a perfect tournament, but he was equal to the ball in crucial moments in the big games. Mandanda got his moment in the sun during the goalless draw against Denmark, which was without a doubt the most boring game of the tournament and a contender for worst ever game at World Cup. So let us take the positives: Mandanda did not concede any goals (he had nothing to do).

Back in 1998, competition was rife between Bernard Lama and Fabien Barthez with the latter picked by Aimé Jacquet for the World Cup on home soil. Lama was bitter and that created a bit of tension in the French dressing room; Mandanda did no such thing and his cameo against Denmark did not alter the hierarchy in this position. Still, Lloris knew that he had a quality understudy which forced him never to rest on his laurels, despite being his nation's captain.

Back at Marseille, the club did not change its shape, with very few ins and outs. Just like for France, Mandanda knows exactly who is and what is expected of him at the club, but that Yohann Pelé is a very able second choice, forcing the ex-Le Havre shot-stopper to hold his game to high standards. He has not been helped this season by poor defending, but he has aided the side as much as he can. Once again, his loyalty can only be admired by the OM faithful.

At 33-years-old, his dreams of being number one for France are over and his best seasons are probably behind him, but he still has much to offer after five solid seasons. His longevity at Marseille is such that the club should think of rewarding it with a longer-term position (goalkeeping coach, in a nod to the way that Gregory Coupet has taken the helm from Joël Bats at Olympique Lyonnais?). He would certainly deserve that.



BORN: 1992/07/27 | MARSEILLE
CLUB: DIJON FCO
POSITION: MIDFIELD
AT CLUB SINCE: 2017
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 35

NAIM SLITI

(+15)

77

To say that Naïm Sliti has impressed during his time with *Les Moutardes* would be an understatement. Since swapping Lille for Dijon in the summer of 2017, the 26-year-old Tunisian international has established himself as the focal point of Dijon's underrated attack, this despite missing significant action from October to December of 2017. Alongside striker Júlio Tavares and midfielder Kwon Chang-Hoon, Sliti led his club to a surprising 11th-place finish last season, the highest end-of-season position in the club's history.

Under manager Olivier Dall'Oglio, Dijon utilise an open, attacking style of play that makes them one of Ligue 1's most entertaining teams to watch. *Les Moutardes* and their manager are enamoured with the idea of football as a "spectacle" - an approach that is meant to turn Dijon, a city that is not traditionally football-centric, into a more appreciative, enthusiastic home.

This distinct yearning to deliver entertainment usually manifests itself in one of two ways, shown most clearly through an 8-0 drubbing suffered at the hands of PSG or a miraculous 3-2 victory over OGC Nice. With the second-worst defence in the league, Dijon regularly went into matches knowing that in order to get a positive result, they would simply have to outscore their opponent rather than relying on shutting them out. As a result, their attack, and more specifically its focal point, were regularly put under copious amounts of pressure. Thankfully enough for Dijon and Dall'Oglio, Naïm Sliti often answered the call.

Creative, intelligent, technical, and adept at set-piece deliveries, Sliti combines a number of strengths into a well-rounded package. The Tunisian is comfortable across a front three, but is perhaps at his best on the left-wing where he can isolate the opponent's right-back and cut in onto his right foot. Dall'Oglio's decision to build his attack around Sliti on the left proved fruitful, as the then 25-year-old finished the season with seven goals and six assists. Sliti often leveraged his dribbling ability to get into dangerous spaces, and in fact finished fourth in Ligue 1 dribbles completed per 90, ahead of household names like Kylian Mbappé and Nabil Fekir.

After a record-breaking 2017/18 season, Dijon's incredible progress has seen a slight stagnation. At the time of writing, *Les Moutardes* sit 16th, but what is perhaps more troubling is their lack of offensive output. Much of this can be attributed to the absence of the influential Kwon Chang-hoon, who is still recovering from an Achilles tendon rupture suffered in the final match of last season. Defences have consequently been able to direct more attention to Sliti, rendering him slightly less effective. Despite this, the Tunisian has shown that he is still able to play an important role in his team's attack, with three assists provided through to the 16th game of the season.

With Kwon Chang-hoon edging ever closer to full fitness and new arrival Nayef Aguerd's valuable defensive contributions, Dijon should be able to get back on track after Christmas. However, should *Les Moutardes* find themselves in a similar position come the end of the season, it will be the consistency of Sliti's performances that will decide whether or not they stay in Ligue 1.



BORN: 1986/02/09 | BUCHAREST
CLUB: NANTES
POSITION: GOALKEEPER
AT CLUB SINCE: 2017
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 35

CIPRIAN TATARUSANU

(-16)

76

During the 2017/18 season, FC Nantes were often criticised for their lack of adventurous football and instead they were known for having a strong and sturdy defence throughout the season. Nobody deserves greater plaudits for that reality than goalkeeper Ciprian Tatarusanu. The 32 year-old was one of the first signings of Claudio Ranieri's reign at the club in July 2017, the Italian manager used his vast connections from his homeland to make the canny purchase. He joined *Les Canaris* from the Serie A club, Fiorentina. This was an undeniable upgrade for Nantes, signing the experienced and Romanian international goalkeeper to replace long-term stalwart in the #1 position, Rémy Riou, who left for Turkey.

Nantes fans quickly adopted the nicknames "Tata" and "Romanian Spiderman" to describe the shot-stopper. His maiden Ligue 1 campaign was an undisputed success, finishing last season with an impressive average of just 1.03 goals conceded per game, with 10 league clean sheets to his name.

Tata, is an unbelievably intelligent player who stays away from the spotlight and is now appreciated in France for his serenity and regularity. The 2018/19 campaign has seen the Romanian international stand out not just because of imperious consistency, but because of a newfound penalty-saving ability. This was on full display in November, with the Romanian giant saving two penalties against very experienced takers, against Nabil Fékir (Lyon) and Clément Grenier (Rennes). This is undoubtedly a great development for Nantes fans, with Tatarusanu going from strength to strength at a club that has seen a tumultuous amount of changes at managerial and personnel level over the last 18 months.

Tata, is also known as the 'yellow giant' because of his height, standing at a monstrous 1.96m. The one weakness of his game relates to defending set pieces, struggling to provide a dominant presence from corner kicks and crosses. Despite his height, he comes across as tetchy in high pressure defensive set-piece situations. The vast majority of his mistakes come primarily from his left side, where his coordination and reactions appear to be a little slower. This has reared its head most notably when Nantes have been faced by opponents' counter-attacks.

However the appointment of Miguel Cardoso in summer as the club's coach, saw Tatarusanu improve his anticipation during pre-season as Cardoso's tactics focused on introducing the idea of the goalkeeper operating as a ball-player. Tatarusanu was used to playing huddled to his line, but he has started to play higher, which has kept him increasingly alert.

Tatarusanu proved his force of character this year and is one of the cornerstones of Nantes' defence. Despite a bad start to the season for the club as a whole, which led to Cardoso's sacking, with 21 goals conceded after 16 games played, Nantes have started to look much better since the appointment of Vahid Halilhodžić. Under the Bosnian, Nantes only conceded eight goals in his first eight games.

Ciprian Tatarusanu will seek to continue his quiet effectiveness into 2019, as the layout of the Ligue 1 table at the end of the calendar year means that Nantes can aspire for European qualification under the stewardship of Coach Vahid.

100-76 RECAP

100.	Dani Alves	Paris Saint-Germain
99.	Ibrahima Sissoko	RC Strasbourg
98.	Christophe Herelle	OGC Nice
97.	Faycal Fajr	SM Caen
96.	Xeka	Lille OSC
95.	Damien Da Silva	Stade Rennais
94.	Alexander Djiku	SM Caen
93.	Léo Dubois	Olympique Lyonnais
92.	Mario Balotelli	OGC Nice
91.	José Fonte	Lille OSC
90.	Ibrahim Sangaré	Toulouse FC
89.	Adil Rami	Olympique de Marseille
88.	Lucas Ocampos	Olympique de Marseille
87.	Kevin Strootman	Olympique de Marseille
86.	Aleksandr Golovin	AS Monaco
85.	Jonathan Ikoné	Lille OSC
84.	Jules Koundé	Girondins de Bordeaux
83.	Teji Savanier	Nîmes Olympique
82.	Walter Benitez	OGC Nice
81.	Baptiste Santamaria	Angers SCO
80.	Jason Denayer	Olympique Lyonnais
79.	Édouard Mendy	Stade de Reims
78.	Steve Mandanda	Olympique de Marseille
77.	Naïm Sliti	Dijon FCO
76.	Ciprian Tatarusanu	FC Nantes



BORN: 1994/03/09 | TOULON
CLUB: MARSEILLE
POSITION: DEFENDER
AT CLUB SINCE: 2017
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 24

JORDAN AMAVI

(+2)

75

The stage was well set for Jordan Amavi to make 2018 the best year of his career. 2017 saw his move to Marseille become official, his continued rehabilitation from a serious injury be complete, and his first ever call-up to the France national team. Chuck in the termination of Patrice Evra's contract at the year's end to make him the only viable option at left-back at OM, you would be forgiven in thinking that Amavi certainly had it good.

The year began with Amavi scoring his first and only goal of the season against Valenciennes in extra time in the Coupe de France that enabled OM to progress with a slender 1-0 advantage. It, in hindsight, may prove to be his only real highlight in a year in which Marseille narrowly missed out on Champions' League football and the UEFA Europa League title.

As OM sauntered forward under Rudi Garcia, in many quarters – observers believed that Amavi had remained static, and then regressed. The former Villa left-back was accused of relaxing in his role, and given there had been no real competition for places in the squad at left-back, it was a seemingly fair accusation.

At left-back, Amavi's performances at OM had been nothing more than average. Indeed, during a four week injury spell at the start of the year, Hiroki Sakai had deputised for the 24-year-old with great panache. The idea that OM would strive to sign a left-back in the summer window was given strong thought by the board, but financial constraints meant it was never realistic.

The left-back was given a rough time in May's UEFA Europa League final in which OM capitulated to Atletico Madrid. He was also pilloried for a thoroughly abject performance in the semi-final second leg against Salzburg, where only a Rolando goal in extra time spared OM's blushes. Despite question marks, OM did not sign a replacement as Amavi continued to start in the vast majority of games, though the level of performances did not get better in 2018/19 as OM sank to 10 defeats in their first 21 games of the season in all competitions.

The 24-year-old had fallen from a position of strength 12 months ago at which time he was touted as a viable option for the France squad in a crowded left-back slot. Alongside Benjamin Mendy and the then-untested Lucas Hernandez, it seemed that Amavi was at least ahead of the likes of Lucas Digne in the pecking order. He has since been usurped by the starring Ferland Mendy at Lyon who has gone on to make his first few appearances for the world champions in 2018. Amavi remains well in the international wilderness in comparison.

In 2019, the player will have to buck up his ideas or risk being forced out by a fervent OM support whose current opinion indicates that Amavi has maxed out his credit with the club. There are rumours that the club will seek a strong left-back to at least provide competition in January, with names such as Alberto Moreno being touted. It remains to be seen whether the left-back can rise to these challenges. The answer....in 12 months.



BORN: 1986/08/18 | PARIS
CLUB: SCO ANGERS
POSITION: DEFENDER
AT CLUB SINCE: 2015
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 33

ISMAEL TRAORE

(+15)

74

Whilst season after season Angers find and ultimately sell on their star forwards, think Karl Toko Ekambi, Nicolas Pépé, Famara Diedhiou and Jonathan Kodjia, they have had to depend on reliable, consistent stalwarts at the back. Ismael Traoré is a player which epitomises those traits. Alongside Romain Thomas, Traoré forms a centre back pairing which have been punching above their weight since Angers returned to Ligue 1 in 2015.

Despite Angers flirting a little too closely with relegation last season and with Traoré looking a touch jaded in the first half of the campaign, they and Traoré finished 2017/18 strongly as they pulled away from the drop. Whilst Angers this season have struggled a little for goals, owing to a failure to adequately replace Toko Ekambi, their defence, including Traoré, were up to the task once again and in only a handful of games did they concede more than once. Angers coach Stéphane Moulin has this season experimented with playing three at the back and whilst it took a couple of games for the likes of Traoré to get used to, there are signs they are becoming accustomed to it. A recent game against Nantes a good example of this where the trio of Traoré, Thomas and Mateo Pavlovic worked well to keep the in-form Emiliano Sala quiet.

A powerful presence at the back, Traoré is able to dominate attackers on the ground but is not always able to convert that physicality into aerial dominance. Positionally though, Traoré is strong and whilst not the quickest, is able to anticipate forwards movements. He is comfortable on the ball and happy to play the ball out of defence with distribution skills to match. His experience, organisation and leadership strengths are obvious, hence the reason he holds the captain's armband at the Stade Raymond Kopa. He is relatively disciplined when it comes to tackling and for a centre back sees surprisingly few cards. A nasty challenge on Moussa Dembélé in a game against Lyon back in October, which resulted in a red card, was certainly a little out of the ordinary for Traoré.

It is his pairing with Thomas which has been the overriding source of satisfaction though. They have played the vast majority of games for Angers over the last three and a half seasons, with Traoré only missing six games last campaign and barely any this season, suspension for that red card aside. Their understanding of where each other is and what they need to do borders the telepathic at times however with both in their 30's, Traoré at 32, time will start to catch up on them soon enough.

Whilst he has struggled to establish himself as a regular in the Ivory Coast national team, he made his debut back in 2012 but has only made four appearances since then, he did find himself back in the squad for the African Cup of Nations qualifying double header against the Central African Republic, although he failed to make it off the bench.

For the time being though, Traoré is still performing strongly whilst being relied upon more and more to continue bolstering an Angers defence which seems to win them more points than their forward line is doing for them.



BORN: 1993/03/15
BARRA BONITA
CLUB: NANTES
POSITION: DEFENDER
AT CLUB SINCE: 2016
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 28

DIEGO CARLOS

(-19)

73

In 2017/18, FC Nantes made global headline news in football publications with the arrival of one of the sport's most cherished managers, Claudio Ranieri. The Italian quickly turned the French side into a compact defensive machine, installing defender Diego Carlos as one of his cornerstones in the process. *Les Canaris* boasted the third best defence in the Ligue 1, conceding just 41 goals throughout the campaign. Despite this impressive record, their attacking play was a weakness, managing to score only 36 times, averaging at less than a goal a game. If their defensive displays had been as poor as their attempts at attacking, Nantes would have been in a relegation scrap. Thanks in large part to Diego Carlos, they finished comfortably mid-table.

Born in Brazil, the defender joined Nantes in December 2016 from Estoril Praia on a five-year deal. Carlos arrived in France with an understated profile but quickly exploded onto the Ligue 1 scene, immediately earning himself a place in the team's starting XI. With a duels success rate of 61.4% last campaign, Carlos' waspish defensive intelligence shone through in what was a campaign of two halves for the club, firmly being in contention for European qualification in the 1st half of 2017/18, before dropping off dramatically in the New Year, in a development that led to Ranieri's departure in summer. Carlos possesses all the stock qualities that make a defender in Ligue 1 successful: a 1.85m frame allowing him to impose himself as a very muscly, tall and strong player with the aerial presence to match. His pace is also a great advantage in the Nantes' back four, as he is usually paired with slower defenders in Matt Miazga or Nicolas Pallois. The 25 year-old has quiet confidence about him and it is clear that he is highly accomplished in his role as the boss of Nantes' defence; the arrival of new manager Vahid Halilhodžić, a coach renowned for being partial to a squad shake-up, is evidence of this as Carlos has been confirmed in his leadership role under the Bosnian.

So far during this 2018/19 campaign, Carlos has significantly improved his ability to calmly play the ball out from the back, with his pass completing rate rising from 76.1% last season to 80%. This remains a weaker point of his game and as he recently mentioned his desire to play for the Seleção one day, he must improve his distribution if he wants to obtain the world-class stature required of a Brazilian national team defender, such as Marquinhos or Thiago Silva who are averaging well over a 90% passing success rate every season.

Carlos' name became more memorable on the French football community in 2018 following an incident with referee Tony Chapron in December 2017. The referee was knocked to the ground in an accidental collision with Carlos. Chapron responded by aiming a kick at the 24 year-old defender, whose reaction saw him receiving a red card. Social media and the world of football was shocked by the referee's outrageous decision. The referee in question has since been forced into retirement. Earlier this year, Carlos was very close to a move to Russian club Zenith St-Petersburg on the final day of the summer transfer window, but Nantes were resolute in their desire to keep the Brazilian, who has undoubtedly created a new chapter in the old South-American tradition at *Les Canaris* in his name. The club have often counted on defenders from Brazil, Argentina or Colombia, with Carlos following in the footsteps of former club heroes Mario Yepes and Hugo Bargas. If Nantes can keep Carlos clear of injury this season, then top 10 ambitions are not unrealistic.



BORN: 1993/09/06 | MALMO
CLUB: AMIENS SC
POSITION: FORWARD
AT CLUB SINCE: 2018
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 31

SAMAN GHODDOS

(*) **72**

Selling mobile phones was not the career that Saman Ghoddos had in mind. In 2013, his club, Swedish third tier outfit Trelleborgs, failed in a promotion attempt as their Iranian forward sat forlorn on the bench. *"It did not go well."* Ghoddos recounted to 11Amienois. *"At the end of my contract my parents told me: 'you have to get a job.' I became a phone seller. I was not very good, I only thought about football. I told myself 'this is not the life for me.'"*

After contacting a former coach, Ghoddos landed a trial with second division side Syrianska, a last chance as failure would mean *"stopping football and finding something else."* Ghoddos however impressed and was offered a permanent deal. Two seasons in the Superettan prompted interest from Allsvenska newcomers, Östersunds. There the young forward flourished under English coach Graham Potter, recording 42 goals in 93 games as the fledgling Northern club, founded as recently as 1996, confounded expectations to force their way into the Europa League and a now famous knockout tie with Arsenal. *"Ghoddos is a marvelous player. Technically and tactically, I was impressed."* said Arsène Wenger after Ghoddos inspired a momentous win at the Emirates, although Östersunds exited on aggregate.

Ghoddos' zenith to date came in Russia this summer. Despite being born and playing his entire career in Sweden, he rejected their advances in favour of his Iranian heritage, making Carlos Queiroz's 23-man World Cup squad. Game time was limited but Ghoddos appeared in each group game as a substitute, *"a great honour"* said the 25-year-old.

Excitement surrounding Ghoddos had been building for some time and it was clear, after Russia, that a move was inevitable. Contact came from Spain, England and a number of French clubs, with Amiens eventually beating Rennes to his signature. *"This is the perfect club for me. My ambition and that of the club's fit perfectly together, I want to win here, help the club, and the club can help me."*

Although Ghoddos understandably aspires to play for a bigger club, his desire to impress and level of professionalism have stood out in his first Ligue 1 season, quickly becoming integral to Amiens' forward line whether playing off the striker, as a lone forward or on the left flank, with his versatility and team ethic impressing manager Christophe Pélissier.

Although it took Ghoddos time to completely settle, Pélissier notably expressed *"disappointment"* following his display against Caen, the Iranian's technical ability routinely stood out. Devilish whipped deliveries from dead ball situations and crossing positions is mirrored by a rasping shot, while abilities to use the ball intelligently, rarely lose possession and pick incisive passes have become pivotal for an often counter-attacking side.

However, Ghoddos needs others to play close to him. The absence of partner Moussa Konaté of late has left him isolated, often dropping deep to try and influence the game to little affect. Nevertheless, despite considering quitting football just five years ago, Ghoddos can relax, his rise to prominence in 2018 via the Emirates, Russia and Ligue 1 means he will not have to consider another change in career anytime soon.



BORN: 1987/07/03 | CAEN
CLUB: BORDEAUX
POSITION: GOALKEEPER
AT CLUB SINCE: 2017
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 35

BENOIT COSTIL

(+16)

71

Few goalkeepers will have had a tougher start to life at their new club than Benoît Costil. The former Rennes captain, and often third choice keeper for the national team, was signed by Bordeaux in the 2017 summer transfer window as a replacement for the outgoing Cédric Carrasso. The long-time number one at the club had effectively been pushed out in favour of the younger Costil, which had left a sour taste in fans' mouths. As a result, the first few months of the Caen native's time in the South of France was marked by a difficult relationship with the fans behind his goal, even at times producing heated exchanges.

What would follow is a spell of bad form in the winter months, which ultimately led to then-manager Jocelyn Gourvennec dropping Costil in favour of the younger Jérôme Prior. It was only when Gustavo Poyet took up the manager's job at the start of the year that his fortunes began to take a turn for the better. Recognising the use of having such an experienced player in his otherwise rejuvenated Bordeaux eleven, the Uruguayan coach rushed him back into the starting spot and even handed him the captain's armband.

Costil went on to play a part in an improbable resurgence which saw Bordeaux clinch a European spot at the end of the season, as part of one of the league's best defences in the second half of the campaign. Notable performances came in the *Girondins'* 3-1 win over Lyon as well as a clean sheet against Montpellier in which kept up his impressive penalty-saving record.

He will have been disappointed to miss out on the French World Cup squad, even if he publicly accepts Deschamps' choices. To rub salt in the wound, he was called up later on for the autumn internationals which saw the team play for the first time in front of their home crowd since being crowned world champions. As the majority of the players were called on to the pitch at the end of the game to celebrate with the trophy, Costil was left to watch from the sidelines to contemplate what might have been.

Nevertheless, it is clear that he has yet to replicate the form that made him stand out so much at Rennes. The Bordeaux faithful still remain unconvinced by his inconsistent performances and lapses in concentration, such as the one that cost his team when his former club came to visit last April. However, he can also point to a host of excellent performances such as his side's win over Lille in September, in which he made six saves to keep out Christophe Galtier's resurgent team.

As the new Bordeaux management look to steady the ship after a tumultuous year, they will undoubtedly look towards the likes of Costil to help consolidate the team. Even if his performances have somewhat faltered since his Rennes days, he remains one of the key figures of the squad. With a probable squad upheaval on its way with the arrival of new owners, Bordeaux would do well to continue counting on him as a fixture of the starting eleven.



BORN: 1985/08/07
SAINT-ETIENNE
CLUB: SAINT-ETIENNE
POSITION: DEFENDER
AT CLUB SINCE: 2003
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 29

LOIC PERRIN

(-54)

70

The silver-haired lothario that has stolen *Les Verts'* hearts for years, Loïc Perrin remains a stalwart at the only club he has ever known. Despite being their best player to have never even made the pitch for the French national team in the club's illustrious 99-year history, he has been ever-present at the Stade Geoffrey-Guichard since his debut in 2003.

His 2018 started and has finished with something that has been lacking for the past few years, consistent fitness. Since two consecutive 34-appearance campaigns in 2012-13 and 2013-14, he has notched up totals of 28, 24, 27 and 28 for the four following seasons. However, since January 14th, he has missed just four games. With many pinpointing his inability to string plenty of games together as a contributing factor to his decline, it is good to see Saint-Étienne's captain avoid too many niggles this year.

He has also seen a shift in emphasis over the past few years since Christophe Galtier's departure, as the club tries to shake off the tag of being limited in attacking areas. This alteration in central focus has had an impact on what had been an incredibly strong defence as the previously consistent best in Ligue 1 has slipped into the middle of the pack in this domain. Part of that has been due to Perrin's slight decline. Like many before him, the 33-year-old has lost some of his pace as years have advanced and while not much of a speed demon in his prime, his inability to cover ground means he is caught out more often than he used to.

It must add to his own frustration that one of his leading characteristics, being aggressive as a defender, means that he needs to be extra careful to win any battle he rushes into. A titan in the air, he is so strong at beating opponents but if his header is not clean or he just mistimes something, the significance of him being out of position becomes much greater. What we have seen is Perrin be a little more conservative when closing down opponents in the final third. Showing both his defensive nous and an understanding of his own limitations, he sticks to his position and commands from a little further back than he previously would.

Despite the deficiencies, he remains a really good defender. Excellent positionally, alert to danger around him and if anything, his tackling timing has got even better, given that he is picked up just two yellow cards in 2018 and averages 0.8 fouls per game. In saying that, his numbers of 1.7 tackles per game and 1.4 interceptions per game are slight improvements from last year but almost half of what he was contributing in his pomp. Simply put, he is not the effervescent force he once was.

Father Time holds an unbeaten record and from the looks of things, Perrin will not be the first to defeat him. Despite his determination to rage against the dying of the light, the defender is clearly now in his post-prime, yet his influence as a bastion of Saint-Étienne remains unblemished.



BORN: 1994/12/24
VALOGNES
CLUB: SM CAEN
POSITION: DEFENDER
AT CLUB SINCE: 2016
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 35

FREDERIC GUILBERT

(-8)

69

At just 23 years old, Frédéric Guilbert has already made a name for himself in French football. The right-back has made over 100 Ligue 1 appearances between his time with both Caen and Bordeaux and got his first taste of European football while with the latter. Now back in Normandy since the summer of 2017, Guilbert has established himself as one of the best in his position, thanks in part to his impressive defensive contributions and incredible work-rate. Stade Malherbe Caen were in the thick of it for much of last season, dipping in and out of the bottom three before eventually securing a safe 16th-place finish. With an inconsistent attack that scored just 27 goals, the lowest record in the league, Caen and then manager Patrice Garande, relied heavily on their defence and its solidity.

At the heart of these defensive efforts was the ever-present Frédéric Guilbert. The young right-back appeared in 36 of 38 matches and amassed a total of 3240 minutes played, the highest in the team. The defensive contributions that Guilbert made are impressive not only within the context of his club, but also within the league as a whole. Across Ligue 1 the 23-year-old ranked third in interceptions completed per game (2.5) and first in tackles completed per game (3.8).

Outside of defensive basics, Guilbert has also shown an ability to get forward and contribute to his side's attack. The right-back has a good passing range which often features long balls and can regularly play a dangerous cross into the box when asked. What the young defender can and should work on, however, is his tendency to commit bookable fouls. Over the course of last season Guilbert picked up 12 yellow cards, one of the highest tallies of the league. That being said, it seems as though there is already a noticeable improvement, as at the time of writing he has picked up just four over the opening 15 matches of the 2018/19 campaign. If Guilbert continues at this rate, then he might not crack double figures for the season.

Caen's defensive stalwart has also shown improvements on his tactical adaptability since the start of this campaign. Patrice Garande rarely used the Frenchman outside of right-back last season, but new manager Fabien Mercadal has been pushing Guilbert outside of his perceived comfort zone. Since the start of 2018/19 the 23-year-old has seen significant action across the defensive line, with five matches at centre-back and one at left-back. Standing at 1.78m, Guilbert is not the tallest, but has seemed comfortable in a more central role.

Now becoming more and more of a known entity, one should not expect to see Frédéric Guilbert at Caen much longer. Both Brighton and RB Leipzig were heavily linked with the talented young defender, and if he continues to lead Ligue 1's defensive charts then such rumours will continue to swirl. Caen in the meantime will be wishing that Guilbert was as good a central defender as he is a right-back, after a largely miserable first half of the 2018/19 campaign sees them once again in contention for a relegation dogfight.



BORN: 1990/06/29 | AMIENS
CLUB: SAINT-ETIENNE
POSITION: MIDFIELD
AT CLUB SINCE: 2018
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 35

YANN M'VILA

(*)

68

It has been a long and rough ride for Yann M'Vila since Euro 2012. Rewind six years and he was being considered as one of France's most promising prospects, treasured by Stade Rennais. Yet he had barely started rising when he fell, spectacularly. In January 2013, M'Vila joined Rubin Kazan, leaving France in disgrace following a two-year ban from playing with any French national team after being caught on a night out on the eve of a crucial play-off fixture with the country's U21s. After five years under contract in Russia, sprinkled with loans to Inter Milan and more successfully Sunderland, M'Vila returned to France last January.

Saint-Étienne manager Jean-Louis Gasset was the persuasive element who convinced the native of Amiens to return to France. As Laurent Blanc's highly respected long-time assistant, Gasset had previously worked with M'Vila in the French national team. He capitalised upon this relationship, in a similar vein to how he closed a deal for Mathieu Debuchy, another French international signed in January. Gasset has made M'Vila one of his key men, after an initially ropery period of integration in his first few weeks. Since mid-February at the time of writing, he has started every match and only been substituted once. From 16th place, when he arrived, Saint-Étienne attained a 7th place finish, falling desperately short of European qualification. This season, ASSE have been in the mix for European spots since the beginning, and will hope to benefit from M'Vila's experience in 2019 to remain there in crucial moments during the run-in.

The former Rennes man's qualities as a holding midfielder have stabilised the *Les Verts* setup. True to himself, he has demonstrated a simplicity in his passing instead of producing over-exaggerated, technical displays. Without being the most natural defender, he still focuses his efforts largely to that end, and his strength and anticipation aid him in his tackling. For *Les Verts*, M'Vila typically starts on the left in a central midfield of two, alongside Norwegian Ole Selnaes. Both are technically gifted but, like to play deep and the onus has been on his Scandinavian colleague to create. Neither individual is a pure number six and the two operate similarly to the way one would expect a centre-back partnership to. Their positioning and movement is synchronised so as to always be close to one another. In attack, one will always hold back if the other pushes up – currently one of the French top flight's most sublime duos. M'Vila also benefits from a good relationship with summer signing Wahbi Khazri, as the two had played together for the Black Cats in the Premier League.

Offensively, M'Vila's contributions have statistically-speaking been limited to a single assist. He serves as a launch ramp for many Stéphanois attacks, using his vision and longer passing to go effect. He may want to improve in the aerial domain, where his height and strength should be an advantage; even though he is a main target for attacking set pieces, he has yet to score. Like many holding midfielders, M'Vila makes few headlines these days despite his quietly impressive performances. He will nonetheless be relieved by this, in comparison to his days at Rennes and the frequent off-pitch stories about him. In Le Forez, he has found a healthy environment to revive his career under the wise counsel of Gasset, and has already been rewarded with a contract extension to 2022. Stability, at last.



BORN: 1991/06/21 | SAO LUIS
CLUB: BORDEAUX
POSITION: DEFENDER
AT CLUB SINCE: 2015
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 29

PABLO

(*)

67

In 2013, Avai finished tenth in Brazil's Serie B. Few stood out in a difficult season, least of all the bench-warming Pablo. *"I did not play, I did not get along with the coach and we were paid five months late,"* the defender summarised to *L'Équipe* in November. The *"worst moment"* of his career. Now 27, Pablo is unrecognisable - a slick, intelligent defender, indispensable to Éric Bedouet's Bordeaux and a Brazil international.

Having forced his way into the Avai eleven, aiding in achieving promotion the following season, a move to fellow Serie A newcomers Ponte-Preta, who sat comfortably in mid-table by summer 2015, brought interest from France. Initially the move proved disastrous, with language a serious issue and Pablo's young children and wife - whom he credits with rejuvenating his confidence at Avai - struggled to settle, while irksome injuries equalled surgery and minimal game time.

Unable to establish himself under the incoming Jocelyn Gourvennec, Pablo returned to Brazil on loan with Corinthians. In a pivotal campaign for the Brazilian, the São Paulo club won Serie A, with their Bordeaux loanee voted as the year's best centre back. However, despite his wife being against a return to France, a permanent deal proved elusive and Pablo walked into a slow-motion train wreck at the Matmut Atlantique last January.

Injuries, indiscipline and a relegation battle resulted in Gourvennec's sacking. However, newly assured, Pablo was paired with teenager Jules Koundé under Gustavo Poyet and then Éric Bedouet, in a partnership that provided *Les Girondins* with a rare consistency in a tumultuous year. *"There is no anti-Cavani plan,"* said Bedouet before December's draw with PSG, instead choosing to rely on the *"very, very strong level"* of his Brazilian defender.

In 2018, Pablo has evolved from the slightly cumbersome and often nervous-looking defender of his first Bordeaux spell, *"not the real Pablo"* he insists, into a powerful and astute leader. This new Pablo is broad and combative, seemingly enjoying the physicality of Ligue 1. A newfound intelligence in one-on-ones, even when outpaced, and in reading play more generally often rescues his team and the less experienced Koundé. Despite being occasionally needlessly rash in the box, his underrated use of the ball and calmness in possession has also become pivotal for Bordeaux.

There is a sense that Pablo is not only leading by example but that he has become the heart of the dressing room. As he admits, although captain Benoît Costil, Younousse Sankharé and veteran Jaroslav Plasil may be more vocal, the proud, humble family man Pablo has overtly taken on some responsibility for guiding this youthful team. The joyous celebrations after his late winner against Saint-Étienne in December underline his popularity.

This autumn, particularly imperious form led to the realisation of a dream, a moment his *"children will tell their children"* about - a cap for Brazil. *"For me, there is nothing bigger,"* Pablo told *L'Équipe*. Nevertheless, a desire to play in England remains and rumours of interest from Manchester United endure. Whatever happens, the £1.8m Bordeaux paid Ponte-Preta for a promising, but raw defender in 2015 has become their most astute signing for some years. Eventually, at least.



BORN: 1991/11/19
FONTAINE-LES-DIJON
CLUB: MONTPELLIER
POSITION: MIDFIELD
AT CLUB SINCE: 2018
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 27

FLORENT MOLLET

(*)

66

Ligue 1 is known for its many young talents, but some players develop later than others. For Florent Mollet, it took several years in Ligue 2 with Dijon and then Créteil before he could make it to the top flight in a struggling Metz side. But now, at 27, the attacking midfielder is finally demonstrating his full potential in an unexpectedly good Montpellier team.

His breakthrough began in the second half of last season, when Mollet was still at Metz. The native Dijonais put together a considerable run of form, free of injury for the first time since reaching Ligue 1. In a desperately poor side, he stood out and scored seven goals, including a notable brace away to Marseille. It wasn't enough, however, to avoid defeat on that day (3-6) or ultimately relegation in the longer run. A €2.6m summer transfer to Montpellier followed, as Metz sought to asset strip in order to cut down their wage budget and prepare for life in Ligue 2. MHSC were hoping to fill the spot left empty by Ryad Boudebouz's departure to Real Betis one year earlier, seeking a player to link midfield and attack more efficiently. In hindsight, that money was well spent, as Mollet has rapidly become a key player.

He inhabits the role of a true playmaker, free to circulate wherever he pleases in order to control play or offer attacking solutions to his team-mates. At the time of writing, he has the best passing accuracy in his side with 89%. He combines technique with power and can be dangerous both with his defence-splitting passes or an array of dangerous long shots. Against Amiens in August, he found the top corner with a thunderbolt of a strike from outside the box, an effort supplemented by his four assists so far this season. His role in the starting line-up is particularly important given the understanding he is forming with the two strikers Andy Delort and Gaëtan Laborde, a duo of previously unfancied forwards by Ligue 1 standards who are forming a partnership that in terms of current output rivals Kylian Mbappé and Neymar. This attacking troika has developed a strong bond both on and off the pitch; and has ensured that les *Pailladins* will be in and around the Champions' League places when 2018 comes to a close.

As with any player under Michel der Zakarian, Mollet has also been pushed to participate more in defensive phases, specifically in relation to the high press that the likes of Laborde and Delort are crucial in instigating. He has equally progressed in delivering set-pieces and made use of his powerful right foot, having been granted that responsibility by his coach. One area in which he will seek to improve on in 2019 still is concerns his attitude. Playfully identified as a whiner by some of his team-mates in training, we caught a glimpse of this when he was sent off against Guingamp in October for sarcastically applauding the referee.

As a late bloomer, Mollet has endured a lack of recognition despite his strong performances over the calendar year. Montpellier will be much the happier for it, hardly having the means to fend off bids for their best players in recent years. Now, club and player can set their sights on European qualification, which would be an incredible and fitting achievement for the club, with long-term president and French football hero Louis Nicollin sadly passing away just over a year ago.



BORN: 1996/08/19 | BONDY
CLUB: DIJON FCO
POSITION: DEFENDER
AT CLUB SINCE: 2016
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 36

VALENTIN ROSIER

(*)

65

Having turned 22 just after the start of the current campaign, Dijon full-back Valentin Rosier is not so young as to be considered a prodigy, having not featured consistently for France's youth sides as so many players from more storied backgrounds have. Much of this is down, of course, to having come through with first Rodez and then Dijon, both clubs who have made little impact in French football in the recent past. Indeed, it was only this year that saw Rosier make his first appearance for *Les Espoirs*, France's U21 side. He has since become as much of a fixture there as he has for his club, where his ability on the ball, physicality, and dynamism have made him an integral part of Olivier Dall'Oglio's attack-minded ethos.

Born in the town of Montauban, he had his first taste of first team football with local side Rodez, then in the third-tier National. His strong performances saw him earn a move to Dijon in 2016, and he has scarcely looked back, playing on both flanks as a full-back. He is a more natural fit on the right, and featured in nearly every match there last season, continuing to be a fixture in the current campaign as well. While his performances in the 2018/19 season are slightly off in comparison to the last, there may be something to that of a lack of consistency, with the injury-enforced absence of Kwon Chang-Hoon having robbed Rosier of a regular partner on the right-flank.

Not the tallest at 1.75m, Rosier makes up for his lack of height with a powerful frame and good acceleration. Though he is right-footed, he is poor at crossing the ball, with Dijon not really playing a style of football that values that skill. He is, however, superb on the counter, with his abilities on the ball dovetailing in superb fashion with his anticipation and tackling nous. He is yet to score in Ligue 1, but with three assists this season already, he has been one of France's more influential right-backs going forward; only Zeki Çelik and Kenny Lala have more this season in the division.

Dijon have notably been more defensive-minded this season, and that is a product of the continuity that the side have developed under Dall'Oglio, as Rosier remarked to *France Football* recently, *"Defensively, we had not been good enough, and we want to rectify that this year. For some of us, we have been playing together for two or three years, so we're bound to develop a familiarity. We know each other better and that facilitates our defensive progress. This is mainly about details: positioning, concentration. We always work on it and I hope it will pay off."*

Dijon have been better, if not a steel trap this season, and Rosier's two-way play has earned him notice abroad, as well as at bigger clubs domestically. Touted as a replacement for Kévin Malcuit on his leaving Lille, Rosier has embraced what he calls a family atmosphere at Dijon, and aims to further his career there. It is a near certainty that the limited financial resources of the club will eventually see Rosier move on, but for now, his quiet development into one of the division's most promising young right-backs has been thoroughly enjoyable.



BORN: 1988/11/30
TARRAFAL DE SAO NICOLAU
CLUB: DIJON FCO
POSITION: FORWARD
AT CLUB SINCE: 2012
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 31

JULIO TAVARES

(*)

64

Much like team-mate and fellow attacker Naïm Sliti, Júlio Tavares bears a heavy burden. As the front-man for Dijon's rock and roll attack, Tavares is expected to score goals, and plenty of them. *Les Moutardes* live and die by their notorious attacking verve, so if Tavares is not scoring, it can be assumed that his club is not getting results. Thankfully enough for manager Olivier Dall'Oglio and company, the 30-year-old Cape Verdean enjoyed an excellent 2018. From January to May of last season, Tavares scored nine goals in the sixteen appearances he made across all competitions for *Les Moutardes*.

His contribution to the Dijon attack is not limited to just finding the back of the net, however, as he regularly holds up play to allow for the introduction of his team-mates into attacking moves. Much of Tavares' ability to do so comes from his height and strength. Standing at 1.88m, Tavares leverages his physicality to shield the ball from opposing defenders.

These same characteristics were on show in Dijon's 2-2 draw against Saint-Étienne on March 3rd. In the 32nd minute, Tavares was on the receiving end of a trying aerial through ball from team-mate Wesley Saïd. The pass left Tavares with much to do himself, but the deceptively quick Cape Verdean judged its path well, utilising his pace and strength to then outmuscle central defender Loïc Perrin before coolly slotting past Saint-Étienne keeper Stéphane Ruffier. The goal encapsulated the qualities that makes Tavares such a dangerous striker: intelligence, strength, and composure.

The 30-year-old's important contributions in the second half of last season impressed not only those within France, but those outside of the country as well. Aston Villa were one club reportedly interested in the Cape Verdean over the summer, but their valuation of Dijon's centre-forward did not meet that of the French top flight outfit's. Tavares represents a key cog in Dall'Oglio's open, attacking style of play, and as such is hardly a dispensable player.

Keeping hold of Tavares has proven crucial for *Les Moutardes*, especially with the absence of the injured Kwon Chang-Hoon. Without the influential South Korean, Tavares has been more involved in Dijon's build-up play, and as a result has not been able to score quite as regularly as last season. Through 15 matches at the time of writing, the 30-year-old has scored three times - evidence that the playmaking ability that Chang-Hoon possesses has been sorely missed.

With the impending return of Chang-Hoon and the upcoming winter break, Dall'Oglio and Dijon will be expected to return to their scoring ways next year. Tavares will continue to be crucial to this, as improved service will surely be followed by a better goal return for the experienced Cape Verdean.



BORN: 1993/03/05 | CHESNAY
CLUB: BORDEAUX
POSITION: DEFENDER
AT CLUB SINCE: 2016
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 26

YOUSSEOUF SABALY

(-11)

63

For years now, Youssouf Sabaly has shone as an example of reliability and consistency. Loan spell after loan spell away from his former parent club Paris Saint-Germain did little to deter the now Senegalese international, as the talented full-back regularly delivered good performances no matter the environment. Two summers ago, Sabaly finally found a permanent home in the form of Bordeaux, and unsurprisingly impressed virtually instantly in southwestern France. 2018 proved no different for the 25-year-old defender, who earned a spot in the Senegalese World Cup squad due in no little part to his steady performances for *Les Girondins*.

The calendar year started off well for Sabaly and his club, winning five of their first six Ligue 1 matches with three clean sheets to boot. Sabaly particularly impressed during Bordeaux's 1-0 victory over his former club Nantes in mid-January. Throughout the 90 minutes the Senegalese full-back showed what he is capable of at both ends of the field, delivering a perfect cross to Nicolas de Préville to open the score and keeping the Nantes attack quiet with a total of five tackles and interceptions.

Across the rest of this second-half of the 2017/18 campaign Sabaly remained in great form as the club began to rally under the stewardship of Gustavo Poyet, providing an additional four assists and playing the entirety of every league match. After a difficult start to the campaign, the full-back's ability to remain fit and deliver influential performances contributed significantly to *Les Girondins*' eventual, surprise sixth-place finish. Sabaly's season did not just end well at club level, but on the international stage too, as a glorious first six months of 2018 was capped off with a well-deserved call up to Senegal's World Cup squad.

It was in Russia where 2018 started to take a downturn for the 25-year-old, though. Senegal manager Aliou Cissé decided to position Sabaly on the left side of defence, in a role that he neither as comfortable in nor quite as adept at. The full-back did not play particularly well against both Poland and Japan, whilst against Colombia he suffered a significant knee injury that forced him off. This same injury kept Sabaly sidelined for the entirety of summer and he was not fully recovered at the start of the season, which undoubtedly contributed to the volatile atmosphere around his club which brought about the sensational sacking of Poyet. *Les Girondins* were consequently without their full-back for all of their Europa League qualifying rounds as well as the beginning of the Ligue 1 season. Now back to full fitness, Sabaly seems a player of diminished quality.

Much like at international level, Sabaly has seen more and more action as a left-back. Summer loan signing Sergi Palencia has made the right-back position his own, often forcing the Senegalese to play on the opposite flank. This, coupled with Sabaly's slow return to fitness, are the likely causes of this dip in form. Youssouf Sabaly has understandably struggled to follow a notable summer in which he played in the World Cup, suffered a significant knee injury, and nearly completed a big money move to Napoli, before the Italian club pulled out citing medical concerns. However, if the full-back can return to form soon, both he and *Les Girondins* will profit greatly. There is a great player in there.



BORN: 1992/03/15 | SAO LUIS
CLUB: LILLE OSC
POSITION: MIDFIELD
AT CLUB SINCE: 2017
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 35

THIAGO MENDES

(*)

62

Arriving at Lille in 2017, Thiago Mendes was part of a wave of more or less successful signings allegedly requested by Marcelo Bielsa, who himself had a torrid time at the club. On the whole, the Brazilian was one of the window's more promising arrivals, and despite *Les Dogues'* terribly complicated season, he still stood out technically. Used in a variety of positions in the 2017/18 campaign, he was a victim of the team's struggles to avoid relegation and Christophe Galtier's desperate tinkering, as the former Saint-Étienne boss placed him in a number of different roles in midfield or on the wings. Mendes seemed to relish strong opposition, with some of his better performances coming against Lyon or Monaco, in a hypothesis that is somewhat undercut by a red card he received in Bordeaux. He finished the season with four goals and four assists, a respectable total for a complete foreigner to European football in his maiden season, as a midfielder in an underperforming club.

Over the summer, it seemed quite possible that Mendes was going to leave LOSC, as the club was in financial difficulty and had one too many non-European players (the limit is at four) on their books. A number of Premier League clubs were interested, but a good relationship with Galtier emerged as the reasoning behind his stay, and despite a flurry of late bids from Wolfsburg, allowed for the 26-year old to settle in the team and stay in Ligue 1. The large group of lusophones in the Northerners' squad was also an advantage for Mendes, minimising the likelihood of his feeling homesick. This season, the Brazilian usually starts alongside the Portuguese Xeka. Neither is a true holding midfielder, but together they secure that area, behind the fulgurant Bamba-Ikoné-Pépé (BIP-BIP) trio. Whereas Xeka has more of a combative personality, Mendes is a pure passer, alternating between offering simple solutions as a bridge between defence and the midfield and ambitious vertical passes to launch Lille's dangerous counter-attacks. Such is his flair that he goes so far as to indulge in outside of the foot passes, generally not popular with French coaches.

The ex-São Paulo man has become a major cog in the now excellent functionality of Lille's 4-2-3-1 system, as illustrated by the fact that they have lost all three games in which he has not played. The stabilisation of the team's style has permitted him in turn to show greater consistency. However, as Lille's newfound style becomes more predictable for opponents, with the BIP-BIP members singled out, it will fall to the likes of Mendes to deliver more offensively and use his creativity to shoulder the strike force. As an illustration, against Montpellier in December, Mendes completely controlled the midfield and created the chances that could have allowed for his side's eventual victory to have amounted to bigger than 1-0. But MHSC were uncharacteristically disorganised at the back, and just a few days later against a much more solid Reims, the story was different. Transition play to the forwards was thwarted, and Mendes found himself going in circles, his deep starting position rendering him ineffective.

With rumours of a big offer from China, we are reminded that the Brazilian remains one of the most bankable assets for his club. But over the past two seasons, we have seen that his presence is generally a critical factor in determining his team's performance. Gérard Lopez and the club's management would be inspired to hold onto him this January if they are ready to gamble on a high league finish.



BORN: 1993/04/03 | MBOUR
CLUB: AMIENS SC
POSITION: FORWARD
AT CLUB SINCE: 2017
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 28

MOUSSA KONATÉ

(*)

61

Life as a footballer has been tumultuous for Moussa Konaté, his career hampered by unagreeable coaches, selfish agents and even his own fierce desire to progress. However, in 2018, Konaté has proven that his future remains bright. *"Now I make my own decisions,"* says Konaté, *"I took my life back."*

Hailing from Mbour, Senegal, Konaté arrived in Europe as a teenager, eventually signing for Israeli side Maccabi Tel Aviv after various trials, a move which he admits was "risky". Some impressive Europa League displays were enough to salvage an injury-affected campaign and instigate a move to Russian club Kuban Krasnodar, albeit against Konaté's wishes.

"I did not want to sign," explained the forward in *L'Équipe*, *"My agent and Maccabi forced me to go. They would not let me go elsewhere and if I stayed in Tel Aviv they would not play me. Many people thought that money brought me there, but I didn't have a choice."* Irked by Konaté's salary, his new Krasnodar coach was unimpressed. *"He said that with the money they paid me, he could buy four players in his country,"* Konaté explained. Despite standing out at the 2012 London Olympics for Senegal, a 2013 loan move to Genoa also failed to come off, scoring just once in 25 Serie A outings.

It was not just goals that were proving an issue. *"I've also been repeatedly scammed by agents,"* Konaté explained, *"some took my money without my knowledge, they picked up my signing bonuses, did odd things. They knew I didn't understand anything about how high-level football functioned."* Frustrated, Konaté took control of his affairs and moved to Sion where he finally blossomed. A half century of goals across 115 games in all competitions during four years in Switzerland, winning the Swiss cup, generated widespread interest from England, France and Russia - Amiens eventually winning out.

In parallel to other newcomers at the Stade de la Licorne, Konaté stated his desire to progress together with his new club, *"The team can give me a lot, and I can bring a lot too."* he told *Courrier Picard*. He scored thirteen league goals last season, equaling Kylian Mbappé and including a brace in a 2-2 draw with PSG, as Amiens finished a comfortable 13th in their inaugural Ligue 1 season, proved Konaté completely right.

Despite an improved goal tally of late, the 25-year-old forward still scores in patches. However, his physicality and ability to hold up the ball while providing a focal point for his side's attacks, bringing others into the game, has been critical for Amiens, whether Konaté nets himself or not. This has become ever clearer this winter as a groin issue sidelined Konaté for two months and Amiens' attack has suffered horribly in his absence as Pélissier's charges have slipped towards the bottom two.

Minor attitude issues can occasionally prove prohibitive, having reportedly been dropped to the bench for arriving late to a team meeting last season. Nevertheless, as Konaté's Ligue 1 form shows, if he continues to make the right decisions, his destiny remains in his own hands.



BORN: 1977/09/13 | BRASILIA
CLUB: MONTPELLIER
POSITION: DEFENDER
AT CLUB SINCE: 2011
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 29

HILTON

(+6)

60

It is 1999, Bill Clinton is President of the United States, the Internet is still some vague concept that only academics know about, nobody has any idea what a smartphone is, even less an iPhone and... Vitorino Hilton is playing his first of many seasons of professional football in the Brazilian Championship with Chapecoense. But it was not in Brazil that Hilton would make his mark, but in France. After being put through his passes at SC Bastia and RC Lens, he has been the pillar of Montpellier's defence for the past seven years. Now considered as one of the icons of 21st century French football, Hilton is still playing at an incredible level considering that he has recently celebrated his 41st birthday. This makes him the oldest player in the league ahead of Gianluigi Buffon and also makes him older than current Rennes coach Julien Stéphan!

Amazingly, through his captaincy and ever sharper defensive abilities, Hilton still constitutes a vital element of a Montpellier side that boasts one of the most impressive defensive records in the French elite and Europe's top five leagues as 2018 comes to a close. Yet again, Montpellier boast the second-best defence of the French league this season despite being one of the clubs with a more modest budget and having lost Nordi Mukiele, the promising French central defender, to RB Leipzig this summer. Given his regularity and perpetual reliability, the club from the Hérault renewed their confidence in the Brazilian by extending his contract for a year this April. In the centre of Montpellier's traditional back five, Hilton's does not have to rely too much on speed as he has Pedro Mendes and Daniel Congré to his left and right sides for that and he can instead dominate his opponents with his sense of anticipation and aerial agility.

Hilton recently gave his opinion on his longevity, which he seems to attribute to his mentality: *"When football players start to approach the age of 34,35... they start thinking about slowing down, putting the brakes on to finish their career nicely. In the end, after all that brainwashing the player convinces himself that he has to stop!"* Hilton's mentality has also elicited praise from his team-mate Damien Le Tallec *"How the hell is he still here at 41 years of age? Where does he find the strength? I don't know how he does it. In Ligue 1, there is nobody like him. Even in the world there aren't many"*. His age and experience make him an essential link between the players and their coach Michel Der Zakarian and his role as a mentor for the younger players of the squad such as the exciting Nicolas Cozza is invaluable.

Given his recent form and Montpellier's current position in the league (they are third which would potentially qualify them for the Champions' League next season if they keep this rhythm up in 2019) if both he and Montpellier keep steering in the right direction, there is little doubt that both club and player would want nothing more than to continue their love story next season.



BORN: 1993/02/02
LONGJUMEAU
CLUB: ANGERS SCO
POSITION: MIDFIELD
AT CLUB SINCE: 2016
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 33

FLAVIEN TAIT

(*)

59

"Miracles happen," joked Flavién Tait after a rare headed goal set Angers on their way to beating Guingamp in March. Heading, the technically gifted midfielder admitted afterwards, *"is not my best attribute"*. Aerial abilities aside, Tait has made a habit overcoming the odds. A serious knee injury at then 3rd division side Châteauroux might have ended his career, but now the dedicated Tait is irreplaceable for Stéphane Moulin's Angers and perhaps deserves the title as Ligue 1's most underrated player.

"It could have been worse" explained Tait to Ouest-France, *"The surgeon fixed what was broken and re-solidified cartilage,"* - club doctors at the time were "pessimistic" on his recovery. Having trodden the typical path of many a young player in France, graduating from an academy before bouncing round the lower divisions, searching for a professional deal, the now 25-year-old Tait had finally found at home with Châteauroux.

A disastrous knee injury which halted a string of standout displays meant, as Angers coach Stéphane Moulin states, Tait ended up in the lower leagues "by accident". Angers however, remained admirers and, following an impressive recovery and return to the Châteauroux team, were quick to sign the stocky midfielder in 2015. Tait's time in Ligue 1 started slowly, rarely making the team. *"Initially, he did not accept the change, the physical challenge and had a hard time doing defensive work,"* explains Moulin. *"So there was a lot of work to be done but he always tried to find out what he had to do to reach the level he wanted."*

Although Tait concedes he was initially "grumpy", he seized every opportunity afforded to him. *"Flavién is a smart person who has worked hard to get where he is today. He put in a lot of effort, raised his level and his intensity,"* although Moulin explains he was *"sometimes severe with him but it was always for a good cause. There are players who, when you are tough with them, give up. He never gave up. He hung on, and today he is harvesting the rewards. All the credit goes to him."*

A stunning 2018 is the culmination of the hard-work Moulin spoke of. Having cemented a place in the side last winter, Tait assumed responsibility as Angers' creative hub. Whether playing from the left or centrally, his deft use of the ball, eye for a pass and tenacity drives Moulin's typically organised and bullish outfit forward, with Tait dictating the play and tempo. The Ile-de-France native not only leads, but perfectly represents his team - powerful and intelligent, brave in possession, the product of desire, commitment and a touch of class.

Despite being one Ligue 1 leading assist providers, Tait's game does lack goals; averaging just one every ten games. This, however, is simply the next barrier for the Angers forward to overcome. Nothing about his form has surprised his Angers colleagues, least of all winger Pierrick Capelle who referred to Tait as "petit Ribéry" and joked that he could have made Didier Deschamps' World Cup squad. For the player that sat in the Châteauroux treatment room just four years ago, his entire career in doubt, any suggestion of a call up must have seemed impossible. But, as Tait pointed out, miracles do happen.



BORN: 1997/03/12
CHATENAY-MALABRY
CLUB: OGC NICE
POSITION: FORWARD
AT CLUB SINCE: 2017
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 29

ALLAN SAINT-MAXIMIN (+12) 58

Ligue 1 has in recent years, and continues to be, filled with a raft of prestigious young talents. Many viewers of Ligue 1 and the French national side will, quite understandably, have been captivated by the likes of Kylian Mbappé and Ousmane Dembélé, who both burst into first team football in 2017 with fearless aplomb to earn eye-watering transfer deals to PSG and Barcelona immediately following their maiden seasons, receiving the predictable “future of French football” tags in the process. At the Allianz Riviera, Allan Saint-Maximin, 20, is a player who earlier in his youth career had been predicted by some to have a similar impact on European football, but grew as a young player to encounter more hurdles and experienced a far more fluctuating development during his breakout seasons.

After making his Ligue 1 debut for Saint-Étienne at just 16, fruitless loans at Hannover 96 and SC Bastia followed, where in the latter spell Saint-Maximin was part of the Corsican side that were ultimately relegated from Ligue 1 in 2017. After playing for four different clubs in the same number of seasons, it was clear the youngster was not developing at the speed his talent deserved and was in need of a coach who he could spend time with, to work on the flaws and over-exuberance in his game that were clearly a symptom of his raw ability that evidently required refinement. A move to OGC Nice was welcome, and in Lucien Favre, Saint-Maximin was suddenly under the stewardship of a manager who could identify his shortcomings, and who could enable him to become a more rounded and valued team player for Nice.

Favre would depart in the summer of 2018 for Borussia Dortmund, following an 8th place finish for Nice, in a campaign that saw the Côte d’Azur side recovering ground for the most part after an abysmal start. Despite an underwhelming scoring return for Saint-Maximin - four goals in 36 games in all competitions – clear improvements to his all-round play were evident and with seven assists to his name, his raw talent was slowly being met with a more levelled attitude and footballing brain, to compliment his pace and strength that was becoming a huge asset to their counter-attacking play. Under new manager Patrick Vieira, both club and player have continued their development and evolution, albeit after a comparably poor start to 2018/19.

His strike in their 1-0 victory at the Parc OL in August – the win that kick-started their season following three winless games – embodied the athleticism and quality that the young talent can turn on so sporadically: receiving the ball from a short corner, Saint-Maximin showed the industry and close control to beat two defenders and work himself into an unlikely shooting space on the corner of Lyon’s penalty box. He unleashed a rocket from his right foot that, despite a minor deflection off defender Marcelo, was unerring and gave Lyon goalkeeper Anthony Lopes no hope of keeping out. A regular starter in attack – usually either on the right of a front three or in partnership with either Mario Balotelli or Myziane Maolida – and despite three goals at the time of writing in the current campaign confirming that his final-product remains in need of sharpening, Saint-Maximin’s overall contribution and presence in the side has been invaluable. 2019 must be about becoming consistently unplayable.



BORN: 1994/07/07
TRONDHEIM
CLUB: SAINT-ETIENNE
POSITION: MIDFIELDER
AT CLUB SINCE: 2016
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 33

OLE SELNAES

(*)

57

Since arriving at Saint-Étienne in January 2016, the talents of Norwegian midfielder Ole Selnaes have slipped a little under the radar. This season, however, has been different and with the 24-year-old's passing and vision turning heads under Jean-Louis Gasset, the reserved and polite Selnaes may not be around for long. Despite arriving with much promise as the stand out player in the 2015 Norwegian Tippeligaen and an obvious technical ability, Selnaes struggled to settle in France. Although being a regular starter, coming to terms with the physicality of French football and the draining schedule of Ligue 1 games whilst travelling for Europa League fixtures proved problematic. It seemed for some time that Selnaes simply might not be the right fit.

His situation came to a head at the start of last season. Left out regularly by Óscar Garcia and criticised by fans, the arrival of Jean-Louis Gasset as coach changed the course of Selnaes' career. Beforehand, Selnaes was used as the 'sentinel', the sole holding midfielder, a position from which, despite his potential, a lack of mobility and strength could be exposed. However, when paired with the security provided by the January arrival of Yann M'Vila, Selnaes was afforded far greater freedom to dictate play, pass and instigate from deep, while even joining attacks. Meanwhile, both Gasset and national team boss Lars Lagerbäck pointed to ever-improving defensive abilities.

"I would not go so far as to say that we can play together with your eyes closed, but I feel confident with [M'Vila]," says Selnaes. *"It's much easier for me to play with a player as smart as Yann, we do not necessarily need to talk a lot to understand each other on the pitch."* This slight adjustment has proven pivotal; four assists in his first 15 league games this season has already surpassed his tally across the previous three seasons in France. A prominent Les Verts fan site went as far to refer to the burgeoning partnership "indispensable". *"I feel fulfilled, confident, very comfortable and freer in this system, it suits my qualities,"* judged Selnaes.

Despite having had no hesitation in moving to Les Verts, impressed by a Europa League visit with Rosenborg, the realisation of Selnaes' potential came via a difficult start to life in France. He suffered through a harsh 11-month international ban after berating a referee during Norway's loss to Azerbaijan in 2016 and, despite being the self-proclaimed best FIFA player at La Forez and introducing a now favourite fan chant, "Saint-Étienne sha-lalala", not speaking French initially, single Selnaes cited the friendship with fellow Norwegian signing Alexander Sørderlund in helping him settle. *"I needed a team-mate like him when I arrived because I had never played any place other than Norway,"* admitted a now *"fulfilled, at ease and very happy"* Selnaes.

Although 2018 has seen dramatic progress, Gasset still demands further improvements. *"He has to provide more assists, to be the engine of the team and, above all, he has to score more goals."* Nevertheless, Fulham, amongst others, have made repeated attempts to sign Selnaes, a Manchester United fan, with the London side's latest bid rejected this summer. Should the Norwegian continue to improve and mature, a bigger club will undoubtedly come calling before long.



BORN: 1996/01/28
JOHANNESBURG
CLUB: STRASBOURG
POSITION: FORWARD
AT CLUB SINCE: 2018
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 33

LEBO MOTHIBA

(*)

56

Lille's start to 2018/19, which has seen them soar to second under Christophe Galtier, offers a stark contrast to last season's miserable campaign, in which financial issues and squad mismanagement saw the club stave off relegation by only the skin of their teeth. By the time the January transfer window had come round, Les Dogues had been desperate for new blood, as Galtier tried to string together a team out of what Bielsa had left behind. Barred from signing any new players due to financial issues, the club recalled South Africa striker Lebo Mothiba from his loan at Valenciennes in exchange for €1m in compensation.

At the time, the move was seen more as a means of making up the numbers, and Mothiba was hardly expected to make a significant impact in Lille's relegation battle. Nevertheless, the striker was quick to make his mark by scoring on his debut and chipping in with another four goals before the end of the season, a vital contribution and one without which the club would have surely sunk to Ligue 2, perhaps even lower given the issues off the pitch. The highlight of the forward's year will have undoubtedly come in the late-season clash with Dijon, in which his double rescued a vital three points which all but secured Lille's top flight status.

Nevertheless, the summer window saw Lille continue to be plagued by financial issues. When faced with the obligation of having to sacrifice one of their forwards to appease the DNCG, French football's financial watchdog, it was the Johannesburg native who the club decided to move on in favour of the arriving Loïc Rémy and a relatively unknown quantity in Rafael Leão.

Now at Strasbourg, Mothiba has continued to impress into the new season. A deceptively agile forward with a knack for finding space in the box, the *Bafana Bafana* striker has proven clinical, already notching eight goals this campaign at the time of writing. The 22-year-old's consistently high conversion rate has been key in the Alsations' strong start, and his persistent attitude in finding the goal has made him an instant favourite at the Stade de la Meinau.

A centre back at the start of his club career in South Africa, Mothiba has endeared himself to fans and coaches alike for his work rate and willingness to drop into midfield to build up attacks and track back to defend. His former coach, Galtier, underlined the fact that his player has "*a great respect for the shirt he wears*", a viewpoint shared by his Strasbourg counterpart Thierry Laurey this season – "*To be professional as he is, at this stage, is extraordinary. I haven't seen many players like him*".

With the South African being one of the main reasons for the club's strong start to the season, the Alsatian outfit will be well aware that interest in their striker will only increase as the season goes on. It would come as no surprise to see Lille exercise their buy back option in the near future, for example.



BORN: 1990/04/12 | KASHIWA
CLUB: MARSEILLE
POSITION: DEFENDER
AT CLUB SINCE: 2016
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 27

HIROKI SAKAI

(*)

55

It has been a busy year for Hiroki Sakai - and the Marseille man keeps going from strength to strength. If his start on the south coast was a rocky one, by time he was halfway through the 2017/18 season he was winning over coaches and - more importantly - the notoriously uncompromising and demanding Olympique de Marseille fanbase. For Sakai - affectionately known as Le Samurai - it ended up being a straight-forward acclimatisation to the world of French football as his qualities were always there to be seen: self-sacrifice, desire and commitment to the cause for L'OM shirt, so much so that it's synonymous to hear his name with: "Il fait son taf" or "he puts a shift in". That pretty much sums up Le Samurai. With Sakai becoming such a reliable character and with an exceptional willingness to constantly benefit the team, his versatility has been exploited by Rudi Garcia and so, although he is a nominal right-back, he has deployed him as a left-back, even as a central defender in a 3-4-3, which has continued into the present campaign.

Only ever away from the starting XI through injury, he helped his team finish to a respectable 4th in Ligue 1 earlier this year, but the most memorable point of Sakai's 2017/18 season was scoring his team's 5th goal against RB Leipzig at the Stade Vélodrome in the quarter-final of the Europa League. The way he was mobbed by his teammates after scoring that goal highlights how highly thought of the Japanese international is by his peers. He could not dwell too long on the disappointment of losing to Atletico Madrid in the European competition's final because in June, Sakai joined up with Japan in the World Cup finals in Russia. Having already played 50 games in a long season for his club, his continuing unflinching attitude to work hard for his team paid off.

One of Japan's more experienced and star players, he helped his team come out of what was a tough group only to be agonisingly beaten by Belgium in extremis in the knockout round. Nonetheless, his irreproachable mind-set and work ethic has endured this season and his team-mates continue to be dazzled by his professionalism and discipline. This is even in spite of Bouna Sarr breathing down his neck, sometimes taking away his playing time, because in Sakai's world it is the team that comes first, such is his altruism.

In 2018/19, his versatility has continued to be on show: right-of-the three against Dijon, left-of-the three against Amiens and in a right-wing back position against Lazio. However, Rudi Garcia realises that, due to his indispensable work-rate, and, owing to a few recent successes, he could continue to be stationed as a part of a three. This makes sense knowing that the strength of his defensive game lies in his aerial duels (surprisingly, given his height) and the ability to not only recover the ball but retain possession calmly thereafter.

On the downside, his two assists this season against Strasbourg and Monaco have come about from the full-back position, so this offensive aspect would be missed if Garcia converts the Japanese footballer into a right-sided central defender. There is nothing but an advantage going forward for Garcia to have such a versatile, humble and dogged defender on the books.



BORN: 1988/03/01
COMPIEGNE
CLUB: EA GUINGAMP
POSITION: FORWARD
AT CLUB SINCE: 2018
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 26

NOLAN ROUX

(*)

54

You could forgive Nolan Roux for beginning to think that he is jinxed. Touted in his youth as a possible future France international, a series of misguided moves, seemingly joining the right team at the wrong time, allied to a failure to progress, saw his career stall somewhat. When he looks back on 2018, he may come to see the year as a perfect summary of his career: great early promise ending in frustration and disappointment.

When Roux joined Metz in the summer of 2017, it would probably be fair to say that Les Grenats fans were non-plussed. Roux had failed to reach double figures in the league scoring charts since 2009/10 – and that had been in Ligue 2. The fans knew that they needed a good supply of goals to have a chance of remaining in Ligue 1 and they were not convinced that Roux would be the man to provide them.

As it turned out, Metz went on to have a horrific season, dropping to the bottom of the table in week five and remaining there till the bitter end. However, the only surprise was that it took until week 36 for the relegation to be confirmed. That it took that long was in great part thanks to Nolan Roux and his goal-scoring exploits. Roux finished the season with 15 Ligue 1 goals – none of which were penalties. That tally put him in the top 12 Ligue 1 goal-scorers, only advanced by players playing for the top four, along with Nice's Mario Balotelli and Alassane Pléa and Angers' Karl Toko-Ekambi. An impressive return for a striker representing the league's worst team – and even more so considering that Roux started matches on the left or right side of a front three as often as he did down the centre.

Roux's 2018 goal-scoring stats for Metz were particularly impressive. Ten of his 15 goals were scored in the second half of the season as it appeared at times that he and Matthieu Dossevi were on a two-man mission to save Metz (Dossevi provided Roux with seven assists – only the Neymar-Cavani combination was more potent across Europe). Although his efforts ultimately proved in vain, Roux deservedly received plaudits and interest from other clubs and ultimately chose to move to Guingamp in a £3.15m deal. Although now 30, with international hopes well behind him, remaining in Ligue 1 offered Roux a chance to continue where he left off and work on a prolific end to his career. The situation should have been familiar to him as, like with Metz a year before, he came in to replace outgoing goal-scorers in Jimmy Briand and Yannis Salibur.

Sadly, also as with Metz, Guingamp's season has thus far been disastrous and they too sit bottom of Ligue 1, with only one win to date. And more frustratingly for Roux, he has been unable to contribute. His one goal came in week two, opening the scoring against PSG before EAG fell to a 3-1 defeat. But the next handful of matches failed to yield more goals and he has not played since late September, due to quadriceps injury issues. As he sits on the sidelines, Roux will have to hope that 2019 brings the luck of the first half, rather than the second, of 2018. Perhaps fittingly, a calendar year that began with such hope has left us all thinking of what might have been.



BORN: 1991/01/07 | ANNONAY
CLUB: STADE RENNAIS
POSITION: MIDFIELD
AT CLUB SINCE: 2018
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 33

CLEMENT GRENIER

(*)

53

It feels a little strange to talk about a player's renaissance when they are still only 27 years old but that's exactly what the last 12 months have felt like for Clément Grenier. Injuries may have prevented him from ever reaching his potential during his time with Lyon but having made a recovery, he found himself frozen out by coach Bruno Génésio. A loan spell with Roma never really worked out for Grenier and so in January 2018, he and Lyon took the decision to part ways permanently.

Despite a lack of playing time and question marks over his injury record, it was still something of a surprise to see him join Guingamp. The Breton side and coach Antoine Kombouaré elected to take a calculated risk on Grenier knowing that if he could rediscover his form, he could prove key to easing any fears surrounding relegation by adding some much-needed creativity in an otherwise fairly stagnant Guingamp midfield. It proved something of a masterstroke, as Grenier stepped up to task with relative ease. Five goals and four assists in his 15 games with the club proved a stark reminder to many that injuries aside, Grenier was still a talented player. None of his qualities from set-pieces had been lost, with goals from superbly taken free-kicks against Toulouse and Bordeaux - a real roll back to his early years with Lyon.

For Guingamp though, this form proved something of a quandary. His goals and talent helped secure them another season in the top flight for the perennial underdogs, but it also acted as a reminder to other teams of his abilities and with a gentlemen's agreement in place that he could leave if a club offered €4m, it became clear quite quickly that his time at Guingamp could be brief. That proved to be the case as Rennes, who had secured Europa League football, came in with an offer which triggered the clause - and as such Grenier made the move across Brittany.

Under then Rennes coach Sabri Lamouchi, Grenier again found himself playing regularly and crucially without suffering injury. He opened the scoring on his debut with a well taken goal against Lille. An ever-present for Rennes, Grenier found his role to be ever so slightly different than at Guingamp. There he was seen as the go-to player for creativity and inspiration and as a linkup between midfield and attack. At Rennes, he has at times played a little deeper, in a midfield which contains a number of creative players. In this role though, Grenier has developed more of a defensive style and whilst he can still be a little clumsy in the tackle, he has impressed. He has also contributed with a couple of goals in the Europa League group stages for Rennes, the second, a winner away at Jablonec, giving Rennes the lifeline they needed to ultimately ensure qualification from the group.

It has been a welcome return to football and form for Grenier and with Rennes looking more positive under new coach Julien Stêphan, we may still get to see Grenier reach something close to his ever-mooted potential.



BORN: 1987/05/21
SAO VICENTE
CLUB: LYON
POSITION: DEFENDER
AT CLUB SINCE: 2017
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 33

MARCELO

(+24)

52

Marcelo Antonio Guedes Filho, not to be confused with Marcelo Vieira da Silva Junior. The Olympique Lyonnais central defender may share one name with his compatriot from Real Madrid, but the 31-year-old's journey to European acclaim has been decidedly different from the iconic left-back. Unlike the *Los Blancos* legend, this Marcelo's now decade-long European career has seen successful, albeit unglamorous stints in leagues across the continent.

After his contract expired with his home club of Santos, he quickly integrated himself into the set-up at defending Polish champions Wisla Krakow, earning Ekstraklasa Defender of the Year nominee honours in his first season at the club. It was his move to PSV Eindhoven in 2010 that really began to make him a target of Europe's top leagues. In an Eredivisie renowned for its free-flowing attack and trend cultivating exciting offensive talents, Marcelo's composure, aerial dominance and discipline to not heedlessly dive into tackles made him a regular in domestic and European competition.

The Sao Vincente-native helped PSV to its first KNVB Cup since 2005 but quickly transferred to pastures anew in Germany, with 'Hannover 96 coach Mirko Slomka explaining his decision to move for the Brazilian as owing to his "*consistent tackling, physical presence and good play from the back*" in 2013. Despite the acclaim, he received a red card in the second half of a loss to Hoffenheim that autumn. Not including a second yellow earned vs Angers in 2017 for inadvertently smacking the physical card from the referee's hand, it is the only time he has ever been sent off in his entire European career.

This stunning statistic for a 10-season European veteran in the heart of defence serves as a microcosm for the Brazilian's success. Despite his sizeable frame and affinity for aerial duels, he has averaged just over one foul per match throughout his entire career. His move to Lyon in 2017 following a successful two years with Besiktas brought a much-needed veteran presence in a team inundated with young academy products. The Angers red card aside, he maintained his disciplined, tactical approach throughout the 2017/18 Ligue 1 campaign.

He managed to average 0.9 fouls per game in league action while contributing an average of 6.5 clearances per game to help *Les Gones* secure Champions' League football at the death of the previous campaign. Jason Denayer's arrival at Lyon this summer has allowed for the creation of a formidable central defensive pairing, slotting in inside the Brazilian. The pair's combined awareness and bullishly deployed intelligence proved paramount in one of the surprise results of the Champions' League group stage recently, when Lyon took all three points away from Premier League kings Manchester City.

Lyon manager Bruno Génésio will aim to improve his team's defensive record in the league in 2019 in comparison with the opening months of the 2018/19 season, and Marcelo's tactical prowess combined with the technical ability of Denayer have the potential to be one Ligue 1's strongest central defence pairs, if their manager decides to abandon the current three-at-the-back system that is.



BORN: 1995/07/03 | CAYENNE
CLUB: LILLE OSC
POSITION: GOALKEEPER
AT CLUB SINCE: 2015
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 35

MIKE MAIGNAN

(*)

51

Back On New Year's Day of 2018, Lille had managed half the points they totalled during the entirety of the 2017/18 season and conceded 45% of their goals during the same timeframe. This means that Lille conceded more goals in the 2nd half of the season than in the 1st, but still managed survival which implies that it was a tough ride, but the club is still going strong and now find themselves at the top of Ligue 1, behind only PSG. The same can be said of Mike Maignan.

Born in French Guiana, the Maignan's moved to metropolitan France when young Mike was eight, Originally an outfield player, Maignan joined PSG in 2009 (then aged 14) and was asked to play between the sticks owing to his aerial prowess (he would have rather played in the centre of the pitch, than waiting for something to happen in net). He made the position his own and was promoted within the club to bench appearances for the senior side, alas without ever playing for the club in an official game (his one and only appearance was in replacing Nicolas Douchez in a pre-season game in Austria in July 2013). Maignan made a total of eight bench appearances for the first team but was PSG's reserve team starting goalkeeper. Unhappy with playing reserve team football at 20, he happily joined Lille who paid PSG €1m for his services. Maignan did not get first team football for Les Dogues immediately either but at least made cameo appearances to then number one, Vincent Enyeama - a solid role model for Maignan to embrace.

His first professional game was a success as he replaced Enyeama (who was sent off) with 20 minutes to go and had a penalty to deal with. Maignan saved the spot-kick (his save percentages from these situations two date a freakish and virtually unparalleled in Europe) but still conceded the equaliser two minutes later (scored by the man who missed the penalty, Paul-Georges Ntep). Not bad for a first try, but not perfect either. He played four games in the 2015/16 season (in which he conceded three times) and seven games in the following campaign (in which he conceded seven goals). Good raw numbers for a goalkeeper who was just beginning to break onto the French football scene and, upon his arrival, Marcelo Bielsa decided to give him his long overdue number one shirt.

Bielsa's reign at Lille can only be described as chaotic, but Maignan learned a lot in those few months. Naturally he could not help avoid the Argentine's sacking but he showed true character following the arrival of Bielsa's successor: Christophe Galtier. Originally, Galtier was unimpressed with Maignan's performances on the training ground and promoted Maignan's understudy, Kouakou Koffi, as acting custodian in early April 2018. This represented a huge blow for Maignan in his first season as an established goalkeeper. Koffi's games did not go so well, overseeing two defeats to Bordeaux (1-2) and Marseille (1-5), as well as a home draw vs Guingamp (2-2) during his spell between the sticks and Maignan took his spot back. With him in goal, Lille managed three wins out of three and secured safety before the final day (they lost the final game 0-5 at Saint-Étienne). This was a victory for Maignan as he proved that he was definitely better than his understudy and gained Galtier's trust for the following season. The ex-Saint-Étienne manager can hardly complain about Maignan's performances this season. He has played every single minute in the league (no window for Koffi this time around) and has proved to be one of the best goalkeepers in the division. With the turmoil he endured last April, it looks like Maignan has learned a valuable lesson and that he now is not going to look back; the only way is up for him.

75-51 RECAP

75.	Jordan Amavi	Olympique de Marseille
74.	Ismael Traoré	Angers SCO
73.	Diego Carlos	FC Nantes
72.	Saman Ghoddos	Amiens SC
71.	Benoît Costil	Girondins de Bordeaux
70.	Loïc Perrin	AS Saint-Étienne
69.	Frédéric Guilbert	SM Caen
68.	Yann M'Vila	AS Saint-Étienne
67.	Pablo	Girondins de Bordeaux
66.	Florent Mollet	Montpellier HSC
65.	Valentin Rosier	Dijon FCO
64.	Julio Tavares	Dijon FCO
63.	Youssef Sabaly	Girondins de Bordeaux
62.	Thiago Mendes	Lille OSC
61.	Moussa Konaté	Amiens SC
60.	Hilton	Montpellier HSC
59.	Flavien Tait	Angers SCO
58.	Allan Saint-Maximin	OGC Nice
57.	Ole Selanes	AS Saint-Étienne
56.	Lébo Mothiba	RC Strasbourg
55.	Hiroki Sakai	Olympique de Marseille
54.	Nolan Roux	EA Guingamp
53.	Clément Grenier	Stade Rennais
52.	Marcelo	Olympique Lyonnais
51.	Mike Maignan	Lille OSC



KAMIL GLIK

(-43)

50

BORN: 1988/02/03

JASTRZEBIE ZDROJ

CLUB: AS MONACO

POSITION: DEFENDER

AT CLUB SINCE: 2016

LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 32

It's by no exaggeration to say that AS Monaco have had a year full of ups and downs - and by the same token, so has Kamil Glik. Monaco's second place finish was excellent considering their poor start to the 2017/18 campaign and what surely helped was having Ligue 1 as their sole focus from the end of January onwards, having been knocked out of all other competitions.

The slow start and impressive run-in mirrored Glik's season too and it probably makes sense seeing how integral he is to the squad as a whole, bringing calm and balance to the young group. Other than the 7-1 mauling at the hands of PSG (which Glik was coincidentally suspended for) and the subsequent loss to Guingamp, the Monegasques were unbeaten in the second half of the season in Ligue 1.

Yet, Glik's absence from that debacle in Paris is an issue that has cropped up with the tough tackling Pole: does he pick up too many cautions due to his combative approach? He picked up eight last season, joint top at the Stade Louis II. The majority of red and white fans would say, no, his borderline judicious style of defending is inherent in him being a solid and reliable defender. This presence continued to be felt in a young squad especially with young Brazilian Jemerson who played the majority of games alongside Glik during the latter part of the 2017/18 season.

So after finishing on a high with his club, it was so unfortunate that after Poland's successful Euro 2016 campaign Glik was ruled out of the first two group games after injuring his shoulder: a freak, rather unnecessary injury as he was attempting a bicycle kick during training! He did manage to start the final game, however, in an encounter that saw his team win three points, although, by that point, Poland had already been knocked out.

Fortunes in the Nations League were no better for Poland or the former Torino man - he scored an own goal in their loss to Portugal - and they were ultimately relegated; so Glik would have been looking forward to another strong club campaign in 2018/19. His expectations were quickly dashed with Monaco in real danger of being in the bottom three for Christmas, such has been their torrid start.

With Jardim unable to turn things around, in early October he was sacked paving a way for a much-anticipated return by Thierry Henry to the Principality, to the club where he made his professional debut. In reality, managerial inexperience has weighed more heavily than God-given destiny and it promises to be a long, hard season. Two seasons on from Monaco's extraordinary campaign with Mbappé, Bakayoko and co, where Glik was very still much a vital cog, he has seen the calibre of player around him transition from precocious talents to those who are, arguably, just sub-standard. He is relied on for an ever-greater share of the intercepting burden, now that Fabinho the destroyer is no longer sitting in front of him.

The vice-captain is more important than ever, but he is not blameless in this Monaco meltdown. He has not been as mobile, a key asset for him to avoid having to decide whether to dive in or not. As legendary defender Paolo Maldini said: *"if you have to make a tackle you've already made a mistake."* The question is whether his other qualities are impressive enough to make up for his increasing lack of mobility...

As a result, his robust but fair tackling has verged into the realms of industrial, picking up yellow cards at a comparable rate to last season. Worse, he has been less effective when bringing the ball out and some of his reading of the play has been off, for example, against St Étienne, as Khazri twice took advantage of him ball watching.

That all said, he still boasts one of the very best average clearances per game of any Ligue 1 defender and one of best overall number of clearances to date this season, despite missing matches through injury. Not to mention that he is still as imperious in the air as ever and always will be a threat when attacking corners or set pieces, like for his vital equaliser against Dijon. After sustaining a torn abductor muscle in the 4-0 drubbing at the hands of Club Brugge, in a Champions' League campaign that was over before it had even begun, Glik may very well have hit rock bottom this season.

But he is now back and recently returned to help a win against Amiens, partnered by the already coveted 17-year-old Benoît Badiashile - another youngster Glik can impart knowledge to - and in doing so, hopefully, the young Frenchman's dynamism can rub off on the Pole. The pair have all the attributes to strike up a useful partnership, with Badiashile being ball-playing and stylish and the Pole doing the not so pretty stuff, with previous centre back partner Jemerson in horrendous form at the end of 2018.

Kamil Glik is still first choice centre back for club and country (64 caps) and will be again looked upon by Henry to help turn Monaco's season around. As ill-fated Leonardo Jardim summed up at the start of the season: *"[Glik] is fiercely competitive, he's got the winning mentality...It's so important having a player like him."*

While age may catch up on his other attributes, nothing about the ex-manager's words are untrue and he will continue to give everything for the club.



ADRIEN RABIOT

(-40)

49

BORN: 1995/04/03

SAINT-MAURICE

CLUB: PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN

POSITION: MIDFIELD

AT CLUB SINCE: 2012

LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 30

"I'm a competitor, but I'm also a man, and as such I would like to have been treated as one." Adrien Rabiot was not pleased. Having been excluded from Didier Deschamps' World Cup squad, Rabiot detailed his refusal to be included on the stand-by list in an open letter to RMC. While the Frenchman may have been *"under no illusions about the impact that [his] decision could have"* it remains typical of a year characterised by unprofessionalism and stagnation.

Although perhaps a common theme among young Parisian players, Rabiot's anger over his World Cup exclusion seems born out of a haughty entitlement, as well as an overt puerilism. Despite just six senior caps, the 23-year-old insisted, *"since I was 15 I have fought in the colours of France, in all youth categories right up to the first team. I am part of the French culture."* Before then implying that "his" achievements had not been recognised. *"Since my first call-up for the first team as a reserve in May 2016,"* read Rabiot's letter, *"I have played for my club, PSG, a European giant in 88 matches, 13 in the Champions' League. I've scored 9 goals and won 7 trophies."*

Although establishing himself in the Parisian squad remains far from an insignificant feat, those seven trophies would have been won without Adrien Rabiot. His Champions' League displays meanwhile, 2017's 4-0 first leg win over Barcelona aside, rarely made the required impact. In truth Rabiot's 2018, pre and post-World Cup, has been largely unspectacular. Deschamps' preference for an in-form Steven N'Zonzi was a surprise, but hardly unjustified, while France (World Cup winners) and PSG (finally impressing in the Champions' League under Thomas Tuchel) have improved without him. Having started in the lacklustre loss at Anfield and a fortunate home draw with Napoli, Rabiot was benched for the impressive Paris performance in Naples, the watershed win over Liverpool and a professional display at Red Star.

Rabiot's 2018 zenith came back in January, amid his best form to date. However, following PSG's Champions' League first leg loss to Real Madrid, despite scoring at the Bernabeu, he fell a little out of favour under Unai Emery as consistency fell away and the duo squabbled about his best position. Rabiot wanted to play in a box-to-box role, Emery sought to place him deeper in the midfield. Deschamps meanwhile later implied that he was not overly impressed with Rabiot's international form. At his bulldozing, chest-out best, Rabiot is unplayable; dragging his team forward with neat and positive passing in tandem with trademark explosive bursts from midfield. While a debate continues over his best position, either as the 'sentinel' in front of the defence or as a more of a box-to-box number 8, the Frenchman remains adept in both. However, at his worst Rabiot is clumsy in possession, caught out of position and prone to poor decision-making, or simply disappearing from the game altogether. As supremely talented as Rabiot is, 2018 has seen more of the latter.

Questionable decision-making seems to be an endemic issue for Rabiot. While Deschamps branded his toy-throwing before the World Cup a "huge mistake", something Les Bleus' assistant coach Guy Stephan remarked that the selected French players "didn't understand", Rabiot has spent much of the year mulling over a new club contract as the furore surrounding him intensified. After refusing a third PSG offer, €7.2m per year with significant bonuses, Rabiot was openly whistled at the Parc des Princes while supporters yelled "go to Barcelona!" as he arrived for the Liverpool match in December.

Despite stating in 2016 he would like to be "PSG's Steven Gerrard", Rabiot has long flirted with a move. Reports emerged as early as 2015 that his outspoken Mother and agent had approached a series of Premier League clubs while Barcelona links are long-standing. In December the situation finally came to a head. Thomas Tuchel stated that Rabiot "may not finish the season" with PSG and the young Frenchman was banished from the first team after contract talks finally evaporated completely.

Oddly, despite supporting their player during the summer, a club statement emphasising "the special connection that it has with a player who joined the youth academy in 2010 and then climbed with talent and character to become a major part of our professional team", Rabiot seems to believe that such support is not wholehearted. World Cup refusals and contract disputes aside, Rabiot has never been one to compromise. At just 21 he and Zlatan Ibrahimovic had to be separated by Thiago Silva during training, the pair had exchanged insults all session. Rabiot openly criticised his team's display in losing 3-1 at the Bernabeu last February, *"It's easy to put 8 past Dijon,"* he said, *"it's in these matches that you need to make it count. We were not at the level required..."* More recently, Rabiot was unhappy to be benched by Tuchel for October's Le Classique having arrived late for a team meeting and as mentioned has previously complained about being used in positions other than his favourite.

This attitude continues to prove problematic for his career. A recent France Football online poll resulted in 73% of readers stating it would not be a mistake to sell Rabiot, at a time when an international return under Deschamps seems very unlikely. If Rabiot wishes to be treated like an adult, he needs to start acting like one.



MATHIEU DEBUCHY

(*)

48

BORN: 1985/07/28 | FRETIN

CLUB: SAINT-ETIENNE

POSITION: DEFENDER

AT CLUB SINCE: 2018

LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 26

This time last year Mathieu Debuchy's career was reaching a crossroads. The French right-back had spent much of the previous four months warming the bench at Arsenal, only seeing action about once every two weeks. At 32-years-old it was clear that a decision had to be made regarding his future. His club career as well as his international future depended on it. After a number of failed moves, Debuchy and Arsenal came to a mutual agreement at the tail-end of January 2018 to terminate the remainder of the defender's contract, which still had another 6 months to run.

Then able to sign for any interested club for free, Debuchy was drawn most towards central France and Saint-Étienne. At the time, *Les Verts* were struggling. The club had recently parted ways with manager Óscar Garcia following a particularly embarrassing defeat to local rivals Lyon and were in the midst of an adjustment to the more understated style and approach of new coach Jean-Louis Gasset. Formerly assistant to Laurent Blanc at Paris Saint-Germain and with the French national team, Gasset helped to restore confidence and pride at the Stade Geoffroy-Guichard. January acquisitions helped too, as new reinforcements in the form of Yann M'Vila, Neven Subotić, and Debuchy brought improved quality to the first team.

Often underrated in London, Debuchy immediately began to show what he was capable of in the green of Saint-Étienne. In his debut for *Les Verts* against Amiens just four days after his arrival the right-back delivered a superb performance, impressing in both attack and defence. Debuchy was a constant threat down the right, linking up well with Jonathan Bamba and Rémy Cabella, as well as delivering a number of dangerous balls into the box. The right-back also found the back of the net against Amiens, scoring both his club's first of the night with a powerful finish after the ball fell to him in the box.

Debuchy continued in this rich vein of form for all of February, putting in imperious performances against both Marseille and Angers, the latter of which he was awarded Man of the Match for. The month concluded with the second Ligue 1 edition of Le Derby, with Saint-Étienne traveling to the Groupama Stadium to face Lyon.

After the 5-0 drubbing suffered at home in their first encounter of the season, *Les Verts* were under intense pressure from both supporters and the media to deliver an improved performance against *Les Gones*. Gasset lined up his men in the same 4-2-3-1 that had kept Amiens scoreless in the previous match, but his defence was bested just 19 minutes in by a great goal from now Real Madrid striker Mariano. Saint-Étienne struggled to answer up until the 90th minute, with the equaliser coming from none other than Mathieu Debuchy. Arriving late in the box, the right-back pounced on a low pass from Rémy Cabella that had somehow nutmegged centre-back Mouctar Diakhaby and made its way past Lyon's keeper and two other defenders. With Mathieu Gorgelin out of his goal, Debuchy easily slotted into the net, becoming the hero of the night and later winning UNFP Ligue 1 Player of the Month for his overall efforts throughout February.

That Saint-Étienne went from 14th to 7th following Debuchy's arrival is no coincidence. Outside of his crucial goals - a part of his game that has exploded since his return to France - the 33-year-old brings with him significant know-how and leadership. It is unlikely that the defender will ever wear the captain's armband for *Les Verts*, such is the importance of club icons like Loïc Perrin and Stéphane Ruffier, but Debuchy's impact on his team-mates is indisputable on the pitch. Saint-Étienne striker Kévin Monnet-Paquet described the defender as *"a great player, with a great state of mind,"* later adding that *"a player like him reassures the defence and the whole team."*

Over the course of the last three months of the season, Debuchy was able to pick up two more goals and contribute to five more clean sheets, further establishing himself as a key contributor to Saint-Étienne's push for European football. *Les Verts* finished agonisingly just outside of the all-important Europa League spots, but their right-back had fully reinvigorated his career, in doing so creating quite a case for his inclusion in France's World Cup squad.

When the team announcement came on May 17th, however, Debuchy was left disappointed. Djibril Sidibé and Benjamin Pavard proved to be worthy of their places, but their older compatriot had hoped that his magnificent start to 2018 had proven his quality and merit. When talking to *RMC* about the selection the right-back made his frustration known, saying, *"I think that I did the most I could at the end of last season to be there and for me, I deserved a place in the squad."* Now retired from international duty, the Frenchman has solely club football to focus on.

Debuchy's summer was not all disappointment, though, as he was rewarded with a three-year contract by Saint-Étienne in July. The experienced defender credited the presence of Jean-Louis Gasset as a major reason for his re-signing, and it is this same partnership that has continued to deliver for *Les Verts*. Since the start of this season, Debuchy has already recorded two goals and two assists, and has conceded just eight goals in the ten matches he has played over 45 minutes in at the time of writing. At this rate, the 33-year-old right-back is showing no signs of slowing down, and under the tutelage of the talented Gasset, will be expected to continue to be a key cog in his side's attack and defence.



GIANLUIGI BUFFON

(*)

47

BORN: 1978/01/28 | CARRARA

CLUB: PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN

POSITION: GOALKEEPER

AT CLUB SINCE: 2018

LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 18

Gianluigi Buffon's first half season in France will have been something of a reminder that he is the last of his generation, and that the footballing world is rapidly passing him by. Since starting in Ligue 1, the forty-year-old has come up against the son of a former team-mate – in Guingamp's Marcus Thuram, son of Lilian – and played with the son of a former opponent with Timothy Weah's first games in a PSG coming this year. A memento mori for his career, in some sense.

Having conquered virtually all there has been to win over an illustrious career spanning three decades, it would have been reasonable to expect the Carrara native to retire in the summer, especially with his chance of appearing in a final World Cup in tatters. Unlike David Beckham during his six-month spell in France, however, the Italian has clearly shown that he is still very much at the top level, having produced reasonably impregnable performances over the course of Juventus' seventh successive title-winning campaign.

Even though it was something of a transitional season, with Wojciech Szczesny gradually taking over, in his final appearances Buffon would make very few mistakes, turning in solid albeit unremarkable performances. His highlights will have included decisive stops in the late-season game against Bologna to clinch the title, as well as becoming the first goalkeeper to save a VAR-awarded penalty. Even if the end of a seventeen-year adventure was fast approaching, Buffon's lightning reflexes did not falter as he was able to bow out of action by winning his first Coppa Italia final as a starter. The only hiccup in an otherwise par for the course season will have been, unfortunately for him, in the biggest game of the season: having been on the cusp of a historic comeback from 3-0 down against Real Madrid, Juventus conceded a penalty and Buffon's ensuing tirade against referee Michael Oliver saw him sent off – an incident which nevertheless did little to tarnish his image in the public eye.

PSG fans have been accustomed to seeing constant rotation in their goal over the last few years, and the number one shirt has been something of a revolving door with no clear holder since Salvatore Sirigu's departure in 2016. Nevertheless, the idea of benching Areola, gaining in confidence and seemingly ready to take full time responsibility in goal, seemed bizarre. On the other hand, the chance to have a goalkeeper of international stature like Buffon's, something not seen at the club since Bernard Lama in 2000, will have also played a part in the transfer. The Italian's arrival in Paris had undoubtedly been one of the main talking points of the French transfer window this summer. Were they sacrificing Alphonse Areola's development in favour of a 40-year-old veteran who would be on his way out soon enough anyway? Was Buffon simply coming to cash in his final big contract and an extended holiday on the banks of the Seine?

Five months in, the verdict has been largely positive. Aside from the obvious benefits that having a veteran goalkeeper with the experience Buffon has brings to the dressing room, his transfer offers the club a chance to market itself positively to the public eye by using his reputation. Within the team, he has unsurprisingly embraced the role of the father figure, a position made all the more crucial by the relative youth of Tuchel's lineups compared to seasons past at the Parc des Princes. Buffon has nevertheless still found himself having to adapt to a new league, something that was never going to be a given for a 40-year-old who had never left Serie A. The Tuscan no longer has the security and compactness of a backline made up of Giorgio Chiellini and Leonardo Bonucci in front of him, but rather the likes of Thiago Silva and Marquinhos, centre halves who are more adept at rushing into challenges and playing a high line. Nevertheless, his performance against Guingamp, which included an improbable reflex save from a deflected Nolan Roux shot, laid to rest many of the reservations those in France may have had. He has also showed that he is still more than capable of performing on the big stage - after serving his Champions' League suspension, he was able to step in and play a key part in PSG's performances against Liverpool and Napoli. Tuchel will feel that, should PSG mount a credible challenge for the Champions' League this year, it would be hard to find a goalkeeper better suited a European run than Buffon, even if the Italian is yet to come out on top in a final.

Regardless of whether Buffon decides to extend his career's epilogue another season, his manager has admitted that the choice between him and Alphonse Areola is an increasingly difficult one as the Italian continues to grow into what is virtually a player-coaching role. Speaking in an interview with Gazzetta dello Sport about coming to grips with the Gallic language, Buffon highlighted one word in particular which sprung out to him - 'drôle', amusing, fun. *"I like the word 'drôle', that's what I want to be like."* It's perhaps the word that best describes his time in the French capital so far, as it looks increasingly likely he will prolong his stay for another year.



KENNY LALA

(*)

46

BORN: 1991/10/03 | PARIS
CLUB: STRASBOURG
POSITION: DEFENDER
AT CLUB SINCE: 2017
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 30

It is probably fair to say that Kenny Lala has taken the scenic route to becoming an established Ligue 1 defender, travelling over the hills and far away before coming to play (obligatory Teletubbies references over – promise!). Even becoming a professional footballer was not a foregone conclusion at one time: while many of his peers were developing their skills at various clubs' youth academies, Lala – who had had failed trials at Caen and Lille and a short, unsuccessful stint at Clairefontaine – was making ends meet by working as a shop assistant in Zara and as a courier.

In 2009, the 18-year-old Parisian native was taken on, after a trial by Paris FC, then in the National. He went on to play 39 matches for the Parisians over two seasons – including featuring against current club Strasbourg, who were then languishing down in the third tier. His performances for Paris FC were impressive enough to persuade Ligue 1 Valenciennes to take a punt on him. Only six league starts followed over the next two seasons as Lala, still in his early 20s, struggled to adjust to the sudden jump in the quality of footballers faced. One of those starts, however, included an eye-catching performance in a draw at PSG, which first brought Lala to the attention of many.

The 2013/14 season saw Lala take a step forward, this time amassing 17 Ligue 1 appearances in a variety of positions including in both full-back roles, centre back and right-wing. His performances were well received, but he could not prevent VAFC from being relegated at the end of the season. He remained with Valenciennes for their first season back in Ligue 2 and played his first full campaign, appearing in 35 league matches across the back line, providing two assists and beginning to gain a good reputation for himself, despite VAFC's continued struggles. His contract having come to an end, Lala was free to join Ligue 2 promotion candidates Lens in the summer of 2015. Two full seasons followed at VAFC's northern rivals. In the first, he played mainly in his less favoured left-back position but was still a central part of the second-meanest defence in the division as well as contributing one assist and one goal – a spectacular last-minute winner from the half-way line against Auxerre. In the second, he returned to his favoured right-back position and was this time part of the fourth-best defence and contributed an improved personal return of one goal and three assists.

Despite Lala's efforts, Lens fell short of promotion and, his contract over, he moved on again, his impressive performances persuading Strasbourg to give him a second chance at the top flight, four years after his last. In his mid-twenties and with more experience gained, Lala is now excelling at the higher level. Last season – again job-sharing at right-back and left-back, as well as a short shift on the right wing – he made 31 league appearances and ended the campaign as the league's most productive defender offensively, with three goals and four assists. 2018 also saw him help Strasbourg to the Coupe de France quarter-finals.

Although his performances at times suggested that the defensive side of his game still needed some work to match his attacking output, his performances had been sufficiently impressive to raise rumours that Bournemouth were interested in his signing, while some even suggested him as an outsider for the France World Cup squad. Although Didier Deschamps opted for Benjamin Pavard, Lala certainly had a fan in his club manager Thierry Laurey: *"he is a serious boy who is rarely injured and is very attack-minded. Sometimes it would be nice if other team-mates followed his example."*

This season, perhaps mindful of that attacking potential, Laurey has often opted for a formation featuring a back three, handing Lala more freedom to push forward in a wing-back role. In a position that seems made for him, he has raised his game further and, after 16 starts, has already matched last year's stats of three goals and four assists. He has starred again against PSG, helping the team to back up last season's shock win with a surprise draw (in which Lala, despite giving away PSG's equalising penalty, pulled out a man-of-the-match performance, winning and scoring Strasbourg's own spot-kick).

With his Strasbourg contract up at the end of 2020, clubs are beginning to consider summer bids, with Bordeaux and Saint-Étienne among the interested parties – although Lala is believed to favour a move to England. There is even an outside chance that he could be on the move this January. His excellent form – allied to Pavard's stuttering start to the season and a dearth of quality French right-backs – has also led many to campaign for him to receive a France call-up. As for Lala himself, he observes that *"I haven't followed the route of a normal footballer, so I know that I've come a long way and I'll take things as they come."* If his career continues to follow its recent trajectory, there is lots more to come.



MOUSSA DEMBELE

(*)

45

BORN: 1996/07/12 | PONTOISE

CLUB: LYON

POSITION: FORWARD

AT CLUB SINCE: 2018

LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 26

Moussa Dembélé has finally arrived. The now 23-year-old forward has long been an oft-discussed name in the football community and not because of his Belgian namesake. Olympique Lyonnais sealed a €22m move for Dembélé on the 2018 summer transfer window deadline day. The fee was the highest paid since *Les Gones* bought Yoann Gourcuff from Bordeaux in 2010. The signing of Dembélé is an exception to a well-respected rule at Lyon in many ways. Lyon badly needed to replace the void filled by the loss of Mariano Diaz to Real Madrid and they acquired a player with a more well-rounded skill-set than their former centre forward, with Dembélé having 25 European appearances in his career. The lofty transfer fee provided by a Ligue 1 side that has maintained excellence with a buy-low, sell high business model is indicative of the excitement around the striker. Dembélé also arrived with a notable European pedigree, another exception to the rule for a club that has been content to make relatively unheralded signings or develop their own academy products instead.

Obsessive FIFA fanboys and transfer tabloids have been swooning over the Frenchman since shortly after he arrived in London to join Fulham at 16. Born in a Parisian suburb, he spent nearly nine years in the Paris Saint-Germain academy after joining as an 8-year-old. Dembélé has become a headliner on a growing list of once PSG academy prospects that have gone on to enjoy distinguished roles for other teams. Supporters of the capital club have long lamented the loss of Kingsley Coman, but Dembélé could prove to be the most talented attacker to come back to haunt the French giants. Dembélé is an electric, modern centre forward whose skilful control with the ball at his feet and propensity to drag defenders outside and leave them in his wake with his dribbling ability make him a handful man to mark. His technical ability in receiving or dribbling only enhances his propensity to isolate defenders and use his strength and size to shield off incoming tackles.

It is no surprise that after stints at two of Britain's most renowned clubs for youth development in Celtic and Fulham, he looks just as comfortable knocking the ball into the path of a team-mate after beating a player as he would continuing his own run. It was an adventure to the FA Youth Cup final alongside England starlet Patrick Roberts that first exposed the promising striker to the world. Dembélé truly made his mark on football when he became a Fulham regular during their second season in the Championship. The Pontoise-native bagged 17 goals in all competitions and formed an exciting strike-force with Ross McCormack, though the Cottagers ultimately failed to achieve their goal of Premier League promotion. His build-up play, aerial threat, poaching ability and proficiency with both feet quickly set the hype machine in motion and saw him linked to many of Europe's biggest clubs. In an interview with *Get French Football News* in 2015, the striker spoke of achieving a world class level of focus:

"We often talk about great players like Van Basten or Henry and the ways in which Muhammad Ali and Mike Tyson focused on their fights for example. It is a state of mind that we call "beast mode". I work hard every day. I do extra training sessions and I have a personal coach as well." Some naysayers will look to his tally of 17 goals in his first Scottish Premiership campaign as an indictment of a short-lived deal for Celtic, as many pegged Dembélé for a return to the Premier League shortly thereafter. However, Dembélé's technical expertise in combination play at Fulham often left him relegated to the role of poacher, with the more experienced McCormack benefitting as the focal point of the attack. The role was not a full use of Dembélé's wide-ranging talents.

After 50 goals in two seasons, two Scottish trebles and over 20 Champions' League appearances, it is hard to doubt the effectiveness of his decision to move to Celtic, as he grew his game in a way it likely would not have through the grind of another Championship promotion push or warming the bench of a Premier League team. His potential was on full display when he opened his Lyon account in style during his second Ligue 1 start. He registered a brace in the span of three minutes against Dijon during the first half. One, a deft chip after being played in. The other, an acrobatic finish to convert a rebounding half-chance. The flurry was emblematic of his game, a timely poacher with deft and unpredictable skill. He will look to truly hit his stride with his new club in 2019.

Bruno Génésio's preference to deploy Memphis Depay as a forward has limited the Frenchman's opportunities as of late. With their shared affinity for cutting in off the left flank, the manager must find how to best incorporate the two together ahead of the knockout rounds of the Champions' League. Lyon has an embarrassment of riches in attack, many of whom face uncertain futures at the club. He may find himself as the focal point for *Les Gones* come next season. Dembélé must continue to strive for 'beast mode' for Lyon if he hopes to follow some of team-mates to Europe's richest clubs.



RUBEN AGUILAR

(*)

44

BORN: 1993/04/26 | GRENOBLE

CLUB: MONTPELLIER

POSITION: DEFENDER

AT CLUB SINCE: 2017

LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 25

A newcomer to this publication, having only arrived in Montpellier from Auxerre last summer, *La Paillade's* right back, Ruben Aguilar, has deservedly taken a rather lofty place for a debutant. Born in Grenoble to a French mother and a Spanish father, his play (and that of Ambroise Oyongo on the opposite flank) has been integral to the southern side's good form as they take what is increasingly looking like a realistic tilt at a European place this season. Under Michel Der Zakarian, Montpellier have been at the forefront of a resurgence that has seen many sides in Ligue 1 opt for a back three, with Strasbourg, Nice, PSG, Marseille, and Lyon all having experimented with the system, albeit to varying degrees of success this campaign.

To be at its most effective, a 3-5-2 (or, more properly, in Montpellier's case, a 3-4-1-2) requires wing-backs with pace, ability with the ball at their feet, and the capacity to supply a good delivery from the flanks. Aguilar ticks all of those boxes with aplomb and then some, establishing himself as an energetic, physical presence. His energy and exuberance sometimes gets the better of him, as his six bookings this season would clearly suggest, but he has also risen to the occasion against the division's better sides, having delivered a man of the match level performance when Marseille visited in November's 3-0 home win.

While his good performances this season have flown somewhat under the radar in France, he has garnered plenty of support abroad, particularly in Bolivia, where an administrative error in popular video game Football Manager saw him mistakenly listed as having Bolivian nationality. He became something of a cult celebrity in the country, receiving hundreds of messages on social media, and even receiving a call from the country's football federation after a standout performance in a draw against Paris Saint-Germain last season. Aguilar has no such heritage, much to the chagrin of many Bolivians, but that does not mean he cannot enjoy the success and attention that he is somewhat belatedly enjoying in the top flight.

On the books of his local club until the age of 18, he joined Saint-Étienne but failed to break into the first team, with former France international François Clerc then firmly installed as the first choice. He returned to Grenoble Foot in 2013, and eventually broke into the first team, playing a handful of matches for the club, who were then in the French third tier, National. His big break, however, came the following summer, when he was signed for Auxerre. The centrally-located club has a strong tradition in French football, having been important in the developments of the likes of Eric Cantona and Laurent Blanc, among others, but had fallen out of the top flight in 2012. They are still yet to return, but Aguilar prospered in Ligue 2, and even helped the club to reach the Coupe de France final in 2015 before attracting the attention of Montpellier last summer.

He spoke with the French edition of *Goal* about his decision to move to the Occitan club, a bold move for a player whose contract had run down in Ligue 2, especially with no guarantees of playing time being offered. However, he was attracted by the project, and in particular, the rigorous managerial style of Der Zakarian:

"I chose to come here because they showed a real desire to see me come and they made me understand that they really wanted me. Contrary to what one might think, nobody told me that I was going to play. I was told that with work, being serious and doing what I could do, I would have my chance to succeed. You have to be focused throughout the match, be attentive to what is happening, to communication. It's also going much faster. There are lots of little details that make Ligue 1 a better league than Ligue 2. I try to be serious, to be combative, to give the maximum and to bring what I can bring. Michel Der Zakarian is a coach who requires a lot of concentration and rigour on a daily basis. Like all coaches, he asks us to wet the jersey. He gives a lot to his players and likes to receive back."

Now eighteen months into his time with the club, it is easy to state that Aguilar made the right choice. His first season with Montpellier was an unqualified success, as he was named the club's best player in the 2017/18 campaign, pipping French international goalkeeper Benjamin Lecomte to the award. Given how difficult it is for full-backs to pick up individual awards, as they rarely rack up goals, assists, or even clean sheets, it only serves to underscore how influential and impressive his play has been. Now, with Montpellier having re-jigged their attack this summer in the form of bringing in Florent Mollet, Gaëtan Laborde, and Andy Delort, the southern side not only retain the sense of dynamism and potency on the break that has been a hallmark of their play, but they also have a much greater capacity for attacking brilliance, which makes their current placement in the top six look all the more sustainable, something in which Aguilar has played a massive part.



DANJIEL SUBASIC

(-9)

43

BORN: 1984/10/27 | ZADAR

CLUB: AS MONACO

POSITION: GOALKEEPER

AT CLUB SINCE: 2012

LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 18

Danijel Subašić is currently a bit of a tragic figure. After enjoying the rewards of Monaco's dynamic transfer strategy over the last few years, the experienced keeper is now enduring its pitfalls. After leading his nation to the World Cup final through a string of heroic performances, the Croatian was subjected to intense criticism following a questionable performance in the ultimate showpiece itself. After staying in Monaco to help the club transition into a new period, a damaging hamstring injury - his third of the year - has kept the 34-year-old on the sidelines.

In spite of recent difficulties, one would be amiss to deem 2018 a failure for Danijel Subašić. Monaco's number one missed just two league matches after Christmas in 2017/18, both due to hamstring issues, as even formidable competition in the form of Diego Benaglio could do little to displace him from the first team.

It was perhaps at the end of the season when Subašić was at his best. With two games to go and his Monaco sitting in third, just one point behind second placed Lyon, the Croatian and *Les Monégasques* knew they would need to win both to have a real chance to overtake *Les Gones*.

Wearing the captain's armband in the penultimate fixture, Subašić led his team to a 1-0 win over Saint-Étienne. A lively Rémy Cabella and a dangerous Jonathan Bamba were both stifled by Monaco's keeper, who throughout the match completed two impressive saves - one a dive to stop a curling effort from the former and the other an instinctive foot save to parry a strong drive from the latter. Fabinho's last-minute penalty conversion meant that Monaco had leapfrogged over OL and could secure an impressive second-place finish if they got a positive result against Troyes.

Captain again for the final match of the season, Subašić secured his second successive clean sheet with his Monaco triumphing 3-0 over a Troyes side that was in the relegation zone. The Croatian was not called into action often on the night, but showed good concentration when faced with danger. This final match in particular showed Subašić's ability to help organise the defence, a unique strength of his that often goes unrecognized.

Heading into the World Cup, Subašić was able to continue this rich vein of form from the end of the Ligue 1 season. Alongside his Croatian defence, the keeper kept both Nigeria and Argentina scoreless, but the heroics truly began against Denmark. Subašić allowed the Danes to score within the first two minutes, but after a goal from Mario Mandžukić and 30 minutes of extra time the score remained equal. In the resulting penalty shootout, Subašić saved a remarkable three of Denmark's five penalties, sending his side into a knockout match with Russia.

Against the hosts, Subašić conceded twice during the ninety minutes, but much like against Denmark, stepped up in the eventual penalty shootout. The keeper's crucial save came against Fyodor Smolov, Russia's first penalty taker, who tried to chip his penalty. While Subašić had committed to his right, he was able to get a strong left hand to Smolov's lobbed effort. Ivan Rakitić later scored Croatia's fifth penalty, sending the national team through to a clash with England.

Much like in past matches, Subašić was bested by a spectacular effort from an opposition player, this time by Kieran Trippier's electrifying free kick. Before that, though, came a simply outrageous save from the Croatian keeper. Just after seeing his first shot impressively saved by Subašić, England captain Harry Kane found himself at the far post with the ball at his feet. The striker took a touch then fired at goal, when out of nowhere Croatia's keeper flung out his left leg and deflected the ball off his foot, off the post, off his knee, then out, all in a matter of milliseconds. Subašić's save was the best of the tournament and kept the score level going into the half.

If the semi-final against England represented Subašić's peak at the tournament, then the final against France was very much the Croatian at his worst. The 34-year-old keeper was left frozen for France's third and fourth goals, both of which might have been save-able if he had committed to the shot. Unfortunately for Subašić, many remember this final performance and not the other matches in which his acrobatics and penalty heroics dragged his team to victory.

What often goes unnoticed is the hamstring injury that Subašić picked up against Russia. It is this same injury that most likely prevented him from fully extending himself in the final, as his recovery was significantly hampered by the rushed nature of the World Cup knockout stages. The fact that Subašić continues to miss action for Monaco because of a hamstring injury only furthers this idea.

Looking forward, Subašić is under contract with *Les Monégasques* until 2020, and will be hoping to regain his place in the first eleven upon his eventual return from injury. For the time being, it seems as though he is being eased back into action, as the only match the keeper has played in this season was Monaco's 2-1 loss to Rennes. That being said, 35-year-old Diego Benaglio has not hugely impressed as Subašić's replacement, and Monaco could certainly use the Croatian's leadership abilities given their youthful squad and the nature of their dire form.



MAX-ALAIN GRADEL

(*)

42

BORN: 1987/11/30 | ABIDJAN

CLUB: TOULOUSE

POSITION: FORWARD

AT CLUB SINCE: 2017

LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 35

From his birth in the Ivory Coast to a move to Paris in his younger years, from cult hero at Leeds to (nearly) spurring Saint-Étienne into the Champions' League, Max-Alain Gradel's career has been one of many twists and turns. 2018 has found him pitched up at Toulouse, having made last season's loan from Bournemouth permanent in the summer. Toulouse, who have struggled in recent seasons following heavy player sales, may not have seemed the most obvious move for the player, who was far more likely accustomed to be pushing for Europe than staving off relegation. The summer's departures of Issa Diop and Alban Lafont are only the latest in an exodus that has also included the likes of Serge Aurier, Moussa Sissoko, Étienne Capoue, Wissam Ben Yedder, and Martin Braithwaite in recent seasons. It would thus be only natural to question Gradel's sanity for wanting to join a club of such limited ambitions, even if he may have felt he owed Toulouse something given what had been a relatively difficult period after a torn ACL severely derailed his time on England's south coast, forcing him to reconstruct both his knee and career.

Last season saw him perform as the club expected, as *Les Violets'* primary attacking outlet, netting 11 goals in 35 matches across all competitions. Yet for a player capped more than 50 times for his country (including a 2015 Africa Cup of Nations title), the move seemed to frankly lack ambition in a personal sense. That said, Gradel, recently having turned 31, is perhaps, at this juncture in what has been a fairly nomadic career, well within his rights to be more motivated by financial remuneration and stability, than to have a forward-looking approach to furthering his sporting career. He was also eager to take part in a project that would see him use his abilities, most notably his pace and wiry strength, to the highest level, and was convinced, too, by Alain Casanova's willingness to use him as an outlet on the break.

He explained as much to the club's website in June, stating: *"Personally I had the goal to find a sense of being grounded, to become effective again after my injury. It was necessary to deal with some obstacles, but the important things were finally acquired through this experience. For me, it was important to have a full season, and in this sense, there are obviously reasons for satisfaction in staying here. It's a bold choice, yes, but I really felt confidence around me, from the club and especially from the president. The manager has also done a lot to encourage me to stay. I've had offers from other clubs, but I'm coming to a point in my career where I also need stability; I think everything is in place to make this a much better season than the last one."*

That "much better season" has not exactly come to pass for Toulouse, who have been languishing in the lower reaches of the table, if not exactly being pursued by thoughts of relegation for much of the early part of the campaign. Conversely, it is more than fair to say that Gradel himself, with five goals and four assists, has been in some of the best form of his life, including leading a recent stirring comeback draw against Dijon despite playing nearly the entire match with ten men after Baptiste Reynet's early sending-off. A spectacular solo goal and a lovely chipped pass to Aaron Leya Iseka for the equaliser were his contributions in aggregate, but the Ivorian has given his team far more than goals and assists.

While not the only veteran in the side (Mathieu Dossevi, Yannick Cahuzac, and fellow summer signing Stéphane Mbia have all lent a more experienced cast to the team than it has seen in recent seasons), Gradel, named captain by new boss Alain Casanova, has been an inspired presence on the left flank, not only going forward, but also defensively. His numbers at Toulouse in terms of tackles and fouls committed are some of the best of his career, and his leather-lunged determination makes him a model player, albeit one who is more than susceptible to a booking. His evolution to becoming a complete player, rather than a somewhat selfish pace merchant (it should be noted those four assists are only one off a career high set at Saint-Étienne) is impressive indeed, and goes hand-in-hand with the sort of maturity that saw him plump for Toulouse in the long term, signing on until 2021, rather than a more high-profile offer elsewhere. This was all the more impressive when one considers the fact that in May this year Gradel, whilst still on loan from Bournemouth, reportedly suspected a fellow team-mate of having stolen his Rolex watch.

It does not, however, appear that Toulouse, despite Gradel's best efforts, are going to enjoy anything better than a mid-table finish this season, owing mainly to their defensive frailties. The Ivorian's consistent brilliance and eye for the spectacular continue to enliven a side that has little in the way of attacking talent in the recent past. Gradel will almost certainly never hit the heights that he would have perhaps hoped for upon leaving Les Verts for England two years ago, but in many ways, he is better than the player who left.



PEDRO MENDES

(*)

41

BORN: 1990/10/01 | NEUCHATEL

CLUB: MONTPELLIER HSC

POSITION: DEFENDER

AT CLUB SINCE: 2017

LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 30

A good scouting network is vital for Ligue 1's mid-table sides as it is often the difference between a bid for European qualification and a season fighting for nothing. When a player quickly goes from club to club to club and without finding a stable home, it becomes a source of frustration for the player in question because of a feeling of not being given enough time to show their true worth. When a club spots an under-appreciated player and feels they can improve them, it is a rare, but exceptional moment for players whose professional careers fail to begin the way they want.

When Montpellier forked out a €1m fee to bring Pedro Mendes to the club from fellow Ligue 1 outfit Rennes in July 2017, nobody took any notice of a centre back who had jumped from Sporting Lisbon, Servette in Switzerland, Real Madrid Castilla, Parma and Sassuolo of Serie A. But for Mendes, it was the moment that he took back control of his career and found a club in which he could relish football again. For the majority of 2018, Mendes has been superb for Montpellier in a defence that ranked the second best in Ligue 1 in the 2017/18 season and has seemingly improved as they fly high, closer to the top of the league than anyone could have imagined and well in contention for Europe as the calendar year comes to a close. It has been the outstanding career year for Mendes at both club and international level.

His first game of the year was at home to Monaco, not the Monaco that we see towards the back end of 2018, struggling for wins and a shadow of their former selves, but one that posed a threat and had enough firepower to worry almost any side in Ligue 1. As the main central defender, sitting in the middle between captain Hilton and Nordi Mukiele, Mendes performed magnificently to keep the likes of Thomas Lemar and Keita Baldé out. The defender was forced into taking a yellow card for the last 20 or so minutes, but that did not faze him. The role of this particular central defender in a back five is primarily and most commonly to hold the line, stay back and cover for the other two central defenders either side who push forward and become ball players. Mendes does not exactly fit this mould, and as a result he has interchanged with Hilton between playing totally centrally and on either side in a three - his passing statistics - with a 84.4% passing success rate for the first half of Ligue 1 in the 2018/19 season - are indicative of this fact.

Throughout the first half of 2018, Montpellier only lost four games (one of which away at PSG) and conceded just 20 goals, nine of those coming in three games against PSG, Bordeaux and Dijon, which goes to show just how well the team defended as a unit, with Mendes at the heart of it all. Mendes' output was somewhat overshadowed by the young talent of Mukiele, now of RB Leipzig, and the veteran Hilton. The latter in particular surprised everyone with his quality and high level of performance despite his age, as fans across Europe marveled at how such an elder statesman could still be so important to a sturdy defence. But the lack of attention for Mendes did not bother the Portuguese too much, because he had finally found a place where he fit in and he was loved by those who mattered. The players and the fans. The scintillating form of both Mendes and Montpellier has carried the start of the 2018/19 season, with Mendes scoring the first goal for the club on the opening day against Dijon, a game they actually ended up losing 2-1. In fact, it was a tumultuous game for the Portugal defender, who opened the scoring five minutes into proceedings before getting booked on the 33rd minute mark and then being subbed off seven minutes later. So just to lay it out for you, the opening game of the season saw Mendes score, receive a booking and be substituted before half-time!

Fortunately for Montpellier, that would be their only defeat until the November 10th clash against Angers, when Mendes was not in the squad as his side fell to a 1-0 defeat. Funnily enough, two of Montpellier's three defeats have occurred without Pedro Mendes in the squad, which goes to show how important he can be, especially in tight games against sides such as Angers and Lille, with both matches finishing 1-0. But, amidst all the qualities shown at club level and the achievements that Mendes has made with Montpellier this year, the highlight of not just 2018 but his career will be his debut for his national side, the culmination of his hard-work and testament to how well he has played this year.

Hampden Park was the venue and Scotland were the opponents as Pedro Mendes came on for Benfica's Ruben Dias after just 57 minutes in October. It was not the first time that Mendes was involved in the Portugal national squad, being picked for the friendly against Croatia and the Nations League clash against Italy despite not leaving the bench on either occasion. It may have been a run-of-the-mill win for the European Champions and a standard friendly game, but for Mendes it was a nod to the rebuilding of a reputation that Montpellier helped construct.

2018 has definitively altered Mendes' career path from becoming a potential journeyman to an individual with a clear opportunity to develop as a top European defender, albeit belatedly. With Hilton's career winding down and Mendes effortlessly occupying any central defensive role, his time with Montpellier does not look like it will be ending any time soon, unless European football-offering vultures start circling.



ELLYES SKHIRI

(-5)

40

BORN: 1995/05/10 | LUNEL

CLUB: MONTPELLIER HSC

POSITION: MIDFIELD

AT CLUB SINCE: 2015

LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 34

While Montpellier may have slipped slightly in last season's run-in, grasping where they might have reached when it came to qualifying for the Europa League, it was still a very solid campaign. The club have since done superbly in the transfer window, as the departed Nordi Mukiele and Jérôme Roussillon have scarcely been missed. Given a glance at the current table in mid-December, one could argue, in totally convincing fashion, that their sales have even facilitated an improved side, with the front three of Florent Mollet, Gaëtan Laborde, and loanee Andy Delort all looking in the form of their careers. Midfielder Damien Le Tallec has also given more solidity to Michel Der Zakarian's side, allowing for more freedom of movement on the part of the attacking trident, while Cameroon international Ambroise Oyongo has sparkled at left wing-back.

The club have also seen improvements in 2018 from players who have been mainstays of the side in the recent past, with Benjamin Lecomte and Pedro Mendes both getting their first call-ups for their national teams, and Daniel Congré and Hilton continuing to defy age. Paul Lasne and Junior Sambia offer flexibility from the bench and Nicolas Cozza has been one of Ligue 1's most capable defenders, but the understated, beating heart of *La Paillade's* hard-nosed ethos has continued to be Ellyes Skhiri. Having resisted numerous call-ups from the Eagles of Carthage prior to this year, Skhiri's head was finally turned as the newly minted international participated in his first major tournament this summer, anchoring Tunisia's midfield. While he did not catch the eye as easily as the likes of his fellow Ligue 1 players Wahbi Khazri and Naïm Sliti did in Russia, his consistency and solidity allowed, as it does his club team-mates, his country to remain a threat on the counter. Now firmly ensconced in his country's set-up, Skhiri continues to play an important role for Tunisia, and his good form has continued as they prepare for the upcoming Africa Cup of Nations.

It has been a long road for Skhiri, though, despite being only 23. French by birth, he was born not far from Montpellier in the small town of Lunel. Initially on the books of neighbouring club Nîmes, Skhiri made the switch to Montpellier in 2010. Always a precocious player, he was integrated into the first team under Rolland Courbis, making his full debut on his twentieth birthday, in the late stages of the 2014-15 season. Interestingly, he had been first used as an attacking midfielder, then was played deeper, as a number six, in the reserves, before finally finding a happy medium as a box-to-box midfielder. Throughout his evolution, though, Skhiri has always possessed a preternatural calm, and has even, impressively for such a young player, been handed the captain's armband when Hilton is unable to feature, firmly underscoring the regard in which he is held by his manager and team-mates.

It is true that Montpellier no longer possess the same steel-trap style that made them such a prosaic and determined presence in Der Zakarian's first season, which has led to the odd surprising default, but when they are on song, they are a thing of beauty to watch, as evinced by November's thumping win over Marseille. Skhiri's statistics, notably his rates of interceptions and tackles, are no longer as impressive as they were last season, but much of that is down to his role in midfield having changed. Last season, his regular partner was Junior Sambia, who was given a freer role with Skhiri sitting deeper, but the arrival of Le Tallec, who had played most frequently at centre back in his previous clubs, has meant that the Tunisian has been tasked with a more attack-minded, if not creative role.

Skhiri has always been a versatile presence for Montpellier; during his initial time with the first team, he was often deployed as a centre back, with Bryan Dabo and Jonas Martin occupying the centre of the park, and he has also played on rare occasions as a right-sided midfielder, albeit not under Der Zakarian. However, this new role has seen him seem a bit uncomfortable at times; he has always been more skilled at breaking up play than developing it, and even if Mollet and Laborde have taken on the lion's share of skilled creative play, Skhiri's dynamism and long strides have made him an essential component in the attacking third. Despite losing possession at a far greater rate than last season, there have been some positives to his new role, most notably in his much-improved disciplinary record, keeping out of the referee's notebook in contrast to being frequently booked last term.

Linked with a move abroad to Fiorentina last summer, and again in the most recent window, Skhiri has surely few regrets about another season in southern France, given Montpellier's lofty standing in the table. Even as he continues to adapt to his more forward-thinking role in the team, he has still more often than not been a reliable and metronomic presence in midfield, and will surely continue to catch the eye of clubs more moneyed than Montpellier. For now, though, the young midfielder should be enjoyed for what he is, a canny player who, while he may be one for the purist, is undoubtedly one of Ligue 1's most promising young midfielders.



MATHIEU DOSSEVI

(*)

39

BORN: 1988/02/12

CHAMBRAY-LES-TOURS

CLUB: TOULOUSE FC

POSITION: MIDFIELD

AT CLUB SINCE: 2018

LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 34

Have a look at the assist charts for the 2017/18 Ligue 1 season and four-fifths of the top 5 are as you may expect: Neymar is unsurprisingly number 1; Marseille's Dimitri Payet and Florian Thauvin are present; and Memphis Depay – who ended the season like a man possessed – also appears. There is just one anomaly. And that the fifth member of the pack played for the team that finished bottom of Ligue 1 (and missed the first four matches of the season) makes it even more striking.

Mathieu Dossevi spent the season struggling to keep lanterne rouge FC Metz's Ligue 1 status intact, but still managed to amass an astounding 11 assists over the course of the campaign, placing him in third place, behind only Neymar and Payet. Despite Metz's troubles (they sank to the bottom of the table after Dossevi's first match for the club and remained there for the rest of the season), Dossevi's tireless running, his tricky wing play on the right and his uncanny ability to spot a killer final ball and then execute it, were major factors in Metz delaying their inevitable relegation until only two weeks before the end of the campaign.

Under coach Frédéric Hantz in particular, Dossevi made hay in the second half of the season, forming an unlikely but fruitful dynamic duo with striker Nolan Roux. The first half of 2018 saw Dossevi provide six assists, five of which were put away by Roux. In all, the pair combined for seven goals, with only the Neymar to Cavani combination more successful. Dossevi's contribution was not limited to assists, however. His set piece delivery, his ability to hold onto the ball, his versatility (he variously also filled in on the left-wing, in midfield and even once as centre forward) and his experience all provided hope against hope for les Grenats, and prevented the team from further humiliation. Although obviously popular with the Metz fans (his strong Twitter game also made him a crowd favourite), it was always likely that Dossevi would leave. And after featuring once for les Messins at the beginning of this season, Toulouse FC – long-time admirers – finally got their man.

Dossevi has experienced a well-travelled career, beginning with spells at Le Mans and Valenciennes which perhaps foreshadowed his Metz experience as, although both were successful for him personally, they both ended with relegation. His performances in northern France were enough to attract Olympiakos, with whom he won the Greek league and cup, as well as experiencing European football and earning international recognition with Togo (a former France U21 international, he has since represented The Sparrowhawks at the African Cup of Nations). Dossevi's next move was to Belgium and Standard Liege, where he added the Belgian Cup to his trophy cabinet, before Metz secured his loan signing for one season, with a purchase option. That option was taken up by the Lorrain club at the end of 2017/18, but with Metz looking for their third coach in a year and Dossevi having proven himself too good for Ligue 2, it was inevitable that he would be immediately sold.

After making his debut in Toulouse's embarrassing 4-0 season-opening defeat to Marseille, Dossevi found himself at the centre of the action in his first home match for the ville rose club, against Bordeaux in the Garonne derby. A first half miss – Dossevi meeting a cross at the far post but hitting the woodwork when it seemed easier to score – will go down as one of the worst of the season and threatened to ruin his Stadium Municipal bow. However, in the second half the Togolese international turned from zero to hero, cutting in from the left and curling a low shot past Benoît Costil to secure a 2-1 win, local bragging rights, and a reassuring first victory of the season for Alain Casanova's men. That win was the first of three straight, but since then, Toulouse's season has not been impressive: with 18 points they now sit in 15th place, their recent victory against Reims their first win since the end of September. During that time, Dossevi has been an ever-present, starting all but two Ligue 1 matches for the Violets. Generally Casanova has played a 4-2-3-1 formation, with Dossevi on the wide right, and for the most part it has been Aaron Leya Iseka playing down the middle. But appearances at centre forward for the likes of Corentin Jean, Jimmy Durmaz and Firmin Mubele (as well as one appearance for Dossevi up front alongside Max Gradel) show that no one striker has yet been able to make the position his.

Whether Dossevi's meek return of two goals and two assists (both for top scorer Gradel) are the cause or effect of Toulouse's lack of firepower, it is clear that Dossevi has not yet found a partner in crime with whom to repeat last season's heroics with Roux. And it may yet turn out to be an ominous sign that Toulouse's recent win came on one of the rare occasions that he did not start the match. However, Dossevi has proven over the course of the year that he is a class act, and if he clicks with one of his strikers, Toulouse may well be moving quickly back up the table.



ADAMA SOUMAORO

(*)

38

BORN: 1992/06/18

FONTENAY-AUX-ROSES

CLUB: LILLE OSC

POSITION: DEFENDER

AT CLUB SINCE: 2013

LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 20

While all the attention at Lille this season has been on their explosive, lightning-fast BIP-BIP attack, the team's impressive defensive record has gone almost unnoticed. With 17 goals conceded in 18 matches, only four teams have allowed fewer in (three of whom have played fewer matches). Lille were also the first Ligue 1 team to limit PSG to fewer than three goals at the Parc des Princes this season. More credit should be due to *Les Dogues'* defence, but perhaps central defender Adama Soumaoro prefers it this way. Shy and quietly spoken off the pitch – with press conferences at times painfully mono-syllabic – the 26-year-old is happy to let his football do the talking and for others to worry about the limelight.

His talent as a youngster at one point prompted Liverpool to make enquiries, but Soumaoro joined Lille's academy set-up in 2008 and has been with the northern club ever since. Although he found it difficult at first, away from home and adjusting to the new position of centre back, having always turned out as a defensive midfielder, Soumaoro, a quick learner, soon acclimatised and was already playing for the reserve team by the age of 16. He impressed sufficiently in Lille's reserves to earn a first professional contract with the club in 2010, a month after his 18th birthday. However, he had to wait another three years to make his first team debut, playing a full 120 minutes in a Coupe de la Ligue defeat to Auxerre in October 2013.

Only seven appearances followed over the next two seasons, but Soumaoro broke into the first team in the autumn of 2015 under now Morocco manager Hervé Renard, retaining his place despite the coach's sacking a month later, and – when fit – has been an almost permanent fixture in the first team ever since. A total of 28 Ligue 1 appearances that season was followed by another 27 in 2016/17 as the versatile defender, who has appeared in both full-back roles but has become a mainstay at centre back, grew in stature and prominence and people began to murmur about the possibility of international recognition, Soumaoro qualifying to play for France or for Mali.

However, in April 2017 he sustained a ruptured Achilles tendon, which kept him out for seven months. He returned to action in November 2017, but last season was marked by the regular injury niggles that often follow a long lay-off, limiting him to only 14 Ligue 1 appearances. Despite January transfer window interest from the likes of Everton and West Ham, the first half of 2018 was particularly frustrating, as Soumaoro was forced to miss more than half of Lille's matches with recurrences of various tweaks and strains. More Everton interest came and went during the summer but, speaking recently about getting over his injury problems, he said *"last season was very difficult for me as I was not able to help the club as I would have liked. I had constant niggles but I always worked hard to remain in form and at my best level. Today I feel good, I prepared well for the season. I agreed with my agent that I should go to Los Angeles to see specialists. Now I am raging to get back and catch up for lost time."*

As an added motivation, coach Christophe Galtier now appointed Soumaoro his permanent club captain, having given him the armband occasionally the previous season. Speaking about how he views the role of captain, he says *"I try reach out to my team-mates, to be a good leader, to communicate, exchange. Also to pass the coach's messages to my team-mates."* Galtier did also mention, however, that he saw new centre back partner, the experienced José Fonte, as an auxiliary captain, clearly making a point about how vital his centre back pairing was to Lille's season.

So far, neither have been found wanting. Perhaps unsurprisingly, since Soumaoro grew up with a twin sister, he has effortlessly formed one half of an imperious partnership made up of differing styles which perfectly complement each other. While Fonte is more about positioning and ball-playing, Soumaoro is more likely to be duelling his opposing striker, commanding the area with his heading ability and strong tackling. Soumaoro's ability to pass the ball out of defence should not, however, be underestimated and he too has been responsible for setting Lille off on their devastating counter-attacks this season.

Of their partnership, Soumaoro says *"we talk to each other a lot during the match and also to our team-mates, to ensure that we remain well positioned and give good advice. As each match passes our relationship is improving."* Unfortunately, another injury – this time to his calf – has meant missing Lille's last five matches and suffering another blow to ultimate ambitions to break into the France squad (*"I was born in France, I grew up here, I dream of Les Bleus and celebrated for them this summer"*) and possibly of a big-money move abroad. Soumaoro has had to get used to showing patience, however, and will continue to work hard to ensure that he is able to grab his opportunities when they eventually come.



BOUNA SARR

(*)

37

BORN: 1992/01/31 | LYON

CLUB: MARSEILLE

POSITION: DEFENDER

AT CLUB SINCE: 2015

LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 32

2018 was a year of development for Bouna Sarr. Long maligned by his own set of supporters and seemingly, his coaches at Olympique de Marseille, Sarr completed a year of revival in which he has become a first-team mainstay at the Vélodrome, but curiously in a position unfamiliar to him.

The 26-year-old is usually a right winger, and has been for OM for the majority of his three years on the south coast. In late 2017 however came a tactical tweak from Rudi Garcia that enabled Sarr to drop a little deeper in position. This was to allow Hiroki Sakai to deputise on the other flank due to injury to Jordan Amavi or in Patrice Evra's case, contract termination. At first, it seemed like another cost-effective way for OM to rotate outside of the transfer window. Sarr was not expected to remain in that position outside of the meaningless Europa League fixtures or the odd Ligue 1 or cup games where rotation was warranted. Indeed, if he was to enjoy playing time, this would largely be the only way with the irresistible Florian Thauvin hovering up all the playing minutes he could obtain on the right wing.

2018 began strongly for the winger, who featured in all but 30 minutes of the first six Ligue 1 games of the calendar year – thanks in part to Amavi's injury. The experiment had begun to bear fruit. Sarr's performances were lauded in those games which resulted in OM winning four and drawing two of their first six league games of the year. What's more, the team scored at least two in each of those games – even hitting FC Metz (Sarr's former club) for six.

The belief was that the new right-back was providing clear attacking width and pace on the flank in a way that the defensively-minded Sakai could not. Here was a player with the legs that could last 90 minutes. A winger's mentality to drive forward but with the growing nous to track back and offer defensive cover where required.

A need for a new right-back in the summer? No. Sarr's newly-honed skillset ensured that OM had two right-backs of roughly good standard which also meant that Thauvin's wish to play every game was not disrupted. Nor would Sarr have to leave OM to seek playing time elsewhere, which was incidentally a very real possibility in the summer of 2017. At one point, Sarr was the most attacked player in the OM squad, the biggest scapegoat when things went awry. In 2018, those chants dissipated. Yes OM were doing largely well in their travails in the league and in Europe, but even if things got tetchy, it was well noted that the fans had turned their opinion on Sarr, that in fact – there was a good player in there somewhere – one who was not expected to take shots on goal perhaps, but could use his profile more fluidly in another outpost for Rudi Garcia's side.

The absolute high point of the year came in April, on that heady night against RB Leipzig in which the flamboyant Sarr started at wing-back in an unorthodox 3-4-2-1 formation as OM chased a one goal deficit. Sarr would strike the second goal in an incredible comeback victory, bursting 60 metres forward to latch on to Dimitri Payet's stunning cross-field pass. Yes, he needed two bites of the cherry to score, but he did bundle in an important goal to set OM on their way.

Forced off with injury minutes later, the image of a handicapped Sarr limping in celebration at the full-time whistle further endeared him to supporters. That he made a quick and public recovery just days later to feature again put him temporarily as the OM faithful's favourite player. As Marseille struck opponents to the way side in the league and en route to the Europa League final, there were even calls to include him in Didier Deschamps' World Cup squad – given France's long-time problem at right-back. In the end that did not transpire.

In 2018-19, the right-back continues to be deployed in his secondary position, but like the team overall – he has failed to capture the sparkle of the first half of the year that saw him named in UEFA's Europa League team of the season. He provided the assist in the opening game of the season against Toulouse and again for Morgan Sanson in a slender 1-0 win for OM at Nice, but the team's swagger has been slightly lost, the movement has been cumbersome and the defensive line – for OM as a whole – has been abysmal. But Sarr has avoided being the complete scapegoat in a way that he used to be back in 2015 and 2016 for example. OM fans may be hard to please, but they do not forget players who have made a turnaround in their careers.

Sarr will look back on a very good 2018 with satisfaction, there is no doubt. But from here the trajectory seems to be a slippery one. Only time will tell if 2019 will be as good.



BENJAMIN BOURIGEAUD

(*)

36

BORN: 1994/01/14 | CALAIS

CLUB: STADE RENNAIS

POSITION: MIDFIELD

AT CLUB SINCE: 2017

LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 35

Much was expected of Bourigeaud when he signed for Rennes in summer 2017. A break-out season encompassed four goals and six assists as he orchestrated the midfield of fourth placed Ligue 2 club Lens, often from a deep lying central position. Unusual for a player in his position to be so renowned in the second division, his talent was obvious across various incarnations of the Stade Bollaert-Delelis outfit both in Ligue 1 and since their relegation from the top flight at the end of the 2014/15 campaign, but the now 24-year-old Bourigeaud's arrival in the top flight had taken some time. *"I was still young,"* Bourigeaud told *L'Équipe*, *"I preferred to build and grow little by little."*

Although squad turnover can often be drastic in Ligue 2, it was perhaps telling that despite other recent departures of Lens' fellow talisman such as Wylan Cyprien to Nice and John Bostock to Turkish football, it was the loss of Bourigeaud that proved most troublesome for the Northern club as they slipped alarmingly quickly towards the bottom of the table without him last season, only finishing fourteenth in their first campaign minus their Calais native midfielder. Bourigeaud had been on the books at the Stade Bollaert-Delelis since 2005.

Bourigeaud's inaugural first division campaign with Stade Rennais saw him prove equally influential. Twelve goals across all competitions, ten in Ligue 1, over 41 games contributed heavily to SRFC enjoying their best season for some years, as they battled their way to fifth and a Europa League spot under Sabri Lamouchi. Meanwhile Bourigeaud led his team with six top flight assists, equaling Angel Di Maria and Nicolas Pépé while bettering Adrien Rabiot's and Houssem Aouar's tallies, underlining his importance as Rennes' newfound creative hub.

Outstanding in September's 3-1 win at Marseille, the game in which Wahbi Khazri re-announced himself in French football with a brace, a thunderous 30-yard strike and a clever assist from a free-kick for the third quickly ensconced Bourigeaud as a key man at Roazhon Park and a fan favourite. Despite being shifted around the midfield by Lamouchi, and initially by Christian Gourcuff, often lining up in a relatively unfamiliar role on either flank, the young Frenchman produced a startling level of consistency in his displays, only missing four games all season.

Bourigeaud is a technically gifted midfielder, capable of sitting deeper in the midfield and knitting play together with his proactive and intelligent passing while his ability to produce beautifully flat, whipped crosses, reminiscent on occasion of the masterful David Beckham, from a variety of areas remains a highlight. His speed, eye for goal and ability to work space should also not be underestimated, while Bourigeaud's vision and reading of play prove effective wherever he is deployed. However, when on form and confident, it is Bourigeaud's dead ball deliveries that can prove most dangerous, his *"fiery"* right foot being of quality Lamouchi had *"rarely seen"*.

Having justifiably won Rennes' player of the season award, the midfielder was unsurprisingly linked with a move away, with suitors such as Borussia Dortmund mentioned and Rennes reportedly wanting €25m for the Frenchman according to *L'Équipe*. Yet Bourigeaud, just as he did with Lens, stayed put and entered the 2018/19 campaign with Europa League football on the horizon for the first time in his career. This term however has proven a little more troublesome.

Much like many a Ligue 1 side who venture into the Europa league for the first time in recent seasons, Rennes' youthful squad has suffered through a lack of experience in playing tough Ligue 1 games as well as travelling long distances for competitive European action. Partly as a result, while the team struggled as a whole, Bourigeaud's previously sparkling form has waned significantly in the latter half of 2018.

Although having assumed sizeable responsibility in leading the Rennes attack during the previous season, Bourigeaud started to drop out of the first 11 as being rested around busy Europa League trips failed to aid his ailing performances. A penalty miss amid an absent display in September's loss at Nice being particularly disappointing, it was one of many games where he simply struggled to exert the control he had so often previously, although his obvious technical qualities remain largely intact.

Impressively however, despite a drop off in influence more generally, his Ligue 1 goals and assists tallies remain solid; counting four and three respectively in the first half of the season despite a reduced number of domestic minutes. A lack of consistent impact in European competition, despite appearing in every group game, perhaps underlines that, clear talent and potential aside, greater consistent exposure to higher levels of football remains a priority in the seasons to come for Bourigeaud.

Although the 2018/19 season may prove to be one of consolidation for the Frenchman, who turns 25 in mid-January, it is likely that renewed links with Dortmund and others will not be too far off. As Bourigeaud told *L'Équipe* in May, on the field he also can *"rush sometimes, I must take the time to calm down."* Bourigeaud may have to take his own advice when looking at his career as a whole, just as he did with Lens. Nevertheless, often praised for his professionalism while his talent and ability remains clear, Bourigeaud has everything needed to push on to a higher level in France or on the continent.



STEPHANE RUFFIER

(-17)

35

BORN: 1986/09/27, BAYONNE

CLUB: SAINT-ETIENNE

POSITION: GOALKEEPER

AT CLUB SINCE: 2011

LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 35

2018 has been a decidedly mixed bag for Saint-Étienne goalkeeper Stéphane Ruffier. Now 32 and never having made a move abroad or to a more ambitious club in France, one almost senses that there is something of his having given up in his play in the current season, or at least beginning to succumb to the vagaries of time. It is a strange juxtaposition for the veteran, given that Saint-Étienne in recent times have spent more heavily on veteran players, with Timothée Kolodziejczak, Neven Subotic, Yann M'Vila and Mathieu Debuchy among those brought into the fold for Les Verts in the recent past.

Ruffier did have a strong run-in in 2017/18, with the team enjoying a thirteen match unbeaten run from January to May. He was summarily named as Saint-Étienne's player of the season, an award that while it might have been based in large part on reputation, surely had some merit to it as well, the fine form of Rémy Cabella notwithstanding. But, as ever, for all of Ruffier's brilliance last season, those performances must be heavily caveated, coming as they did on the back of a three-match ban after being sent off against Monaco. Ruffier has always been a bit of a fiery character, but has surprisingly rarely struggled with discipline in his time in Saint-Étienne, a characteristic that dates back to his time at Monaco, a club that he joined as a youth and with whom he made his professional debut.

His time at Monaco was impressive, as he was not ever given an easy path to being first choice, having to first play second fiddle to the Italian international Flavio Roma before being given his chance by Ricardo in the 2007-8 season, due to injury on the part of the Italian. The following season saw Ruffier, despite Roma's recovery, retained as the team's number one, and he played well before missing the latter half of the 2010-11 season through injury, his spell on the sidelines coinciding with Monaco dropping into Ligue 2.

He made the move north to the Stade Geoffroy-Guichard upon the Principality side's relegation in 2011, electing to battle for a place against the experienced Jérémie Janot rather than be a part of his boyhood club's battle to regain their to-flight status. He has scarcely looked back since, becoming a fringe part of the France side until recently declining Didier Deschamps' call-ups to be third-choice and seeing *Les Verts* consistently qualify for Europe, even if the Champions' League, except on rare occasions, has seemed a rather too ambitious goal. He has always maintained a powerful physicality and a gift for the incredible, even if some of his best moments have been the product of lacking in fundamental awareness rather than his own talent.

Now, though, like his long-time team-mate Loïc Perrin, also a touchstone of Saint-Étienne's defensive excellence over the past decade, time has seemingly caught up to Ruffier, a 'keeper who has always relied as much on his physicality and reflexes as he has his positional nous, aerial ability, reading of the game, or even his marshalling of a defence. The last of these has fallen as often to Perrin, and the club captain's protracted absences this season have likely had much to do with Ruffier's poor form, but whether this is a matter of natural decline or the vagaries of time is a point to debate. There has been some suggestion that his head might have been turned; links this summer had emerged with both Lille, where former manager Christophe Galtier had doubts about the abilities of Mike Maignan, and Nice, where Yoan Cardinale's foibles had driven several managers to distraction.

Thus, in contrast to last season's protracted excellence, the current campaign has been a different beast, with Ruffier keeping just five clean sheets, a marked fall in performance from averaging nearly a clean sheet every other match over the four seasons spanning 2012-16. To be fair, *Les Verts* have been in the thick of things as they jockey for a place in the top six, but rather than their success being built on the defensive prowess and solidity that was a hallmark of the side under Christophe Galtier, things have been decidedly more attack-minded, with Wahbi Khazri and Cabella earning most of the plaudits.

Even with these doubts, though, he is still capable of playing a blinder on occasion, as he had against Nice in Week 18, making a stunning save against Youcef Atal to preserve a slender lead. Still adept with his feet as well, even if he is no longer one of the league's very best, or most consistent 'keepers, his style of play, energetic and brimming with a passion that stands in stark contrast to his recalcitrant manner off the pitch, continues to make for compelling viewing. While he may not be called upon in any end of the season awards, seeing *Les Verts* back into Europe would cap an impressive season.



MARCO VERRATTI

(-23)

34

BORN: 1992/11/05 | PESCARA

CLUB: PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN

POSITION: MIDFIELD

AT CLUB SINCE: 2012

LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 20

Now into his seventh season at the Parc des Princes, Marco Verratti remains a vital part of Paris Saint-Germain's ambitious project. The Italy international has now amassed over 250 appearances in *rouge et bleu*. Verratti has become a key figure and a senior member in PSG's squad as they embark on their ambitious project, specifically hell-bent on European glory. However, many have argued that Verratti has entered a level of stagnation over the past 12 months and beyond, producing several below-par performances; something unaccustomed to the Italian in his formative years at the club. What has not changed is that Verratti is very much capable of the sublime and on his day, he can produce a moment of magic that can take your breath away. Frustratingly, Verratti has been unable to fine tune some of the minor flaws in his game that have been present during his time in Paris. Now 26 years old, the little Italian is, along with Thiago Silva, the longest-serving first team player at the club and a prominent symbol within the first team squad. The ex-Pescara man is still picking up non-sensical yellow cards thus creating unnecessary pressurised situations for himself. This is nothing new and some may debate that if he was to change his style then he wouldn't be the same player.

But with maturity comes calmness and a more measured approach. Many players of Verratti's ilk have been able to show tenacity and composure and whilst there are signs that Thomas Tuchel is helping to elevate his game, Verratti still needs to find that balance on a more consistent basis. For example, his red card against Real Madrid in the Champions' League in March could and should have been avoided, but petulance and frustration overcame the Italian. The resulting suspension carried over into this season's European campaign and he was missing for PSG's mammoth group opener against Liverpool; a game that Les Parisiens lost and one in which he was sorely missed. Interestingly, it has been since the decline and eventual retirement of compatriot Thiago Motta that Verratti has stopped obviously improving as a footballer.

Motta was the orchestrator in PSG's three-man midfield and often facilitated the development of the former Pescara man. You could regularly see Motta advising and directing Verratti during games, which enabled PSG's number six to do what he does best, create chances, provide assists and become the commander during attacking transitions. With Verratti forming a new-found midfield partnership with Adrien Rabiot and occasionally Julian Draxler when playing in a central three, Verratti has been required to adapt his role by forming a rotation system covering PSG's infamous and vacant number six position. This variation has taken away some of the creativity that Verratti once shown and if the diminutive Italian is to rekindle some of the form we are accustomed to seeing from him then PSG need to address their on-going defensive midfield problems which could provide Verratti with the freedom needed to excel with more dynamism. Marco Verratti has had a good year in Paris, no more, no less. But progression in his game is needed. After a summer of flirting with Barcelona in 2017 followed by the high-profile signings of Neymar and Kylian Mbappé, Verratti has shown his commitment to PSG and wants to stay at the capital club for the foreseeable future.

Verratti has continued to show promise and PSG's success in 2018 can be partly attributed to him and his efficient displays, particularly in Ligue 1. In Europe, we eagerly await the return of the Marco Verratti. The same Verratti that was the orchestrator at Stamford Bridge in 2015 and in the first leg against Barcelona in 2017. As we look ahead into 2019, Verratti's ambitions will clearly be centred on success with PSG particularly in Europe, considering dominance in all domestic honours has become compulsory. The Italian will be hoping to put his stamp on a big European night, something he has the capacity to fulfil. With so much talent at his disposal and around him, it would be disappointing to see no progression made in a year's time. There may well be some truth in the view that Verratti has grown stale, but the only way to change that interpretation is to start delivering on the big stage again.

With the Italian national team vying for Euro 2020 qualification, Verratti has long been viewed as the natural successor to Andrea Pirlo and the Azzurri will be counting on the PSG man to deliver to avoid consecutive failures to qualify for a major competition. There have been calls from figures within Italian football suggesting that Verratti is wasting his talents playing in Ligue 1 and that he should move to Serie A, with Juventus heavily linked on numerous occasions. Verratti has dismissed a move to the team he supported as a boy, continually showing his love and affection for Paris Saint-Germain. There is little doubt that the best is yet to come for Verratti, who has not yet reached his peak, and if that is the case then PSG will be hoping that they can convince the Italian to remain at the club for the foreseeable future. As for now, we anticipate an improved and more consistent 2019 with continued success, because without a doubt, Marco Verratti is good for Ligue 1 and Ligue 1 is good for Marco Verratti.



JULIAN DRAXLER

(-20)

33

BORN: 1993/09/20 | GLADBECK

CLUB: PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN

POSITION: MIDFIELD

AT CLUB SINCE: 2017

LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 29

Having signed for €40m in January and scoring 10 goals from left wing in the next 25 games, Julian Draxler would have been forgiven for assuming his place in the PSG eleven was assured for the following season. However, just 6 months after his arrival in 2017 and €400m later, the arrivals of Kylian Mbappé and Neymar saw Angel Di Maria, Javier Pastore, Lucas Moura and Draxler all either offered to other clubs or told they were free to find new employers. Suddenly, Draxler had a fight on his hands.

All four declined the opportunity, Lucas eventually labelled the odd one out, while Draxler was relegated to the Parc des Princes' bench with MCN a sizeable roadblock between him and the starting eleven as Adrien Rabiot, Thiago Motta and Marco Verratti provided balance in Unai Emery's midfield. This swift marginalisation affected the confidence and performances of Draxler and Di Maria in particular, both looking a little wide-eyed at what had unfolded that summer. At one point it seemed as though both would have little choice but to quietly make their excuses in January. Draxler, however, as others sulked, took his chances and grew into the season, proving himself a valuable cog in the PSG machine for Emery and now Thomas Tuchel. Paris' failure, or inability due to FFP, to replace Blaise Matuidi in the summer of 2017 may have rescued Julian Draxler's PSG career. As neither Jean Michaël Seri nor Fabinho arrived, Giovanni Lo Celso was considered too inexperienced to stand in for the perpetually injured Pastore and it was Draxler who assumed a midfield role with at least one of Motta, Verratti and Rabiot always injured.

Originally used in a more natural left-sided role, Emery trailing a 4-4-2 in what proved to be a vain attempt to pair Mbappé with Edinson Cavani in attack, a feat since achieved by Tuchel, Draxler had moved inside to more of a number 10 role before dropping deeper into Matuidi's former position as the furthest forward of a midfield trio, affording Neymar and Mbappé more freedom in a front three. This move now seems an obvious one, the 25-year-old's skill set lending itself to a deeper position. His comfort in possession, range of passing and awareness of space means Draxler's performances are far removed from the mobility and dynamism brought by Matuidi but Draxler's grace and guile offers PSG more control and creativity. His undoubted class and can-do attitude had him back in the team, as Emery underlined; *"He is very positive, he wants to play, he wants to help, he wants to adapt to several positions."* Although admitting he had to "fight in training", Draxler finally belonged again.

Despite an underwhelming World Cup, a common theme for German players - being dragged off at half-time against Sweden having missed a huge chance was a low point, Draxler returned to Paris with a new manager to impress and new gaps in midfield to fill with signings again non-existent and Adrien Rabiot's contract situation keeping the Frenchman on the fringes of the team.

Although tentative at first, Tuchel came to rely on Draxler, almost as a holding player, in his gradual move towards three centre backs. A burgeoning partnership with Marco Verratti deep in the midfield, most notably in domestic fixtures and at Napoli, has been a key feature of PSG's play this season. Their interplay, ability to beat opponents and a wide spectrum of passing, has often made two men feel like three. Individually, Draxler goes a little under the radar as he serenely floats around midfield next to Verratti's all-action, yellow card collecting, referee berating displays, but he remains quietly outstanding.

A highlight came as a free-wheeling Lille visited Paris, their closest league challengers this term, which saw Draxler produce a masterful midfield display. Telepathic interplay with Verratti, pitch perfect passing, continually jinking away from Lille players, often picking incisive through-balls and always making the right decision in possession. He only meaningfully lost the ball once all night. Despite perhaps becoming a little wayward in the final third of late, he continues to contribute a steady stream of goals and assists, with an intelligent pair of headers in a victory over Saint-Étienne this autumn being particularly memorable: the first to control on the run and the second to deftly lob Stéphane Ruffier.

Despite a standout 2018 at club level, uncertainty remains on the horizon. With Rabiot likely to depart, Tuchel has discussed the need for one, maybe two, central midfielders to be added this winter while, with FFP an issue, a sizeable offer from an in-need Bayern Munich, their squad ageing, Arsenal or Liverpool, both long-term suitors, could be enough to tempt Paris into selling. Draxler remains positive on his PSG future however. *"I played 47, 48 games last season and am convinced I will play them this season as well."* Draxler said this summer, *"I like the club and the city, I feel comfortable there, and that's why there was no reason for me to look for an opportunity to leave."* Not giving him that opportunity should be a priority for Thomas Tuchel and Paris Saint-Germain in 2019.



BERTRAND TRAORE

(+53)

32

BORN: 1995/09/06

BOBO-DIOULASSO

CLUB: LYON

POSITION: FORWARD

AT CLUB SINCE: 2017

LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 35

In the modern football world, it has become overtly apparent that the formative years of precocious talents belonging to the elite European clubs often suffer from stymied development; largely due to irregular playing time and unsettling loan spells that instil a nomadic narrative to a player's career before they have had the opportunity to flourish at their parent club. It is hard to think of a Ligue 1 talent to fit the paradigm more aptly, who has been faced with more of a challenging and circuitous route to regular first team football, than Bertrand Traoré.

Barely making 10 appearances in three years at Chelsea, Traoré enjoyed two productive loan periods in the Eredivisie for Vitesse and Ajax, scoring two vital goals in the latter spell in the Europa League semi-final first leg against his future employers. Following his €10m move from Chelsea to Lyon in June 2017, he enjoyed his most prolific campaign to date in his maiden season at the Parc OL, scoring 18 goals in all competitions –outdoing his previous best tally during the 2014/15 loan spell at Vitesse by one goal.

A year into his Lyon career, Bertrand Traoré's 2018 has been one of growth and maturation. Following the signings of Moussa Dembélé and Martin Terrier, Traoré currently finds himself playing in a Lyon side that boasts an array of attacking talent – arguably top-heavy in this department especially considering the lack of strength in-depth in other positions – and the imposing 23-year-old has had to contend with spells in and out of Bruno Génésio's side during this first half of the 2018/19 campaign.

Lyon have been deployed in a variety of formations hitherto this season – ranging from 4-3-3, 4-1-2-1-2, 4-2-3-1 and 3-5-1-1 to show the heavily rotating nature of the squad – meaning that not only has Traoré's role in the side been disrupted, but his role and physical requirements to this team have been interchanging throughout. Such alternating of the playing squad is only natural considering Lyon's Champions' League schedule in conjunction with their Ligue 1 domestic agenda – that plainly demands a top-three finish – and many would argue that the Burkina Faso international is developing his game by enhancing his range of physical qualities and versatility by adapting to changeable roles in this Lyon team as directed by Génésio, often based on the nature of their opponent.

Nevertheless, at 23-years-old, Traoré is at a stage in his career where he needs to be playing in a team that not only maximises his playing time, but ideally one that can give him a role and a platform to allow him to flourish and consistently display the talent that his potential promises, rather than be dictated by the pragmatic needs of a manager who restricts him to irregular cameos that could well hinder his long-term development. Traoré ended the 2017/18 season on a real high, scoring in five of his final seven league games of the season. This purple patch was underlined in Lyon's 3-0 home victory over Troyes, with Traoré notching a brace for *Les Gones*. The first goal was an exquisite flick that completely wrong-footed Erwin Zelazny from Houssem Aouar's initial attempted low shot. Confidence clearly flowing, he built upon this just seven minutes later, rising imperiously to head home Ferland Mendy's cross to set Lyon on the way to assured victory.

His willingness to contribute across multiple areas of play was manifested in his March goal at home to Caen, where he was at the genesis and culmination of a move that proved to be the decisive winner. Collecting the ball inside the Caen half, Traoré looked up and swiftly switched the play to the now-departed Myziane Maolida, who smartly fed the overlapping run of Ferland Mendy. The left-back's cross was deflected off a Caen boot, and momentarily, bounced around in the air unattended, before Traoré's instinctively poached upon the loose ball to slam home. In Lyon's September home encounter with Marseille, their renowned Ligue 1 rivals, the 23-year-old not only produced similar incisive quality in the creation of his goals, but delivered the kind of big-game performance that will propel him forward in his OL career, scoring a double in their 4-2 victory.

Likewise to the Caen goal, Traoré turned on the corner of the penalty area, exchanged a delightful one-two with Nabil Fekir, before swinging his left-foot to beat Marseille goalkeeper Yohann Pelé at his near post. That strike was his second of the game, following his first goal that his virtuoso runs often promise: receiving a cross-field pass on the right side, his close control whilst menacing forward into the penalty area with speed and intent too much for Jordan Amavi, before making no mistake in firing low into the far corner. Traoré's beguiling first touch when receiving the ball on the wing, and running at pace whilst bewitching defenders by cutting inside is one of the more irresistible and potent aspects to his game. Génésio needs more of these moments from Traoré if he is to cement his place in the first XI; if not, there should be plenty of other willing suitors across Europe.



WAHBI KHAZRI

(*)

31

BORN: 1991/02/08 | AJACCIO
CLUB: SAINT-ETIENNE
POSITION: FORWARD
AT CLUB SINCE: 2018
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 29

Do you sometimes look over the water and think how different your life could be somewhere else? Wahbi Khazri did, but sometimes the grass is not greener on the other side. A disastrous stint at Sunderland had the Tunisian international running back to Ligue 1 and it has not taken him long to restore his strength. Almost like Samson re-growing his hair, the 27-year-old once again is a creative force that can be a thorn in any French club's side. His 2018 started at Rennes, where he had been on fire at the beginning of the season. Employed as a makeshift centre forward, the Tunisian thrived in a false nine role, as he not only helped combine play but also still managed to effect things in the opponent's box. However, he did not bust the statistics sheet as much as people predicted. Three goals and two assists punctuated what was a topsy-turvy end to the season from the Breton side who continued their habit of fluctuating wildly in form throughout a single campaign.

Then came what must have been the proudest moment of his career, representing Tunisia at the World Cup. While the African side crashed out at the group stages, Khazri showcased his talent as he grabbed two goals and an assist in Russia, including being a huge part in his nation's turnaround in the final group game against Panama. The 27-year-old then had the pick of Ligue 1 clubs chasing him, as they sought to add to their creative options. Many anticipated a return to Roazhon Park but instead, Khazri chose the green of Saint-Étienne and he has not looked back once.

He has fit seamlessly into a team desperate for more of a creative spark and whether it has been out wide, behind a central striker or acting as the frontman himself, he has been by far their most important player. Eight goals and an assist in just 15 games at the time of writing is an excellent return so far and serves to underscore the extent to which he has been a real menace. Khazri has built up a great understanding with team-mates such as Rémy Cabella and Loïs Diony almost instantly and the ability he affords manager Jean-Louis Gasset to play him anywhere in the attacking half of the pitch has been such a bonus for a side that typically either fail to keep players in form or fit. The Tunisian has always been an excellent technician, that is why he has garnered so much interest over his career to date. Superb close-ball control, the ability to pick out a pass and be a threat from set pieces as well, the latter a trait that is surprisingly underappreciated for above-average teams in the modern game, but he is someone that at least in Ligue 1, consistently delivers.

What has really changed since his time in England is, by his own admission, his positional maturity. In an interview with RMC back in October, he admitted his time as a lone striker seasoned his overall quality, allowing him to understand the importance of positional discipline and avoiding drifting out of matches, because of the need to constantly get involved or to simply fill space that is place on the shoulders of many frontman. With this, he has become a much more efficient player. No longer is he trying to go on mazy runs from deep, darting around an entire defence only to be too tired or off-balance to create something meaningful.

Instead, he will pick up the ball in the final third, drive at opponents and move inside towards the goal, where he is much more dangerous. Opponents cannot stand off him because of his ability from distance, which creates space for those around him, while still giving him the chance to try an effort on goal if he so pleases. Not only that, he has added attacking instincts akin to a striker to his game, allowing him to become a more deadly threat in the box. Whether it was his wonderfully controlled first-time volley on the opening day against Guingamp or his sublime chest control before spinning into a half-volley to rifle in his first of two against Monaco, he has really become a deadly goal-scorer as he begins to reach the prime of his career.

You can see the improvements he has made over the last 12 months in so many of his goals, especially with the technical ability constantly associated with his finishing. He drives through the ball so fluidly that it leaves goalkeepers scrambling and he has really honed in the art of arrowing a finish into the bottom corner. As 2018 comes to a close, it feels as if his time at the Stadium of Light was a simple blip in the road. The way Khazri has not just returned to form, but even surpassed it is a testament to his will to not only put that bad experience behind him but to still become the footballer everyone expected to see when he did hop over the Channel. Many will point a finger at Ligue 1 for being a "weaker" league, but this feels closer to the Florian Thauvin return story than someone simply slipping back into their comfy French slippers. It would be doing the work he has put into his game a great disservice to dismiss his rebirth at Saint-Étienne as being simply because of his environment. It is more than that, Khazri has pushed himself onto the next level. He is one of the best players in the league outside of last season's top four and could be even getting glances from them in the near future should this form continue.



ISMAILA SARR

(+3)

30

BORN: 1998/02/25, SAINT-LOUIS

CLUB: STADE RENNAIS

POSITION: FORWARD

AT CLUB SINCE: 2017

LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 34

It has been another year of progression for Ismaila Sarr. The Rennes forward has steadily built on the promise he originally showed at Metz, before his move to Brittany in the summer of 2017 and now has the eyes of Europe on him after some standout performances and wonderful goals.

The start of 2018 saw Sarr return from a lengthy period out injured, as he successfully put behind him a slightly frustrating start to his Rennes career, to finish the season strongly. Under then Rennes coach Sabri Lamouchi, Sarr was deployed in a variety of positions but seemed to find himself most often in a centre forward role. Whilst he performed admirably there, it certainly is not a position which lends itself to the maximisation of his best attributes and he often looked isolated or was forced to drop too deep at times.

There is no doubt that Sarr's long-term future is instead in a wider position, the left-wing in particular, even if his dexterity facilitates his playing occasionally on the right. In those wide areas, he can fully unleash his most dangerous attribute; his pace. With or without the ball at his feet, Sarr is one of the quickest in the division and with a genuine love for taking players on, marking him as a daunting prospect for Ligue 1's defenders. His agent Thierno Seydi spoke in the summer, *"he is very fast with excellent technique. He has the same qualities of (Ousmane) Dembélé of Barcelona (and also formerly of Rennes)"*.

Whilst his desire to run with the ball is encouraging, developments are required in terms of decision-making as too often Sarr finds himself running down a blind alley or struggles to make the correct decision at the right time. Over the course of the year it has been pleasing to see Sarr acknowledge this and come the close of 2018, there have been dramatic improvements. It is also easy to forget that Sarr is still only 20-years-old and in just his third season of professional football, so to be playing at the high level that he serves to announce his quality.

After finishing the 2017/18 season strongly, helping Rennes to a 5th place finish and qualification for the Europa League, Sarr, as part of the Senegalese squad, headed out to Russia for the World Cup. Despite Senegal cruelly being denied a chance of progressing to the next stage, due to an inferior discipline record and some questionable play towards the end of the Japan vs Poland game, Sarr still found time to attract glowing praise for his performances. His pace and power caught the eye of scouts from Barcelona and Juventus.

Rennes successfully ward off interest in the summer from all potential suitors, however their start to the 2018/19 season was something of a struggle. Sarr remained a bright spot in an ever-increasingly muddled squad. Goals against Angers, a classic burst down the left-wing before cutting inside and curling an effort into the far top corner, and Marseille, a poacher's finish, pouncing on a goalkeeping mistake, gave further evidence that he was becoming more clinical in front of goal. He has already matched last season's goal-scoring tally in the first half of the current campaign. It is the variety of goals that Sarr scores which is impressive. In addition to the aforementioned efforts: runs into the box followed by low composed finishes, delayed runs into the box to lose his marker before firing in and wonderful curling efforts from outside the area. There are not many areas of the pitch from which he cannot score it seems.

With Europa League football came a new audience for Sarr to impress and he has taken the opportunity with both hands. As Rennes just about progressed from their group, the only French team to achieve that this season, Sarr was without doubt the shining light. Few teams could cope with him and it was to his credit that UEFA included him in their Europa League Breakthrough Team of the Group Stages. This was no doubt helped by a goal of the tournament contender against Jablonec. Collecting the ball on the left, he cut inside and played a one-two with Benjamin André before smashing home the return pass on the volley into the top corner from 20 yards. The finish was sublime, the power was immense, but the technique to hit the high bouncing ball that well was something else. He followed that up with another wonder strike against Astana in the final group game hitting a powerful finish, again into the top corner, from 25 yards out this time.

Finishing the year strongly with noticeably improved performances, under new Rennes coach Julien Stéphan, has meant that for the third time in his short career to date, Sarr is facing a barrage of interest from some of the biggest teams across Europe. Arsenal are reportedly the latest side to join the queue, forcing Rennes to indicate they would not entertain offers less than €30m. If his performances continue in their recent manner, that valuation will only increase at a rapid rate in 2019.



FERLAND MENDY

(*)

29

BORN: 1995/06/08

MEULAN-EN-YVELINES

CLUB: LYON

POSITION: DEFENDER

AT CLUB SINCE: 2017

LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 33

Back in the summer of 2017, while still at Le Havre, Ferland Mendy was being linked with a move to West Bromwich Albion and Birmingham City. Fast forward to the present day and the now Lyon man is touted with a January transfer to the likes of Barcelona and Juventus. That is the kind of difference 18 months can make but more importantly, demonstrates how his growth has accelerated over the course of 2018.

The start of the year was really his breakthrough, after a number of starts replacing the injured Marçal saw him pin his flag to the mast of left-back. By the end of the winter break, he had edged in front of the former Guingamp to make his spot in the starting line-up his own. While his impact did not quite push them into second, Lyon still attained their goal of qualifying in the Champions' League places. With that came calls for him to make the French national team World Cup squad, especially given the slow recovery of his name-sake Benjamin, but they eventually went unheeded.

Into the new season and the 23-year-old has picked up where he left off. A consistent performer who is now unquestionably the number one choice in his position at the club, there are now more eyes on him than ever given his excellent performances in the Champions' League group stages. Not only did he do well in *Les Gones'* two strong performances against Manchester City, he came up with the assist for Tanguy N'Dombélé against Hoffenheim that at the time, put them 2-0 ahead.

Performing on the biggest stage also meant he finally got a call up to the France squad in November, after injury saw Benjamin Mendy pull out. He made his debut in the friendly against Uruguay in a performance that was so impressive that it will likely not see him overlooked by Lucas Digne again any time soon. Mendy is a modern full-back, to the extent that he has even played in left midfield this season. The Frenchman is most effective in the opponent's half, driving to the by-line before either pulling the ball back to a team-mate in space, putting in a cross or going for goal himself. In fact, both the goals he has scored this season show how advanced up the pitch he is. For a recent equaliser against Caen, he was level with the forwards before the ball was switched to him and as for a header in a victory over Monaco, he was practically positioned as a wide forward.

His usefulness in those positions and why he has been so successful is also due to those in front of him. Whether it be Memphis Depay, Houseem Aouar, Nabil Fékir or Maxwel Cornet, all prefer to play in a more central role, which leaves Mendy acres of space to advance into and hold the team's width at the same time. Added to that is his willingness to take players on, whether that be by dribbling around them or bursting past them with pace. What is so good to see is his positivity in those attacking areas, he always seems to want to beat at least one opponent to take them out of the game before passing the ball on and he never settles for a recycling of possession.

What really helps him excel in trying to beat his man is that he can use both feet with equal success. His ability to shift the ball between his left and his right peg without missing a beat can be so disorientating for his opponents, knowing that should they show him inside then he could quite easily go for a shot or cut back for an in-swinging cross as easily as swinging in the out-swinging ball or pull back with his left. That has also benefitted Lyon, who could rely on him playing on the opposite flank during a mini injury-crisis down the right earlier this season. It could have been his best game of the campaign in fact, driving past defenders at will but the general level of comfort he harbours all over the pitch demonstrates how much he has improved under Bruno Génésio's stewardship.

As an anecdote, he hilariously committed a foul throw against Lille after being confused by some coloured-out markings on their pitch, therefore a small investment in an eye test might be recommended. As for the future, the next six months will be interesting to see exactly what lies ahead for Mendy. Arguably third-choice for the national team, he may feel a move away to a bigger club is needed in order to force his way up the pecking order ahead of Euro 2020.

However, leaving in January could have real adverse effects on his current growth pattern. Clubs like Barcelona and Juventus have well-established full backs that he would not immediately displace, so would it be worth the risk to take your name out of the headlines for an immediate transfer or complete the season with Lyon before looking at potential new destinations in the summer? All depends on how those big guns want to move forward into 2019 but one thing is for sure, Lyon fans would like to keep hold of him for a little longer, even if he cannot quite work out where the throw-in line is.



JONATHAN BAMBA

(+37)

28

BORN: 1996/03/26 | ALFORTVILLE

CLUB: LILLE OSC

POSITION: FORWARD

AT CLUB SINCE: 2018

LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 38

In last year's GFFN 100, we lauded Jonathan Bamba's ability to make such a good impression for two different teams in one year. He had returned from his positive loan spell at Angers to carry Saint-Étienne in their strong early-season form, before their drop in form and the departure of manager Oscar Garcia. This year, we could praise a similar achievement, and at this rate we may even have to again next year. Bamba has pursued his strong form into the season with a new club, Lille. His role in a mouth-watering trio for whom scouts from throughout the continent have turned their eyes leaves all possibilities open for upcoming transfer windows.

A supersonic forward with excellent close ball control, Bamba is a typical Ligue 1 "dragster", a signature export of French football. He can play on either wing or, less naturally, as a striker. In addition to his pace and counter-attacking abilities, he is able to unlock a compact situation with his long shots. The 22-year old is becoming more mature and regular in his performance levels, and we are now able to tell with better certainty what sort of player he can turn into.

Going into 2018, Saint-Étienne, under their new manager Jean-Louis Gasset, were hoping to extract themselves from lowly 16th position. Bamba started the year strongly, with a goal against Nîmes in the Coupe de France followed by two assists to forge a win against Toulouse in the league. He was relegated to the bench after the following loss to last-place Metz but came on to find a winner against Caen. From 25 metres out, his sudden effort curled and bounced into the bottom right corner of a surprised Rémy Vercoutre. In February, playing as centre-forward, his two assists saved a point against Marseille. His performance against Paris was also outstanding in one of Saint-Étienne's best matches of the season, marred only by the eventual champions' late, late equaliser (1-1).

At the end of the season he totaled eight goals and ten assists, and his contract expired. A falling-out with Oscar Garcia had put an end to negotiations earlier in the season. Bamba signed for five years at Lille on a free transfer, a team he had beaten 5-0 just a few weeks earlier. LOSC had saved themselves from relegation late in the season, but he was attracted to the club by his former coach Christophe Galtier, who had given him his professional debut at Saint-Étienne. He was equally reunited with Lille's star Nicolas Pépé, with whom he had played at Angers.

Since the start of the new season, the 22-year old has consistently started as an inverted winger on the left, as part of the BIP-BIP (French for the Road Runner from Looney Tunes) trio with Jonathan Ikoné and Pépé as a trio in behind the striker. Their speed and chemistry have made Les Dogues one of the most dangerous counter-attacking teams in the league and a clear contender for Champions' League spots. At the time of writing, the trio has scored 75% of LOSC's goals and supplied 53% of their assists this season. Bamba himself is on seven goals and one assist, the second best total behind Pépé. He is however interestingly yet to score in an away match.

Of the trio, Bamba also has made the most important contributions in defensive phases. As the team occasionally shifts into a 4-4-2 formation, he descends to a left midfield position, with Pépé doing the same on the opposite flank. His defensive qualities are perhaps unnoticeable, but he is athletically capable of contributing by busting a gut to get back, which he does so capably.

In September, Bamba made headlines as he scored two late goals to assure Lille's 3-0 win against Marseille. The following week, Bamba was man of the match as LOSC hosted his former side ASSE. He scored almost two identical goals – classic Bamba right-foot curlers from the edge of the box – and assisted Pépé in a 3-1 win. Throughout the year, Bamba has continued to make regular appearances for the U21 France national team, scoring four goals in nine caps. He has admitted being contacted by Côte d'Ivoire to link up with his club team-mate Pépé in their senior national team, but he does not yet appear to be ready to give up aspirations of breaking into the Les Bleus senior set-up.

Bamba's progression has put him in an ever-increasingly sizeable spotlight, but 2018 has shown that greater attention, bigger contracts and more high-profile moves are not distracting him. With the likely transfer of Pépé from Lille in the next 6 months, with Les Dogues a little cash-strapped, Bamba may soon have to become the undisputed attacking lynchpin for Lille, as they march on to gain re-entry into the world of continental football. If Lille continue on their current trajectory, then European football in the 2019/20 campaign is both realistic and represents a further opportunity for Bamba to showcase the necessary maturity that he has gained in 2018. Unless he too attracts a buyer for his talents, which won't be difficult if Lille are willing to sell.



PRESNEL KIMPEMBE

(-5)

27

BORN: 1995/08/13

BEAUMONT-SUR-OISE

CLUB: PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN

POSITION: DEFENDER

AT CLUB SINCE: 2015

LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 25

Let us be clear on one thing: 2018 was not the year that Presnel Kimpembe announced himself as one of the best performing central defenders in Europe – he did not, and he is not. However, it was an incredibly important 12 months for a central defender of his age trying to find a foothold at the highest level of the game, playing with and going up against the top players in the world for club and country.

If we are in the habit of being completely honest, Kimpembe has made far too many mistakes to even warrant the suggestion that he is a top defender at this stage in his career, but that perception has come about in part because he plays for PSG, in France, viewers and critics are less forgiving of his mistakes. After all, the young man is only 23, and is still undergoing an apprenticeship under the wing of one of the best centre-backs in the world (Thiago Silva) – it is undeniably important to make the mistakes he has made now, rather than when he is older, at a time when lapses of concentration shall not be so easily forgiven when he will undoubtedly be tasked with greater responsibilities that extend past simply his own, on-pitch performances.

For his club, Kimpembe has shown to be reliable enough at the back, but new PSG boss Thomas Tuchel has asked to work on specifically on his close control and technique. It was glaring for all to see against Liverpool that, out of the three centre-backs passing the ball from side to side, Kimpembe was the most error or accident prone. This is a learning curve for the Frenchman, not like some skill he will never be able to master – it merely requires repetition. Tuchel is trying to turn Kimpembe into a complete central defender and at this juncture the jury remains out regarding whether or not the German succeeds. Kimpembe has of course embraced this challenge, as it is a naturally enticing interesting prospect to become a more intelligent defender and a better player on the ball than someone in his position who merely seeks to perfect the basics involved with the art of defending: aerial dominance and a knack to consistently pull off impressive interceptions, the latter of which Kimpembe must time better also.

Some critics have compared the PSG youth academy product to Mamadou Sakho in the type of mistakes that he makes – this is a harsh judgement to make so early on in Kimpembe's career – he has also shown that he is capable of match-winning, unbeatable, wall-like, herculean performances. Many will remember his role in Unai Emery's greatest night as PSG manager, during a 4-0 victory over Barcelona in the Champions' League in 2017. It is unclear which direction his style of play will take, but Kimpembe certainly has not taken the approach of resting on his laurels now that he starts for the Ligue 1 champions – this is something to be applauded and somewhat bucks the trend amongst the personality traits of the more fun-loving French young footballers to have come through the ranks in the last decade.

They say that attitude is half the job. If that is the case, then young Presnel is halfway there! Not only is he eager to learn, he has also had good relationships with managers both past and present. He got along incredibly well with Unai Emery, indicating in interviews that there was more constructive communication with the Spaniard than he enjoyed under Laurent Blanc - he is loving his first season under Tuchel so far and recently signed a new contract that keeps him with the capital club until 2023. He also recorded his first career assist at Nîmes for a Kylian Mbappé goal. Lest we forget, Kimpembe is also World Champion! Whilst he enjoyed virtually no playing time in Russia this summer, he participated immensely in fostering the exceptional team spirit off the field that kept a squad happy and together, creating an atmosphere within the French camp which are perhaps underrated qualities for someone his age – a type of leadership that is less lauded than more conventional methods. However, he has been given his chance in Les Bleus' starting set-up by Didier Deschamps after the World Cup, in place of the injured Samuel Umtiti and he unfortunately made a string costly errors, most notably in a friendly with Iceland in October, making him an easy scapegoat for the Les Bleus faithful as the squad deals with the transition associated with coming off cloud nine following their summer of success.

What does the future hold for young Presnel? He needs to be more focused, more consistently and throughout 90 minutes; he needs to improve technically, but the kind of year he has endured and the kind of pressure he has been under will make him grow mentally. Kimpembe is probably not worth tens of millions just yet, but a little more concentration could see his career rocket for both club and country.



REMY CABELLA

(*)

26

BORN: 1990/03/08 | AJACCIO

CLUB: SAINT-ETIENNE

POSITION: MIDFIELD

AT CLUB SINCE: 2017

LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 32

Some of you reading this may be surprised that Cabella will soon be 29 in a few short months. For he is a player who still resembles youthful zeal and precociousness but has had precious little to show for it. Now plying his trade at Saint-Étienne after completing a permanent €5m move from Olympique de Marseille, time is running out for Cabella to make a big splash in the same way he had achieved five or six years ago.

How has 2018 fared for the attacking midfielder? In short, it has been more of the same for the 28-year-old who is performing without the glare he received in the Premier League and at Marseille. Perhaps he has found his level at Saint-Étienne, a well-intentioned and able club who should be targeting the upper echelons in the Championnat, but have yet to quite break through into the established top four. The start of the year saw Sainté in the midst of cripplingly poor form that brought them to drop out of the top six and hurtle towards the relegation zone. Of course, little of that can be attributed to the former Newcastle midfielder, who missed six weeks of action. His early year form was unremarkable as Sainté steadied the ship under Jean-Louis Gasset. Nevertheless, Cabella was ever-present, featuring the full 90 minutes of every game in January and early February bar one.

A bemusing administrative oversight saw him miss the 2-2 draw against Marseille, his then-parent club. No one thought he would be missing before rumours crept up in the few days before the game. Les Verts' administrative staff had overlooked the clause when hurriedly finalising Cabella's loan deal in August, and thus that became the only blip in his playing time for the rest of the campaign. In Saint-Étienne and particularly under Gasset, Cabella found an organised structure in which he could thrive and a coach that would eke out a defined place for him within the team. Not since the Montpellier days had Cabella enjoyed such freedoms. He was largely shunted into wide roles and moulded into the team structure rather than have a team built around his qualities.

The result? You guessed it. A stable run of form – so much so that Saint-Étienne did not lose once from the end of January to early May – a run of results that saw them leap from 16th to 5th. Cabella featured in every game in the number 10 role at the heart of a rigid 4-2-3-1 formation. His brightest spot of form came in March-April, where he struck four goals and assisted one other in the space of five games. This run included a sumptuous 3-0 away win to FC Nantes as well as a well-earned 1-1 draw at the home of the champions-elect Paris Saint-Germain, a game in which Cabella scored. Yet towards the end of the season both he and the team ran out of steam. Despite netting against Bordeaux, a highly damaging 1-3 defeat to direct rivals Bordeaux – themselves in Europa contention – saw them drop out of the top five. A defeat to Monaco on the penultimate weekend put paid to the comeback that meant that even a 5-0 win over Lille to close out a topsy-turvy season was in the end, academic.

His heart was set at the Geoffroy-Guichard stadium though, and thus there he would remain in the 2018/19 season. In the new campaign however, Cabella's form became more erratic and disjointed. He also had to contend with more competition after Sainté pulled off the signing of Wahbi Khazri from Sunderland. In Khazri, ASSE have a player that has most of the qualities of Cabella, though is more forward thinking and proficient in front of goal.

And so it proved. Despite being a mainstay in the number 10 role, Cabella was once more shunted to the left in a 4-2-3-1 or 4-3-3 formation that allowed the former Sunderland man to fit into the side more easily. The move has produced mixed results, but a clear discrepancy between the two. At the time of writing, Khazri has eight goals to Cabella's three in the league. The former OM man was wary of Saint-Étienne signing a player that threatened to limit his influence with the side, so much so that Gasset took the step of calling Cabella personally ahead of the move to explain the rationale behind the signing. He contested that having two creative players with significant Ligue 1 experience and that also play in several roles across the front four would only be beneficial to the team. Furthermore, with Cabella's surgery in the spring and late start to pre-season coupled with Khazri's World Cup exertions – a set of ready-made rotation options would be welcome.

So far the Khazri-Cabella relationship remains on the surface lovely, though one imagines that will not go on forever. For Cabella, he will have to be frank to himself whether he is able to share the limelight once more with a rival, or whether – with 30 approaching – he has the fortitude to make another big move.

It will be an important 12 months ahead.

50-26 RECAP

50.	Kamil Glik	AS Monaco
49.	Adrien Rabiot	Paris Saint-Germain
48.	Mathieu Debuchy	AS Saint-Étienne
47.	Gianluigi Buffon	Paris Saint-Germain
46.	Kenny Lala	RC Strasbourg
45.	Moussa Dembélé	Olympique Lyonnais
44.	Rubén Aguilar	Montpellier HSC
43.	Danijel Subasic	AS Monaco
42.	Max-Alain Gradel	Toulouse FC
41.	Pedro Mendes	Montpellier HSC
40.	Ellyes Skhiri	Montpellier HSC
39.	Mathieu Dossevi	Toulouse FC
38.	Adama Soumaoro	Lille OSC
37.	Bouna Sarr	Olympique de Marseille
36.	Benjamin Bourigeaud	Stade Rennais
35.	Stéphane Ruffier	AS Saint-Étienne
34.	Marco Verratti	Paris Saint-Germain
33.	Julian Draxler	Paris Saint-Germain
32.	Bertrand Traoré	Olympique Lyonnais
31.	Wahbi Khazri	AS Saint-Étienne
30.	Ismaïla Sarr	Stade Rennais
29.	Ferland Mendy	Olympique Lyonnais
28.	Jonathan Bamba	Lille OSC
27.	Presnel Kimpembe	Paris Saint-Germain
26.	Rémy Cabella	AS Saint-Étienne



LUCAS TOUSART

(+15)

25

BORN: 1997/04/21 | ARRAS

CLUB: LYON

POSITION: MIDFIELD

AT CLUB SINCE: 2015

LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 33

For Lucas Tousart, 2017 was the year he revealed himself to France. He became an essential element in Bruno Génésio's side with his name even being put forward for the captaincy (finally given to Nabil Fekir) at the beginning of the season. However, at first it did not seem that Tousart had the level required to make a place for himself in Lyon. Joining OL from Valenciennes, his first year at the club was complicated as he barely played with the first team and the few appearances that he did make were very far from dream debuts. He also had to balance this first year with his ongoing academic studies, complicating his adaptation even more.

This all changed in the second part of the 2016/17 season. With Gonalons' level gradually dropping, Lyon were in vital need of an element of physicality in the centre of the pitch. Next to Tolisso or Gonalons (when the current Bayern player played higher up the field) in Génésio's 4-2-3-1, Tousart excelled, showcasing his physicality and sense of anticipation. His demeanour and slumped body language with the long strides he took to break opposition lines along with his defensive abilities were reminiscent of Jérémy Toulalan at his peak, arguably one of the best defensive midfielders to ever wear a Lyon shirt. He even started displaying some superb passing skills, which not many would have believed him capable of upon his arrival in Lyon. The future was bright for Tousart who was starting to demonstrate that he was capable of performing at very high levels, even showing hints that Lyon might not be big enough a club for him and that the French national team was not far away.

2018 however, has been more of a mixed year for the former Valenciennes player. If his place in the starting eleven was relatively safe in the first part of 2018, the emergence of both Tanguy N'Dombélé and Houssem Aouar has eclipsed Tousart, who in the midst of their ascension, has tended to stagnate, even regress, some Lyon fans might claim. Collectively, the latter part of the 2017/18 campaign was extremely disappointing for Lyon, eliminated from the Europa League by CSKA Moscow and losing their 2nd spot in Ligue 1 from right under their noses to Monaco during the penultimate week of top flight football. This season, Tousart's highlights have included two red cards against Dijon and PSG. If the former did not cost his team any points, the latter led to Lyon conceding five goals to Les Parisiens in the second half of the game, after almost dominating the Qatari owned club in the first 45 minutes. He was also lucky enough not to have conceded a penalty on Yannis Salibur in the derby against Saint-Étienne when Lyon were up 1-0 in the final minutes of the game. Given the importance that game possesses for Lyon fans, Tousart can thank referee Anthony Gautier for sparing him a massive dent in his Lyon career.

Other evidence of his poor recent form includes him being snubbed from starting both games against Manchester City and for a clash against Marseille, three games in which Lyon delivered their best performances of the season, and his overall declining game time in contrast to the previous season where he was Lyon's most utilised field player. At the moment, Tousart simply does not seem to have the same impact as he did when he first started to integrate the team. Tousart does seem aware of his changing stature within the squad: *"I think I started the season well (...) but it's true that coming back from the international break it was a little more complicated for me (...) I need to work hard and prove to the coach that I am improving and ready to play"*.

Nevertheless, Lyon have not forgotten his earlier performances that attracted the attention of some of the biggest European clubs, Barcelona and Juventus included. Evidence of this is provided by Tousart's recent contract extension that now binds him to the club of the "Capitale des Gaules" until 2023, a clear demonstration of the confidence Lyon have in their defensive midfielder. This is further highlighted by the fact that other key players such as Rafael, Anthony Lopes and especially Nabil Fekir have their contracts running out in the near future. Yet, Lyon decided to give Tousart's situation priority.

If he wishes to live up to that that extension however, he will need to regain his 2017 level quickly. Right behind him, the young talented Spaniard Pape Cheikh Diop and academy gem Maxence Caqueret are knocking on the door. Also, the current system used by Bruno Génésio, a 3-5-2 or 5-3-2 depending on how you want to look at it, only allows for two central midfielders. But Tousart has shown in the past that he is not afraid of a little competition.



BENJAMIN ANDRE

(-1)

24

BORN: 1990/08/03 | NICE

CLUB: STADE RENNAIS

POSITION: MIDFIELD

AT CLUB SINCE: 2014

LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 35

Benjamin André is a name that rarely makes headlines. The 28-year-old French midfielder has never been capped by his country, and only saw seven matches at youth level. His contributions in the final third do not top the charts either, having scored or assisted a total of four goals across 2018. What Rennes' captain does do, however, is provide a reliable presence at the centre of midfield. It is there where André excels - where his ability to retain possession, read the game, and win the ball back are on full show.

These qualities, and André's ability to regularly deliver them, are what made the 28-year-old's 2018 so impressive. The year started just two months after the appointment of Sabri Lamouchi as Rennes manager, a decision that breathed new life into the stagnating Rouges et Noirs. André, like many of his team-mates, excelled under Lamouchi, finding a key role both on the pitch and off it. Acting as captain due to the continued absence of Romain Danzé, André did well to meld together a young core of Ismaïla Sarr, Joris Gnagnon, and Jérémy Gélina with more experienced newcomers Wahbi Khazri and Diafra Sakho. Lamouchi, along with his captain, instilled a consistency that had been missing from the Breton club for a number of years; from February onwards Rennes lost just twice in league play. Across this run came prominent 2-0 victories over both Lyon and Bordeaux, the latter of which André had significant influence in. In that March face-off *Les Girondins* were insistently pestered by the 28-year-old, exemplified by his seven tackles and relentless breaking up of play.

Les Rouges et Noirs continued their charge into April and May, losing just once while picking up important victories over Paris Saint-Germain, Toulouse, and Strasbourg. Rennes' end-of-season form catapulted them up the table and gave them a significant advantage in the race for Ligue 1's European spots. Bordeaux, Nice, and Saint-Étienne were all outlasted by Lamouchi and his men, who went on to finish fifth, led by their determined and steady captain. After such a successful spring, Rennes and club president Olivier Létang had a busy summer. *Les Rouges et Noirs* had just matched their highest ever finish in Ligue 1, in doing so securing Europa League qualification for the first time since 2011. To prepare for a busier upcoming schedule Létang brought in new faces, signing Jordan Siebatcheu, Clément Grenier, and Hatem Ben Arfa among others.

New arrivals did not provide improved form, however, and after 15 matches Lamouchi was fired, with reserves coach Julien Stéphan stepping in to fill the void. Lamouchi had struggled to get the most out of players like Benjamin Bourigeaud - individuals who had been key to Rennes' success the season prior. That Benjamin André, true to his nature, continued to perform came as no surprise, such is the consistency, dependability, and professionalism of the 28-year-old. Even more impressive has been the midfielder's form since Stéphan's appointment. While André's role at the centre of the park has largely been the same under his new manager, he has only gone from strength to strength. In Stéphan's first match, André dominated Lyon's midfield. *Les Gones'* starlets - Houssem Aouar, Pape Cheikh Diop, and Tanguy Ndombélé - struggled to shine through the suffocation provided by André's tireless pressing and shadowing. Rennes' skipper completed 50 passes, seven tackles, and three interceptions, all while committing just one foul. The 38-year-old Stéphan has received plenty of plaudits since his appointment, and rightfully so, but much of his immediate success can be traced back to the ever-present disruption that is Benjamin André.

In a Rennes midfield boasting the likes of Hatem Ben Arfa, Benjamin Bourigeaud, and Clément Grenier, André's name can often be forgotten or overlooked. His team-mates captivate viewers with mazy runs, silky ranges of passing, and impressive dead-ball routines. All of this, though, would not be possible without the experienced skipper. It is André's dogged defensive work and intelligent positioning that enable his team-mates to push further forward, to join the attack, and to entertain. Still very much in the honeymoon phase of his time with Rennes, Julien Stéphan and will likely experience defeat in the coming weeks. What is reassuring no matter the situation, though, is that right by his side will be a determined, professional, and loyal captain whose performances are rarely overtly affected by the mood at the club. Benjamin André's consistency and leadership have been a welcome foundation for managers to build upon, and it seems as though Julien Stéphan has already continued the trend.

For André, it is hard to see a future away from Rennes. The 28-year-old, while not always given enough credit from national media, is beloved by the loyal supporters of *Les Rouges et Noirs*. A move away from Brittany could materialise if André so desires, but the captain has rarely shown aspirations to move away. If the Breton club can continue to provide European football, an exciting style of play, and bountiful playing time for him, then André could likely see out the rest of his career in northwestern France.



FRANCOIS KAMANO

(+57)

23

BORN: 1996/05/01 | CONAKRY

CLUB: BORDEAUX

POSITION: FORWARD

AT CLUB SINCE: 2016

LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 34

There have been times over the last twelve months where François Kamano has been the only player capable of bringing something to the table in Bordeaux's forward line. With Malcom duly leaving the club for Barcelona this summer and internal chaos meaning few signings were made, Kamano was expected to take the lead once the season started. With seven goals in his first nine games this season, the winger had made a resounding statement; that he would be capable of stepping up and filling the hole left by the Brazilian. The *Girondins'* qualification for European football in 2018 was partly down to his decisiveness, and in the midst of a power struggle between former coach Gustavo Poyet and the boardroom as well as a change in ownership that had dragged on throughout the summer, it is to Kamano's credit that he was able to keep his head down and produce on the pitch.

The bulk of the winger's attacking output comes from carrying the ball inside from a wide position, usually his preferred left side, and creating space for a chance to be made. His propensity to dribble and take players on, a feature rarely seen in modern wing play, allows him to eliminate defenders effectively whilst still keeping a sense of conservatism in his game. The Guinean will rarely go on a slaloming run à la Neymar, but look to keep an attack going for as long as possible instead.

Arriving from SC Bastia over two years ago, Kamano had often shown glimpses of promise in his first season and a half for the Marine et Blanc club, but never consistently enough to the degree Malcom, often his counterpart on the wing, had. There was a sense that his game was stalled by indecision and tactical rigidity once he had the ball at his feet, which all too often resulted in him losing the ball rather than getting his head up and analysing the options available to him. This would usually lead to defenders duly closing him down and blocking him on his wing. At the turn of the year however, like so many of his team-mates when Gustavo Poyet arrived, he began to string together high quality performances. The Uruguayan's frantic, high pressure tactics and youthful line-ups breathed new life into what had been a turgid, lacklustre Bordeaux side waiting more than anything to cross the finish line at the end of the season, home and dry in midtable mediocrity.

It was in this environment that the Guinean truly began to pick up form, having gone through a barren spell in the winter months. Poyet, after leaving him out for the first few games after his arrival, had handed him a quasi-free role on the left wing, which allowed him to drift inside at will to create. This was crucial, as, by Kamano's own admission in an interview with *L'Équipe*, he is an "instinct player" – *"once I have the ball, I have to be left to it. I have to feel the game."* His five goals at the back end of the season were instrumental to clinching a Europa League spot that had seemed unthinkable only a few months prior. By the end of the campaign the Uruguayan manager was singing his praises – *"He has exceptional quality. He's a goal-scorer even though he plays on the wing, and we need him to be a presence in the box."*

Nevertheless, and perhaps unsurprisingly given the tumultuous backroom atmosphere since this summer, Bordeaux have failed to carry over their form from the end of last season. Kamano, though, has managed for the best part to confirm the promise he was showing in spring. So much so that it is often the case of late that the whole team's performance depends on Kamano, an over-reliance clearly reminiscent of stretches of Malcom's spell in the South-West of France. This dichotomy becomes even more obvious when comparing the team's European and league performances. When Bordeaux became the first club PSG dropped points to in the league this season, Kamano was instrumental notably in keeping attacks alive and was a constant presence in the final third, even without getting on the scoresheet. Nevertheless, Bordeaux have gone on to win all five of the games in which he has opened the score this season.

Of course, such performances were never likely to go unnoticed, and sure enough a host of English clubs have made their interest clear, hoping for Kamano to be the next in a long line of success stories to go from Ligue 1 to the Premier League. Even Atlético Madrid have been rumoured to be interested. Should Kamano continue to perform, it would be no surprise for Bordeaux to have another 'Malcom' situation on their hands come next summer. Even if new owner Joe daGrosa has insisted that the Guinean will be a part of his plans for the club and that he has no intention of selling him, he will soon find that Ligue 1 outfits rarely have a say in the matter once a Premier League club comes knocking.



ANTHONY LOPES

(-8)

22

BORN: 1990/10/01 | GIVORS

CLUB: LYON

POSITION: GOALKEEPER

AT CLUB SINCE: 2011

LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 31

A year on from last year's publication, Anthony Lopes' star has somewhat dimmed. In the 2017 edition, he was our highest-ranked goalkeeper, comfortably the league's best, but in the present version, he has slipped behind Alphonse Areola (although the PSG guardian's rank is more the product of last season's run-in than his current "time-share" with Gianluigi Buffon) and Benjamin Lecomte. The Montpellier goalkeeper deserves his place, but one would also likely be quick to inject Edouard Mendy into the conversation as well. All in all, we are a far cry from Lopes' marked superiority twelve months ago.

The Lyon number one has not really done much wrong; he is still one of the world's best in terms of reflex saves, but compared to a year ago, his on-pitch mentality, that of an almost overbearing intensity that can cloud his judgment has, at times, received more publicity than his play between the posts. The incident that springs to mind most clearly occurred in Lyon's late-season win over Marseille. Lyon won a vital three points at the Vélodrome in March, 3-2, but Lopes and Adil Rami got into a dust-up after the match, an incident which saw the goalkeeper suspended for five matches; the final three of last season and the first two of this. That petulance, wholly unnecessary, especially after a victory, saw Lopes stripped of the team's vice-captaincy (ironically passed to Marcelo, who was also rather provocative at the time) and clearly frustrated Bruno Génésio.

The manager's blunt assessment of the matter was typically taciturn, and his appraisal of the matter wasn't wholly damning, but did underscore the Portuguese international's biggest area for improvement. *"He also has a leading role on the group. He has a personality. I find him impatient, but in a good way. He knows how to draw lessons from last season. I took a weight off him and did him a favour; he understood very well the reasons for my choice. It was a very frank discussion. These are events that will allow him to go one step further."*

While Lopes has been on better behaviour this season (he is yet to be booked in twenty matches in all competitions), his performances have conversely taken a noticeable, if slight dip. He has been stellar in a few matches, most notably in a narrow derby win over Saint-Étienne (the same fixture in which he made his debut in 2013), and against Manchester City at the Etihad, but he has also been middling on more than a few occasions, disappointing in losses to the likes of Nice and Rennes. One has to wonder at this juncture what deleterious effects that vice-captaincy demotion may have had on his confidence; while Lopes was able to participate in the World Cup this summer (a Lyon-area native, he qualifies for Portugal through his family), he also surely would have had an outsized amount of time to ruminate on his future and his role within his boyhood club, not playing a single minute in Russia.

Under contract until 2020, Lopes has been candid about wanting to remain with Lyon, even as he expresses some doubts about his international future. Speaking to Lyon's in-house television channel ahead of November's derby, he was pensive, but also affirmed that Génésio's decision with regard to the vice-captaincy had been a rather galling one. Reflecting on the incident in Marseille and its aftermath he said, *"There were some doubts. I put my family, the club, in danger. It was a very tough time. I disappointed people and myself as well. After the Marseille match last season, I was on the national team and it was complicated. I had a lot of discussions with my entourage... I made a big mistake, I was too intense. Now, I'm the one who calms others."*

Lopes may be giving himself a bit too much credit with that last statement, but it will be up to him in the months to come to successfully combine the positive elements that make him, despite that slight downturn in form, one of Ligue 1's best. After all, it has been that fighting spirit which has no doubt been key in allowing him to overcome somewhat long odds in his progression to the first team. Slightly undersized at 1.84m, Lopes is the third in a series of impressive goalkeepers for Lyon, following on from Grégory Coupet and Hugo Lloris under the expert tutelage of recently departed goalkeeping coach Joël Bats. While he may not be on the level of the two French internationals, at his best he is a more complete player, better in the air and positionally than either.

Coming up from the team's reserves, he had won plenty of plaudits and titles as a youth team player, but had to wait until Rémy Vercoutre was injured to earn a chance in the first team. Already 22, Lopes has scarcely looked back, and delivered some memorable performances in the process. Lyon have had their struggles defensively, conceding two sets of disappointing equalisers against Hoffenheim in Europe, but it is hard to pin those on Lopes, especially as Lyon have shuffled the deck quite a bit at the back this season, both tactically and personnel-wise. At 28, Lopes has shown a higher level of maturity, but he needs to continue to focus on striking the right balance between that maturity and delivering on the pitch.



RADAMEL FALCAO

(-19)

21

BORN: 1986/02/10 | SANTA MARTA

CLUB: AS MONACO

POSITION: FORWARD

AT CLUB SINCE: 2013

LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 26

As they languish in the lower reaches of the table with a depleted squad and a novice manager trying to find his way, that title-winning season has never looked more distant for Monaco. Leonardo Jardim's young, albeit outrageously talented side had been led, in every sense of the word, by captain Radamel Falcao, the man so often at the end of a move as well as the figurehead of the squad. Two seasons on, there is an undoubtedly stark contrast as the Principality club languish in the lower reaches of the table, with Jardim being made to pack his bags after a disastrous start to the season and many of the key players of 2016/17 long gone. Falcao, though, still remains.

While last season saw the striker carry over his goal-scoring form from the previous season, notching a respectable eighteen goals in the league campaign helping Monaco to a second-place finish, he has largely blown hot and cold so far this term. While his seven league goals show a consistent output and put him comfortably at the top of Monaco's goal-scoring charts, there is a sense that he has nonetheless lost his way.

This was best seen in a recent Champions' League group stage tie in which he returned to Madrid to face his former club. As has been the case many times this season in domestic and European competition alike, a baby-faced Monaco side were unable to take the few chances they were presented with. Falcao, given a standing ovation by his former fans, would top off a muted performance with a penalty miss. On a similar European night a few years ago, that same Falcao would have at least made himself more of a nuisance for opposition defenders, as we saw many a time during the club's run to the semi-finals in 2017.

Having missed the 2014 World Cup in desperately unlucky circumstances following an injury sustained in a Coupe de France game, there was no chance the national team captain would be missing the competition this time round. For him, the finals would arguably be the centrepiece of his year, a chance at redemption. So desperate was he to arrive in Russia firing on all cylinders that he sat out many of Monaco's late season games to avoid risking another injury, much to the resentment of the fans whose team was in the midst of a battle for second place. In the end, he will have at the very least finally scored that World Cup goal which had eluded him for so long – coming in the second half of Colombia's 3-0 win over Poland – but this was a flash in the pan in an otherwise fairly muted tournament for the captain. A last 16 loss to England on penalties, which saw him at the centre of the action for all the wrong reasons, had likely signalled his final appearance in a World Cup.

It is perhaps hard to judge Falcao's decreasing quality in performance as a sign of decline, his age notwithstanding, given the different calibre of player that surrounds the Colombian in the Principality with respect to seasons past. While he is undoubtedly capable of carving out and creating chances by himself, the essence of Falcao's game relies on having a supporting cast that can facilitate this as well as play off of him. His age will have precisely been the reason for which he remains at Monaco whilst all of his younger colleagues have moved on to bigger and better things. Meanwhile, his role as a tutor and calming presence grows with each passing year as the new horde of young players is thrust forward by Monaco's revolving door transfer policy.

However the rest of the season plays out, Falcao will know that by having a manager like Thierry Henry, he has a coach who perfectly understands the trials and tribulations that a striker can go through. The former Arsenal forward had recently expressed his support for his striker in a press conference, naming him the team's *"leader"* and *"charismatic goal-scorer"* – *"we all know what Falcao represents for this team"*. He has also refused to be drawn into criticising the Colombian: when questioned over the penalty miss in Madrid, Henry chose instead to praise Falcao for stepping up and taking the lead. It is clear that both men will benefit from working with each other – Henry is all too aware what a fit and confident Falcao represents to his struggling young team. This was evident in recent victories against Caen and Amiens, both of which saw the Colombian's goals decide the game and give Henry his first two wins as a manager.

While it would be difficult to deny that Falcao remains one of the lead actors in a Ligue 1 when the spotlight is away from the capital, with each passing game it becomes increasingly evident that his curtain call is fast approaching. For now, he will remain one of the figureheads attempting to keep the Monaco boat from sinking, but should the improbable happen, this could very well be *El Tigre's* final appearance on this list.



MORGAN SANSON

(+10)

20

BORN: 1998/12/20

SAINT-DOULCHARD

CLUB: MARSEILLE

POSITION: MIDFIELD

AT CLUB SINCE: 2017

LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 32

2018 marked the one year anniversary of Morgan Sanson's €12m move from Montpellier to Marseille. And after a rather productive first year at the Vélodrome, 2018 saw him progress but perhaps not in the great strides that he had hoped for in 2017. It is easy to characterise Sanson as the player that is "thereabouts" but never quite there. A highly versatile player who can evolve as a number 10, in central midfield, deep as a defensive midfielder and occasionally on the wing. But the thing is, OM possess established players in each of those positions these days, leaving the 24-year-old precariously on the edge of the label "jack of all trades, master of none".

It might be a little harsh to mark off the player as Payet's deputy, or indeed that of Luiz Gustavo or Kevin Strootman. The fact remains Sanson managed an impressive 53 games in 2017/18, finishing as the club's second best scorer in the league with nine goals – as many as Valère Germain and Kostas Mitroglou managed. He is a Swiss-army type of player who is enormously liked by the team and it seems Rudi Garcia – but without a clearly defined position that enables him to shine brightly over a long stretch of time. In a 4-2-3-1 set-up, Garcia had initially preferred Gustavo and André-Frank Zambo Anguissa in midfield, with Payet at in the 10 role. Toward the end of 2018, Garcia has opted to play with a more fluid 3-5-2, which sees Gustavo usually paired with Strootman. These combinations typically come to the detriment of Sanson in terms of a place in the starting XI, with issues with squad balance elsewhere usually his route into the team, rather than any obvious indication that he can bring something better or different to the team.

For the most part, it was Rolando's injury and Gustavo being shunted back into central defence that enabled Sanson to develop in a holding role for several weeks. If Payet was out, Sanson would deputise in the 10 role, with Maxime Lopez – another big loser of this consequence – replacing him in the middle of the park. The lack of fluidity and continuous change has had an impact on Sanson's performance levels, undoubtedly. In early 2018, Sanson was regularly criticised for an uncharacteristic period of poor performance. An indication is this – in the first four league games in 2018, he played twice in attacking midfield, once in central midfield and once as a defensive midfielder – each with a different partner, each in a different setting.

A regular spot as the central attacking midfielder brought more stability to his game thereafter, and it showed in February where he struck three goals in five league games. In Europe, it was largely more straightforward – Sanson played almost exclusively as a defensive midfielder from the knockout stages onwards. His contribution to Marseille's 5-2 win over RB Leipzig was a telling one. He played deftly on the counter attack, splitting the German's defence with a stunning range of passing and picking up a rather impressive 8 rating in *L'Équipe* the next morning. But the inconsistency returned, a trait that Sanson really was unable to shake off across the year. A paltry performance in the semi-final second leg against Red Bull Salzburg was masked by OM's eventual qualification – but he was again a bystander in May's Europa League final.

In 2018-19, he has largely remained static as OM have swung from post to post in consistency. There was a strong start to the season with assists against Toulouse and Nîmes, but precious little since – save for the game-winning goal away to Nice in mid-October. Garcia has since deployed him exclusively in a deeper role with Payet or Lopez preferred further-up the field, this despite the latter being Sanson's favoured position. In the new campaign, he has struggled to find the fluidity and understanding alongside three different midfield partners, whilst also clearly lacking in the qualities that Zambo Anguissa – since sold to Fulham – brought to the team.

Sanson is clearly a gifted player in the right conditions and in the right environment. His movement in the middle of the park and passing ability (in my view second only to Dimitri Payet) is a key asset – but nearly two years on, there is not a massively defined spot in the side for him. A major plus is that €30m signing Kevin Strootman has not kicked on, whilst Gustavo is rumoured to be sounding his displeasure at his repeated shunting to central defence. Though, even paired with Gustavo in defensive midfield may be troublesome given the two different profiles. Indeed, Sanson is no Anguissa with the energy and tenaciousness that saw the latter produce an impressive season on the south coast. Perhaps there may be an opening in 2019 that will allow Morgan to fully exhibit his qualities – particularly if Payet moves out left, enabling Sanson to develop in his favoured 10 role. But do not hold your breath!



RONNY LOPES

(+78)

19

BORN: 1995/12/28 | BELEM

CLUB: AS MONACO

POSITION: MIDFIELD

AT CLUB SINCE: 2015

LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 23

The forgotten man that turned into the maestro. When everyone else decided it was time to leave, Rony Lopes only saw opportunity and in 2018, after many years of promising to do so, he grabbed it with both hands and took it to the house. His first half of the season was much of the same we had seen before, snippets of quality interspersed with head-scratching moments. Just when Monaco were begging for someone to step out of the shadows, especially with Thomas Lemar having a slow start as well, Lopes was only good in spells.

After the winter break, he exploded. 13 goals in 19 Ligue 1 games is no mean feat for a striker, never mind a wide player who many thought would never quite fulfil his potential but there we all were, witnessing the meteoric rise of another unpolished gem that Monaco were finally buffing out. Between mid-February to April, he scored in eight consecutive games and at times, he looked unplayable. Every time he was around the penalty box, defences would panic, and fans would be out of their seat waiting for the Portuguese sensation to nestle the ball into the net.

That form should have seen the forward make his national team's World Cup squad and while he made the initial 35-man preliminary squad, he did not make Fernando Santos' final cut. A bitter blow, especially given how dramatically he had improved and how perfectly he would be a like-for-like replacement for his former team-mate Bernardo Silva should he have needed a rest in the Santos system. It looked like the trend would continue into the new season, especially after a barnstorming performance against Nantes where he also got himself on the scoresheet, but then injury struck. Just 22 minutes in an international friendly against Croatia was enough and since then, the 22-year-old has been sat on the side-lines.

What he returns to when he is fit is a side desperate for flair, leadership and the confidence he brings with his bustling attacking nous. Under new stewardship in Thierry Henry as well, it will be interesting to see how both that and a return to full fitness will affect Lopes' recent career trajectory. The former Manchester City youth product looked for the longest time like he would forever be in the shadow of more illustrious compatriots. Whenever he was used in Monaco's title-winning season, he never quite inspired the same admiration as those in front of him and too often, you could see him trying to emulate them as well. It did not work so when the likes of Silva moved on, he started forging his own path and once he concentrated on improving what he excelled at, namely direct running, he started flying.

Despite playing out wide, Lopes is not a winger by any stretch of the imagination. He would usually fit the mould of the more modern number 10 that plays in these positions à la those at his former English club but unlike their tendency to move inside and drop of the ball, he tends to stay high and hang on the last defender whenever possible. Regardless of which flank he is operating on, this belief to keep himself forward has really benefitted his goal total as so many strikes are from a few yards out, either due to rebounds off the goalkeeper or passes along the box. On six or seven occasions last campaign and even in his goal against Nantes on the opening day of this season, Lopes popped up at the back post without a marker or anyone following his late run into the danger zone. That ability really helped supplement the loss of goals the club had, especially from Kylian Mbappé, while not straying away from what Bernardo Silva brought in terms of team set-up and shape.

Adding that to his already impressive arsenal really has taken him to the next level. He is still a very clever player on the ball, willing to drive at his opponents and is even more physical than in the past, not being bullied off the ball easily despite his size. He also superbly links up play, passing in-between the lines and making sure he is always an option for others to give the ball to. This, in particular, is something that Monaco have missed over the past three months, someone who can really act as the definitive link between the midfield and the attack, as the club have struggled for consistency creating chances and taking them and Aleksandr Golovin has not impressed.

2019 already looks like an uphill battle for Monaco and when he does return to fitness, a lot of pressure to carry the load will fall on the shoulders of Lopes. Some would argue that is a tough ask, given he only has six months' worth of great work under his belt but at this moment, the Principality club just needs a beacon that will give them hope. If he can get back into his stride quickly and come close to the heights he has achieved in 2018, he alone might just be the boost Henry needs. The only worry would be that should he do so, he may be another to decide his time at the Stade Louis II could be drawing to a close.



EMILIANO SALA

(+79)

18

BORN: 1990/10/31

CULULU LAS COLONIAS

CLUB: FC NANTES

POSITION: FORWARD

AT CLUB SINCE: 2015

LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 34

As 2018 draws to a close and one looks back at the events of the past 12 months, perhaps it is necessary – considering what he has achieved in that time – for a few people to revisit their view of Emiliano Sala. For much of his career, he has been a figure of fun for many in the French football fraternity. A tall, gangly striker with little in the way of a good first touch or control of the ball, often missing makeable chances when well-positioned, and displaying very little in the way of subtlety. He has even been referred to in some quarters as a cult hero – not necessarily a good thing for a centre-forward who should usually fit the straight-forward hero mould, rather than the more tongue-in-cheek version.

However, perhaps now is the time to give Sala some credit for the career he has built for himself. Born in Santa Fe, Sala joined Bordeaux's Argentina-based Proyecto Crecer academy as a teenager before taking the brave step of crossing to Europe to join les *Girondins*. Not yet ready for the Bordeaux first team, Sala was sent on loan – first to National side Orléans, where he scored 19 goals to help the team to a respectful eighth place finish; and then to Ligue 2 Chamois Niortais. Unphased by the step-up in level he achieved almost identical statistics, scoring 18 goals in 37 league appearances, placing him fourth in the scoring charts, as Niort finished an impressive fifth, surrounded by a bevy of traditional Ligue 1 clubs.

Willy Sagnol saw enough to give him his chance at Bordeaux but a poor goals return, allied to the strong form of Cheick Diabaté and Thomas Touré, limited his chances. He was therefore sent on a six-month loan to Caen, where he scored against PSG on his debut and began very well before petering out at the end of the season but nevertheless finishing up with reasonable figures of five goals and three assists in 13 matches. This was enough to convince Nantes to make a move. A fee of just €1m for a striker in his prime, however, again suggested that he was not the most highly rated of attackers.

His time with *Les Canaris* has seen constant improvement for Sala, who has endeared himself to fans for his never say die attitude, and his hard-work, if not always his efficiency in front of goal. (The full-throated way in which he celebrates every goal, whether a thunderbolt from distance or a run-of-the-mill penalty, also makes him popular.) His first season produced only six goals – although it was enough to make him the team's top-scorer. 2016/17 then brought with it 12 goals for Sala, a reasonably impressive figure bearing in mind that Nantes were poor until Sergio Conceição joined mid-way through the season.

Despite the disruption of another new coach – Claudio Ranieri – Sala maintained his position as leading striker and ended 2017/18 with another 12 league goals, although – like Nantes as a team – his form went downhill as the season went on, only five of those goals coming in the first half of 2018. Yet another change of coach this past summer did not bode well for Sala, as Miguel Cardoso came in and made it clear that Sala was not in his plans. Sala came close to joining Galatasaray but ended up staying put and has been rewarded for his patience and dedication: Cardoso was quickly fired and replaced by legendary Nantes goal-scorer Vahid Halilhodzic, who has given Sala a new lease of life.

Sala has hit an extraordinary run of form – by far the best of his career – which has seen him hit 12 goals so far this season – including a hat-trick against Toulouse, helping earn him Ligue 1's Player of the Month Award for October – and placing him joint-top of the goal-scoring charts with Kylian Mbappé and Nicolas Pépé. Sala is responsible for exactly half the team's league goals, as well as contributing two assists, including an excellent piece of hold-up play and skill to set up Abdoulaye Touré against Marseille in his most recent match.

Now surrounded by arguably a better supporting cast of providers than he has done in the past, Sala is thriving. He remains modest, however: *"I always give my best and try to fulfil my role, which is to score goals. Sometimes things go well, sometimes it's harder. I'm happy to be in a purple patch. It feels great but I mustn't get carried away."* He also gives his coach credit - *"I'm lucky to have Vahid as a coach. He talks to me and offers me advice so I have to use that. I have to listen to him and keep on working in the same way"* – and the feeling appears to be mutual: *"I'm happy for him because when I arrived he was feeling pretty down. We've talked a lot together, and now when you see how much he's giving the team, how hard he's battling, you don't get many strikers like him these days."*

This season's heroics have aroused great interest from the Premier League, including from Cardiff, Burnley and Fulham – now coached by his ex-boss Ranieri. While it may still be risky to spend too much on a 28-year-old only now finding his best form, clubs could do worse than signing a hard-working striker who will always give his all.



ALPHONSE AREOLA

(+47)

17

BORN: 1993/02/27 | PARIS
CLUB: PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN
POSITION: GOALKEEPER
AT CLUB SINCE: 2010
LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 26

Always the bridesmaid, never the bride. Alphonse Areola's career to date has almost always been defined by near-misses, half-opportunities and set-backs, but the Frenchman's 2018 might have finally been the turning point creating a situation where he might actually walk down the aisle with the team he always had a special place for in his heart. At the start of 2018, the Frenchman was the clear number one at Paris Saint-Germain. Unai Emery had seemingly lost his patience with the error-prone Kevin Trapp and while Areola had his own moments of goalkeeping embarrassment, he was seen as the best of the then-bumbling duo.

That theory, however, was put to the test early as he made yet another error in their 2-1 loss to Lyon. A free-kick from Nabil Fékir caught Areola in a strange position, leaving him stranded as *Les Gones* put themselves ahead in creative fashion. It did not faze him too much as from that point, he became a figure of strength for the club. Superb performances like in the Round of 16 Champions' League tie with Real Madrid and a strong penalty save against Saint-Étienne which helped PSG to a point, showed that this was maybe one area of the pitch that the big spenders did not need to focus on in the summer.

His summer was spent on possibly the greatest watching brief in existence. Called up to the France squad but the only player not to record a single minute in their World Cup-winning campaign, yet still coming home with a medal, and the right to be called a champion until the end of time. Upon his return to the Parc des Princes, he was greeted with new competition for his position in the shape of fellow World Cup winner and goalkeeping legend Gianluigi Buffon. Many thought that he would be playing second-fiddle to the decorated Italian stopper but fast-forward to now and the split has been more 50-50.

With Buffon suspended for the first few Champions' League games after his "rubbish bin heart" comments while still at Juventus, Areola needed to be ready. That gave him a chance in a few league games before the 2018/19 edition of Europe's premier competition began and he remained in between the sticks until a below-par appearance against Bordeaux at the start of December, in a fixture that represented the first time PSG dropped points in Ligue 1 this season.

Yet the amount of action he has seen as a whole of the last 12 months has been enough to convince him to remain in Paris, signing a four-year extension until 2023. His passion for the club is clear in his words, stating it is the club of his "heart", but whether he will see out that deal and PSG will prevent themselves from going for another superstar stopper in the future while cashing in on Areola remains to be seen. Sandwiched in between that was finally his debut with Les Bleus in the Nations League tie against Germany, where he rightfully won the man of the match award. He was truly sensational, a roadblock for every one of the opponent's 13 shots and helped earn his country a vital point that in the end was not enough for France to earn progression to the inaugural finals.

The outstanding characteristic of Areola as a goalkeeper are his reflexes. He anticipates well, does not simply admire his own top save but springs up to be ready for any follow-up and is particularly impressive when a one-on-one scenario sees him tighten the angle as he reacts well to any strike from close range. Added to that is his agility and athleticism to make any kind of save, whether it be low and close to his body or pushing it out of the top corner. There is no doubting his physical capability to do what is needed, especially when under pressure and unlike his previous colleague Trapp.

What has always been the question for him at a top-level club is his concentration. Not infallible to a classic brain-fart, Areola still has those moments that make you wonder whether he can really be a number one for a big team. Whether it be his positioning for that Fékir mistake, his awful touch against Lille at the back-end of 2017 that allowed a struggling team an easy goal or his limp attempt at a save for Andreas Cornelius' equaliser for Bordeaux in December, there is always a question mark hanging over him. That being said, he does still need to be more consistent in other areas, such as when he is on the ball. Areola never quite looks comfortable when he is trying to pass out, both regarding where he should be in the box when in possession and with his level of accuracy when going long.

All of that means that although he is being used more consistently than expected and has signed a new deal, his long-term future is still in question. Paris Saint-Germain will look across Europe and see most big clubs have a consistent goalkeeper that comes up trumps in even the most mundane moments and as of yet, Areola has not done that. The contract then looks like more of a safe-keep to get a good price for him if and when they bring in another big name once Buffon retires. Otherwise, despite his improvements, it is hard to see Areola be anything more than a bridesmaid for PSG into the future as well.



BENJAMIN LECOMTE

(*)

16

BORN: 1991/04/26 | PARIS

CLUB: MONTPELLIER HSC

POSITION: GOALKEEPER

AT CLUB SINCE: 2017

LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 36

As the old adage goes, the best things come to those who wait. Benjamin Lecomte may have resorted to repeating this as a mantra throughout his slow-burner of a career. 2018, however, has seen the Montpellier goalkeeper finally begin to receive the recognition that many have suggested that he has deserved for some years now. After impressing for local youth teams, Lecomte was signed up as a 15-year-old by Chamois Niortais, before, at 18, moving in 2009 to Ligue 1 Lorient, where he eventually turned professional in January 2011.

Lecomte made his debut for Les Merlus in October 2010, replacing the sent off Lionel Cappone for the final half-hour of a 1-0 away defeat at Nancy and keeping a clean sheet during his time on the pitch. A first full start followed three days later in a Coupe de la Ligue defeat to Monaco. However, over the course of his first three seasons, Lecomte made a total of only 18 starts in all competitions (including playing all matches in Lorient's run to the 2013 Coupe de France semi-final), blocked from more game time by the likes of Cappone, Florent Chaigneau and regular starter, veteran Fabien Audard.

This period also saw him continue to go up the France youth ranks, playing for France U18s, U19s and U20s, as well as being called up to the U21 squad to replace injured Dijon keeper Baptiste Reynet. Ironically, in August 2013, Lecomte was loaned for a season to Ligue 2 Dijon, with Reynet going the other way on a permanent deal. While Reynet was limited to a handful of games at Lorient, Lecomte played 31 games, keeping 14 clean sheets and attracting rave reviews. The following summer he returned to Lorient under new coach Sylvain Ripoll, ready to take on the number 1 role (while Reynet returned to Dijon on loan, then permanently).

Over the next two seasons Lecomte made the goalkeeping position his own, missing only one league match in total and leading Les Merlus to another Coupe de France semi-final. A further 31 league matches followed in 2016/17 but, after Lorient were relegated following a play-off against Troyes, Lecomte and Lorient agreed to part ways. But not before Lecomte had established himself as one of the best young goalkeepers around – Opta noting that from 2014/15 to 2016/17, Lecomte had made 354 saves – more than any other Ligue 1 shot-stopper during that period. Lecomte's eventual destination was Montpellier – who had ironically seemed certain to sign Dijon's Reynet, until the deal fell through. The €2.5m price tag looked a bargain at the time and has seemed a steal ever since.

Before he had even made his competitive debut, his new coach Michel der Zakarian was full of admiration: *"he's a charming lad with a great work ethic."* As for Lecomte himself, he began the season hoping to *"rediscover my best form after an up and down last season."* The 2017/18 campaign saw him get back to his best and then some, as he played every league match and, forming a great relationship with his mean defence, kept 14 clean sheets. The 33 goals conceded were second only to PSG and, in their eight matches against the top four, he conceded only one defeat and seven goals (with over half coming in one match, a 4-0 loss to PSG). Although the 2018 half of the season was slightly less impressive (20 conceded and only five clean sheets), representing a dip in form for the whole defence, Lecomte's performances earned him a UNFP best goalkeeper nomination and aroused the summer interest of Nice and Monaco.

This season, Lecomte – who has everything you want from a keeper: height, confidence, command of his area, authority at crosses and shot-stopping ability (as well as boy band-worthy good looks) – has continued in the same vein. To date, in 16 matches he boasts seven clean sheets, with only 12 goals conceded – a great return for him and his defence bearing in mind that two of last season's regulars, Jérôme Roussillon and Nordi Mukiele, have since departed. Even more pleasing for Lecomte is that he has received a long-overdue France call-up, after Hugo Lloris and Steve Mandanda pulled out of the squad for the September UEFA Nations League matches against Germany and the Netherlands.

Speaking of his call-up, he said that *"I am the first MHSC goalkeeper to be selected since Bruno Martini. It shows that by playing well and consistently, even if you're not at Paris, Lyon or Marseille, you can still get your chance. It's harder but it's possible. Now it's up to me to keep up my levels and to progress. The aim is not to be picked just once but to find a regular place and to be picked for major competitions."*

Although Lecomte did not play, Mandanda's loss of form may give him more opportunities in 2019, and he certainly intends to receive further call-ups: asked what the first thing he did was, after receiving a phone-call from Didier Deschamps, he replied *"I saved his number and added him to my contacts!"* Mandanda may need to start watching his back at club level too, as Marseille have recently made enquiries about Lecomte. For the moment he is happy to remain and help MHSC qualify for European competition - whether or not they do may have a bearing on the team he represents next season. Whoever it is, Lecomte *"est bon"* and only getting better.



MARQUINHOS

(+9)

15

BORN: 1994/05/14 | SAO PAULO

CLUB: PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN

POSITION: DEFENDER

AT CLUB SINCE: 2013

LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 26

One of the most memorable images of Paris-Saint-Germain's 2018 is the furious chest-bumping celebration by Marquinhos and Thiago Silva after a tackle from the latter in the dying minutes of their reception and gigantic victory over Liverpool. As a sign of how important that night was for the Parisian players, the full display of Marquinhos' palette, through an ingenious tactical invention of Thomas Tuchel, was still overshadowed by the performances of his compatriots Neymar and Silva, as the whole team gave everything.

Sometimes we forget that at 24, Marquinhos is still young for a defender. He has spent five years at Paris now, and before that was already an important player at Roma. He has evolved into a well-rounded and versatile centre-back. He is good in the air and with his feet, quick and decisive in his tackling. Anticipation is a huge part of his game, and playing in a three at the back has enabled him to surge leap to make interceptions with less of a risk of exposing his goalkeeper to dealing with a goal-scoring opportunity. He is also remarkably quick, and his years in Paris have taught him to play from the back and occasionally break the opposing lines with vertical passes. He is also a highly effective and crucially clean defender, making very few fouls.

The key moment of this year for Paris was in the Champions' League knockout stages, and in February the round of 16 pitted them against Real Madrid. Like many of his team-mates, Marquinhos was disappointing as Zinedine Zidane's side won 5-2 on aggregate, despite being granted the captain's armband at the Bernabeu following a controversial decision made by Unai Emery to leave out club leader Silva. Therein lies the obvious, on paper margin of progression, for most individuals and the collective at PSG.

Marquinhos did of course contribute to the usual domestic trophy haul. He scored in the round of 32 against Guingamp in Coupe de France, and also netted during the semi-final of the Coupe de la Ligue against Rennes. He was however left out of the final of this competition, against Monaco. In the league, he made 26 appearances, fewer than in the two previous seasons, as PSG reconquered their title from the hands of Monaco. The World Cup was disappointing for Marquinhos, not only because of Brazil's elimination in the quarter-finals against Belgium, but also because of his single minute of playing time. With Silva and João Miranda starting as central defenders, Marqui was confined to the bench and brought on only in added time against Mexico. Since then, he has played the entirety of Brazil's six friendlies however, and even scored his first international goal, against El Salvador in September.

Under German tactician Thomas Tuchel, Marquinhos has been used in a number of different positions. In an era bearing similarities with the days when Laurent Blanc played Marquinhos at right-back, Tuchel has looked for solutions to distribute playing time between centre-backs and compensate for weaknesses in other positions. He has often employed a 3-4-2-1, which allows Marquinhos, Silva, and Presnel Kimpembé all to play at the same time. However, the ongoing tale of the season is the Brazilian's usage as a holding midfielder. PSG, for all their money, find themselves severely lacking in depth in midfield. Tuchel decided to experiment and Marquinhos returned to a position he had known in his youth. First in the league, but also in Champions' League action, more specifically against Liverpool. The tinkering did not fail, but it was uncomfortable for Marqui, who said when asked about his repositioning, *"I am no Marco Verratti"*.

In the return fixture, this positioning was adapted with fluctuating depth. During possession, Marquinhos would descend to sit as the central centre-back of three, allowing the full-backs to get forward more. From that position he was very often on the ball and making passes, although mostly casting play out wide. In defence, he would step up to Verratti's level and help him shut down Liverpool before they were able to construct meaningful moves. The plan worked marvels, but the Brazilian's cramps at the end of the encounter illustrated the huge effort that this demanded of him.

Although still young, Marquinhos is a mentor for his youngers at PSG. As a vice-captain and as the second most experienced centre-back after Silva, he can show the way to Kimpembe and summer recruit Thilo Kehrer. Silva still delivers, but he is 34, and the passing over of power is surely imminent. As ever, Europe will do the talking for Marquinhos and PSG. He is one of the first names on the team-sheet for big nights, which has not always been the case, and any success or failure will be his in part. We all know that the answer to PSG's problems will eventually come from better team cohesion on the day and the ability for individuals to make meaningful sacrifices for the team. Through his new positioning, Marquinhos has shown that he is not only capable of doing so, but executes such requirements in exemplary fashion. Can he replicate these performances and inspire his team-mates to match him in 2019?



THIAGO SILVA

(+1)

14

BORN: 1984/09/22 | RIO DE JANEIRO

CLUB: PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN

POSITION: DEFENDER

AT CLUB SINCE: 2012

LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 26

Paris Saint-Germain's talismanic captain has enjoyed another solid year marshalling the backline for the French champions. The Brazilian international signed by Carlo Ancelotti in 2012 has maintained fruitful partnerships with both compatriot Marquinhos and academy graduate Presnel Kimpembe. Not too long ago, a PSG line-up without Thiago Silva in it would have seemed absurd, such was the Brazilian internationals' influence, but PSG have since found an effective formula of rotation to best manage their captain's workload. Now at 34-years-old, the ex-AC Milan defender has played a pivotal role in the development of his compatriot Marquinhos and Kimpembe who have both become some of the world's most promising young players at centre-back and can readily be trusted to deputise when Silva is either rested or unavailable.

Thiago Silva has arguably been pound-for-pound one of PSG's best signings and the Brazil star quickly ingrained himself into the fabric of the club after his big money move from the *Rossoneri*. Silva quickly learned the language and was immediately given the honour of captaining the club in place of Mamadou Sakho, who eventually left for Liverpool. 2018 has been a successful year for PSG's number two, once again lifting a domestic quadruple and consistently producing fine form throughout the season. PSG's talismanic captain has at times been a tower of strength and consistency in a position that requires total concentration, especially in Ligue 1, with the league's attackers as a whole being more physical, direct and quick with each passing season. PSG are admittedly rarely troubled defensively in the French top flight, but Silva is regularly alert to bail out his team-mates when danger does present itself.

Whilst the Brazilian continues to deliver impressive performances and consistent form, there are some that continue to question his fragility and leadership. These opinions aimed at Silva are in relation to high profile Champions' League games where the Brazilian's mental strength has been called into question. This stemmed from the 2017 Champions' league last 16 tie with Barcelona when on the eve of the first leg, Silva allegedly pulled out of the game with an injury. Fans were bemused with the timing of the injury and PSG amazingly went on to win 4-0 in his absence.

The infamous second leg saw PSG lose 6-1 with Silva back in the starting line-up and questions were asked about his leadership skills, particularly when PSG were throwing the game away so spectacularly in the final 10 minutes. That continued into the following season when in February 2018 he was dropped to the bench for the Champions' League last 16 knockout tie against Real Madrid at the Santiago Bernabeu. PSG went on to lose the game 3-1 and suffered defeat in the second leg 2-1 at the Parc des Princes. *"It is impossible not to hear some of the criticism,"* said Silva. *"However, no newspaper, nor journalist, is going to tell me who I am. I know who I am. Because of this, I continue as I always have done. I respect all opinions, but when you are attacked personally, it starts to get hard. I am especially sad when it impacts my family and my loved ones. However, when you wear the PSG shirt, you always have a responsibility."*

If truth be told, there have been periods over the past 18 months where Thiago Silva has received unfair treatment. At the age of 34 he continues to be the mainstay in PSG's back four (or three) and provides organisation and calmness in what can sometimes be a rickety PSG defence, particularly in Europe. Like all of PSG's defensive players, Silva has been guilty of some fatal errors that have cost the club at key moments, such as the sloppy pass and resulting penalty conceded at Napoli in November. However, if PSG are to advance to the latter stages of the competition and start winning high pressured European games away from home, then Silva and his colleagues have to eradicate the high-profile blunders and crucially must feel that the club and fans have full confidence in them.

Looking ahead into 2019, Thiago Silva's personal goals will not be too dissimilar from those of recent seasons gone by. Cast your mind as far back as May 2014. PSG were celebrating their second Ligue 1 title of the QSI era and with the coaching staff and squad of players on the pitch, Thiago Silva was asked what his ambitions were for the following season. His reply, *"my dream is to win the Champions' League"*. This still applies now and nearly five years later Silva has got no closer to his dream. However, with arguably the most talented squad in PSG's history and with no overwhelming favourite to win this year's competition, Silva will be quietly confident that PSG can do something special in Europe's premier tournament. If not this campaign, then the Brazilian will have his eyes on European glory next season under his captaincy before his current contract comes to an end in the summer of 2020.

At International level, Thiago Silva realistically has one more opportunity to win further honours with Brazil after winning the 2013 Confederations Cup and back to back Olympic gold medals at Beijing 2008 and London 2012. With the Copa America approaching in his homeland in June 2019, success in this competition would present a wonderful swansong to an international career spanning 10 years. But the PSG man must firstly remain fit, stay consistent and continue his good form throughout the remainder of the season if he is to represent the *Seleção* next summer. Another good and successful season with Paris should provide Silva with the best possible opportunity to do so.



HOUSSEM AOUAR

(*)

13

BORN: 1998/06/30 | LYON

CLUB: LYON

POSITION: MIDFIELD

AT CLUB SINCE: 2016

LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 36

On 30 June 1998 in Saint-Étienne, a young Michael Owen metaphorically announced himself to the world with his stunning solo run and strike for England against Argentina. Just up the road at around the same time, Houssem Aouar was literally doing likewise, as the city of Lyon welcomed its newest resident. Twenty years on, it is Aouar who is now one of the brightest talents in world football.

Although he made a few cameo appearances at the end of 2016/17, scoring a goal in the Europa League, 2017/18 was Aouar's breakout season, the fact that he was given Corentin Tolisso's number eight shirt a clear sign, with hindsight, that Lyon's bosses saw him as a first-teamer. He was given his first start in week seven and never looked back, ending the Ligue 1 season with six goals and five assists. One of the latest in a long line of diamonds being polished in Lyon's famed youth system, he can play in central midfield, attacking midfield or on the left side of a midfield three or diamond.

Two-footed and very comfortable on the ball, able to dribble and beat his man, or spot a defence-splitting pass, as well as being a calm finisher, Aouar is a Roger Federer of a player who, at his best, seems to glide across the pitch, making everything look easy. His intelligence with and without the ball means that he always appears to be in space and never seems hurried or harried, able to work his way out of tight corners with good footwork and vision, always ensuring that moves are kept flowing. His runs with ball at feet do not contain the explosivity and sheer force of will of his team-mate Tanguy N'Dombélé; nor do they contain the party tricks of Kylian Mbappé. They come from a drop of the shoulder here, a feint there, a clever first touch that can already eliminate a marker before Aouar even sets off. It is no coincidence that midfielder Fayçal Fajr, now playing at Caen after a spell in Spain, describes Aouar's movement as *"like a dancer"* and compares him to Andres Iniesta.

Aouar is not all understated balletic grace, however. He is also hard-working with a serious attitude, and a surprisingly good tackler who is unafraid to put in a defensive shift. Indeed, Fajr also recalls a match earlier this season where the two exchanged words after a flair-up: *"I liked that side of him – a man who stands his ground."* Former youth team team-mate Christopher Martins-Pereira agrees: *"off the pitch he's a delight. But on the pitch he's willing to put himself about, though nothing too serious."*

Despite that will to win and strength of character, the beginning of the current season was tough for Aouar. Whereas the first six months of 2018 had gone more or less perfectly, working in harmony with Lucas Tousart and N'Dombélé in a midfield three that helped push Lyon into third place and Champions' League qualification, the new season saw growing pains. Aouar in particular looked a shadow of the player who ended last season, and was even dropped for a couple of matches. It is hard to determine whether he was playing badly because Lyon were; or Lyon were playing badly because Aouar was. Either way, it indicated both how important he had become to the team and how the next step in his development needed to be for him to become more proactive, dictating events rather than being dictated by them.

In the last couple of months he has begun to do this with gusto and re-emerged as a stand-out player. His innate sense of timing has also enabled him to become more involved in team attacks: he is currently the team's leading Ligue 1 scorer with six goals – already equalling his total for last season. His Champions' League performances have caused a stir across Europe – his second match against Manchester City in particular drawing very public plaudits from Pep Guardiola and leading City to be the latest big name heavily linked to him, along with Liverpool, Chelsea and Barcelona. On the international stage, as N'Dombélé has dropped out of the U21 side to join the senior squad, Aouar has become a leader among *Les Espoirs*, dictating play and contributing goals and assists as Sylvain Ripoll's men qualified unbeaten for next summer's European Championships. However, if Aouar continues his current rate of progress, there is a good chance that he will have joined N'Dombélé with the big boys by then (despite Algeria also attempting to bring him into their full squad).

Many saw Lyon's willingness to sell Nabil Fékir last summer as a sign that Aouar was being lined up to replace him as the team's main source of creativity. Despite Fékir still being there, his struggles for fitness and form have seen Aouar become the man to whom the OL fans look as the team's playmaker, and he has now embraced that responsibility. Fékir and N'Dombélé are perhaps likely to leave this summer, which may mean Aouar staying as Jean-Michel Aulas is unlikely to sell the three at once. But if and when he leaves Lyon, he will be ready to fit into, and improve, any midfield in the world.



EDINSON CAVANI

(-6)

12

BORN: 1987/02/14, SALTO

CLUB: PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN

POSITION: FORWARD

AT CLUB SINCE: 2013

LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 25

January 17th, 2018. Paris Saint Germain are strolling over Dijon, 7-0. In the 83rd minute, Edinson Cavani goes down and earns a penalty. It was his chance to score his 167th goal for the club, surpassing Zlatan Ibrahimovic as top scorer in the club's history. The Parc des Princes was already singing his name. But "El Matador" looks on as Neymar steps up to score his fourth of the night, under the boos of his own fans.

Following "penalty-gate" earlier in the season, the Brazilian was officially designated the taker, and decided not to make an exception even for such a special occasion. Cavani would get his record-breaking goal one week later against Montpellier. This episode encapsulates the paradoxical succession of highs and lows in the Uruguayan's history at PSG, which continued throughout this calendar year. Despite achievements worthy of a club legend, his status is the nonetheless perennially undermined. Throughout 2018, the "C" in MCN has little by little been eclipsed by its partners, despite the habitual goal tally. Cavani finished top scorer in Ligue 1 with 28 goals (40 in all competitions) at the end of the 2017/18 campaign, and still the talk of the town was about his team-mates. At times, we are reminded of the days of Zlatan's reign over the capital, during which Cavani patiently lived in exile on the left wing.

The trio, completed euphorically in the summer of 2017 when Neymar and Kylian Mbappé, the world's two most expensive players, joined the man who had scored a glorious 49 goals the preceding campaign, was the envy of all Europe at the time. But despite the usual raffle of domestic trophies, once again there was no progress in continental competition. Against Real Madrid, Cavani scored a fortunate goal from a pinball sequence in the box. Not enough to save Paris from its shortcomings, or to mask other his difficulties. Although he can score with essentially any body part, his ability to impressively miss keeps haunting him. Against Saint-Étienne in April, his right foot was too shaky in front of an empty goal. A viral, silly miss, which likely left him hoping for sunnier days in the Russian summer.

Cavani arrived at the World Cup as an undisputed leader of his national team, commanding the respect of a Celeste squad that retained a wonderful balance of experience and potential, from Diego Godin to Lucas Torreira. Cavani's duet with Luis Suarez up front carried his country's hopes. In a relatively easy group, Uruguay slowly found their form and "Edi" scored his first ever goal in an international tournament in a 3-0 win over Russia. In the round of 16, he took global headlines for his class, scoring twice against Portugal in one of the outstanding games of the tournament. The first goal he scored was a header following a splendid one-two composed of cross-field passes between himself and Suarez; for the second, he wrongfooted Rui Patricio with a curving shot into the far side of the net. Cruelly, he was forced off, injured, and had to watch his team's subsequent defeat against France from the sideline.

In this latest club campaign, Cavani has seen little improvement to his contrasted situation at Paris. He endured a particularly difficult five-week goal drought, despite the team's strong league start, although admittedly in part caused by a hamstring injury, but he ended it with a hat-trick in Monaco, followed by a splendid juggling goal against Toulouse, which showcased all the exceptional elements of his game: flashes of close control, innovation and poaching instinct.

A consistent observation throughout the year has been the imbalance in the exchanges on the pitch amongst the MCN. On average, and particularly during big matches, the number of passes between Neymar and Mbappé is considerably higher than between either of them and their elder. As of 4th November, Mbappé & Neymar were exchanging an average of 22 passes between each other per game, with each passing to Cavani an average of once and twice respectively. Thomas Tuchel's new 3-4-2-1 has, among other things, sought to capitalise on the Neymar-Mbappé connection, bringing them closer together but without "technically" forcing Cavani out. But the German is still confronted by the same dilemma that Unai Emery once faced. During certain away trips in Ligue 1, three forwards who do not have a proclivity for tracking back make the side unbalanced and thus the logical adjustment is to take one of the forwards off. Cavani has often suffered from this and endured early substitutions, even though he is the member of MCN who has shown the greatest appetite for fulfilling his defensive duties in 2018.

Between this capacity to continuously put in physical efforts, his positioning, and his goalscoring ability, Cavani is still an incredibly attractive prospect for any big club, even at 31. At this point, however, any move would be unlikely except to satisfy possible demands from UEFA's Financial Fair-Play, depending on how that situation evolves – the Uruguayan forward's current deal expires in 2020. Cavani is less of a superstar than his attack partners. Even though this is somewhat by choice, given his discreet personality, it has certainly played against him in the dressing room politics at PSG whilst simultaneously making him the Parc des Princes faithful's favourite. It is unfortunate that in the megalomaniac development of PSG, the contributions of such a loyal and productive servant may sometimes be overlooked. A player of his class, both on and off the pitch, is, and should be recognised, as a privilege for Paris and for French football.



NICOLAS PEPE

(*)

11

BORN: 1995/05/29

MANTES-LA-JOLIE

CLUB: LILLE OSC

POSITION: FORWARD

AT CLUB SINCE: 2017

LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 38

A man very much in demand after a stellar 2018, Nicolas Pépé has enjoyed a real breakthrough year which has resulted in Europe's elite showing interest in acquiring his services. Whilst Lille enjoyed a pretty torrid 2017/18 campaign, they have been able to put that behind them by getting the best out of Pépé during 2018/19. After shining at Angers, Pépé resisted the lures of clubs overseas to join Lille, then under the stewardship of Marcelo Bielsa. Things quickly unravelled for Les Dogues though as they endured a calamitous season and ultimately only just avoided relegation. Pépé's form however was perhaps the only positive during that campaign, even if for large parts he was played out of position as a lone, central forward. Following Christophe Galtier's arrival as coach, Pépé was deployed more in his preferred right-wing role and he ended the season with 14 goals and six assists across league and cup as it pretty much felt like he was single-handedly keeping Lille in the top flight.

It is not a huge surprise that Pépé has found his very best form under Galtier, a coach who likes to work very closely with his players and places a lot of trust in them, encouraging them to take responsibility on the pitch. That has translated into some blistering form for Pépé during the first half of the 2018/19 season, as he has taken his performances to an entirely new level. Going into the winter break, Pépé found himself only outscored by a certain Kylian Mbappé, finding the back of the net 12 times. Whilst many of those have been penalties, his number of goals only tell half the story. Pépé's overall play has been terrific, forming a lethal forward trio at Lille with Jonathan Bamba and Jonathan Ikoné, who together have been labelled "BIP-BIP" in reference to the Road Runner cartoon character and their blistering pace.

Pace is certainly an attribute that Pépé has in abundance, but he is so much more than that. Blessed with a lethal left foot and a solid frame, Pépé combines speed with strength and at 1.83m, he is also more than capable in the air. Many of his goals come from late bursts of pace and power into the box, taking advantage of his almost telepathic relationship with Bamba and Ikoné. In addition to finishing, Pépé has improved his overall contribution to the team by ensuring he regularly provides an end product. If it is not a goal then he has developed his eye too for the crucial pass, something his assists statistics back up.

On or off the ball, Pépé is a danger. With the ball, Pépé loves to run at players as his close control is excellent, when he is not in possession, his vision is also strong and his movement off the ball creates space time and time again for colleagues to exploit. In terms of finishing, he is proving himself pretty lethal from all areas. Give him the smallest amount of space on the edge of the area and he is capable of curling in efforts with his left foot or, by using his dribbling skills, he can wriggle free in on goal before showing coolness in front of goal.

If there is one area of his game that Pépé should perhaps look to improve in, it is his consistency. Whilst that has come on leaps and bounds during 2018, there are still the odd games, or lengthy periods during matches where he can go a little missing. To his credit though, those instances are few and far between and it is really a case of being quite picky to find a clear weakness in the player at the end of an exceptional calendar year for the former Angers man. 2018 has also brought international success for Pépé as he has become a staple fixture in the Ivory Coast squad and thanks to appearances in friendly games against Togo and Moldova back in March, notched his first goals for his country.

All of that excellent form naturally brings with it interest from other teams and despite Pépé himself stating a move away from Lille was off the table until the end of the season at the earliest, that has not stopped enquiries from gathering pace. Lille are not out of the woods yet in terms of their book-balancing issues and with offers expected in the region of €50m for the 23-year-old from the likes of Arsenal, Bayern Munich and Manchester United, Lille may consider cashing in on their biggest asset. In his current form, Pépé certainly would not look out of place at the very best clubs.

The North London side mentioned in particular seems like a well-suited place for him to end up, with Unai Emery's side in need of a strong player on their right-wing. However with Lille going well in the league, sitting in second place going into the winter break, it is to be expected that Galtier will be pleading with his board that they do not let their talisman go. Wherever he ends up, there is certainly little doubt that, if he maintains his current form, the sky is the limit for Pépé. It is still too early in his career to know whether his 2018 will serve as a microcosm for the player he will become and continue to be, or if he has enjoyed a rather large purple patch instead.



MEMPHIS DEPAY

(+57)

10

BORN: 1994/02/13 | MOORDRECHT

CLUB: LYON

POSITION: FORWARD

AT CLUB SINCE: 2017

LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 36

Lyon manager Bruno Génésio is hardly known for his sharp wit or keen comments, but in the wake of Lyon's 2-1 win over Angers at the end of October, on an occasion where the Dutchman lagged in joining his team-mates in exiting the team bus, and failed to take a full part in the warm-ups, he was hardly loath to lay into Memphis Depay in no uncertain terms. *"I want to apologise to Memphis,"* said the manager. *"I want to apologise for all the times you were late, to apologise for all the kit that you wear that does not belong to the club, to apologise for the way you conducted yourself during the warm-up against Angers, your lateness and your lack of effort. If you want to have a great career, you must have humility."*

Humility, of course, must not be conflated a lack of self-belief; all great players must have the confidence, or indeed, the audacity to believe that they can be the best to achieve as much on the pitch, but the Dutch forward has, as he has done since arriving in Lyon from Manchester United in January of 2017, spent 2018 confounding not only his manager, but fans of his club and observers of French football worldwide. As of this writing, he has six assists top Ligue 1, and also leads his club with five goals, decent outputs for most players, even if those numbers are a step or two below the brilliant displays he had put on in last season's run-in. He has also, however, been in the spotlight for a host of less desirable reasons, both on and off the pitch, including an embarrassing penalty miss against Lille and a cringe-inducing freestyle rap in front of the Eiffel Tower on Instagram.

These instances, as well as his sulky attitude over being left on the bench against Angers (he came on to turn the match with a goal and an assist), have meant that 2018 has seen Depay continue to be arguably the world's most maddening player, despite having professed a newfound maturity ahead of his return to Manchester to face Manchester City in September. Speaking then, the player remarked of his past intransigencies, *"It's in the past and I'm a flamboyant guy and like nice stuff but that doesn't mean I couldn't be more smart. I've become more mature."*

Maturity must surely be relative, but despite these frustrations, one cannot but question where Lyon would be without the Dutchman. He was a peripheral figure for much of 2017, with Mathieu Valbuena and Alexandre Lacazette driving the attack following his January arrival, and was a fitful presence at the beginning of last season as well, when Nabil Fékir was playing arguably the best football of his career and the Dutchman often found himself displaced by the emerging talent of Houssem Aouar. However, an injury to Fékir saw the academy product sidelined for two months, and Aouar began to be used more often in a deep-lying midfield role. While it was not an opportunity earned on merit, Depay seized his chance with both hands, racking up ten goals and six assists in the season's final nine matches. Eight of those were Lyon wins; every point proved vital as *Les Gones* steamed past Monaco and an exhausted Marseille into the Champions' League.

Prior to that incandescent run of form, Depay had been a middling contributor; he had scored nine goals in the league, but was not a regular starter, and aside from a brilliant winner against Paris Saint-Germain in January, had been somewhat of an afterthought, especially against Lyon's fellow top sides. He seemed to be what many had deemed him after his failure to make an impact in Manchester: a player with a decent amount of flair, but whose impressive form for PSV was more a product of the lack of quality in the Eredivisie than a true measure of his ability, and indeed, consistency. He may have been achieving more for Lyon over the course of the season than he had for United, but that only followed as no one would argue that Ligue 1 is as tough a proving ground as the Premier League.

In the current season, as previously mentioned, Depay has been neither the moribund presence that he was on his initial arrival, nor has he come to life as he is clearly capable of doing. It should be noted that - despite the inconsonant quality of his play for Lyon - he has thrived for his country. The Dutch national team has underachieved badly in recent years, failing to qualify for the summer's World Cup, and cycling through managers with a remarkable ferocity. This difficulty was, of course, the product of several key players (Arjen Robben, Wesley Sneijder, Dirk Kuyt, Robin Van Persie, Klaas-Jan Huntelaar) ageing out of the side, but also of a dereliction on the part of the Dutch FA to sufficiently develop players between that generation and the current side, many of whom, Depay included, are yet to reach their 25th birthday.

However, since the appointment of Ronald Koeman earlier this year, with an influx of impressive young talent, as well as key veterans such as Georginio Wijnaldum and Virgil van Dijk, the *Oranje* have been one of Europe's strongest sides, topping a difficult Nations' League group that included Germany and France. Granted, Germany are in flux as they deal with the ageing and loss of form of key players from the 2014 World Cup-winning side, and France were surely suffering a hangover of sorts after winning their second World Cup this summer, but the Dutch were widely looked upon as odds-on favourites to finish bottom of the group, being perhaps lucky to scrape a point or two. That they exceeded expectations is greatly to Koeman's credit, particularly when one considers his rather bold tactical decisions, chiefly to deploy Depay as a centre forward. While admittedly this wrinkle was first brought about by necessity as the Netherlands were short of players in attack ahead of a trip to Lisbon to face Portugal, a 2-0 win over the European champions has meant that the player, and Koeman, have scarcely looked back.

Depay had a phenomenal scoring rate for PSV, but for his boyhood club, he played on the left, a role in which he struggled at Manchester United, and was only fitfully successful in for Lyon. However, playing centrally for his country has seen him become prolific. Freed from much in the way of defensive duty (it certainly aids Depay's to cause to have the energetic Ryan Babel and Steven Bergwijn on the flanks), he has scored five goals in nine starts at striker for his country this year, a reflection that his position with Lyon may be in need of a rethink.

It is not as though Depay cannot be effective when played on the left, as his experiences at PSV show, but Lyon, to privilege Nabil Fékir, who has no natural position in a 4-3-3, rarely play that system. Played on the left in a 4-2-3-1, Depay's lack of defensive diligence simply leaves the midfield too exposed. Lyon have recently experimented with a diamond midfield (a system that worked to great effect in 2014-15, with Fekir playing behind Alexandre Lacazette and Clinton N'Jie), and a 3-5-2. Both of these seem to capable of getting more out of Depay, although Bruno Génésio has struggled to use him in these situations as well at times, sometimes pairing him with another, more physically imposing forward (Martin Terrier or Moussa Dembélé) in a two, but also trying him in attacking midfield during Fékir's absences, as the captain has missed a handful of matches due to a variety of nagging injuries this season.

While Génésio was quick to take Depay to task for his antics ahead of that Angers match, the Lyon manager has also readily backed his player when he feels that he has come under undue criticism. Lyon were gutted to have drawn 2-2 against Hoffenheim in November, and Depay was awarded a 3/10 by *L'Équipe*, the venerable paper describing his play ahead of Fékir in a 3-5-1-1 as cutting a figure *"rather isolated, but took a long time to get into the rhythm of the match. Too much non-chalance in his play and too many missed chances."*

While Fékir and the underrated Ferland Mendy did have far more to do with Lyon's efficacy in attack on that occasion, Génésio acknowledged that part of how Depay underwhelmed may have had more to do with his own tactics than indifference, or indeed indolence on the part of the player. The manager also intimated that Depay's aforementioned antics, such as the rap video, may have exerted an outsized influence on the perception that the press (and duly the public) have of his play on the pitch. *"I heard that Memphis was catastrophic, scandalous. That is not the case. His performance was good for the team. He showed a lot of commitment, his attitude was good too. His match has not been judged, we have judged his public appearances. It is a pity that we stigmatise a player. Last year he had a hard time at the beginning, but he had a very good end to the season."*

So there, then, is where Depay must truly be judged; he is exactly as Génésio has described him, being at once maddeningly selfish, unfairly maligned, and supremely talented. One never knows which Memphis will be on the pitch (or on Instagram), but that unpredictability is what makes him such a compelling presence. His numbers for 2018 for club and country are truly impressive, and he is undoubtedly talented, but his limitations mean that his efficacy is restricted to only a handful of tactical setups, and how well he can perform in tandem with Fékir is something that has yet to be in evidence.

Depay has hinted on more than one occasion that he desires an opportunity to move to a bigger club, and with his having done poorly in his first spell in England, there may be indeed something of the redemptive in his taking the path of Mo Salah or Kevin de Bruyne, both of whom underwhelmed before returning to England to become among the league's very best. There was not, per LFP rules, a buyback clause in his sale to Lyon, but a Manchester return has been mooted. If only Depay can achieve just a bit more consistency, he may not be long for Lyon.



THOMAS MEUNIER

(+11)

9

BORN: 1991/09/12 | SAINTE-ODE

CLUB: PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN

POSITION: DEFENDER

AT CLUB SINCE: 2016

LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 27

Less than a decade ago, Thomas Meunier worked as a postman. Scouted at a young age by Standard Liege, Meunier failed to graduate and an ailing career lower down the Belgian pyramid needed financial supplementation. 30 international caps and a surprise transfer to PSG later, the outspoken Meunier is regarded by most as the premier full-back at the Parc des Princes and by many as number one right-back on the continent in 2018. Unfortunately for Meunier, however, the question remains: does Thomas Tuchel agree?

Proving himself has become customary for Meunier. Having been scouted by Standard Liege as a youngster, Meunier was eventually released in 2006 after a succession of injuries. A fan of art from an early age, taught by his grandmother in drawing and painting, a frustrated the teenage Meunier considered giving up on football entirely. *"There was even a period when I said that I would become a cartoon artist,"* Meunier told The Guardian last year. *"I was a huge fan of Bugs Bunny."* Nevertheless, after a difficult adolescence, overcoming *"some psychological challenges in my youth, like the divorce of my parents,"* which he asserts *"shaped his character"* Meunier, a Manchester United fan as a boy, admitted that it was *"when I had a ball at my feet, I was happy,"* and took his mother's advice to persist with his passion. Although he maintains overcoming that initial rejection was troublesome. *"If you are, just like me at that age, purely focused on football and your club tell you that you're not good enough it can be a shock."*

Then playing as a forward, Meunier was awarded a contract with third tier side Virton after a ludicrous ten goal haul during a 15-3 win while on trial, eventually drawing interest from first division sides once more. Club Brugge paid €200,000 for the young Meunier's services in 2011 where, again due to injury absences, he was moulded into an attacking full-back.

When the Belgian arrived in Paris from Brugge for €7m during summer 2016, despite playing a prominent part at the Euros for Belgium that summer, starting in both of Belgium's knockout out games against Hungary and Wales, few recognised Meunier at PSG's training ground, Camp des Loges. *"When I arrived, not many of my team-mates knew me,"* Meunier recalled. *"Thanks to the Euros there were maybe two players who remembered my name. Thiago Motta had played against Belgium with Italy. I was not in the starting eleven but after the game I swapped shirts with him. He did not even remember."* Although initially slipping under the radar, Meunier's stature quickly grew despite being originally brought in as an under-study to then first choice right-back Serge Aurier as Unai Emery arrived at the Parc des Princes that summer. Paris' new recruit quickly engineered a regular spot in the team towards the end of 2016. Having started out as a forward, his gung-ho attacking style, marauding up the flank from full-back, proved well-suited in a team who had little defending to do.

In November, a thunderous 25-yard volley in injury time to win a Champions' League group stage tie at Basel marked the first of many memorable strikes with PSG. Continuing to impress, albeit given limited chances to do so, Aurier's extended January stay at the 2017 AFCON cemented Meunier's place in Emery's plans. As winter became spring, Meunier stood out, as many did, in the 4-0 Champions, League last 16 first leg win over Barcelona, while Aurier watched from the bench.

Despite the sale of Aurier that summer, the Ivorian's rash defending and poor attitude having been an issue for some time, Meunier again found himself relegated to second choice as Dani Alves arrived from Juventus to join an already powerful Brazilian contingent at the capital club. Although Meunier continued to make an impact when afforded the opportunity, notably scoring both goals in a 2-1 October win at Dijon - including the injury time winner - and producing another spectacular long range volley to open the scoring in a Coupe de la Ligue tie at Rennes, Alves unsurprisingly proved more difficult to usurp than Aurier as the Brazilian remained Emery's choice for the bigger games despite his somewhat undulating form.

Although rarely seen at the Parc des Princes, Meunier remained an ever-present, injury permitting, for Roberto Martinez's Belgian national team, the former Everton manager's switch to a trio of central defenders playing to Meunier's strengths as goals and head turning displays remained common. A hat-trick and three assists in one game against Gibraltar underlined his ability in the final third.

No longer the unknown man, the 2018 World Cup in Russia sparked the most productive period of Meunier's career. A lovely pass for Romelu Lukaku's second in a 5-2 demolition of Tunisia capped a threatening Meunier display, before his cross provided Nacer Chadli with the chance to round off a memorable comeback in a pulsating last 16 tie with Japan. Having again impressed in beating Brazil to a last four spot as part of another enthralling Belgium victory, it is perhaps telling that suspension robbed Martinez of his flying wing-back for the semifinal defeat to France. Meunier's frustrations were evident as he posted a man of the match display in beating England to third place, scoring the opener and coming close to what would have been a brilliant second.

Having again shown his worth in Russia, Meunier was parachuted back into the PSG first team this autumn after Alves sustained a serious knee injury during May's Coupe de France final win over Les Herbiers. A string of standout performances seemed to cement the Belgian in the first team once more as goals continued to flow for Thomas Tuchel's incarnation of PSG, three in three games during September including one at Anfield, as Meunier enjoyed some of the best form, both defensively and offensively, of his career. Having been deployed as a full-back previously in the ubiquitous Parisien 4-3-3, Tuchel moved Meunier to wing-back, usually in a 3-4-3 set up, which suited the Belgian's traditionally top heavy skill set.

However, as 2018 drew to a close, Meunier's rhythm was interrupted. Despite such excellent form, the spectre of competition again haunted him as Alves edged closer to a return while the recent signing, German international Thilo Kehrer, drew praise for his own increasingly assured displays at all of wing-back, full-back and centre back. Kehrer's versatility, technical ability and superior defensive acumen notably impressed Thomas Tuchel.

Despite again impacting all three of Paris' Champions' League fixtures until that point, Tuchel was reportedly frustrated at Meunier's display in the trip to Naples, a 1-1 draw. Having made the wrong decision on a handful of occasions on the right flank, Paris missed out on potentially dangerous chances as they dominated early on at the San Paolo. Meunier then missed the visit of Liverpool (although admittedly due to the death of his grandfather) and has struggled to regain his place since, as Kehrer was again preferred for the crucial win in Belgrade which saw Paris secure qualification and top a tough group.

Unfortunately for Meunier, despite a productive 2018 at the Parc des Princes and beyond, praise has not always been universal from PSG's rumbustious ultras. In May, the Belgian was roundly booed as he replaced Thiago Motta for the final half an hour of a 2-2 home draw with Guingamp. The PSG full-back had liked a tweet praising the atmosphere created by perpetual rivals Marseille's fans at the Stade Vélodrome ahead of their Europa League win over RB Leipzig. "Loyalty" has been a long running issue for PSG's main supporters group, the Collectif Ultras Paris (CUP) and Meunier's tweet was seen as disrespectful.

"Contrary to your contracts, respect is not negotiable" read a CUP banner deployed before Guingamp game. "When you sign for a club like PSG, you must at least know its history and its values," the CUP's Vice-President told L'Équipe, "I do not see [St Etienne's Stéphane] Ruffier 'liking' a tifo by Lyon fans or [Marseille's Florian] Thauvin 'liking' one of our tifos. Why do we in Paris have to accept it? We, the ultras, are the guardians of the values of Paris Saint-Germain." Meunier's refusal to apologize and decision to brand some "pseudo-supporters" and others "12-year-olds" while also telling another fan on Twitter they should "know their place", only escalated matters.

Such forthright and frank statements are not uncommon for Meunier. He was one of very few to vocalise his sympathy for Adrien Rabiot during his high profile contract dispute with the club while he admitted to RTL after Belgium's Nations League loss in Switzerland that "there are a lot of things missing... we forgot to defend well." Meunier's lack of a filter occasionally strays beyond the sensible, a jovial recreation of Robbie Fowler's infamous "line-snorting" celebration on Twitter was ill-advised while the player was remarkably honest about his transfer options in the summer as Alves and the CUP got the better of him. "I could target a club like Everton, Valencia or Dortmund, for example," Meunier told the Belgian outlet RTBF, "Michy Batshuayi made a very good decision choosing to go. The fun is playing football and that's what I'm missing right now."

Confidence and passion have never been issues for Meunier, openly discussing PSG's chances of going the season unbeaten in Ligue 1. "There's nothing to stop us thinking about those kind of records and I think it's quite possible to not lose a single game in a season," he explained, "fixing goals can help concentrate minds too, and we certainly have the quality to aim high." Meanwhile, he continually defended himself during the CUP dispute. "Know that my involvement and my passion are devoted to you to 1000%" he told PSG fans via Instagram, "loving what is done elsewhere in France must in no way call into question the respect that I have in fighting for red and blue shirt." Furthermore, a post proudly showing Belgium atop the FIFA world rankings currently sits pinned to his Twitter profile.

Although 2018 remains the best year of Thomas Meunier's career, his place in Paris is again under threat as Thilo Kehrer, Dani Alves and perhaps even youngster Moussa Diaby look to supplant him. In truth, they may have already. With Meunier honest about his need for first team football, the winter window may become his last at PSG with interest remaining wide spread. Whatever happens to Meunier in 2019, he has proven repeatedly over the course of his career to date, from postman to Parisian, that he will always deliver.



DIMITRI PAYET

(+23)

8

BORN: 1987/03/29 | SAINT-PIERRE

CLUB: MARSEILLE

POSITION: MIDFIELD

AT CLUB SINCE: 2017

LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 34

To distill the last twelve months of Dimitri Payet's career down to a handful of statistics would be missing the point completely. The main piece of American owner Frank McCourt's "Champions Project" - a investment designed to propel the Phocéens back into the European spotlight - Dimitri Payet had until last season come far from justifying his €30m price tag. Since returning to Marseille in January 2017, few could argue that Payet had had the impact expected of him, even if his unquestionable technical ability has been on display. The transfer, framed as a grand homecoming, had undertones of a resignation to a career as the luxury player of the team rather than the talisman that his first year in London had led West Ham fans on to believe. Installed as captain and central figure of the team, he had been unable to impose himself as the undisputed creator-in-chief and leader of the attack in an inconsistent Marseille side. The Payet that fans were seeing return to the South of France was a markedly different player, one dragged down by a drop in fitness levels and injury.

The club would spend the season locked in a three-way battle for a second place synonymous with direct qualification for the Champions' League, and ultimately, they would push Monaco and Lyon until the end of the campaign. Nevertheless, despite notching an impressive 77 points, scoring a total of eighty goals in the process, Garcia's men, often captained by Payet, would falter at the end and finish fourth. The consensus, however, was that the former Nantes man had little to do with this success, with the spotlight rather falling on Florian Thauvin, Morgan Sanson and Bafétimbi Gomis. Whereas the opening months of the following campaign saw the midfielder continue to turn in fairly unremarkable performances, it was at the turn of the year that he began to rediscover the form that had endeared him so much to the West Ham faithful in 2015/16. Cementing his place in the attacking midfield position after muted spells on the wing, he would end the season boasting impressive statistics, with 10 goals and 24 assists in all competitions. Alongside Thauvin, equally resurgent in the South of France after a torrid time in England, Payet was giving fans hope that McCourt's ambitious project was starting to take shape.

It was in Marseille's Europa League campaign, an epic which culminated in the club's first European final in 25 years, that Payet's talents shined the most. Five years on from the disastrous Champions' League campaign in his first season at the club, in which the team would finish rock bottom of their group without picking up a single point, it was abundantly clear that this was a different Payet. In the quarter-final tie against Leipzig, Marseille had found themselves 2-0 down on aggregate a few minutes into the second leg. In one of the defining matches of their season, they would come back to score five goals before the end, Payet being instrumental. Payet's goal, a series of stepovers followed by a trivela finish into the top corner, was undoubtedly the pick of the bunch and would go on to be in contention for the European goal of the season. Over the two games of the semi-final against Salzburg, the midfielder was once again crucial to his team's success, grabbing the assists for both of their goals in the first leg, with OM pegged back in the return fixture and forced into extra time by the Austrian outfit. Throughout extra-time, Salzburg had been putting pressure on their opponent's goal, forcing keeper Yohann Pelé into several improbable saves. Up stepped Payet four minutes from time, who sent in the ball for centre back Rolando to scramble into the goal to send Marseille to the final in Lyon. Overall, he would contribute three goals and seven assists to the European campaign which gave France its first continental finalist since Monaco in the 2004 Champions' League.

As ever with the Vélodrome faithful, Marseille were carried by their fans into the match, riding on a wave of fervour and optimism. They may not have been the favourites, but they had not been in 1993 either. The first twenty minutes of match had been promising for Rudi Garcia's men. It was Payet who immediately propelled his team straight into the action, combining with Florian Thauvin early on to hand Valère Germain Marseille's best chance of the match, which was blazed over the bar. Nevertheless, this positive start to the game would be confined to the opening twenty minutes as Koke pounced upon Frank André Zambo Anguissa's fumbled control from a Mandanda pass, setting up Antoine Griezmann to open the score and quickly quell any hopes of a repeat of the 1993 final in Munich. The nail in the coffin would come fifteen minutes later as Payet was forced off as a thigh injury sustained the week before flared up again. Starting him had been a risk that Garcia was well aware of, but *"in this sort of game risks have to be taken"*, the manager would explain after the final. Ultimately, it was one that did not pay off, as Payet limped off in tears before half time. A bad night had quickly turned into a nightmarish one.

The Réunion island native was desperately unlucky to miss out on France's World Cup squad the day after, with that muscle tear depriving him of a trip to Russia and by consequence a much deserved international title. After coming so desperately close at Euro 2016, a tournament which had seen him at his creative best, he had returned to form at just the right moment in order to be in contention for selection. While ultimately it would not matter, Payet offered a midfield profile – a creative number 10 – which Les Bleus were lacking. At the time of the squad announcement, Didier Deschamps had nonetheless made it a point to make it clear that had he not been injured, Payet could very well have been in his list of 23 players. Even if he may even have recovered in time for France's opening game, the former Marseille manager was adamant on having a final squad with *"no uncertainties or question marks"*.

Come August, fans were keen to see the 31-year-old confirm and build on what he had shown with the new season around the corner. The campaign started brightly for Payet and his team-mates, as he scored the first goal of the season from a VAR-awarded penalty to set Marseille on their way against Toulouse. He would add a second after the interval to round off a resounding 4-0 victory in front of their fans, a clear statement and a match which fans would have hoped would be a preview for things to come.

However, as the campaign got into full-swing, Marseille have suffered something of a malaise and have failed to replicate their 2017/18 late season form, nor have they managed to find the spark that carried them in Europe. By losing 3-2 to Nantes in early December, despite leading twice in the game, OM registered their sixth loss of the season, already more than the whole of last year. Having already lost to their rivals in Lyon and Lille, they remain off the pace in the race for that elusive Champions' League spot. As the team's spokesman, Payet has lamented what he sees as the team running on *"alternating currents"* of late and is all too aware of the importance of rekindling the spirit of last year's European run for the rest of the season – *"last year, we were more able to manage our matches, we need to be more consistent"*. Should they continue in this vein, there is a very real chance that the Olympiens will find themselves trophy-less at the end of the year once again. More importantly, it once again delays their European ambition, with the *"Champions Project"* quickly becoming nothing more than a punchline for opposition fans.

Payet's lack of silverware over the course of a 15-year career – save for a Réunion island cup title in his first year as a professional – belies the Frenchman's outrageous talent. And yet, he consistently racks up the individual accolades, notching the title of Ligue 1's top assister in two years, player of the season awards at both Marseille and West Ham and an appearance in the Premier League's team of the season. What this makes abundantly clear is that his game revolves around impressing with the ball at his feet rather than being part of a wider scheme of play. This is not necessarily synonymous with being individualistic – Payet is one of the standout playmakers in the league, having racked up over 100 assists over his time in the French top flight – but it has limited his opportunities, in the sense that his talents would have perhaps warranted a more successful career. He is capable of pulling off the near impossible with his right foot, or his *"velvet paw"* to use the French expression, but his willingness to track back has all too often a different matter.

Nevertheless, in coming back to Marseille and taking on the responsibility of guiding the *"Champions Project"* on the pitch, he has secured his place as one of the main actors in French football once again. This was the year that he fully stepped into the role that the club had prepared for him, as leader of the charge. With Deschamps known to be loyal in his national team selections, it would have been no surprise to find him back in the fray for the World Cup squad. This autumn, the now double world champion reiterated that he is still looking at the playmaker's performances. Perhaps, after a couple of years in the wilderness, there may be a way back into the Les Bleus setup. Overall, it may not have been a year of silverware, but it has been one in which Payet has well and truly embraced the role that it seems he was destined to fulfil in the French football landscape.



ANGEL DI MARIA

(+19)

7

BORN: 1988/02/14 | ROSARIO

CLUB: PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN

POSITION: MIDFIELD

AT CLUB SINCE: 2015

LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 33

One year ago, a large section of the Paris Saint-Germain fanbase would have been comfortable with the idea of Angel Di Maria leaving the club, as reports of the winger's possible exit surfaced. After the signings of Kylian Mbappé and Neymar and with the strains of FFP weighing down the club, it was the Argentine that was pinpointed as the one to make way. At the turn of the year, Di Maria was linked with a move to Barcelona and as playing time became more sporadic, it looked increasingly likely that the man from Rosario, Argentina was on his way out.

Di Maria has never shown a desire to leave the club and has always expressed his happiness in the French capital and when the Argentine began to find more game time in early 2018, he showed a willingness to fight and use the opportunities he was given to deliver some eye-catching performances. In late February, Neymar suffered a season-ending foot injury against Marseille which opened the door for Di Maria on the left side of the front three. At this time, Julian Draxler had been deployed in a deeper midfield role therefore leaving Di Maria to fill the huge void left by the Brazilian's absence.

The ex-Manchester United man began to add goals to his game as well as putting together a string of fine displays showing a level of consistency that he had simply failed to show before. Di Maria was unable to inspire his teammates to overturn a Champions' League first leg deficit against Real Madrid, but did help PSG to wrap up a third domestic quadruple in four years.

After a mixed World Cup, which albeit included a fantastic goal against France in Argentina's only knock-out encounter, Di Maria returned to Paris under the guidance of new head coach Thomas Tuchel, not knowing whether he would feature under the German tactician, in yet another regime change in the French capital.

With the intention of making a myriad of tactical changes, specifically to the formation of the team, Tuchel stated early-on in the campaign that he wanted to include a potentially devastating forward quartet of Mbappé, Neymar, Cavani and Di Maria in the starting XI. Initially, the set-up looked better suited to domestic football, where PSG could take the kind of risks associated with such a top-heavy team. However, when Tuchel's formation accommodated the Argentine in the Champions' League match-day one encounter at Liverpool in September, it was a real statement of just how importantly Di Maria is viewed by his new coach.

So far this season, Di Maria has been in good form but with further room for improvement. This could be attributed to his deeper role where he usually makes up a midfield three. In this position, Di Maria is forced to play at a slower pace, he will often play the first pass in a move rather than make an assist and is far more unlikely to get into threatening positions to score, as reflected by his season's goal return thus far. Di Maria will undeniably be enjoying the playing time that he is getting but may at times be bemused by the inability to affect a game in the destructive way he can. The same can be said of his team-mate Julian Draxler, who has also had to adapt to a different role to acquire game time, whilst Lucas Moura left Paris to join Tottenham Hotspur for similar reasons.

The signings of Neymar and Mbappé have been gamechangers for every attacking player in the PSG squad, with the likes of Di Maria, Draxler and Edinson Cavani all having to make modifications to their game to accommodate the two stars. Nonetheless, Di Maria should be lauded for his fighting spirit and attitude at a time where there were enticing options to play his football elsewhere. The Argentine has taken his chance when it has arisen and has adapted to the changing times in Paris when other players may have become exasperated and showed signs of ill-discipline.

For Angel Di Maria, 2019 will present another huge challenge with both club and country. At PSG, the club's number 11 will look to continue to shine and further adapt to the new position he has found himself in. On a personal level, he will look to add the goals to his game that he was producing this time last year and be able to work more efficiently in the multiple formations deployed under Thomas Tuchel.

His last minute equaliser against Napoli aside, replicating his form in the big games can occasionally be a shortcoming in the Argentine's game. If PSG are contesting a string of big European nights in the spring of 2019, then he will need to step up, particularly away from home where so far this season he has failed to be decisive and perform to the standards he has set himself.

Di Maria will be conscious of PSG's desire to recruit one or more central midfielders either in the January transfer window and in the summer. With the likely departure of Adrien Rabiot seemingly imminent, competition for places is rife and with Di Maria recently signing a new contract until 2021, which is likely to be his last sizeable one, he will be weary of playing a bit-part role as PSG continue to grow and strive for success in Europe.

"It is with great pleasure that I renew my commitment with Paris Saint-Germain," said the 30-year-old after signing his new deal in October. "For three years now, I have found here, in Paris, an extraordinary context to flourish. Day after day, I feel honoured and extremely motivated to participate in such an ambitious project, as it does not exist anywhere else in Europe. With my team-mates, we still have many beautiful and big stories to write together to continue to increase the dimension of Paris Saint-Germain on the map of international football. The support of all those who love this club will help us push our limits and defend this shirt with passion and determination. All together, we will still share a lot of emotions, meet many challenges. I am even convinced that the best is yet to come."

Di Maria is likely to get more chances in his preferred attack-minded role than Julian Draxler when covering for Neymar. The world-record signing has only played in around 50% of PSG's games since arriving from Barcelona due to injury and rest thus giving any replacements more playing time. Draxler has arguably taken to the deeper role with more ease than the ex-Real Madrid winger therefore giving Di Maria the edge when replacing the enigmatic Brazilian.

It has been encouraging to see Di Maria get some of the praise and gratitude that he deserves for the performances displayed in 2018. At times it has felt as though he has not been fully appreciated for the role he has played in the club's recent success. Although some fans would have been happy to see him sacrificed to appease FFP regulations at the start of the year, the perception is very different now and many are comprehending the key role he plays, his professional attitude and his new diverse style.

2019 will be a big year for Di Maria at international level with Argentina, with the Copa America commencing in June. Di Maria will be expected to turn out for La Albiceleste and will want to impress after a disappointing World Cup for Argentina and for the player personally. With Di Maria turning 31 by the time the tournament in Brazil kicks off, he will know only too well that he is in the latter stages of his international career and that there is an abundance of young attacking talent knocking at the door of coach Lionel Scaloni.

As decorated a player as Angel Di Maria is at club level, he will feel unfulfilled on the international stage. Despite starting well by winning an Olympic gold medal in the 2008 Beijing Olympics alongside an emerging Lionel Messi, Di Maria would have hoped to have won more honours in the white and sky blue surrounded by an astounding pot of talent, but three straight final defeats has kept the ex-Benfica winger waiting to fill that void. A 2014 World Cup Final defeat to Germany followed by successive Copa America defeats to Chile in 2015 and 2016 means that the dream goes on for the PSG man.

With few opportunities left for Di Maria to taste success with Argentina, expect the pacey winger to go all out this summer to ensure he does not end his international career empty-handed. Angel Di Maria currently has eight major honours to his name during his time in Paris: two domestic quadruples. Although he already holds a Champions' League winner's medal from his time at Real Madrid, success in this competition with PSG could be the most important title of his career to date.

But there is a lot of work to do for the winger to reach this goal and he will be a key component if Paris Saint-Germain are to reach the holy grail either this season or next. Alongside Dani Alves and Neymar, Di Maria will be looked upon for his experience and know-how when it comes to winning Europe's biggest prize.



NABIL FEKIR

(+2)

6

BORN: 1993/07/18 | LYON

CLUB: LYON

POSITION: MIDFIELD

AT CLUB SINCE: 2013

LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 26

It is safe to say that the Nabil Fékir of a year ago was in far better standing than the current edition, but that is not necessarily the fairest of comparisons given how, at that time, he may have been the best player in Ligue 1 not named Neymar, having scored thirteen goals domestically, with a further three assists. January started with a bang as well, with four goals and two assists including one of each in a momentous victory over Paris Saint-Germain at the Parc OL in late January. However, an injury suffered in a derby draw against Saint-Étienne the next month kept him out for six weeks. He was still included in the UNFP's team of the year, but after his lengthy struggle to recover from an ACL injury suffered on international duty in 2015, there was something of the tragic about another set-back, especially ahead of the World Cup.

Fékir did recover, and even as Memphis Depay and Bertrand Traoré came to the fore for Lyon down the back end of last season, the captain still worked hard for *Les Gones* and was duly selected to feature in Russia. For his country, he is never going to be a first-choice selection, or the focal point of the attack, as he had been tipped to be prior to that ACL injury, but his versatility, tenacity, and ability on the ball make him an ideal substitute for his country. That said, there still remains something of the unfulfilled about his career, and 2018 has been that in microcosm. Like the rest of his title-winning team-mates from the national side (save perhaps Kylian Mbappé), his reintegration into his club side in the current season has been a slow burn, with Ligue 1 having kicked off just three weeks after *Les Bleus* lifted the trophy in Moscow.

Fékir's first appearance this season was off the bench, in week three against Strasbourg, and he has worked hard to get himself back up to speed, but it did take him roughly a month to be looking the driven, dynamic performer that was the beating heart of Lyon's success for much of last season. That dynamism was on full display on one of the biggest stages of Fékir's career, though, as he delivered a man of the match performance at the Etihad in September, captaining Lyon to one of the most famous victories in the club's history, a 2-1 win over Manchester City and helping Lyon offer a firm rebuttal to the farmers' league narrative that has dogged the French top flight in the years since PSG were purchased by QSI. Fékir recorded a goal and an assist in the match, but he was more than that on the evening, as he not only played as the team's creative hub, but also acted as a role model in terms of his work pressing and tracking back, making a bevy of tackles and earning what has almost become a customary booking for his troubles.

Some twelve months ahead of that match, he was all too frequently lambasted as a player over whom many had had doubts regarding his being handed the captain's armband, owing not only to his perceived physical frailty but also his struggles with his weight and a general lack of motivation.

This, then was the Fékir that had thrilled last season, one who sparkled as a number ten in a 4-2-3-1, demonstrating his hustle and ability by not only taking on the playmaking responsibilities but also drifting into wide areas to allow the likes of Houssem Aouar and Tanguy N'Dombélé, both also superb on the ball and gifted passers, to affect the attacking phases of play more. He retains his penchant for a booking, but remains a willing worker, displaying a relatively newfound maturity that has seen Bruno Génésio's decision to hand Fékir the captaincy vindicated, and then some, particularly with Fékir, even at 25, being one of the squad's senior statesmen and a good role model for a young team.

His experience may not be especially vast, as injury has robbed him of much of his already young career, but he has been a willing mentor and seized the mantle of leadership while still allowing those exciting younger players to grow alongside him, even if his fitness woes have given them more in the way of opportunity. After all, his own chance in the first team was only as a result of long-term injuries to Clément Grenier and Yoann Gourcuff.

He will also, of course, be cognisant of how quickly a career can pick up steam; despite largely being an afterthought for France at youth levels, he shunned calls to play for Algeria and was quickly installed into the senior set-up in 2015. His determination to be recognised has also been reflected in his overcoming a somewhat peripatetic career prior to arriving at Lyon, having been on the books of no less than five different Rhône-area clubs before signing for *Les Gones* in 2011, already 18 and with little pedigree of which to speak, especially when compared to the likes of Tolisso and Samuel Umtiti.

Reflecting back on the present, then, that performance against City was followed by another against Marseille, as Fékir, again full of vitality, scored and set up another to see off the club's (second) most bitter rival, 4-2. Two weeks later, however, Fékir was sidelined again, as Thiago Silva's late challenge six minutes into Lyon's loss at the Parc des Princes saw Fékir miss a month out with an ankle injury, including two vital matches against Hoffenheim in the Champions' League. Lyon could only draw those matches, but were able to leave themselves in decent position heading into the final match of the group stage, away to Shakhtar Donetsk, by earning a draw against City in the return fixture.

In that match, which ended 2-2, Maxwel Cornet was the hero, notching a brace and keeping City's attack at bay with his vaunted pace, but Fékir, only recently back from injury, was a shadow of his usual self. It is hard to say if this was due to an aggregation of injuries or if the occasion (and his having rushed to return for it) got the better of Fékir, but he was far from his best, struggling to affect the game and being withdrawn late on as Lyon sought a winner.

He has again struggled to convincingly find his place in the side, even as Lyon have tweaked their tactics around him, switching among a 3-5-1-1, a diamond 4-4-2, and a 3-5-2, with Fékir played behind a strike partnership. One can hope at this juncture that he is simply at a low ebb, as he has been before in his career, but having turned 25 and thus approaching a time in his career in which his age and how long he is capable of performing at his peak could potentially be off-putting to suitors, the present has become another difficult test of his mental fortitude.

The latest news on Fékir, though, may be the most interesting, and could see an end to his inclusion in this publication next year. There can be no doubt that this summer's interest from Liverpool, which went to the point of his alighting in Merseyside and undergoing a medical, will have unsettled him. Even if the Reds' interest will have been an unwelcome distraction for Génésio, Fékir, has been a real professional on the pitch, even as those links fitfully persist. What would damn them to being fantasy is the persistent rumours over why the transfer did not come to fruition, with Liverpool reportedly having concerns about the player's long-term health vis-à-vis the ACL injury and the niggles and absences that have occurred with fairly alarming consistency in the three years since.

Under contract until 2020 with Lyon, the club do not want to let the player enter this summer with only one year remaining on his deal, as his value, thought to be in the neighbourhood of €50m, would severely diminish. Indeed, Lyon may be entertaining selling him on as soon as January, hoping that his presence in what is typically a very shallow market can artificially inflate his value. There is no doubt that his move to Liverpool falling through will have had a damaging effect on his price, but January (Andy Carroll, Fernando Torres) has had more than its fair share of ludicrous transfer deals, and Jean-Michel Aulas has always been the canniest of operators in that regard. There is also, to further complicate matters, currently a very frosty relationship between Fékir and his agent, Jean-Pierre Bernès, which necessarily makes the likelihood of an extension being signed a rather small one.

Speaking recently to Groupe OL shareholders, Aulas was as frank and unsentimental over his captain's future as he always is, *"For the moment, we have not really had a real discussion, even if we met three weeks ago. The sorting out of various things concerning who the agent is, is ongoing. The aim, is to have a clear and precise position from his point of view between now and the end of the year... Bernès is still his agent but he cannot be so at the end of the player's contract."*

Thus, while frustration and impasses, some within his control but many out of it, have been the leitmotif of Nabil Fékir's 2018, there has still been more than enough brilliance to warrant his placement on this list. His scoring ability from his position as an attacking midfielder is almost without peer in the division, and he has continued to work hard to see Lyon have success on the biggest stage, even if the best the club can really hope for in the Champions' League is likely a battling Round of 16 exit, with a second place finish domestically. Despite a patent ceiling on the club's ambitions, Fékir does not seem to have one himself, and perhaps the time is right for a departure from his boyhood club. If he does go now, he should be remembered far more for his best moments than the odd occasion of indolence or frustration, as a player who, on his day, is capable of the sublime, even if he will probably never become truly world class.



LUIZ GUSTAVO

(+22)

5

BORN: 1987/07/23

PINDAMONHANGABA

CLUB: MARSEILLE

POSITION: MIDFIELD

AT CLUB SINCE: 2017

LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 33

Verging on his thirties after a disastrous season for then employers Wolfsburg, Luis Gustavo's career was slipping towards its autumn without him having truly found a home. Nevertheless, success was forthcoming in Germany for Gustavo, albeit in the shape of medals rather than the adoration of supporters. In France with Marseille however, complete with shaggy new curls and a bristling mustache, he has quickly established himself as a cult hero - the 'gentleman' of the Vélodrome. Now, Gustavo has a shot at both affection and glory, as well as an enduring legacy as a great of one of Europe's most historic clubs.

Gustavo's European career started apace back in 2007. Three impressive seasons at the emerging Hoffenheim had brought him to the forefront of the Bundesliga consciousness, having arrived from Brazilian lower league outfit Corinthians Alagoano and helping his new German employers win promotion. A €20m move to the perennial champions Bayern Munich followed, a transfer that led to then coach Ralf Rangnick's departure, so infuriated was the enigmatic German to lose his midfield general. However, despite an impressive trophy haul, Gustavo failed to impose himself with real regularity on the Bayern first team, particularly during the latter half of his three season stint at the Allianz Arena. Cash rich Wolfsburg made a move to add him to their growing list of Bundesliga stars in 2013. It was here, at the Volkswagen arena, that Gustavo enjoyed status as a squad leader.

However, injuries hit hard in the latter half of 2015, while Gustavo's consistency, fitness and overall form had been on a downward trajectory in parallel to the fortunes of his club. This was not a surprise, given his importance to the team's successes. Valérien Ismaël, Wolfsburg coach at the time, had suggested that the Brazilian had lost an appetite for playing the game, something Gustavo actually alludes to. *"He [Ismael] coached me at a time of my life that was particularly difficult,"* reflected Gustavo in *L'Équipe*, *"There were situations at the club that I could not accept, so I went home to recharge my batteries, to come back more motivated."*

Gustavo arrived in Marseille during the 2017 summer transfer window for a fee of €10m and the Brazilian had an instant impact on his new Marseille team, both as an emotional leader and as a squad figurehead, while his individual displays have been consistently superb, especially during his freshman year. A now relatively wizened Gustavo naturally assumed the sizeable responsibility as a leader and talisman of the Vélodrome club, often inheriting the captaincy when regular wearer of the armband, Dimitri Payet, was absent, and dictating midfield battles both in France and in Europe with a serenity and assuredness that OM had both long lacked and been desperately searching for.

"Luiz is a very intelligent player with technical, tactical and physical qualities," explained OM coach, a Ligue 1 winner at the helm of Lille in 2011, Rudi Garcia. *"He's a leader. He does a very good job at playing out from the back. In fact, he can play anywhere as long as he's in the middle of the pitch."* Gustavo's impact has been so great that his stay on the French south coast could yet come to define an already decorated and vibrant career. Marseille are an almost prohibitively proud club, boasting a rich history and France's biggest fanbase while still fiercely arguing their case to be seen as the biggest in Ligue 1, despite PSG's recent dominance and bottomless pockets. Their roll of honour makes for daunting reading: Deschamps, Papin, Voller, Barthez, Boli and Drogba all count themselves as members of an exclusive club, as greats of the cathedral that is the Stade Vélodrome. Luiz Gustavo has a chance to, one day soon, join them. He may already lay some claim.

A sizable caveat to Gustavo's rise on the South coast of France is that the credentials required to join the pantheon of Marseille greats has been eroded a little in recent times. Given the current level of investment and playing staff at Garcia's disposal, Gustavo will not be winning European cups or even Ligue 1 titles as Didier Deschamps did as player and then coach but crucially, and in a short space of time, Gustavo has quickly embodied the fans' unbridled desire for success and passion for their club, while personifying the typical mix of panache and zeal that characterises Marseille's historical style of play.

Assuming that Gustavo can maintain his overall level and perhaps lead the developing 'Champions Project' to a domestic cup or Europa League silverware over the next few years, his status as a hero of the Vélodrome would be confirmed. However, having come close last season in losing the Europa League final to Atletico Madrid, chances of that seem slim. OM, with Gustavo in its vanguard, may have missed their chance as the Brazilian edges towards the twilight of his career and the Champions Project continues to falter.

Rudi Garcia, however, remains his shaggy haired midfield general's champion. Having attempted to lure the Brazilian to his Roma side, Garcia finally got his man at Marseille, noting his obvious abilities as a leader and an all-round consummate professional. *"He's a gentleman and important in the dressing room. He has charisma and a good relationship with everyone,"* explained the Marseille coach. Meanwhile, upon Gustavo's signing, a delighted Garcia spoke of his potential influence on the squad as a whole, key to OM's pursuit of the player. *"It is above all about character, we have a very young midfield... we needed a boss and a player of this caliber to give this team a little more confidence."*

Calibre of character, as referenced by Garcia, has been the determining factor in bonding Gustavo so tightly and so quickly to the Vélodrome faithful: *"I'm someone very calm and positive."* explained Gustavo, *"I'm always trying to help my colleagues, find the words that will aid morale. I always think of others, to be strong together with them."* His honest, humble and supportive persona is clear in his play at OM, so much so that the club's various supporter groups quickly devoted a song to their new hero, an honour to which Gustavo responded in a typically grateful manner: *"My name has been shouted in stadiums before but a song to my glory? Never! It was really a pleasant surprise. I can only thank the fans by working even harder on the pitch."*

Despite an extraordinary first season at the Vélodrome, the start of the 2018/19 season has been rocky for both Marseille and, in part, their moustached midfielder. Despite retaining their entire squad from last season, although admittedly meaningful additions were as rare as departures, having challenged for second (and Champions' League football) on the final day of the Ligue 1 season and battled through to the Europa League final in Lyon, Garcia's Marseille and the much derided 'Champions Project', having finally made progress as a whole, have stumbled horribly this autumn. Already accruing more league defeats this season than they did in the whole of last, OM have been largely dull and uninspiring while their Europa League group stage campaign ended in an early exit and, embarrassingly, just a single point.

For his part, Gustavo has often dropped into defence, playing as part of a pair or even a trio of centre backs. This was initially largely out of necessity, as Adil Rami missed a handful of games with a thigh issue while his usual partner, Rolando, also struggled to recover from a long term knee issue. Croatian World Cup squad-making defender Duje Caleta-Car and teenager Bou-bacar Kamara have both been rarely trusted to fill their places.

Although no stranger to the role, being deployed there at both Bayern and Wolfsburg on occasion, the switch has become a problematic one for Gustavo. Despite showing his typical passion, zeal and chest-out combativeness that so endears him to the Marseille fanbase, his lack of pace and support from an ailing back line regularly leaves him exposed in both Ligue 1 and European competition as Garcia persisted with Gustavo in a deeper role longer than many saw as necessary. Having been returned to a more natural midfield berth, the Brazilian's displays have largely righted themselves, but with the OM team more generally lacking gumption, intensity and even heart at times, Gustavo has been unable to drag the side back towards its effectiveness of last season, despite possessing (and showing) all three of those qualities in abundance.

Clearly frustrated, despite his on field efforts, Gustavo has not pulled his punches this campaign. Following a particularly poor home defeat to Lazio he told RMC: *"We must do a lot better because this is not the level of Olympique Marseille. It's always the same, we need to defend as a team. When we play as individuals, we concede goals. We need to fix that... This is a difficult time, one where you have to stay together."* 'Staying together' has repeatedly been Gustavo's edict this season but despite his best efforts, it doesn't seem to be catching on. *"We continue to make the same mistakes, which does not put us in a position to progress,"* said Gustavo after the 3-0 loss at Montpellier in November, *"It's not a crisis, but we're not playing well at all. We all need to improve, otherwise we will have a difficult season."*

Crisis or not, the importance of a sense of belonging, or the right fit, is an underrated force in football. For example, only two managers in the post war era have won the English first division with more than one club; Brian Clough and Kenny Dalglish. Although there are other forces at play here, it is clear that surroundings and circumstance can make or break a player's or manager's spell with any one club, regardless of their individual quality or record. Gustavo and Marseille, however, are perfectly suited - they simply work together. One fan site described him recently as *"the lungs and the brain of the team."* *"I cannot find the words to explain what is happening between [the fans] and me,"* continued the Brazilian in an interview with L'Équipe, *"this move is the one I've always dreamed of, it's wonderful to receive so much gratitude and love."*

"I do not consider myself the boss. I am very quiet here. I respect everyone. No matter their age. I mainly try to help my teammates... For me, the main thing is that the team wins," says the midfielder, *"I think the more time passes, the more we will unite and the more we will help each other to go far."* In no small part down to Gustavo, Marseille have made progress in some areas, despite falling behind in others. However, without the 'Gentleman of the Vélodrome', as he quickly becomes the heart and soul of the team, that glacial progress could come to a halt entirely after a tough end to 2018. Wherever l'OM go from here, at 31, Luis Gustavo has finally found a home.



TANGUY NDOMBELE

(+65)

4

BORN: 1996/12/28 | LONGJUMEAU

CLUB: LYON

POSITION: MIDFIELD

AT CLUB SINCE: 2017

LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 35

Lyon have long been vaunted as having one of France's, and indeed Europe's strongest academies, with the likes of Karim Benzema, Alexandre Lacazette, and Frédéric Kanouté among its products, but the club have taken a rather different approach to sustaining success in recent times. While there are still academy products sprinkled throughout the team, including Houssem Aouar, Anthony Lopes, and Nabil Fekir, in recent seasons, younger players brought in from other clubs have been rather more decisive in *Les Gones'* quest to maintain their place as regulars in European competition. Lucas Tousart, Ferland Mendy, and Jason Denayer are key examples, but perhaps no player has blossomed quite like Tanguy N'Dombélé, who recently earned his first full cap for France against Uruguay.

Admired by the likes of Manchester City, Roma, and Tottenham Hotspur in the summer, N'Dombélé has been nothing short of a revelation since arriving from Amiens, initially on loan, last summer. Now signed to a contract through 2023, despite enduring a somewhat shaky start to the season, thought by some to be tied to his not having departed in the summer, he has been back in magnificent form of late. While the injury absences of Corentin Tolisso and Paul Pogba certainly played their part in his being given an opportunity by Didier Deschamps, it is also more than fair to suggest that he would be ahead of those two on form, fitness notwithstanding.

Born to Congolese parents, like so many promising players in the current French set-up, N'Dombélé came of age in the outskirts of Paris, in Longjumeau, also the birthplace of Benjamin Mendy. N'Dombélé had a somewhat peripatetic youth career, spending time on the books of a variety of amateur clubs as well as Guingamp, where he was seen as talented, but perhaps lacking the necessary drive to succeed as a professional. Speaking to *L'Équipe* last year, Lionel Rouxel, who was the manager of the Breton side's reserves at the time, recalled N'Dombélé thus:

"He was a nice kid, and funny, but he didn't seem to care much in school. It wasn't a case of his potential being questioned, and he had a good mentality — respectful — but he seemed to be lacking the awareness to reach a high level. He had a hard time waking up in the morning, he was overweight, and didn't always present himself seriously. We were kind to him, we were tough, but in the end we felt we'd given him a chance."

Following his departure from Guingamp, he struggled to latch on with another club, as trials with Caen, Auxerre, and Angers failed to result in his being offered a training contract, again because of concerns over his weight. Humbled by this experience, in 2014 he joined Amiens, who were then playing in the semi-professional third tier, having lost their professional status. Despite taking what seemed, at the time, a big step down vis-à-vis his ambitions, N'Dombélé buckled down and made a big impression with the northern side, despite playing only sparingly with the reserves in his first season.

Patrice Descamps, his manager then, recalls that N'Dombélé seemed to be almost in a state of shock at the seeming set-back of playing for such an unheralded club: *"He was full of negative emotions caused by a gap between what he was hoping for and reality. He had to overcome this dark period, to forge a new mindset and a degree of willingness to learn that he had lost."* N'Dombélé offered in that first, difficult season, a firm rebuttal, and in his second, he subsequently became a regular with the reserves, before breaking through to the first team and finally signing his first professional contract in October of 2016.

Already an ever-present for Christophe Pélissier's side at that point, having taken advantage of a lengthy injury absence on the part of Guy N'Gosso, he became a key figure, (particularly in the run-in as he played a hand in nine goals from late January onwards) as they famously earned promotion in dramatic fashion. His style of play was hardly one which would garner much in the way of agate type, even as he did record seven assists in less than 2,000 minutes on the pitch, but his physicality, explosiveness and power allowed him to affect play with a remarkable level of dynamism. That same frame that had been criticised by Rouxel for being overweight had been honed by this point into something far more lean, without sacrificing any of his power.

With Tolisso, Sergi Darder and Maxime Gonalons all having departed in the summer of 2017, Lyon certainly had a pressing need in midfield, and in N'Dombélé, they had a player who could provide a similar amount of versatility as Tolisso had. Like the Bayern Munich man, he, too, had also played on occasion at right-back and on the right wing with Amiens' reserves, offering a relatively like-for-like degree of polyvalence. Capable of playing as a six, but also a decent attacking midfielder, N'Dombélé is at his best as a relayeur, a player capable of breaking up play, but more importantly, driving the game forward on the counter through his ability to keep possession and play through balls to players who are more naturally gifted or have a better eye for goal. In an interview with Amiens paper *Gazette Sport* on the occasion of signing his first contract, the player himself mentioned Giannelli Imbula, who had also spent time at Guingamp, as a model, but it is clear now that his sights should be set much higher in terms of emulation, with another former Lyon player, Michael Essien, perhaps a more apt comparison.

Initially signed on loan but with an obligation to buy and despite permanent offers being tabled from the likes of Hoffenheim and Saint-Étienne, he quickly made a splash upon his arrival in summer 2017, delivering a man of the match performance against Paris Saint-Germain in his first appearance with his new club. It was a clear precedent that set the tone for his early days with Lyon, offering a commanding performance whilst driving forward from midfield. Coming on the heels of a similarly strong display against Paris with Amiens a month earlier, that match showed how comfortably he could adapt to the rigours of not only the top flight but also European football, as he was key to Lyon navigating a tricky Europa League group successfully. While *Les Gones* were frustratingly eliminated from that competition by CSKA Moscow, his play continued to prove key as Lyon withstood the lengthy absence of Nabil Fékir in the second half of the season to pip Marseille to third place.

N'Dombélé was the victim of a contentious non-call that ought to have resulted in a penalty against Paris Saint-Germain in that initial meeting, but he was again at his most vital in the reverse fixture, proving decisive in a 2-1 win that presaged the club's improved form in the run-in, with Fékir admitting that his young team-mate was a more deserving winner of the man of the match award which had been bestowed upon him. Memphis Depay and Bertrand Traoré may have garnered most of the headlines given their prodigious scoring rates during that period, but one would be foolish indeed not to recognise that the freedom in attack that those two enjoyed was surely down to the energetic displays put on by the midfield.

Things have admittedly been slightly rockier for N'Dombélé this season. The aforementioned big links to moves abroad will have surely turned the head of a player signed by Lyon for what seems a paltry €8m, but his form has also suffered slightly as a result of Bruno Génésio's tactics. Lately, the Lyon boss has become enamoured with playing three at the back, despite only having three orthodox centre backs in his side (and that's only if one counts Jérémy Morel, a converted left back). With Ferland Mendy and Rafael pushed up on the wings, that has seen N'Dombélé and Houssem Aouar playing as a midfield two with Nabil Fékir taking up a more creative role ahead of them.

Last season, Lyon often lined up in a 4-3-3 with Lucas Tousart playing in front of the defence, or in a 4-2-3-1, with N'Dombélé paired with the former Valenciennes man. Tousart is not the quickest player, but he offered the sort of shield that allowed N'Dombélé and Aouar to get forward and affect the match with their dribbling ability, something that was similarly on display for France as N'Golo Kanté and N'Dombélé seemed to quickly forge a profitable understanding, also in a 4-2-3-1. However, Tousart has been out of favour for much of the season, and while Pape Cheikh Diop is also capable of being a more prosaic option, the pairing of Aouar and N'Dombélé in front of a back three has seen both players often playing too deep to affect matches going forward, as neither seems exactly comfortable as the deepest-lying midfielder, nor do either want to be derelict in helping to protect the defence. Génésio had at times similarly miscast Tolisso as a defensive midfielder, playing him deepest in a three, to no great effect as well, and one must ask the question of how much more defensively sound Lyon could be with a natural six in the lineup.

Putting aside those tactical considerations, N'Dombélé has continued to improve, ranking as one of the division's best dribblers (and most-fouled) among central midfielders, with only Nîmes' Téji Savanier bettering his figures. Even with a role that sees him be less involved in the attack, he has still managed to record four assists in the league, putting him on pace to improve upon the six he recorded last year. While he has been somewhat inconsistent with his play domestically, in Europe, he has put in a number of displays that are on a level similar to what he has shown for France, scoring two goals and being the club's best player across the five matches played in the Champions' League to date.

Internationally, despite being wooed by DR Congo, he has been a key part of France finally qualifying for this upcoming summer's U-21 Championships, despite only making his debut after joining Lyon, featuring eleven times as *Les Espoirs* topped their group, recording nine wins and a draw in ten matches. This, in stark contrast to their failure to qualify for the 2017 tournament, despite then having an arguably more talented side. His involvement with the senior national team may curtail his ability to play in Italy this summer, but that fact should underscore his remarkable rise and still brighter future. This young man was playing for Amiens' reserves in the fifth tier almost exactly two years before first being called up by Deschamps.



NEYMAR

(+1)

3

BORN: 1992/02/05

MOGI DAS CRUZES

CLUB: PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN

POSITION: FORWARD

AT CLUB SINCE: 2017

LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 18

Neymar's big-money move to Paris Saint-Germain did much to make Ligue 1 and the capital club the focus of an unprecedented degree of attention, but sixteen months on, how has the Brazilian gotten on in a practical sense? The agate type is exceptionally clear in this regard; with thirty goals and eighteen assists in 32 league matches (as of December 2), his impact as both a creative hub and a finisher has been keenly felt in the capital. He has also fostered a strong relationship with the world's most promising talent, Kylian Mbappé, with the two showing an increasingly copacetic style together both on and off the pitch. The teenager's having been a key figure in France's run to the World Cup likely had no small part to play in what seems a heightened level of respect and understanding between the two, but it is hard to argue that, diving antics aside, Neymar has displayed an increasing degree of maturity, particularly in the current season, and would easily have topped this list were it not for his being beset by injuries for long stretches of the calendar year.

The injury, of course, that had the most effect on his maiden season in the French capital was a broken foot that kept him out for almost three months, including Paris Saint-Germain's lacklustre elimination from the Champions' League, but he continued to struggle through the summer, having played for his country despite being half-fit. This general malaise extended, and also marred some of the early part of the current campaign. That said, even missing last season's final dozen-odd matches did little to limit the impact he had upon France's top flight, leading the league in assists, and being named the UNFP Player of the Year by his peers. There were other, less savoury incidents, of course, such as his much-discussed birthday party and what appeared to growing pains among himself, Mbappé, and Edinson Cavani as the three stars sometimes looked to struggle to establish an understanding in the attacking third.

He also at times seemed to treat former manager Unai Emery with an inordinate amount of disdain, failing to adopt much of the gritty ethos which the Spaniard seems to wring from his squads. Both are clearly much happier now, with Emery impressing at Arsenal and Neymar largely freed from anything approaching defensive responsibilities as Thomas Tuchel has installed an innovative tactical system that allows PSG to easily switch between a 3-4-3 and a 3-4-1-2. This system sees Neymar playing well as both a number ten (a position which allows him to expand his game considerably, being able to make good use of both feet, rather than an over-reliance on cutting inside when played in wide areas) and a left-sided attacker while still giving Mbappé, playing on the right or through the middle, plenty of space in which to express himself. This tactical revolution from the perspective of the squad will clearly require additional player movement to really start to purr, but it has already made no small impact on "Ney".

Seemingly considerably happier without being shoehorned into an awkward 4-3-3 or clashing over space with his team-mates, as could be the case last year, Neymar has been instrumental in his club's flying start to the season, scoring remarkable goals with aplomb while continuing to be that creative fulcrum, even when played on the flank. It is no small matter to see this happier Neymar, as the summer's World Cup was marred by a stilted performance from both player and team in the quarter-finals, being eliminated by Belgium. With Tuchel being noted for his hard-nosed style, what he might demand of the Brazilian, especially with Real Madrid and Barcelona lurking as avenues for a lucrative departure, was the source of some trepidation among the club's supporters.

For as well he has played under Tuchel domestically, he has been perhaps at his best in this new, freer role in Europe, scoring four goals and allowing the club to progress through what has been an exceptionally tough group. It is true that the draw at home against Napoli and the loss to Liverpool at Anfield were hardly vintage performances from the club, but the win over the English club at the Parc des Princes was nothing short of inspirational, and the Brazilian was again key, joining his compatriots Marquinhos and Thiago Silva in more than rising to the occasion by offering a relentless will to drive forward with the ball at his feet, scarcely offering the visitors a moment's repose.

It should be mentioned here, that for all of his tricks, passing nous, and sheer cheek when it comes to creativity, Neymar certainly has his foibles beyond his perceived lack of willingness to engage in PSG's pressing. To wit, only Wilfried Zaha has been dispossessed more than Neymar in the current season, and while the two are markedly different players, the comparison goes a long way for those who do not watch Paris Saint-Germain on a week-in, week-out basis to underscore the way in which Neymar can be both devastatingly effective and supremely frustrating as the focal point of the attack.

Crystal Palace, of course, do not have auxiliary options of the calibre of Mbappé, Angel Di Maria, or Edinson Cavani, but there is a similar gulf with regard to the difference of their level in pure footballing terms. That is no slight towards that trio, nor any of Neymar's other fellow attackers, but so instinctive and forward-thinking is his play, that in practical terms, there is little that makes sense for those players but to operate in a way deferential to the Brazilian.

That being said, however, despite Di Maria being in some of the best form he has shown since leaving Real Madrid, there can still be a certain degree of coldness on the pitch when it comes to Neymar's relationship with his teammates. This is most evident in Cavani's being effectively frozen out (and not, as some would have it, on the grounds of performance) of the side, and a seemingly bright season of opportunity for the likes of Moussa Diaby being stymied to Neymar's insistence on being more direct when not able to connect with Mbappé or Di Maria, and also his being on the pitch for nearly every possible minute (unnecessarily so) hindering youngsters' development.

These are small caveats, however, and given the success that Neymar had at Barcelona, his outlook on "trusting" team-mates is surely coloured by years spent playing alongside Luis Suarez, Andres Iniesta, and Lionel Messi. Those three are not perfect, but each had enough of a reputation prior to Neymar, despite his hubris, being their team-mate, to have approached playing with them with an appropriate amount of deference, something which he is likely yet to have seen in action, at least in terms of consistency, from the likes of Cavani.

Truly, at this juncture, the only thing that looks capable of derailing Neymar, save how well (or poorly) Paris Saint-Germain construct a side around the brilliant effervescence of he and Mbappé is his fragility. Neymar is rightly (in)famous for his diving, but one has to wonder, at this juncture in his career, what the aggregate cost of being kicked on a continuous basis for both club and country is having on his body. Neymar is admittedly far from being a pensioner at 26, but he does have, in addition to north of 400 professional appearances for Santos, Barcelona and PSG, a century of matches for his country in his sights in the new year. This, coupled with the taxing reality of intercontinental travel and his insistence on playing as much football as possible (all the better to inflate his statistics as he jockeys for a Ballon d'Or of his own), means that he has perhaps been subjected to more wear and tear than most players his age. This is driven home most poignantly in that, even on matchdays prior to or just after the Champions' League, it is almost always the case that he is on the pitch from the first kick of the ball to the last, having only come off early against Bordeaux owing to an injury. This is a bizarre tactic to take when managing so influential a player, but one has the distinct feeling that Thomas Tuchel's hands are perhaps tied on this matter, even if his relationship with Neymar is hardly as contentious and combative as that of the winger and Emery.

This latest injury, a groin injury suffered against Bordeaux (itself a recurrence of an issue suffered during the November international break), only saw Neymar miss a fairly routine trip to Strasbourg (which albeit ended in a draw), but even if it is niggling, one has to wonder what it will take to have his fitness fail to be an issue on a less consistent basis. This is, of course, doubly true with success in the Champions' League as the ostensible goal; with Ligue 1 all but sown up, even at this early juncture, one has to wonder how Neymar's drive to rack up a level of statistics domestically affects his ability to be at his best in Europe.

Indeed, for all the progress that PSG seem to be making under Tuchel, will it all be for naught if Neymar (who will be back in action again this summer in the Copa America) and his ability to affect matches is continually undone by an (admittedly admirable) irrepressible drive to push to play every possible minute in every possible competition? With the domestic cups also coming into play in the weeks and months to come, all Neymar lacks is the right amount of self-awareness and willingness to temper his hubris to be at his best, allowing others in the side to take a bit of the limelight, even if only on occasion. After all, by rights, despite the ability of Mbappé, and the scoring prowess of Florian Thauvin, Neymar's particular blend of instinctive finishing and willingness (on occasion) to facilitate his side's attack is (almost) without parallel in world football. Should he take that next step towards a holistic approach to managing his drive to be a do-everything player, the conversation this time next year could once again see him mentioned in the same breath as Messi and Ronaldo.



FLORIAN THAUVIN

(+10)

2

BORN: 1993/01/26 | ORLEANS

CLUB: MARSEILLE

POSITION: FORWARD

AT CLUB SINCE: 2016

LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 32

How to describe 2018 for Florian Thauvin? Incredible. Record-breaking. Exciting. Memorable. Yet for all of those words, the 25-year-old will be most satisfied in “redemption”. If in 2017 there were still concerns that he was at best an in-form player, and at worst a shirker when the going gets tough, the last 12 months have done a lot to eliminate the naysayers.

The Orléans native entered the calendar year ending the previous one with eight goals in 19 league games. A neat return for the winger who more than compensated for Kostas Mitroglou and Valère Germain's shortcomings in the OM attack. He started 2018 with complete aplomb netting seven goals in seven games and laying on three more. This included a significant 6-3 win over FC Metz, with Thauvin netting his second treble in his OM career. In that run, OM did not lose once – with 2-2 draws against Monaco (h) and Saint-Étienne (a), understandably difficult games punctuating an otherwise perfect record.

The Thauvin of 2018 had already looked a different player than the one that ended 2017, and miles better than the shrunken figure that lapped up at the Vélodrome on express delivery from Newcastle with his tale between his legs. The reason? Not only were OM playing better as a team – but the new found confidence given to him by Rudi Garcia had certainly left a mark on the player. In Rudi there was a coach – quite like Marcelo Bielsa – who completely understood the player's qualities and offered him a freer role in attack. This of course was not the case with the likes of Michel, Franck Passi or Steve McClaren who overlooked the player's qualities stringently and insisted on the work of the collective. In Rudi's Marseille however, this was a player to be cultivated – and unlike with Bielsa, the player had certainly come to play.

Thauvin quickly settled into a neat 4-2-3-1 set up by the manager. In his favoured right-wing position, he had carte blanche to roam wherever he felt necessary. You could make the argument that he can be considered a selfish player, particularly in the final third. Thauvin would often pick up the ball, attempt to beat the oncoming defender on his stronger left-foot, cut in and attempt a shot. It usually worked – thereby earning him comparisons with Bayern Munich star Arjen Robben whose simple trick continuously bamboozles defenders to this day. In Marseille, this would be the case also. By early March, Thauvin had netted 15 league goals – just slightly below the number set by recent contemporaries Michy Batshuayi and André-Pierre Gignac in whole seasons despite not being a striker.

His importance to OM grew significantly in the early months of 2018 while other players stagnated or were not at their full potential. This was the case of Thauvin's former rival and captain Dimitri Payet – whose own renaissance in the latter stages of the year brought him plaudits. He was later criticised for only coming to the party when the World Cup moved into the horizon. But while Payet was dormant and others such as Mitroglou, Germain and Clinton N'Jie were highly criticised – it was Thauvin who picked up the mantle to drive OM forward in search of a podium place.

By March, OM were alternating between 2nd and 3rd in the fiercest race for the Champions' League in years with the winger in the thick of it. In recent seasons Thauvin was either simply one unremarkable winger in a team full of them, or the scapegoat of a failing campaign as was in the case at Marseille in 2015 and at Newcastle. Not so this time. This time it was different. He missed three games in four come mid-March, as OM chugged along without him for the first and only time that season. Against Toulouse, a come-from-behind 2-1 win was completed by the revivals of Payet and Mitroglou. That was bookended by a 3-1 away win to Dijon and a sour 0-0 draw to Montpellier at the Vélodrome – a result they would later come to regret.

In the middle however was a high-profile clash against Olympique Lyonnais. OM had been five points clear of their rivals come that weekend. A win would have surely sent Rudi Garcia's men to the UEFA Champions' League for the first time in five seasons. However, Thauvin had missed the win against Toulouse and while he completed an hour in the Europa League win over Athletic Bilbao – it seemed that the winger was not 100% for the fixture, and would be monitored on the eve of the game.

As it happened the game was considered too important for the talisman not to feature and by no surprise, Thauvin was largely a bystander and well-shackled by a dogged Lyon defence. Marseille would later lose the fixture and their heads in a highly controversial game at the Stade Vélodrome. He also missed April's UEFA Europa League quarter-final first leg against RB Leipzig in Germany. Without him, it became apparent that Marseille were heavily reliant on their winger. They played gingerly and without conviction – nominally passing the ball around with no real end product. His return was much welcomed, and not without time. OM came from behind to beat Troyes 3-2 with Thauvin striking the winner as OM continued to do battle in the race for the Champions' League.

It was a similar story in Europe too – he struck the scintillating third goal for OM to down Leipzig 5-2 in a cacophony of noise in Marseille to lead his side into the semi-finals of a European competition for the first time in 14 years. Back in Ligue 1 – a late end of season rally saw him strike five times in the final seven games. He scored a double against Lille (5-1) and then away to Guingamp as captain as OM huffed and puffed.

Yet a calamitous 3-3 draw at the Roudourou which saw Steve Mandanda sent off brought Marseille to eventually limp to a fourth place finish, finishing just a point behind Lyon. Their total of 77 points after 38 games was the highest ever recorded for a fourth-place finisher. Thauvin himself would end the league season with 22 goals – Marseille's highest since Jean-Pierre Papin. Again, for a player that is not a striker, that was an incredible return. "FloTov" as he is so lovingly called by the OM support had finished 2nd in the scorers ranking – behind PSG's Edinson Cavani but ahead of the likes of Radamel Falcao, Kylian Mbappé, Neymar and Memphis Depay.

His travails were also noted on the continent too with a man-of-the-match display in the semi-final against RB Salzburg. In the showpiece final at Lyon's Groupama Stadium however, he floundered against Atletico Madrid. Perhaps it is this particular stadium that is the issue, for Thauvin has not once performed well in the three years of the stadium's existence in the tête-à-têtes against Lyon and evidently, not in May's UEFA Europa League final. He trudged off the field in tears as meek comparisons to Antoine Griezmann were quietly shied away.

Nonetheless it was an epic season for a player who had clearly made the step up. His efforts earned him a spot in Didier Deschamps' FIFA World Cup squad which was not a surprise in the end, given his inclusion in every squad since March 2017. He featured intermittently – at the tail end of France's 4-3 win over Argentina in the last 16 as Les Bleus won the World Cup. It was Thauvin's second world championship after the U20 success with France in 2013. It was also curiously his first career title. Not bad.

The summer brought the usual transfer rumours linking Thauvin away from the south of France. It also saw a change of agent, with the infamous Jean-Pierre Bernès now leading his affairs, perhaps paving the way for a high-profile move. It did not materialise. Not that Thauvin cared of course. Earlier on in the year he proclaimed his interest in being the "Francesco Totti of Marseille", feeling that he owed something to the club and fans that continuously stuck by him over the years and offered a safe refuge from his English hell.

As Marseille floundered however in 2018/19, the feel-good mutual loving was punctuated by claims that he would quit OM if they failed to qualify for the Champions' League for the sixth year of the row – saying that he cannot live without top-level European football anymore. Given Marseille's stated aim to qualify this season, it is quite clearly do or die for Thauvin at the Vélodrome.

Not that he is not contributing. Not by a long shot. A tally of 11 goals in 17 league games bests that of the previous year. While Mitroglou et al have failed, he has continued to drag Marseille into the top half of the table. So much so that after Marseille's failure to sign a recognised striker to correct their striker woes, Rudi Garcia opined that he has indeed found a "great attacker" right here. Indeed, Thauvin is filling in where others have failed, but he should not be required to.

The club have found themselves in difficulty, losing a high number of games towards the year's close. At the time of writing, they remain close to the podium but do not look like a side ready for Champions' League football. While Thauvin has progressed, Marseille under Rudi Garcia have headed in the opposite direction. And that sets the stage for a transfer battle in the summer if things continue.

Yet there does not seem to be a clamour for a player who has scored the third highest number of league goals in 2018 – only the legends Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi have done better. The Premier League links remain quiet. Barcelona, Madrid and Bayern are also quiet. In Italy, there is nothing. Who will take on the player in future?

In a surprising report earlier on in the year it was claimed that the big European clubs were lukewarm on the player. They believe that he has found his level in Marseille and are of the belief that he is not worth the outlay, particularly given that he bombed in his first club outside of France and question marks remain about his big-game ability. Only time will tell if those concerns are correct. Though Florian Thauvin can look back on 2018 with great satisfaction as quite possibly the most productive French player of them all.



KYLIAN MBAPPE

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1

BORN: 1998/12/20, BONDY

CLUB: PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN

POSITION: FORWARD

AT CLUB SINCE: 2017

LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2018: 25

1998 was a triumphant year for French football. In July, Aimé Jacquet's team united a fractious nation in winning their home World Cup with a typical panache and sparked wild celebrations on the Champs Élysées. Five months later, Paris witnessed another potentially momentous event, although unheralded at the time. Kylian Mbappé Lottin was born. Summer divisions in the country were again briefly eased as Les Bleus became World Champions for the second time, instigating similar scenes of joy. This time, however, Kylian Mbappé was at their centre, still just 19. Trophy in hand.

While *Les Bleus'* World Cup triumph remains an overtly collective success; the harmony bred by Deschamps, the defensive solidity, each star forward producing when needed all being crucial, but there remains a sense that Russia 2018 was Mbappé's tournament. Although Luka Modric took the Golden Ball, it is the teenage Frenchman's contributions that will be replayed over the decades ahead. Mbappé often proved decisive. Pivotal so to win an entropic second round tie with Argentina - perhaps the only occasion when Deschamps stoic back five couldn't be relied upon as a primary or secondary means of success; Benjamin Pavard's goal aside. Mbappé's chest-out, freight-train of a run to win an early penalty, his loping gazelle-like stride blurred, remains perhaps the enduring image of Russia 2018. A clever nutmeg and arrowed shot under Franco Armani and a confident finish to an exacting team move was enough to quash a late Argentine stirring.

Despite flashes of his illusive best, the narrow semi-final defeat of Belgium hinted at what has become an increasingly evident trend this year as the happy-go-lucky and boyish grin of the teenage Mbappé at Monaco morphed into the superstar celebrity brand, albeit not deliberately on his part, he is today, as petty late gamesmanship brought a needless booking. A minor incident, but a jarring departure nonetheless. Fortunately, there was no need for Gazza-esque crocodile tears. Another emphatic finish in the Moscow rain to effectively seal French victory a few days later, Mbappé's fourth goal of the tournament - only Golden Boot winner Harry Kane more prolific - drew parallels with Brazil's Pelé-led victory at Sweden 58, remarkably just 17 at the time; two year's Mbappé's junior. At first glance, likening Mbappé's achievements to Pelé's may seem hyperbolic, however it is likely that as the 2018 World Cup recedes into memory, Mbappé's tournament will stand alongside other greats in the context of the world game.

While many emerging talents suffer through the "new-(insert past national great here)" prefix, such declarations have been less of an issue with Mbappé. Although comparisons with Thierry Henry's pace, deft touch and flare are clear, as are the unerring finishing and alarming change of the direction of a young Ronaldo Nazario, Mbappé's talent is such, his ceiling so high, that he has the potential to set himself apart from fellow footballing greats. Maybe he already has.

Having won the tournament's best young player award and emerged as Russia's headline act, the experience has had a noticeable effect on Mbappé. Although already the world's second most expensive player with a glittering career stretching out before him, since the summer there has been a sense that Mbappé has embraced his status and future in the game. Although the fearlessness of youth has perpetually been his ally until this point, the joyous World Cup win and his performances in doing so has nudged the Frenchman's displays on even further. Mbappé recognises his responsibility for club, country and perhaps even beyond, and has welcomed it.

Nevertheless, the blossoming of his talent has not been quite as simple as a €180m transfer and World Cup winners medal would suggest. Although the previous domestic season under Unai Emery, his first in Paris, was successful on the whole, there remained a feeling that, partly due to such lofty expectations, Mbappé had at best plateaued, even regressed somewhat. Although there remained a handful of memorable performances, a Champions' League dismantling of Bayern Munich's David Alaba at the Parc des Princes being one, rhythm and verve were not always evident. Thirteen league goals for that campaign was respectable, but considering the ubiquitous nature of Parisian dominance and the vision of those in support, Angel Di Maria, Adrien Rabiot and Marco Verratti loading the chamber, and that this tally only matched Moussa Konaté (Amiens), while falling two short of the perennially wayward Nolan Roux from bottom side Metz, the shine diminishes a little.

Clear goal-scoring chances were regularly missed, occasionally woefully, alongside the unerringly emphatic strikes reminiscent of his previous league winning campaign at Monaco. While such devastating form was always going to be difficult to maintain, the slight drop off was surprising, if not alarming. To say his confidence was affected or that he was overawed having been thrust into the midst of a collection of superstars he grew up watching would be a stretch, but an adaptation period was understandably required. Last term an obvious deference to Neymar on Mbappé's part, admittedly from the entire PSG squad save Edinson Cavani, became a little suffocating. Mbappé became the main culprit of passing up his own chance to shoot or a simple ball to a better placed team-mate (usually Cavani) to play a lower percentage pass to the Brazilian. As Mbappé told *L'Équipe* in the summer: "*Neymar is our leader, we try to help him.*"

After Russia, all that changed. Mbappé has never been slight, but he returned border and more powerful, seemingly eager to embrace the more physical side of Ligue 1 football. After the World Cup final, Mbappé would require to put this into action in a trip to Guingamp in mid-August for his next outing. A goal down, and lucky not to be further behind, Thomas Tuchel threw Mbappé on at half-time, with an exuberant brace from the 19-year-old winning the game late on after Neymar's penalty had equalised. A neat side foot finish for the first followed by lightning acceleration to beat Christophe Kerbrat and nonchalantly dink the ball over Karl-Johan Johnsson for the second, carried a feeling of the unstoppable.

Not for the first time this season, Mbappé appeared to be comfortably superior to everyone else on the pitch, including his expensively assembled team-mates. As Eden Hazard said he *"has continued to walk on water"* since Russia. Even his 'Neymar is our leader' rhetoric softened, telling *BeIN* in October this was a club edict. *"The club has chosen its leader, that's Neymar. For the moment, at PSG, it's not in the question that I should be the leader. The club has chosen,"* before later stating, *"A great team needs leaders, I can fulfil that role."*

Mbappé's impressive volley from a Di Maria cross had punctuated a home win over Angers, before PSG travelled to a free-wheeling promoted Nîmes. A rumbustious encounter underlined the effervescent ability of the young Frenchman, but also a more petulant side seen against Belgium. When breaking through at Monaco, Mbappé was, aside from his explosive performances, correctly portrayed as down to earth, just a grounded kid enjoying his football. His father remains integral to the managing of his career, while his folded arms celebration comes from younger brother Ethan, who first came up with the sequence when beating Kylian at FIFA. Despite the praise that Mbappé the individual and Mbappé the footballer received, the move to Paris was potentially problematic for a young man of just 18.

A sense of entitlement has become ingrained at PSG since their QSI-instigated dominance began in 2011. Initially perpetuated by Zlatan Ibrahimovic's unique brand of self-confidence, a cliquey squad has become accustomed to having it their way. Guingamp's Coupe de France triumph of May 2014 was the last time anyone, other than Monaco's Mbappé inspired 2016/17 Ligue 1 title, stopped the Capital club from winning any of the three domestic trophies. Over-confidence has bred, on occasion, a sneering arrogance. As underlined by Dani Alves' comment that he *"couldn't tell you a name of a single Marseille player"* before Le Classique last season and Adrien Rabiot's toy-throwing over not being included in Deschamps' World Cup squad. *"I am part of the French culture,"* he insisted in a statement despite just six underwhelming senior caps.

Perpetual Parisian entitlement added to Neymar's partying image, the pair becoming fast friends, has had an effect on Mbappé. Aside from the duo seemingly isolating Cavani, in November, Neymar and Mbappé exchanged 22 passes on average per game compared just three with Cavani, instances of arguments with opposition and referees have increased. So has instances of showboating, while Mbappé was benched by Thomas Tuchel ahead of Le Classique for arriving late to a team meeting. This attitude was underlined as the teenager raced away from Nîmes midfielder Téji Savanier at Stade de la Costières.

Having already made sure of three Paris points, as Mbappé's impeccable chest control and rasping finish had halted a spirited Nîmes fightback, Savanier tripped Mbappé to halt a dangerous counter. Seemingly a fairly innocuous and common incident, Savanier expecting the obligatory yellow card, Mbappé angrily shoved Savanier to the floor and was promptly dismissed, receiving a three-game suspension. Bewilderingly, despite admitting he would have to *"be above it"*, Mbappé complained in the aftermath that he *"cannot tolerate"* such treatment, that he does *"not regret"* his action and would *"do it again."*

Savanier, ludicrously sent off himself and the recipient unfathomable given a five-game ban - likely as a direct result of the ensuing furore, pointed out that *"if he continues like this, he's going to see a lot of red cards this season."* This incident, paired with Mbappé's first Paris red in a cup tie with Rennes, where he scraped his studs down Ismailia Sarr's calf and left the field complaining the he had received similar treatment that had gone unpunished, underline a more sullen and irascible side to Mbappé, which has emerged since joining PSG. Although this remains of lesser concern for now, how the joyful Monaco Mbappé develops as an individual, lest we forget his age, will be crucial factor as his career develops.

It seems almost farcical that Kylian Mbappé only turned 20 in mid-December, but that his senior career to date reads 150 games, 73 goals and 40 assists, having obtained every French domestic honour and a World Cup winners medal. Upon winning the Trophée Kopa in December, the Ballon d'Or's young player award, placing fourth for the main award, Mbappé said: *"This is award just makes me hungrier to go on and achieve more. My next aim is to lift absolutely every trophy."* While further trophies, notably the Champions' League and the Ballon d'Or, are yet to be captured, Mbappé's career goals are all tangible. Assuming he can avoid the disastrous injuries of Ronaldo Nazario, what will ultimately shape the Frenchman's career will be adding to a burgeoning list of defining moments.

His barrelling run against Argentina may soon sit alongside images of Diego Maradona surrounded by Belgians at Mexico 1986, Pelé's volley in the 1958 final and Johan Cruyff's 1974 turn against Sweden. While there remains many barriers to the success Mbappé is capable of - injury, attitude, form - what he could win is perhaps immaterial, even inevitable, rather it is what he could do that may come to define him.

THE GFFN 100 2018: TEN TO WATCH

YOUCEF ATAL | 22 | OGC NICE

The Algerian-born defender, used as a wingback by Patrick Vieira, has been arguably Nice's most influential player this season short of goalkeeper Walter Benitez. A marauding, tireless presence on the right, his energy, dribbling ability and willingness to continue to harry defenders have made him one of Ligue 1's best in the position. He has already earned a handful of caps for his country, and as Nice continue their push up the table in recent weeks, his performances will only gain more recognition, having emerged from the relative obscurity of the Belgian league, where he had been playing on loan from Algerian side Paradou.

BENOIT BADIASHILE | 17 | AS MONACO

Badiashile has unfortunately made a name for himself for many by having Thierry Henry admonish him to push his chair in at a Champions' League press conference, but the fact that, at 17, he was sitting in front of the press ahead of a match in Europe's biggest competition says plenty about his promise. A willing worker with some learning to positionally, Badiashile's coltish energy has at times looked an ideal foil for Kamil Glik as the veteran defender starts to slow a step or two. Playing alongside Glik will do wonders for his game, and if Badiashile can survive a relegation scrap with his head held high, he could attract more than his share of suitors sooner rather than later.

GIULIAN BIANCONE | 18 | AS MONACO

A powerfully-built right back, Biancone announced himself in no uncertain terms against Lorient in the Coupe de la Ligue with a scorching goal to hold off Les Merlus. There is more to his play than that, however, and while he is still learning the game, his development as a strong, defensively sound right back who can also do a job centrally has earned him comparisons to Benjamin Pavard in some quarters. Biancone will continue to face stiff competition in the principality with Almamy Touré, Djibril Sidibé and Ronael-Pierre Gabriel also options for Thierry Henry, but the feeling here is that should Monaco survive, he could become an increasingly key player heading into next season.

MATHIEU CAFARO | 21 | STADE DE REIMS

A product of Toulouse's academy, Cafaro showed remarkable maturity when he made the move to Reims in 2017, thinking nothing of dropping down a division to earn more playing time. He was rewarded, of course, with immediate promotion, and while he hasn't exactly taken Ligue 1 by storm, he has shown that he certainly belongs in the division. Often used as a number ten by David Guion, he is really more of a box-to-box midfielder, with a high-energy, physical style. He has done well to net three goals this season, and has increasingly displaced Marvin Martin in the starting eleven. It's hard to get a true measure of his abilities given what Guion asks of his midfield, but it would be no surprise to see Cafaro blossom even more if given a longer leash.

NICOLAS COZZA | 19 | MONTPELLIER

Montpellier, despite their lofty standing in the Ligue 1 table, continue to be a rather unsung success story this season. When the southern club is mentioned, it's more often the age-defying prowess of Hilton or the in-form strike partnership of Andy Delort and Gaetan Laborde that gets praised. Cozza, though, despite not being an automatic starter, has been a key element for Michel Der Zakarian, able to play capably as both a wing-back and a left-sided centre back in a back three. Cozza's height (1.78m) and pace mean his long-term future is more likely on the flank, but his grit and determination are manifest when playing more centrally as well. As Daniel Congré and Hilton continue to feel the strains of a long season, he should continue to get more opportunities, increasing his visibility.

THE GFFN 100 2018: TEN TO WATCH

GHISLAIN KONAN | 22 | STADE DE REIMS

Konan is on the cusp of turning 23, and will be by the time this publication reaches you, but that shouldn't diminish what he has achieved and the promise he has. Signed from Vitória Guimarães in the summer by Reims, his aggressive, attack-minded style has given the Champagne side a much-needed dynamism in the wake of the departure of Diego Rigonato. While not as skilful on the ball as the Brazilian, his energy and ability on the ball make him a vital link between defence and attack for a club that has done exceptionally well to punch above its weight this season.

ENOCK KWATENG | 21 | FC NANTES

Despite the summer signing of Fabio from Middlesbrough, Kwateng has been hugely impressive for Les Canaris this season, making the right back position his own with a burgeoning positional nous and an impressive turn of pace in close quarters. Part of the same side that won the 2016 UEFA U-19 Championships alongside Kylian Mbappé and Lucas Tousart, Kwateng has taken a bit longer to make his mark for Nantes, but with last summer's departure of Léo Dubois, his opportunities have risen commensurate with his play.

RAFAEL LEAO | 19 | LILLE OSC

Born in Portugal of Angolan descent, the lanky Leão spent ten years with Sporting Club de Portugal before joining Lille this summer. Used sparingly at first, the departure of Lebo Mothiba, followed by subsequent injuries to Loïc Rémy and Rui Fonte have seen his playing increase dramatically in the last few matches, and he's responded with two goals, to run his tally for the season to three, a more-than-decent return for less than four hundred minutes of play. This is doubly so when one considers that it's the three midfielders/wingers rather than the striker that ostensibly act as the focal point in Christophe Galtier's 4-2-3-1. Rémy and Fonte's returns may yet put a dent in Leão's playing time, but should he continue to affect matches from the bench, it would be easy to see the youngster finish the season with a half dozen goals or more, an impressive return for his first extended stint in professional football.

REMI OUDIN | 22 | STADE DE REIMS

Reims are decidedly under-represented in the main part of the GFFN 100 is testament to not only their recruiting acumen, in the case of Konan and Cafaro, but also their own academy. In a side rather bereft of homegrown players, Oudin is an impressive outlier. A striker by trade, he has more regularly seen playing time on the wing this season, with Pablo Chavarria or Hyun-Jun Suk preferred to lead the line. That wider role has seen a drop in Oudin's scoring numbers, but his pace and ability on the ball continue to make him a threat. His future position is a matter of some debate, but it's easy to look at the examples of players such as Max-Alain Gradel who have become effective attacking outlets without playing centrally; the future is bright indeed for Oudin.

JEFF REINE-ADELAIDE | 20 | ANGERS SCO

Angers' big-money signing in the summer, while Reine-Adélaïde is most strongly associated with Arsenal, the club from which he moved, he is actually more properly a product of Lens' academy, having been on the books at the northern side until moving to England at the age of 17. A pacy and tricky winger, his opportunities for first-team football were limited with the Gunners, and last season's loan spell saw him sufficiently impress Stéphane Moulin to earn a permanent move. He is hardly a like-for-like replacement for the departed Karl Toko Ekambi, but his wiry strength, dribbling ability and, yes, his rapidly improving work ethic have made him a quick favourite. His stamina still leaves much to be desired, as he frequently struggles to play 90 minutes, but there is little concern on the part of the club's hierarchy as to his coming good in that regard.

THE GFFN 100 TEAM 2018

Adam White

Christian Nourry

Eric Devin

Grant Maitland

Greg Raucoules

Hal Walker

Jeanne Lollichon

Jeremy Smith

Lee Davey

Louis Pullen-Freilich

Mohammed Ali

Nathan Staples

Oliver Doyle

Paul Karamath

Peter Rutzler

Pierre-Paul Bermingham

Philip Bargiel

Raphael Jucobin

Rich Allen

Tom Scholes