

# GFFN100



# 2019

# THE GFFN 100: AN INTRODUCTION

While the continued trolling of Ligue 1 as a farmer's league shows no signs of abating, we at Get French Football News believe strongly in the quality of the players on show in the division. One would be hard-pressed to find a top team in European football which doesn't rely on a player who was developed in the French game, something in evidence at every club from Liverpool to Juventus and beyond. The Get French Football News 100 is thus published at the end of every year by GFFN, to profile not only superstars such as Neymar and Kylian Mbappé but also the talented young full-back labouring at a mid-table club; the guide you are reading is as detailed and comprehensive a set of player profiles as one is likely to find, especially in English. For those players for whom we may be suffering from a bit of over-exposure, we hope to have added nuance to their narrative, while in the case of those who are less frequently hailed outside of France, we are here to give light to the variety of narratives that have shaped their journeys to Ligue 1.

After topping the rankings last year and averaging better than a goal a game in the league last season, Mbappé wins out for the third year running. Having recently turned 21, he is objectively the best young player in football, and seems to top himself with each passing week. But away from the floodlights at the Parc des Princes, there are many more talented players; at GFFN we watch the dour, rain encounters between mid-table sides, those not even shown on the red button or various streaming platforms. This is as comprehensive and intelligent a take as one is likely to see on French football aside from L'Équipe, and we aim to combine the usual statistical analysis with our passion for Ligue 1's many narratives to create what we feel is a definitive guide to the professionals currently plying their trade in France. If some rankings seem to not sit right with you at first glance, we encourage you to read them before directing your ire our way. Is Idrissa Gueye a markedly better player than Neymar? Surely not, but his consistency for both Everton and Paris Saint-Germain, as well as the difference in the capital side's structure when he is on the pitch, make the difference.

For a player 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 2019. For example, Ferland Mendy and Tanguy N'Dom-bélé, are ineligible despite playing half of the calendar year in the Rhône valley, because as of the end of 2019, neither were playing in France. Conversely, a player like Gueye, or indeed Wissam Ben Yedder, are eligible for the GFFN 100 despite having only joined in the summer; on the aforementioned date they were registered squad members at Ligue 1 clubs. Players that are eligible are judged on all their professional appearances in 2019, regardless of whether or not they were playing abroad for a part of the calendar year. This applies as well to any international appearances they might have accumulated, during the Africa Cup of Nations, the UEFA Nations League, for example.

The selection process involved a nomination stage whereby the GFFN 100 contributors chose a 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 have a bright future. Last year's edition included the likes of Youcef Atal, Jeff Reine-Adélaïde, as well as former Lille striker Rafael Leão; we are nothing if not prescient, and we take particular pride at identifying France's next big thing in this section. 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**

\*NOTE THAT THIS DOCUMENT WAS NECESSARILY WRITTEN BEFORE LEONARDO JARDIM'S DISMISSAL FROM AS MONACO; ALL REFERENCES TO HIM SHOULD TAKE THAT FACT INTO ACCOUNT



**BORN:** 1987/11/30  
**CLUB:** TOULOUSE FC  
**POSITION:** FORWARD  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2018  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 35

*MAX-ALAIN GRADEL*

(-68)

**100**

There is no better way to describe Max-Alain Gradel and what he is at Toulouse than "one-man army". Since signing for them permanently in summer 2018, he has had to do a lot of carrying of a team that hobbled to safety in 2018/19 in the now familiar battle against relegation. There seems to be a feeling that Toulouse are really pushing their luck with the constant flirting with Ligue 2 and not even the sacking of Alain Casanova has changed things for them. If they are to escape again this season, much will depend on how Gradel, the one man army, uses the weapons at his disposal.

Many were left scratching their heads when he made the permanent move to Les Violets, following a solid 2017/18 campaign in which he scored 11 goals in 35 games in all competitions on loan from Bournemouth. There was talk of how he had perhaps earned himself a move to a team playing at a higher level, one where his talents would receive more notice in Europe's top five leagues than the south-western French outfit. With every passing week now, his decision to join and subsequently stick around at Toulouse looks awfully ill-advised. Gradel just seems to be simply too good for the players around him. This summer, Toulouse made some smart signings, notably Efthymios Koulouris and Wesley Saïd. On paper, these players were supposed to complement Gradel's efforts and elevate Toulouse. Things have not turned out that way. Once again, Gradel is doing all the heavy-lifting in attack, creating, scoring, buzzing everywhere and trying to make things happen with the scraps he has been dealt.

Last season in Ligue 1, Gradel achieved the following things more than all his other team-mates: goals, assists, took more shots, missed more big chances, created more big chances, completed more dribbles and won more penalties. This season, it has not looked as Gradel-sided as in the last campaign but he is still crucially influential. TFC are 20th in the Ligue 1 table and have now lost eight straight games in all competitions as 2019 closes out. Not even the famous 'big manager bounce' has gone right for them - they have achieved just one win in eight since the arrival of Antoine Kombouaré. As it is, they look like prime candidates for relegation and it will take a huge effort for that not to happen. The club is still heavily reliant on Gradel to produce moments to bail them out again and again. This time, they might be asking for too much.

On an individual level, Gradel has had a really good year. Despite Côte d'Ivoire's underwhelming African Cup of Nations showing, Max was one of their bright sparks at the tournament. He finished 2018/19 with 13 goals in 39 games for Toulouse, impressive numbers considering how poor they have been as a collective. As a result, there will be no lack of suitors in the summer despite Gradel's age, and especially if he is available at a cut-price should Toulouse lose out in the relegation battle.



**BORN:** 1996/03/12  
**CLUB:** AMIENS SC  
**POSITION:** FORWARD  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2019  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 27

*SERHOU GUIRASSY*

(NEW)

99

Amiens are not the most feared team in Ligue 1, but they have a collection of talented forwards to which Serhou Guirassy was a significant addition, in January 2019. He joined the Picardy side during their second ever season in the top flight. It was first on loan from FC Köln, with a permanent purchase made over the summer for a sum of €5m – a club record. This was his return to Ligue 1, a division which he had briefly discovered under Hervé Renard at Lille, in 2015/16. Previously, he had made a name for himself in Ligue 2 with Stade Lavallois, and on loan from LOSC at Auxerre.

While the loan in January felt like deadline day desperation, Guirassy's first few months justified it. The native of Arles scored three goals, each coming in a win for Amiens. The pick of the lot would be his March goal at home to Nîmes, when a poorly cleared long throw landed on his chest, from where he re-oriented himself towards goal to volley it in. That performance was however tarnished by a late red card. A well-built man, Guirassy has demonstrated himself to be a clever poacher. He has scored four goals in 2019/20, to which you can add another that was deservedly his but officially attributed as an own goal to Nantes' Alban Lafont. Guirassy's goals may not be works of art, but they are built on thoughtful occupation of space. He makes runs to counter defender's expectations and create space for himself.

In August, the former France youth international obtained the only goal in a win against Lille, at the conclusion of a pitch-length counter-attack achieved by a combination of his team-mates. His best match at Amiens came against Metz in September. Guirassy scored the first goal in a 2-1 result, by nodding on from close range an excellent Alexis Blin cross. He also displayed an ability to create chances, including a pointed assist for Bakaye Dibassy. Another glorious moment came against OM in October. He obtained and converted a penalty in a splendid 3-1 win for Amiens.

As for any player in teams fighting relegation battles, a key contribution is measured in defensive efforts. You can take the words of his manager Luka Elsner after the Metz match on this: "He has understood that good players are at the service of their team from the first minute of a match to the last, even when they don't have the ball. Have you seen the way he pushes himself towards the end of matches? He will have a great career if he continues that way."

He finished 2019 with only 15 minutes played in Amiens' last five matches, due to some minor injuries. This came at a time where the club's results dipped drastically in Ligue 1, but qualified for the Coupe de la Ligue quarter-finals. When he returns, now that he is a starter, Guirassy looks ready to beat his first division goals record, which has capped at five so far.





**BORN:** 1996/03/06  
**CLUB:** TOULOUSE FC  
**POSITION:** FORWARD  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2019  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 33

*EFTHYMIOS KOULOURIS*

(NEW)

98

There was a general sense of surprise in the French media following Efthymios Koulouris' impressive start to life in Ligue 1, with the Greek 23 year-old finding the net four times and notching an assist in his first nine appearances for Toulouse. Signed for an initial €3.5m from PAOK in the summer, the deal seemed excellent business for the Greek Super League champions, selling a player who hadn't featured once during their title-winning campaign. It may prove to be a decision they regret. For keener observers of Greek football, Koulouris' start to life in France made sense, with last season very much being his breakout year. As a PAOK academy graduate, the Greek had failed to find consistent playing time at his parent club, and was sent on loan to fellow Super League outfit Atromitos for the season.

19 league goals later, eight of these in 2019 and the Greek was the league's golden boot winner. The first Atromitos player ever to achieve this feat, he was also just the third Greek player to finish as top scorer in the Super League era, and the third-youngest in top flight history. The club achieved its second highest ever finish, largely thanks to their star striker. 2019 highlights for the forward also include winning 11 of his 15 international caps, becoming a regular for the Ethniki. The only significant blemish is perhaps that he is yet to score at senior international level in 15 appearances.

Koulouris' decision to join Les Violets may have left many scratching their heads; Alain Casanova's second regime had seen every out-and-out striker at the club fail to make an impact, with young forwards Aaron Leya-Iseka, Yaya Sanogo and Firmin Mubele all floundering. The climate at Toulouse is also increasingly volatile, with the club perennially on the verge of relegation over recent seasons, and fan dissatisfaction at an all-time high. Yet the Greek showed that he could be relied on in crucial moments, coming up with pivotal last-gasp equalisers against Brest and Metz, dragging his team to two indispensable away draws against teams considered direct competitors for survival.

Koulouris is a very well-rounded forward; in an interview with LesViolets.com, Greek football expert Martial Debeaux praises his "[not having] a strong point [but being] good in all areas, without any clear weaknesses." A modern striker and highly versatile finisher, he often contributes to attacking construction. This, along with his mobility and excellent positional awareness, makes him highly effective on the counter, as seen with his goal in Toulouse's 2-0 August win over Amiens. His heading and defensive work rate do however require improvement.

Koulouris has struggled to maintain this early form since Casanova's departure in early October. Since Antoine Kombouaré became head coach, Sanogo looks to be first choice, and has justified this with goals. Having attempted to play both in a 4-4-2, it is clear that, for now, the strikers do not have a productive relationship, with La Dépêche awarding the Greek a 3/10 after Les Violets 3-2 defeat to Rennes due to his incompatibility with his strike partner. Should Kombouaré return to a 4-3-3 with Koulouris playing centrally, he could again prove to be a difference maker. Taking French classes twice a week, it is clear Koulouris is ready to work in all areas, and is here to stay.



**BORN:** 1990/04/09  
**CLUB:** STADE RENNAIS  
**POSITION:** MIDFIELDER  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2019  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 11

*JONAS MARTIN*

(NEW)

97

It has been a mixed and slightly unfortunate 12 months for Jonas Martin, filled with a number of highs and lows. Despite being a regular for Strasbourg, leading them to what they viewed as a successful 11th place finish and ultimately earning him a move to Rennes in the summer, injury has robbed him of playing time and the chance to become a regular at his new club.

The no-nonsense midfielder has earned a reputation of being a hardworking, if not particularly flashy operator. Very much of the old school when it comes to the central midfield role, he's neither one to significantly contribute in terms of goals nor is he a purely defensive operator, instead he's much more of a team player. Be it becoming a nuisance for opponents in the middle of the park or leading out attacks going forward. His numbers probably undersell how effective he can be.

His main problem has been staying fit. He suffered an ankle knock which disrupted the run-in last season as he missed three months, including being forced out of Strasbourg's Coupe de la Ligue final win over Guingamp. Despite that spell out, Rennes forked out €4m to bring him from the Alsace to Brittany in the summer. Sadly for Martin, injuries have again taken their toll, as a thigh problem has seen him out of action from mid-October and he probably won't be back until the New Year.

When fit, Martin is not a player to get the pulses racing as he likes to keep things simple. His distribution is more efficient than daring and whilst this might not get him on many people's radar, it has seen him play important, if not stellar roles, at Montpellier and Strasbourg. That could arguably be said is his biggest drawback. In the modern game, there is an increasing demand that a midfielder either acts as a disrupter in front of the defence, or is at least a semi-regular contributor to goals. By not fitting into either of these categories, Martin perhaps is the unfortunate victim of his own style.

When he returns from injury, Martin will find plenty of competition in the Rennes midfield with the likes of Eduardo Camavinga, Clément Grenier, Benjamin Bourigeaud and James Léa Siliki all in contention for perhaps only two starting roles. It could well be the first time in some years that Martin is facing the prospect of not being an automatic starter.

To avoid that and get back into Julien Stéphan's plans, he must stay injury free first and foremost. This has not been a vintage year for Martin but when he has been fit there have been times where it is abundantly clear what he can bring to the team. This was evidenced by the reluctance of Strasbourg to let him go. Coach Thierry Laurey at the time said "he's a very good player and it's not easy to replace someone at his level." He was an integral member of a successful Strasbourg team but only time will tell if he can become that with Rennes too.



**BORN:** 1992/08/28  
**CLUB:** GIRONDINS DE BORDEAUX  
**POSITION:** FORWARD  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2019  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 34

*HWANG UI-JO*

*(NEW)*

**96**

While the recent good form of Josh Maja and Nicolas De Préville, coupled with the return to fitness of Yacine Adli, have meant that Ui-Jo Hwang is no longer the automatic first-choice that he may have been some six weeks ago, that should not do much to diminish the South Korean's level of play since joining Bordeaux in the summer. Having started 2019 by being the stand-out player for his country in the Asian Cup, despite a quarter-final exit, Hwang continued his good form for his club side Gamba Osaka. Even if he did not quite reach the heights of the previous calendar year in terms of goals scored or assists (perhaps owing to a busy schedule), a brace in a relegation scrap against Matsumoto Yamaga proved decisive and further boosted his profile in terms of interest from abroad as he finished third-top scorer in the J-League.

His decision to come to France, and indeed Bordeaux, a club who are in no small amount of turmoil after principal shareholders King Street recently leverage out Joe DaGrosa, was not one taken lightly, despite the southwestern's club's state of flux. As he told Sud-Ouest, "I had several offers from Europe; I knew Les Girondins by name, I knew that the club had a long history. When the opportunity presented itself. I talked a lot with Chang-Hoon Kwon and Hyun-Jun Suk. They recommended it to me; Bordeaux was a team with potential."

That potential has been in evidence as Bordeaux have shaken off some early-season doldrums to position themselves as a contender for the European places, and the Korean has played his role in that progress. Despite his stature and wiry strength, and having played in a front two in Japan, Paulo Sousa has decided to take advantage of Hwang's pace, dynamism, and (perhaps most importantly) his ability to be a goalscoring threat from outside the box to play in a deeper role at Bordeaux (he still plays as an orthodox centre forward for his country). Playing as one of two attacking midfielders in Sousa's 3-4-2-1, his strength allows him to be an effective aerial presence and a physical bulwark in attack, even if he is not operating, strictly speaking, as a target man.

With Maja, De Préville, Adli and Jimmy Briand all being somewhat smaller, Hwang is able to handle the physical demands of an attacking player, having worked in a similar vein for his country as a foil for Tottenham's Son Heung-min. His ability to draw fouls without necessarily being an adept dribbler of the ball allows those around him to link play more effectively, even if his style is not strictly either that of a false nine or a second striker in terms of his hold-up play. As the player himself has admitted, language and adjustment to a new league may be slightly hindering his adjustment to France, but his goals (and assists) show an eye for the spectacular, and a level of self-belief that has quickly made him a fan favourite at the Matmut Atlantique.





**BORN:** 1996/11/16  
**CLUB:** STADE DE REIMS  
**POSITION:** FORWARD  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2018  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 29

*Boulaye Dia*

(NEW)

95

If patience is a virtue, then Boulaye Dia may well be the most virtuous player currently playing his trade in Ligue 1. Although only just turned 23, the young striker from Oyonnax has already overcome a series of knocks and set-backs in order to have his chance in the top flight. When only 11, Dia's talent was spotted by St Étienne, who invited him for a trial. However, just outside the city, Dia's dad's car broke down, he lost his rag, u-turned and Boulaye missed the trial.

Lyon were the next club to show interest, Dia attending for training once a week. However, at the age of 15, Lyon carried out their standard wrist x-ray test to estimate a youngster's projected growth. The result was unsatisfactory and he was not taken on. Dia instead joined Jura-Sud, but soon had to quit after his father developed health problems, meaning that Boulaye – the sixth of seven children – suddenly needed to look after the family. He obtained his electrician qualifications and began working in factory maintenance.

He never gave up his footballing dream though – even travelling to Wales for a trial – but missing out again through injury. In 2017 he contacted Jura-Sud again, asking for another chance. A temporary contract became a three-year deal within a week, as he immediately impressed. 15 goals in 21 matches attracted Reims, who made a move in the summer of 2018, completing Dia's jump from nowhere to Regional 2 to Ligue 1 in less than two years. Not the tallest, but not as small as Lyon feared – and more than making up for it in strength and speed, good footwork, intelligent running, an ability to play across the front line and an excellent finish, Dia made his Reims debut in October 2018, scoring his first goal a month later.

Dia himself admitted that the speed and physicality of Ligue 1 was a shock to him but, now that he has acclimatised, 2019 has seen Boulaye go up a level. He scored two and provided one assist in eight starts as Reims finished an impressive eighth playing exciting attacking football in the second half of last season. Reims have continued their good form into this campaign and currently sit sixth – although goals have been harder to come by, the team scoring only 16 in 18 matches. Dia has contributed to more than a third of them, however, with five goals and one assist. And no flat-track bullying for Dia – he scored and assisted in a win at the Vélodrome, scored the winner at Rennes, his goals against Bordeaux and St Étienne were crucial – and most notably his excellent overhead kick sealed Reims' shock win over PSG.

He was rewarded last April with a contract extension to 2022 and is already being linked with a Senegal call-up. Dia has spoken of how his circuitous route to the top gives him a different perspective from those who have come through the youth ranks: "those two years [of work] taught me life values. I had to wake up early, work nights in the cold while everyone else slept." Dia's chance has been well-earned and, just like his goal celebration, he is grabbing it with both hands.





**BORN:** 1997/10/27  
**CLUB:** RC STRASBOURG  
**POSITION:** MIDFIELDER  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2018  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 30

*IBRAHIMA SISSOKO*

(+5)

94

2019 has been a year of evolution for Ibrahima Sissoko, in his first full calendar year in top-flight French football. Eighteen months on after transferring to Thierry Laurey's side from then-Ligue 2 side Brest for a modest €2m, it is comprehensible to see how the 22-year-old has somewhat gone under the radar from the larger exposure of European football media, not least because of the plethora of young French midfield talent that has emerged in the past two years, largely playing for more prestigious sides.

Sissoko has steadily matured into a more consistent prospect, noticeably refining his prominently weaker attributes such as his ball distribution in order to become a more versatile and balanced player, complimenting his natural physicality and strength in acting as a screen for his defence. Regular game time in Alsace has enabled him to fine-tune his game and gain invaluable experience, albeit for a team that has produced indifferent form and at the time of writing hover just five places above the drop zone.

It was his strike at the Stade Louis II on 20th January though, that has garnered him the most widespread praise, in a game noted for Monaco's sheer chaos and turmoil that shrouded Thierry Henry's penultimate game in charge. Receiving the ball from Ludovic Ajorque 25 yards from goal, Sissoko sumptuously executed a perfectly-weighted curling effort that simply flew past stopper Diego Benaglio to restore Strasbourg's lead in the game. Captured live on television at the time - with one camera angle ideally sat directly behind Sissoko to cue football media to collectively drool over the strike in motion - the moment, in hindsight, underlines exactly a key feature behind what is missing from his game to move to the next level, goals.

Sissoko is yet to record a goal this campaign and his wonder-strike at Monaco was just one of three he recorded last season. For a player who, despite having been often used in his earlier career as a defensive midfielder, enjoys exhibiting his dynamism to press opposition without the ball and uses his long stride to drive through the midfield with it, should really be contributing more in offensive play. This, along with his tendency to commit too many fouls to halt opposition counter-attacks rather than winning the ball back cleanly to recycle possession, are two aspects of his game that if he were to improve in the following calendar year, should enhance his career development, whether he is still at Strasbourg or not.

The 22-year-old has been strongly linked to a move to Newcastle United in the impending January transfer window. Such a move would be a significant step up for Sissoko, but should suit his athletic and domineering ability – indeed, the physical nature of the English Premier League would not faze him at all. However, owing to the generally short-attention span in England, he would need to hit the ground running at St. James' Park to ensure he maintains regular first team football, fundamental to his burgeoning growth as an all-encompassing young midfielder.



**BORN:** 1993/03/14  
**CLUB:** NIMES OLYMPIQUE  
**POSITION:** FORWARD  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2012  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 38

*RENAUD RIPART*

(NEW)

93

It has become a rarity to see such loyalty to a football club as Renaud Ripart has shown to Nîmes Olympique. He has been at the club his whole career and as club captain, he is an icon of the southern outfit. During an early away fixture in August to Monaco, referee Amaury Delerue was made aware of homophobic chanting from the away supporters. His response was to ask captain Ripart to calm his supporters and stop the chanting. Ripart skipped over the advertising hoardings and consulted with the energetic away support and asked them to stop chanting.

It was clear that he had persuaded them to stop as they immediately began chanting his name instead. After the game he admitted his surprise at the referee's request and commented that: "We are not used to it. but it was my duty as captain." Ripart has always had the respect from his supporters but with promotion to Ligue 1 came plaudits from the wider French football audience.

Nîmes' first season back in the top flight since the early 1990s was dominated by Téji Savanier who was the catalyst for the exciting season in which only PSG and Lyon were involved in more goals. Nîmes scored 57 and conceded 58 finishing 9th, a great feat for the promoted side. Savanier was the main attraction to those visiting the Stade de Costières, but Ripart was ever-present and influential. Apart from Savanier, no other player finished the 2018/19 with more goal contributions than Ripart (12), including Sada Thioub and Denis Bouanga, two players that were fought over by European clubs in the transfer window that followed, before both deciding to stay in Ligue 1 through moves to Angers and St Étienne respectively. Ripart holds no jealousy over his former teammates for their moves away from Nîmes. After all, he is at his home club.

Ripart has featured in every Nîmes league fixture in 2019/20 to date bar one. His utilitarian profile allows coach Bernard Blaquart to place him in a number of roles. He is utilised mainly as a central striker but has also played on both flanks and even as a makeshift right-back, despite his crossing is consistently wayward. Blaquart has put Ripart on the flanks at times because of his penchant for defensive work and surprisingly deft tackling skills. It never matters his position on the pitch; Ripart will always apply his bustling, hard-working and functional style to whatever he does. He is not a flamboyant player; this was left to his other attacking teammates Bouanga last season or Zinedine Ferhat this season.

Despite all the outgoings in the summer, Ripart has remained at the core of the team. Nîmes have struggled with such an exodus of players and the incoming signings, who largely came from Ligue 2, have yet to adjust to the league and their new team-mates. Ripart has suffered with a lack of creativity around him and has only scored three goals, two of which were penalties. It is going to be a tough season at the Stade de Costières but whatever happens you can bet that Ripart will leave every last fragment of his ability, stamina and passion on the pitch.



**BORN:** 1996/01/05  
**CLUB:** LE HAVRE  
**POSITION:** FORWARD  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2018  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 37

*TINO KADEWERE*

(NEW)

92

Confidence can have a transformative effect in football. When Zimbabwean international striker Tino Kadewere joined Ligue 2 Le Havre from Swedish club Djurgardens in summer 2018, injury and poor form were difficult to shake. Kadewere had to wait until December for his full debut and it proved something of an anti-climax. Lacking in impetus and assuredness, Kadewere was often isolated in attack and many of the chances that came his way were wasted.

This campaign has been dramatically different however - meek, quiet displays have been replaced by a brash swagger and some exacting finishing. 17 goals in 19 league games makes the dreadlocked Zimbabwean comfortably the second tier's top scorer, a tally which puts him well clear of Yoane Wissa of Lorient and Adrian Grbic of Clermont. However, out-of-the-blocks strikers are nothing new in Ligue 2. In recent seasons a host of second tier forwards have enjoyed similar lightning starts, only to wither after Christmas. But there is something different about Kadewere.

Although his goal record remains impressive, despite a raft of penalties adding to the number, his effect on the team as a whole is the most head-turning aspect of his shock breakout season. When dropping off to pick up the ball or bring others into an attack, he carries an air of authority which is backed up by his high level of technical ability, ghost-like movement and intelligent interplay with his partners. A glorious back heel assist for veteran wideman Alex Bonnet to round off a flowing move for the winner at Troyes was perhaps a personal highlight despite the flood of goals.

After HAC's playoff chasing team was picked apart over the off-season, an occupational hazard for a club with such a prolific academy, it seemed as if repeating their top six charge would be tricky. However, despite losing exciting young centre back Harold Moukoudi (ASSE) and his partner Denys Bain (Brest) plus Algerian international and creator-in-chief Zinedine Ferhat (Nîmes), Le Havre raced to the top of Ligue 2 under incoming experienced coach Paul Le Guen thanks to nine Kadewere strikes in their first six league games.

Only two further goals followed in the next six, both penalties, as HAC slipped back into the pack but Kadewere continued to lead the charge despite increasingly rare opportunities in front of goal. A 2-0 win over Le Mans in December underlined the Zimbabwean's importance to Le Guen's side, cleverly creating both goals despite not scoring himself. Since that initial slump, Kadewere's goalscoring touch has returned of late with six in Le Havre's most recent seven games.

Although an arrowed half-volley finish from the D against Grenoble and a clever touch and turn as he reacted quickly to rebound to equalise against Niort show his quality, Kadewere, still just 23, is now charged with maintaining that form and prolific goal record into 2020 and succeed where those before have failed. Although a sizeable percentage of his goals have come from the penalty spot, considering his newfound swagger, that seems likely and Kadewere will not be in Ligue 2 for long.





**BORN:** 1998/06/06  
**CLUB:** OGC NICE  
**POSITION:** MIDFIELDER  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2019  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 31

## ALEXIS CLAUDE-MAURICE (NEW)

91

Alexis Claude-Maurice is already a well-known name outside of French football circles, despite having had only a minor role in Ligue 1 to date. This is because he is best known for his second division campaign with Lorient in 2018/19, during which he illustrated himself as a potent #10. With 14 goals, he was the fifth best goalscorer of the season in Ligue 2. In March he enjoyed a particularly prolific month, with a series of four matches in which he scored. Lorient fell short of promotion, but unsurprisingly "ACM" figured in the Ligue 2 Team of the Season.

One trend is noticeable across the 19 goals he scored for Lorient: his ability to hit the target from outside the box. Often this is the case while running towards goal, on the ball, before triggering a sudden, low shot. There were a number of these in 2019: against Ajaccio, Brest, Metz or even Auxerre. His best goal of the year was undoubtedly against Béziers, when he smashed a 25-metre shot in off the underside of the crossbar. Over the summer, Claude-Maurice was subject to very strong interest from Arsenal, as well as some smaller Premier League clubs. In the end, it was Nice who won the battle, benefitting from the late takeover by Jim Ratcliffe's INEOS to invest heavily, including €18m on ACM. The 21-year old wanted to remain in France, preferring not to attempt too big of a step too early.

While waiting for his transfer to take place, Claude-Maurice offered a Lorient a parting gift with a goal and an assist in the two matches he played in. Then it was off to Nice, where Patrick Vieira waited three games before starting him. Since then, he has been a regular starter on the left-wing, and occasionally repositioned elsewhere in attack to accommodate injury problems.

In 13 appearances, he has not yet confirmed himself as the prospect we had seen in Ligue 2, perhaps because of the positional change. In their Nice's hours in a so far difficult campaign, they have largely been carried by individual talent, of which Claude-Maurice has not yet been a contributor, with only the single assist. In October, he told Nice-Matin, about his time there so far: "I view it negatively. I must do better. In my first matches, I didn't recognise myself. I was playing with the handbrake on. I was restraining myself. I have discovered a new club, a new league. It is not an excuse, but I also arrived with an injury. A mark out of 10 for how I have done so far? 2.5 out of 10. After each match, I was disappointed with my performance, angry even. It is not who I really am. I want to show people the footballer that I am."

Nice is the right-sized club for a player who was looking for a stepping stone before possibly reaching the highest level. Hopefully, they will find stability and balance on the pitch, so that Claude-Maurice can click better with the other very talented forwards at the club.





**BORN:** 1996/05/30  
**CLUB:** AS MONACO  
**POSITION:** MIDFIELDER  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2018  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 36

*ALEKSANDR GOLOVIN*

(-4)

**90**

At 23 years of age, the Russian international had already finished 2018 a proven international for his country and made the big leap from playing for CSKA Moscow to plying his trade in Western Europe. Few of his countrymen have succeeded in such an endeavour. 2019 should not be called a success for Golovin, rather a step in the right direction in a very tough environment down at Monaco. Indeed, the year started with an under-fire coach who eventually got the sack and was replaced by his predecessor. However, be it under Thierry Henry or Leonardo Jardim, Golovin was one of the first names on his manager's team-sheet.

In the last few games of Henry's tenure, Golovin was often played as the attacking left-winger of a 3-4-2-1. Things did not go to plan (the 1-5 home defeat to Strasbourg a prime example), Henry was sacked and Monaco pled with Jardim to come back. It mattered not for the Russian. Under the Portuguese's stewardship, Golovin started virtually every game as a second striker in a 4-2-3-1 (generally with Gelson Martins on the right, Rony Lopes on the left and Falcao the centre-forward) until the end of 2018/19. A vote of confidence, yes, but a thankless task for such a young player; indeed the shadow striker role is increasingly difficult in a modern game becoming more structured and defensive, especially in a league that is known for harnessing those two attributes. Golovin did finally break his Ligue 1 scoring duck in 2018/19, with three goals in three different games, the first coming in early February.

Monaco had a terrible second half of the season but avoided finishing in the bottom three. Changes were always going to be made during the summer but Golovin's level of performances were one of the few aspects not under scrutiny. Unsurprisingly, the Russian played most of his side's league games in the 1st half of 2019/20 (14 out of 16 at the time of writing, only bettered by Gelson Martins and goalkeeper Benjamin Lecomte). When one takes into account that one of the two games missed was due to suspension obtaining his 1st Ligue 1 red card in early October at Montpellier, and that he is the 3rd highest goal-scorer behind striker Islam Slimani and Wissam Ben Yedder, Golovin's cruciality to Monaco's limited success remains undisputed.

Whilst Monaco's XI has changed and so has the formation, Golovin is the constant and Jardim's 3-4-1-2 is suited to Golovin's ability. With only Falcao upfront and the generally bad atmosphere at the club in 2018/19, things were not easy for anyone. This time around; Golovin can have much more fun with the free-scoring aforementioned strikers (Ben Yedder is the top Ligue 1 scorer at the time of writing). The Russian will hope that 2019 is a year that he will look back on as one that forged his character as he played a vital part in keeping things tick upfront in a side desperate for reasons to be cheerful.



**BORN:** 1992/08/06  
**CLUB:** FC NANTES  
**POSITION:** MIDFIELDER  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2019  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 27

*MEHDI ABEID*

*(NEW)*

**89**

It has been a long road to the top for Mehdi Abeid. From RC Lens' academy to Newcastle and Greece, the midfielder travelled a lot before settling himself once and for all in Ligue 1 at Dijon. Born in Montreuil in Paris' eastern suburb, he quickly left his hometown for up north, at Lens. In the former mining city, he got to play for the under-19 section alongside a well-known player in France and in Spain: Raphaël Varane.

Abeid never broke into Lens' first team and spent two years in the reserves, prompting him to cross the Channel. He arrived at Newcastle in the summer of 2011 and started his English career in their U23 squad. Even though he finally got his first professional experience up-north under Alan Pardew, the Magpies' first team midfield was quite crowded by the likes of Yohan Cabaye and Cheick Tioté, preventing him from attaining a run of games to put his stamp on the side. This fierce competition saw Abeid flitting constantly from the first to the U23 team, preventing him from building confidence as a result.

Abeid shortly thereafter started a streak of loan spells that would see him visit Scotland (St. Johnstone) and Greece (Panathinaikos). In an interview with Onze Mondial in 2017, he looked back on his various loan experiences and how it helped him grow as a player: "I travelled a lot. When I came back to Newcastle (from St. Johnstone) my playing time was not guaranteed and a former Magpie advised me to join Panathinaikos. I played very well there but Newcastle insisted on bringing me back. I didn't play a lot in England and eventually joined Pana on a permanent transfer."

These two seasons in Greece were the turning point in Abeid's career as it earned him a reputation in the professional game, especially in the eyes of Algeria in 2015, the nation he chose to represent after having played in France's youth categories. Mehdi Abeid quickly established himself in the Burgundy side's line-up after Dijon had the wisdom to snap him up in 2016. He played a total of 77 games for DFCO and earned a reputation in Ligue 1 as being a steadying force on a rocky ship. His dogged activity on the pitch and his refined passing shone through. However, 2019 was a unique year.

He actively played a part in Dijon's fight against relegation but was injured at the end of March, resulting in him largely watching his team fight against his old club Lens in the relegation play-offs. He only played four minutes in both matches that saw his team stay in Ligue 1. This win allowed him to leave Burgundy feeling the job was done. He joined Nantes shortly thereafter on a free transfer, where he rapidly imposed himself as a regular starter. Alongside Abdoulaye Touré, he played 11 of Nantes' first 14 Ligue 1 games, delivering one assist. Moving to Nantes was an astute choice from Abeid – he's settled brilliantly in a team that appreciates midfield energy, a home for central players with a Swiss Army knife set of skills like Abeid's.



**BORN:** 1994/08/17  
**CLUB:** AS MONACO  
**POSITION:** MIDFIELDER  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2019  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 29

TIÉMOUÉ BAKAYOKO

(NEW)

88

Tiémoué Bakayoko returned to the Stade Louis II on loan from Chelsea in August 2019 with a very different European reputation to the player that originally made the move in the opposite direction, back in the summer of 2017. The midfield enforcer, who was a shining light in Monaco's extraordinary 2016/17 title-winning campaign, suffered a lamentable spell in West London the following season, struggling to adapt to Antonio Conte's tactics, so much so that he was sent on loan to AC Milan where, for the first half of last season, he endured a similarly unhappy spell.

However, a tactical tweak by then-Rossoneri manager Gennaro Gattuso in conjunction with a long-term injury picked up by Milan's trusted deep-lying midfielder Lucas Biglia signalled an upturn in form for Bakayoko. The 25-year-old was, between January and March, arguably their standout performer, relishing the defensive pivot role. Clearly seeming more suited to the slower nature of the Serie A, he gave the likes of Lucas Paquetá and Franck Kessié the freedom to offer offensive impetus. The nature of Bakayoko's loan deal in Italy – including a €35m buy-out clause – made the chances of a permanent move entirely dependent on Milan's qualification for the Champions' League, which, ultimately, they fell short of by a solitary league point.

Thus, Bakayoko was back at Chelsea, and the question was then if the club would attempt to integrate him back into the squad or not. After a period of indecision from Frank Lampard on Bakayoko's usefulness, the Parisian-born midfielder was ultimately welcomed back by ex-manager Leonardo Jardim. Another loan, this time with a €42.5m option to buy. The timing of the move was indicative of the fact that CFC had hoped to find a permanent buyer, but failed to do so.

Although it was undoubtedly an uplifting return to familiar surroundings that evoked such triumphant memories for Bakayoko, this is a very different Monaco team, having only survived last season to Ligue 2 by two points clear of relegation play-off positioned Dijon. Nevertheless, in a transitional period for the club, Bakayoko has slotted seamlessly back into the Monaco midfield, in a team that admittedly remains hampered by inconsistency. His role now is similar to the one in which he thrived in during the first half of 2019 in Milan and thus very different to where he played during his first Monaco spell. Now offering defensive protection to the backline while providing structural security for the more creative industry of Cesc Fabregas and Aleksandr Golvin in the centre of the midfield, he used to be the more advanced midfielder in a two with Fabinho.

Bakayoko looks more assured in possession, playing in a system and at a game speed that suits his attributes, displaying good judgement for when to press in defensive areas and offering his team-mates the option to recycle attacks from deep. The midfielder has eluded this season to the trust he places in Jardim as key to Monaco's chances of returning to former heights: "This is the same coach that I have known for five years. He is still very motivated; he really wants to take us as high as possible... I want him to be here for several more seasons."



**BORN:** 1996/11/30  
**CLUB:** ANGERS SCO  
**POSITION:** MIDFIELDER  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2019  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 37

## MATHIAS PEREIRA LAGE (NEW) 87

Prior to Angers' match against Nice on 30th November, no player had been involved in more consecutive matches in the top two divisions in France than Mathias Pereira Lage, featuring in each of the previous 100 games; testament to his talent, versatility, work ethic and physical prowess. Born in Clermont-Ferrand to Portuguese parents, the 23-year-old attacking midfielder is the latest in a long line of promising youngsters to emerge from Ligue 2, having cemented his reputation as one of the hottest prospects in the division at local club Clermont. Pereira Lage had thrived in Pascal Gastien's possession-based outfit, marauding forward to shoot or deliver sublime passes on swashbuckling counter-attacks.

The Franco-Portuguese's side punched well above their weight, finishing in the top 10 last season despite having the fourth-lowest budget in the division. This, while playing ambitious football, provided an excellent environment for the midfielder's development. He was directly involved in five of their goals in 2019, with the highlight being a phenomenal effort from range against Orléans in April. Here, he did what he does best, cutting inside from the left side of mid-field, beating his man, working the ball onto his right foot and letting loose with a fizzing shot into the top of the net.

It was only a matter of time before Pereira Lage sought a greater challenge, and opportunity knocked in the form of Angers. A stable Ligue 1 club exceeding expectations, their recent track record for developing young talent, such as the outgoing Jeff Reine-Adélaïde and Flavien Tait, made them an ideal destination for the then 22 year-old. Though they play a very different game to Clermont's possession-based setup, the counter-attacking element of Stéphane Moulin's tactics are well-suited to the Portuguese youth international, while his work ethic, physicality and willingness to run make him a perfect fit for the defensive side of the job.

€2m already looks like exceptional value for a player whose stock is only on the rise. Pereira Lage delivered his best performance of the year on his debut against Bordeaux; playing most of the match on his favoured left side of mid-field, while also switching to the right, he proved a nightmare on the counter, providing a perfectly weighted cross from the right flank for Reine-Adélaïde's equaliser before putting Angers ahead with his signature, Neymaresque shot, cutting inside onto his right foot and smashing home at the near post. He was also instrumental in Angers 4-1 thumping of St Étienne in late September with two assists (an incisive through ball and pinpoint free-kick into the box), despite starting the match on the bench.

He runs tirelessly, helps out the defence, can dribble, pass and shoot, while his versatility means he can play on either flank, centrally, or as a number 10. Wherever Moulin needs him, he can deliver. His explosive bursts forward on the counter will become a very familiar sight this season. Angers have been one of Europe's surprise packages this campaign, and their attacking play seems to have advanced to another level. Pereira Lage is a big part of this, and could quickly become Le SCO's latest prized asset. The 23 year-old has a bright future ahead of him, and Angers have themselves a gem.





**BORN:** 1994/05/04  
**CLUB:** GIRONDINS DE BORDEAUX  
**POSITION:** MIDFIELDER  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2017  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 38

OTAVIO

(NEW)

86

Bordeaux finally seem to have found their feet under head coach Paulo Sousa. Despite a lack of big summer investment, the composition of the first-team strikes a healthy and successful balance between promising youngsters and hardened veterans. Otávio falls somewhere in the middle. The now 25 year-old Brazilian midfielder needed a season to adapt to French football after joining the club for around €5m in August 2017. Last campaign however saw him firmly cement his position in the starting line-up, and consolidate his reputation as a reliable performer. 2019 has seen Otávio further develop, now to one of the first names on the teamsheet.

This is no mean feat. Otávio has had to contend with Bordeaux' worst league campaign in 14 years. A relatively promising yet thin squad had failed to gather any real momentum under returning manager Ricardo Gomes. The team's performances were stale and underwhelming, with Otávio's contributions one of the few positives. The Brazilian was consistent in the out-and-out defensive midfield role he was asked to play, often in a 4-3-3, which continued into the early tenure of Paulo Sousa. The Portuguese coach's inability to settle on a system or implement a set style has meant that it is only now that we are starting to see what Otávio is truly capable of.

The Brazilian has not only been a standout performer for Les Girondins, but is also now one of the best central midfielders in the league. Starting every league game when available, he has been labelled a "fundamental player" for the team by his coach following a commanding performance in the club's 2-0 win over Dijon in August, for which he earned a spot in France Football's Team of the Week.

Otávio plays a crucial role in Sousa's 3-4-2-1 formation, as part of a midfield pivot alongside promising youngster Aurélien Tchouaméni. The Brazilian is a vital part of the team's pressing game, seeking to win the ball back and propel his team up the pitch in devastating counter attacks. Acting as the perfect foil, Otávio's presence gives the young Tchouaméni the freedom to maraud forward, with the Brazilian bringing solidity and composure. As of the November international break, Otávio was fifth in the league for successful tackles (with 28 completed), and is terrific at reading the game defensively and making interceptions.

Far more than just a gifted destroyer, Otávio is also an impressive passer of the ball. While his dribbling, pace and overall mobility are not outstanding, the Brazilian more than makes up for this with his distribution. With an 89.2% pass accuracy, he is amongst the top midfielders in the league, and already has a pair of assists to his name. In Bordeaux's recent 1-1 draw with Nice, the midfielder was monstrous; 93% of his passes were successful, and he was first in the match for touches (110) and second for successful tackles (five).

Ambitious, Otávio has stated on numerous occasions that he wants the club to be competing at the top of the league. Music to the ears of Bordeaux fans, then, who may continue to watch the growth of one of the most reliable and revered defensive midfielders in France.



**BORN:** 1993/02/02  
**CLUB:** STADE RENNAIS  
**POSITION:** FORWARD  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2019  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 28

*FLAVIEN TAIT*

(-26)

**85**

SCO Angers have shed light on many a talent in their current five-year spell in Ligue 1, from Karl Toko-Ekambi to Nicolas Pépé or Jeff Reine-Adélaïde. Along with such big names, other less renowned players have contributed to building a secure spot in the first division, including Flavien Tait. A key man in the team's set-up since 2016, the 26-year-old was rewarded last summer with a move to Stade Rennais, a rising contender for European football.

At Angers, the former Châteauroux player was crucial to Stéphane Moulin's system, and was very highly-rated by close observers despite drawing limited attention from beyond. In a way, Rennes were lucky to have little competition when they swooped in to sign him. The deal was still worth €9m, which may sound high for an intra-Ligue 1 club not involving a bigger side. But the fee is revealing of Tait's quality, given that Rennes shied from a similar price tag for a player like Rémi Oudin.

Tait's work rate is an essential attribute. His running statistics are among the best, and the runs that he makes are rarely vain, be it defensively or rushing forwards on the ball. Positionally, he has been used in several areas. Usually, it is as a left winger, but Moulin also positioned him as an advanced #8. With Rennes, who were confronted with injuries early this campaign, he has even appeared as a striker.

His best match of 2019 came against Monaco, during which he scored a brace. One goal on that day illustrated his drive brilliantly, as he powered through the defence from his left flank and benefitted from a favourable deflection to finish the play. In a loss to PSG, he also found a goal on a rebound from his own penalty that had been saved by Gigi Buffon. The Frenchman finished 2018/19 with five goals and seven assists in the league, his best ever total. He played in 36 league matches in a campaign that saw Angers finish at a secure 13th place.

With Rennes, it has not been an easy adaptation. In the first league match of the season, he was sent off and subsequently missed three matches. Since then, he has only started in one league match, although he was unlucky to miss a few weeks with an injury to the ankle. In the Europa League, he has featured more frequently and started the four matches for which he was fit. Although Rennes' European campaign was rather disastrous, he supplied his first assist in the only win against Lazio, the last group match.

In fairness to Tait, Rennes have had not had an easy season, following their glorious Coupe de France victory. He himself was absent for the better parts, due to suspension for the winning streak at the beginning of the season or as a substitute for the streak they have finished the year on. But his hard-working style will certainly earn the recognition of Julien Stéphan at some point, and this will help Rennes return to the level of performance that they aspire to reach.



**BORN:** 1991/08/01  
**CLUB:** GIRONDINS DE BORDEAUX  
**POSITION:** FORWARD  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2017  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 30

*NICOLAS DE PREVILLE*

*(NEW)*

**84**

One glance at his goalscoring statistics would indicate that, since his arrival from Lille for the club-record sum of €10m, Nicolas de Préville's time at Bordeaux has been nothing but underwhelming. His total of twelve goals two and a half years as a striker would be enough to vindicate Lille's decision to ship him off in 2017, made by then-coach Marcelo Bielsa. Nevertheless, it would be misleading to reduce the Frenchman to a misfiring flop, especially over the last 12 months.

The crowning moment of his year, and undoubtedly the moment he finally endeared himself to fans after a turgid first two years in the southwest of France, will have been his winner against Marseille at the back end of last season. Just as Bordeaux's rivals were beginning to impose themselves in the all-important fixture in which they hadn't tasted victory in forty-four years, de Préville broke away on the counter, latching onto a threaded Jimmy Briand through ball before beating two defenders and calmly slotting past Steve Mandanda into the far corner. Having also scored in the corresponding fixture the season before, he will have had no problems in making himself a cult hero among the Marine et Blanc fans, even if they remain divided on his poor end product.

It's clear that de Préville has been one of the main beneficiaries of Paulo Sousa's arrival in the second half of the season, thriving in a style of play which has seen him take on a freer role in which he often drops into midfield in order to push attacks forward. His lack of finishing touch can partly be excused by his selfless style of play, often being the first to draw his teammates into attacking moves. The Portuguese manager's decidedly less direct style of play than that of previous managers has seen de Préville thrive in an unexpected way, almost playmaker-like in facilitating fluid interchanges between the midfield and attack, whilst still retaining a high level of commitment in pressing opposition defenders.

As Paulo Sousa continues to rotate his attacking players in the start of his first full season, de Préville's place in the starting eleven is far from ensured. He reiterated at the end of the last campaign that the former Lille man had his full confidence, even predicting that 2019/20 would see the de Préville notch at least ten goals. Having reached five at the halfway point already, in what has been quietly successful start to the season for the club, there is reason for optimism.

However, the competition that has come out of the emergence of the young Josh Maja and the level-headed experience that Briand can give has meant that the Portuguese manager has used a variety of combinations in an attempt to kickstart Bordeaux's attack. On the wing, new arrival Ui-Jo Hwang has impressed, and François Kamano is making something of a comeback after being frozen out for angling for a move away last year. de Préville's vacillation between second striker and winger also shows that Sousa is still unclear on how he should be used, even if he does want to include the former Reims man in his plan.



**BORN:** 1992/02/12  
**CLUB:** MONTPELLIER HSC  
**POSITION:** DEFENDER  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2019  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 35

*ARNAUD SOUQUET*

(NEW)

83

The first half of 2019 saw Arnaud Souquet complete his maiden season for KAA Gent where he became an incredibly reliable right-back playing 36 times in all competitions for the Belgian side, who finished 5th in the Belgian First Division A with Souquet collecting three assists along the way. European football and a disagreement over salary terms for a new contract were factors in Souquet's transfer from Nice to the Belgian side, but the former aspiration did not materialise as a poor play-off run saw the team win just three of 10 games resulting in a 5th placed finish.

On the 6th August 2019 the 27-year-old cut his contract with the Belgian side short by two years and 10 months as he returned to Ligue 1 to represent Montpellier for a fee of €2.8m. MHSC coach Michel Der Zakarian was quick to sign the Frenchman as replacement for the departing Ruben Aguilar who left for Monaco. Souquet, who had been offered to a number of Ligue 1 clubs by agents, saw an opportunity to stamp his mark on the French top flight once again and come out of Belgian obscurity.

Der Zakarian's decision has been vindicated as Souquet has thrived on his return to the top tier of French football. He has made 17 appearances (one off the bench) thus far for Montpellier and has been defensively excellent currently ranking twelfth in the league for defensive duels per 90 with a score of 10.03. Playing in Montpellier's 3-4-1-2 system as a right-wingback is really where Arnaud Souquet has impressed so far this season with his progressive playing style shining through as he ranks third in the league for progressive passes with 170. He has contributed two assists and along with two second assists, the six most in Ligue 1 this season and the highest of any right sided defender. He has also scored two goals so far this season with a perfectly executed drive into the top right-hand corner against Lyon, well worth a watch on YouTube.

With Montpellier currently sitting 9th currently four points off a league position that would enable them to enter into the Europa League qualifying phase, Souquet and the rest of Montpellier's under-appreciated band of characters will be aspiring to showcase his talents on the European stage. 2019 has resulted in Souquet integrating himself into squads at both Gent and then Montpellier, quickly becoming a key player in both outfits, a shining reflection on his professional outlook and work rate, which he was already renowned for during his time at OGC Nice and which contributed to his swift return to France. With the progressive full back position becoming more and more crucial in the modern game, Montpellier's number two will almost certainly be going from strength to strength in 2020.





**BORN:** 1997/04/29  
**CLUB:** OLYMPIQUE LYONNAIS  
**POSITION:** MIDFIELDER  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2015  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 32

*LUCAS TOUSART*

(-57)

**82**

Lucas Tousart's 2019 may have flown under the radar to this point, but there is no avoiding his importance to Lyon; of Les Gones' six losses in Ligue 1 this season, two have come with him either on the bench or suspended, while a third (Paris Saint-Germain) had him playing less than twenty minutes as Sylvinho tried to hold on to a draw in a ghastly, negative affair. Despite the arrival of competition in the form of Lille's Thiago Mendes in the summer for a near-club record fee, the unassuming holding midfielder has continued to show that his particular brand of play, prosaic though it may be, is an absolutely integral part of Lyon's success.

With the likes of Houssem Aouar and Jeff Reine-Adélaïde being played in central midfield in a 4-3-3 of late by Rudi Garcia, Lyon thus have a demonstrable need for a player whose mandate is not creativity, but who can offer the sort of physical backbone that allows players of that ilk to shine. It is true that the emergence and arrival of other midfielders who are capable of getting stuck in in the form of Eduardo Camavinga and Idrissa Gueye means that there is more competition to catch the eye among number sixes in Ligue 1. However, among his peer group, that is, players of a similar age, save Camavinga, Tousart has been arguably the league's best central midfielder; it's easy to forget that Tousart, despite having broken through with Valenciennes in early 2015, is still just 22.

For all the eye-catching play offered by the likes of Ibrahim Sangaré, Ibrahima Sissoko, and Boubakary Soumaré, Tousart's reliability, maturity, and intelligence continue to shine, and as he has become, aside from Anthony Lopes and Maxwell Cornet, the club's longest-serving player, he has worn the armband on occasion, a just reward for being a paragon of maturity both on and off the pitch. Even as Lyon have endured a shaky start to the season, with performances that have been markedly uneven, it is clear that, as at all ambitious clubs, for the team's feted attackers to function at their best, they need to be at least moderately freed from their defensive responsibilities, something Tousart is more than eager to do, valuing as he does the success of the team over his own acclaim.

Speaking recently to Onze Mondial, Tousart reflected on the path that led to his becoming a defensive midfielder, "When you're little, nobody says, 'Great, I made a tackle in my dreams.' That's not true. A kid is going to tell you that he scored a goal in his dream, not that he saved a goal with his tackle. As you get older, you realise that there aren't eleven attackers on the pitch. You have to work with the qualities that you have."

With his willingness to make that tackle, and to offer metronomic passing and intelligent movement at the base of midfield, Tousart is wholly cognisant of his own qualities and uses them to superb effect, setting up his mental and physical strength to be none-too-insignificant part of Lyon's ability to shake off their summer departures and be once more at the level a club of their stature demands.



**BORN:** 1977/09/13  
**CLUB:** MONTPELLIER HSC  
**POSITION:** DEFENDER  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2011  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 40

HILTON

(-2/)

81

Vitorino Hilton was 24 when he moved to Europe for the first time, joining Servette in the Swiss League. At 26, he was playing in Ligue 1 for Bastia. At 32, he was winning his first Ligue 1 title with Marseille. At 34, he was winning his second Ligue 1 title at Montpellier. At 42, he is still delivering commanding performances at the heart of Montpellier's defence that was only out-done by Lille, PSG, Nice and St Étienne last season in terms of smallest number of goals conceded. Usually, players of his age retire as the intensity of playing in one of Europe's top five league becomes harder to cope with. That is just not the case for Hilton. He is still the guy leading his troops out against the likes of Kylian Mbappé, Neymar, Moussa Dembélé, Memphis Depay, Dimitri Payet, Victor Osimhen, Wissam Ben Yedder and more.

This year, Hilton became the oldest player to feature in a Ligue 1 match this century. He played 36 games in the 2018/19 Ligue 1 season, with Montpellier keeping 11 clean sheets in those matches in which he featured - the highest clean sheet total in the league belonged to PSG, who kept teams out 17 times in 38 games. He had twice as many clearances as any Montpellier player, led the team in interceptions and delivered more accurate long balls than everybody in the league bar relegated Caen's Faycal Fajr. This season, he leads the league in accurate long balls. Everywhere you look on our Excel datasheets, you see Hilton.

When Montpellier arrived at Stade Pierre-Mauroy to face a Lille team that was scoring for fun led by the inimitable Nicolas Pépé, Hilton delivered a Man of the Match performance, thwarting wave after wave of attacks with his excellent reading of the game. Lille just could not find a way through and it ended goalless. It was the kind of performance that people often describe as 'rolling back the years'. The difference here is that Hilton has not particularly dropped in level to start with. The years have stayed with him.

When Montpellier went up against a St Étienne team with Champions' League ambitions who had won four straight games, he again led his defence to an impressive clean sheet away from home, despite Daniel Congré's red card early in the second half. Montpellier left Stade Geoffroy-Guichard with three points and cut St Étienne's lead over them to four points to keep their hopes of European qualification alive with two games left. Of course, there was the baptism of fire in Paris when PSG ran riot and beat them 5-1, with Hilton unfortunately scoring an own goal. But it was the outlier more than the norm of his performances. Also, it is PSG. When they turn it on, they are really difficult to stop.

With Vitorino Hilton still being an integral part of this Montpellier team that is back in the hunt for Europe, it will be interesting to see what 2020 holds for them. Ligue 1's silver fox has more life in him yet.



**BORN:** 1997/04/18  
**CLUB:** NIMES OLYMPIQUE  
**POSITION:** GOALKEEPER  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2018  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 35

*PAUL BERNARDONI*

*(NEW)*

**80**

It's little wonder that Nîmes decided to renew the goalkeeper's loan for an extra year. Despite the financial effort it required following his contract renewal with Bordeaux, Paul Bernardoni finds himself back at Les Crocos for a second season. With Benoît Costil cementing his place as Bordeaux number #1 and taking the captaincy, it was clear that the 22-year old's first team opportunities would be limited in the Gironde.

Part of an emerging generation of French goalkeepers who are making their mark at an increasingly young age, Bernardoni was undoubtedly one of the main reasons for Nîmes' surprise entrance to top flight football. Starting all 38 games of the 2018/19 season, he has already become a stalwart of the side at the age of 22 - even if he is often the target of teasing from his own fans for looking much older. The way in which Bernardoni commands his defence and gives a sense of security shows shades of his idol Grégory Coupet and a maturity not often seen in goalkeepers in their early twenties. Having played in Ligue 1 sides with defenders almost two decades older than him back in his Troyes days, Bernardoni already boasts a number of years of experience at the highest level which manifests itself in the respect he commands from his teammates.

Bernardoni has himself declared that he wishes to impose himself at his parent club in the future, and even if Costil retains a high level of performance for now, Bordeaux will have a ready-made replacement at their disposal whenever a changing of the guard becomes necessary. This is especially true if manager Paulo Sousa is to stay in the long-term, given that Bernardoni appears to be more comfortable on the ball than his older counterpart, an aspect of his game which would suit the Portuguese manager's style of play.

This season, the honeymoon period that was their first year in the top flight has ended for Nîmes as they now find themselves in a relegation battle. It could be argued that this is partly down to Bernardoni's absence for a large chunk of the campaign, as his start to the new season was cut short by an ankle injury sustained against Lille in October.

While his primary occupation on his return to the side is to steer them clear of danger, the goalkeeper will undoubtedly have his sights set on the summer, as he hopes to take part in France's Olympic campaign in Tokyo having qualified for the competition with the U21 side. While he has been quietly impressing at Nîmes, taking the number one spot in a major international competition would give him the opportunity to raise his profile and reach a new level in his career as he looks to displace Costil at Bordeaux in 2020/21. Having scaled the ranks at the international level as well – playing continuously in the French youth teams since 2013 – it should not be long before he reaches being a serious part of the conversation for the full national side, either.





**BORN:** 1995/07/05  
**CLUB:** OLYMPIQUE LYONNAIS  
**POSITION:** DEFENDER  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2019  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 29

*YOUSSEUF KONÉ*

(NEW)

79

2019 started with a bang for Youssouf Koné as he became Lille's first choice left-back following the departure of Fodé Ballo-Touré to Monaco. Prior to that, he had struggled to get into the side in the first few months of the 2018/19 season, upon his return from a cruciate ligament injury that he sustained on loan at Stade de Reims. He slotted in seamlessly and made sure that Ballo-Touré was quickly forgotten. With him in the team, Lille marched forward in the league, cementing second place well before the season officially came to a close. The plaudits poured in for Koné, and such was his impact in those five months that transfer rumours quickly followed.

There were two performances that defined Koné's year. The first was a game at the Stade Pierre-Mauroy against Nîmes. He was up against the tricky Sada Thioub who is one of the most effective dribblers in France. By the time he was being substituted off in the 86th minute, Thioub left the pitch frustrated. Koné had completely shut him down, reducing him to zero key passes, one shot off target and a single dribble completed, with the added caveat that this dribble was completed when he fixed a Lille player that wasn't Koné! The left-back won every duel against him and made sure Nîmes' attacking endeavours down the right flank were reduced to dust. Koné even had time to chip in with an assist in attack!

The second performance was at the African Cup of Nations, during Mali's 2nd round game against Côte d'Ivoire. This was perhaps Koné's best performance of 2019, partly because of who he was up against and partly because of the occasion. His foe this time was a familiar face, his own Lille teammate Nicolas Pépé. Pépé had been having a poor tournament up until that point, but everyone knew the threat that he posed. He had after all just come off a Ligue 1 campaign where he achieved 22 goals and 11 assists as Lille's undisputed catalyst for their strong 2nd-placed finish. However, by the time the game was over, the name on everyone's lips wasn't Pépé's. It was Koné's. Pépé could only last 68 minutes against his club teammate before being taken off for Maxwel Cornet. The Lyon man was almost as ineffective as Pépé in his own 22 minutes on the pitch. Pépé completed zero dribbles in six attempts, also winning only one out of 12 duels in that game and having zero shots on or off target. Meanwhile, Koné won nine of his 10 ground duels and completed nullified all threats down his side in a Man-of-the-Match showing.

After the African Cup of Nations, Koné returned to France to complete a transfer to Lyon to replace the Real Madrid-bound Ferland Mendy. He has struggled to settle so far, mostly due to the managerial and behind-the-scenes instability at the club this season. 2020 will be an opportunity to put Koné's OL false start behind him, should he fully recover after ankle surgery that he underwent in December.





**BORN:** 1997/03/25  
**CLUB:** STADE DE REIMS  
**POSITION:** MIDFIELDER  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2017  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 29

*MATHIEU CAFARO*

(NEW)

78

It seemed as if Mathieu Cafaro's career might be at an end. As a promising youth player with Toulouse, Cafaro and team-mate Odsonne Édouard, then on loan from PSG, were involved in an incident that saw a pedestrian shot in the ear with a pellet gun, supposedly by Cafaro, according to Édouard's lawyer and the AFP, from Édouard's car. After Édouard was questioned by police, TFC's incandescent club president Olivier Sadran described the incident as "unspeakable" and "scandalous". Both players were immediately sacked.

Already 20 at that stage and of far lesser footballing reputé and profile than Édouard, Cafaro's next opportunity seemed a long way off. Nevertheless a lifeline emerged, the attacking midfielder quietly resurfacing at Ligue 2 team Stade de Reims in the summer of 2017. Upon signing with Reims, Cafaro explained: "I learned a lot from this very difficult time, I want to show who I am on the field and for people to talk about me because of my ability." The fact that he has achieved both of the latter objectives underlines Cafaro's quality as a footballer and his unexpected impact on the French top flight.

Following disappointingly missing out on the play-offs in the second tier after relegation from Ligue 1 under the less than expansive Michel Der Zakarian, former Reims youth coach David Guion took charge and swiftly lead SDR to promotion via the Ligue 2 title. Willing to give chances to a wealth of talents emerging from Reims' prolific academy, such as rangy forward Boulaye Dia and intelligent wide-man Rémi Oudin, Cafaro - barely on the fringes of the squad in the second tier - slowly forced his way into Guion's 18 then, by the end of the season, his first choice 11.

Impressive cameo's in beating Lyon in August and scoring against Amiens the following week afforded Cafaro starts in four of the next six games, largely at the expense of the now departed, experienced Martin Marvin in a number 10 role. Not everything came off for Cafaro but his technical quality, intensity and overflowing keenness to impress were obvious. Eventually, things started to coalesce after a Man of the Match display as Reims bested Monaco 1-0 at the start of November; Cafaro with the winner. Guion's gamble was paying off and, fitness permitting, from then on Cafaro was an ever-present in Guion's stoic and effective side.

That winter, Cafaro's highlights included a whipped free-kick to beat Strasbourg, a stunning volley for the only goal at Guingamp, a pair of clever assists to see off Marseille and another Man of the Match performance to deny Toulouse. A final day 3-1 win over PSG underlined Cafaro's new role as Guion's creative fulcrum. Capable centrally or on either wing, Cafaro's directness, vision, pace, neat dribbling, stamina and powerful shooting provide a variety of means to affect any type of game.

Although injury has heavily hampered his start to 2019/20, and while Édouard Mendy, Yunis Abdelhamid and Rémi Oudin have deservedly received much praise during Reims' confident return to Ligue 1, Guion's outfit would not function anywhere near as well without Cafaro; his ability is now coming very much to the fore.



**BORN:** 1997/03/04  
**CLUB:** OLYMPIQUE LYONNAIS  
**POSITION:** FORWARD  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2018  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 33

*MARTIN TERRIER*

(NEW)

77

Like many players currently at Lyon, the first half of 2019 was much kinder to Martin Terrier than the last few months. For the 22-year-old, it was even the highlight of his career this far.

The former Strasbourg player's strengths include finishing, when he is feeling confident, and one-touch passing. He has a very strong tendency to use the inside of his foot, including for getting shots away. He often aims for the right side of goal, in other words the far post from where he plays. In fact, his role as an inverted winger serves not so much to pose a direct goal-scoring threat as to support his team's play, offering solutions for quick passing. Terrier showed himself at his best as a starter in Lyon's very encouraging 0-0 with Barcelona, in the first leg of the Champions' League Round of 16. Without a sensational save from Marc-André ter Stegen, he could have been the hero on the night, as his half-volley from outside the box was tipped onto the bar. For the return leg, he was left out of the squad. There is a sense at Lyon that players with a lesser "market value" are not always adequately rewarded, even when they produce good returns on the pitch. Terrier, who is not the most flamboyant name in OL's attack, is sometimes subject to this, as is Maxwel Cornet, for example.

But four days later, he was on the scoresheet against Montpellier. And again, for each of the following four matches in Ligue 1, his best ever run of form. He scored eight goals in the second half of 2018/19, including one in the cup. His solo run at goal in Marseille was cut short by the arm of Duje Ćaleta-Car holding him back. The Croat's red card was of great help in OL's 3-0 win over their rivals. Over the summer, he told L'Équipe how beneficial his goal streak had been: "In terms of confidence, I have passed several thresholds. I want to impose myself and become a key player."

But the rocky start to Lyon's season has also illustrated he can make progress in terms of consistency. The former youth French international has scored only twice in the current campaign. The first came in Leipzig, in the Champions' League, and the second in a comfortable win over Toulouse in the Coupe de la Ligue Round of 16. While he starts just over half of Lyon's matches, this is below the level of expectation we would have for him. Rudi Garcia has also underlined the need for Terrier to be more aggressive on the pitch.

With the long-term injuries of Memphis Depay and Jeff Reine-Adélaïde, Lyon will be looking towards other names to carry the front line. Though they may be active on the transfer market, every fit player will have a contribution to make. Terrier is a talented forward, who psychologically appears too discouraged by managerial decisions. He has a great opportunity to reproduce his best form and make the left wing his own at Lyon, potentially forever, in 2020.



**BORN:** 1990/01/14  
**CLUB:** STADE BREST 29  
**POSITION:** MIDFIELDER  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2018  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 30

*YOANN COURT*

(NEW)

76

Of these one hundred players, few are more unexpected and yet more deserving of recognition than Yoann Court. At 29 this is just Court's second top flight campaign after a meandering career which has both threatened to flourish and, after the diagnosis of type 1 diabetes, to evaporate completely. Court, however, explains that although "I play two games, the sporting one and the one against the disease," this "illness has made me stronger."

Type 1 diabetes occurs when the body cannot produce insulin. Insulin moves glucose, carbohydrates broken down after eating, from the bloodstream and into the cells for energy. Without enough insulin, glucose stays in the bloodstream rather than moving into cells to give them energy to work properly. High levels of glucose in the blood can damage arterial walls and a build-up can lead to heart disease, heart attacks or a stroke. Understandably, having being diagnosed with diabetes back in 2012 when at Sedan, Court told L'Équipe that he feared for his career after an initial two month lay-off which including a week in hospital. However Court was informed that his illness could be managed if he took it seriously.

"At first it was complicated," Court explains. Having struggled to gauge his insulin dosage he "was afraid of falling into hypoglycemia or having a sugar level too high. Once or twice in training I didn't feel good but I resurfaced." The Brest midfielder however admits that "before, I didn't eat well, but since I met my wife I'm eating a lot better. Physically, I feel better than before, maybe because I'm more careful, I'm resting more."

With this in mind, Court's 2019 becomes all the more remarkable. After a depressing 2015/16 Ligue 1 season with the hapless Troyes, Court found himself with struggling second tier side Bourg-en-Bresse at the start of 2017/18 but was quickly snapped up by Brest. Installed as their creative fulcrum, Court helped the Western club to promotion. Seven assists and two goals so far this term have come at key times too; a brace to draw 2-2 with Lyon being a highlight.

However, it is his assists that have been pivotal, only Islam Slimani and Angel di María have more. "I don't cut corners. I won't miss training for a small injury. I work hard to progress and to bring what I can to the team," said Court. "I tell Gaëtan Charbonnier that if we're two on one in front of goal, I'd rather pass to him than score. An assist is as good as a goal for me."

Potentially very affecting for most sufferers, for a professional athlete diabetes can be career threatening. As a result Court told the Ligue 1 Show: "Every time I play, I'm delighted, I've played another game and as someone who suffers from diabetes, each match is a victory!" Even so Court has worked hard to highlight his continued top level career as an example that diabetes can be managed and suffers can continue to pursue their dreams. "I remind them that life is far richer than they might think... You have to stay positive!"

# 100-76 RECAP

100.	Max-Alain Gradel	Toulouse FC
99.	Sehrou Guirassy	Amiens SC
98.	Ethymios Koulouris	Toulouse FC
97.	Jonas Martin	Stade Rennais
96.	Hwang Ui-Jo	Girondins de Bordeaux
95.	Boulaye Dia	Stade de Reims
94.	Ibrahima Sissoko	RC Strasbourg
93.	Renaud Ripart	Nîmes Olympique
92.	Tino Kadewere	Le Havre
91.	A. Claude-Maurice	OGC Nice
90.	Aleksandr Golovin	AS Monaco
89.	Mehdi Abeid	FC Nantes
88.	Tiémoué Bakayoko	AS Monaco
87.	Mathias Pereira Lage	Angers SCO
86.	Otavio	Girondins de Bordeaux
85.	Flavien Tait	Stade Rennais
84.	Nicolas de Préville	Girondins de Bordeaux
83.	Arnaud Souquet	Montpellier HSC
82.	Lucas Tousart	Olympique Lyonnais
81.	Hilton	Montpellier HSC
80.	Paul Bernardoni	Nîmes Olympique
79.	Youssef Koné	Olympique Lyonnais
78.	Mathieu Cafaro	Stade de Reims
77.	Martin Terrier	Olympique Lyonnais
76.	Yoann Court	Stade Brestois 29





**BORN:** 1995/08/13  
**CLUB:** PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN  
**POSITION:** DEFENDER  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2015  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 23

*PRESNEL KIMPEMBE*

*(-48)*

**75**

Overall it has been a year to forget for the PSG academy graduate. It is common knowledge the club's coaches and players are judged significantly by their exploits in the Champions' League. A harsh reality that has damaged the reputation of Presnel Kimpembe this year. His crucial handball, reviewed and given through VAR in the Round of 16 home leg against Manchester United, lost the tie for the Parisians in a freakish 90 minutes. This was predicted by Arsène Wenger before the match stating on BeIN Sports that the Frenchman had not been convincing recently as "he was too impulsive and made too many fouls."

That short statement can summarise the issues that still persist in Kimpembe's game. He has always shown the physical and combative ability to compete against opposing strikers in most scenarios. However, it is often his in-game intelligence and anticipation that lets him down too many times and in crucial fixtures.

It now seems that the recent purchase of Abdou Diallo from Borussia Dortmund adds up. Diallo has shown in Germany that while operating centrally or in a full-back role, he can read the game better and looks more assured. Despite this, Kimpembe has still featured in half of PSG's games so far in 2019/20, with Diallo often positioned as a left-back.

The question has to be asked. Has Kimpembe proven himself to deserve a starting XI place in the PSG side? Disappointing performances in both the league and more notably in the Champions' League have plagued his 2019, a recent example being during the 2-2 draw away at the Bernabéu. A sizeable portion of PSG fans believe that Kimpembe is given an easier time by the club due to the fact that he is an academy graduate and remains a French international, with Didier Deschamps favouring him for his left-footedness. If Kimpembe was ever moved on by Les Parisiens, the media coverage would likely be critical of the club for their lack of trust in academy graduates.

It has been a blessing in disguise that Thomas Tuchel has preferred Marquinhos in a midfield role in 2019, which has meant that Kimpembe has not faced much competition for his place, although the Diallo signing has begun to threaten this. For his time at the club, Kimpembe has always remained a decent player, but aside from during the 2017 4-0 victory over Barcelona at the Parc des Princes in the Champions' League, Kimpembe has not consistently stepped up to the plate.

PSG have a genuine issue to solve here and Kimpembe, like others, has this mental fragility as a learnt trait owing to seasons of Champions' League trauma. If PSG continue to underperform on the big stages, the growing lack of positive sentiment for Kimpembe will continue. He will remain a reliable player for most Ligue 1 games but with the rise of youth products Tanguy Kouassi and Loic Mbe Soh, 2020 has to be the year in which Kimpembe leaves his bad habits behind and changes his mentality to be more consistently focused on what matters: winning.



**BORN:** 1987/03/29  
**CLUB:** OLYMPIQUE DE MARSEILLE  
**POSITION:** MIDFIELDER  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2017  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 29

*DIMITRI PAYET*

(-66)

**74**

It's been another yo-yo year for Dimitri Payet who will be heavily satisfied with his strong finish to 2019, particularly when compared to the malaise that featured in his performances for much of the first half of the year. One could argue that 2019 resembles both 2015 and 2017 for Payet which probably tells you more about the hot-and-cold maverick than anything else. For Payet has long been labelled as a broody genius, incapable of consistency unless there was a grand prize that he had his eye on. Plenty in France have long-lamented the former Marseille captain for turning it on when it mattered to him, not at the benefit of the team at large.

And yet, it is the team that benefits greatly from Payet's output when he does turn on the style. Similar to the Marcelo Bielsa year at Marseille and to Slaven Bilić's great delight in 2016, Payet has had moments which has genuinely turned a club's fortunes – and 2019 was no different. On all three occasions, a major tournament has been on the horizon.

The year began terribly for the 32-year-old, having missed four games with a ligament injury. Indeed, he did not start a game until early April as the beleaguered Rudi Garcia chose other options in a 4-4-2 formation. The broody France international only racked up two assists in the second half of the 2018/19 campaign, and had endured a forgettable season. Gone were the freestyle, confident, slick football that he had embodied, replaced by a sullen, laborious wreck. Marseille had missed out on Europe, Garcia had been sacked and many had wondered whether it was time to cash in the club's second highest earner.

Having missed the World Cup with injury in dramatic fashion in the 2018 Europa League final, to say inclusion at EURO 2020 – in which he starred in the previous edition – was far off was a laughable understatement. Not anymore however. Payet spoke openly in the close season about his fallout with Rudi Garcia, somewhat surprising given the coach had given him the captaincy. He was a player that needed to be loved and given a frenetic free role on the left wing, not shoehorned into a tight tactical set-up.

What Payet was seeking, new coach André Villas-Boas delivered. Payet scored two in his first six games, including in impressive wins at Nice & Monaco. A late red card in a 1-1 draw to Montpellier for allegedly insulting the referee saw him out for four games. If it was disappointing for the winger, it was galling for Marseille who missed his presence in the following matches.

Since his return though, the former Hammer was unleashed. He could not resist another crack at Rudi Garcia, now at Lyon, ahead of a feisty game between two rivals. Payet stood up with a marvellous performance, scoring twice in a red-hot and full Vélodrome before racking up one goal and four assists in the following four games as OM ran rampant with a six-game winning streak.



**BORN:** 1992/02/17  
**CLUB:** FC NANTES  
**POSITION:** DEFENDER  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2017  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 30

**ANDREI GIROTTO**

**(NEW)**

**73**

Prior to joining FC Nantes for a modest €2.3m in 2017, Andrei Girotto could have been best described as a journeyman. Born and raised in Brazil the midfielder turned defender bounced around his native country on loan deals – even going as far as a brief sojourn in Japan. It was perhaps because of his lengthy CV that his arrival at Nantes came with little fanfare.

It took Girotto some time to settle into French football, but 2019 has been something of a breakout year for the now 27-year-old. In the first half of 2019 he started primarily as a defensive midfielder for then manager, Vahid Halilhodžić – featuring regularly, but by no means an everyday starter. However, that changed with the aforementioned Halilhodžić's abrupt departure and the subsequent appointment of Christian Gourcuff as the club's first team manager.

Girotto would start Gourcuff's first match in midfield, but by the second fixture was shifted into central defence where he has remained ever since. The move has worked gangbusters, as Girotto has struck up a pivotal relationship with his central defensive partner, and Ligue 1 cult hero, Nicolas Pallois, as well as standout defensive midfielder Abdoulaye Traoré.

Girotto has always been a deft operator defensively and he has carried that over to help buoy a stingy Nantes backline. Under Gourcuff, Nantes have allowed the third fewest goals in so far in Ligue 1, which can be largely attributed to the club's work in their own defensive third. Here Girotto has remained steadfast – ranking in the top 10 in the league in tackles and the top 15 in clearances.

In many ways Girotto's emergence as a reliable backline defender has helped quell the nerves surrounding the club after his fellow countryman, Diego Carlos, was allowed to leave on a big-money move to Sevilla FC over the summer. What is more, Girotto's ability to shift the ball out of defence effectively has been a major plus for Gourcuff.

Nantes are not typically a side that relies on slow buildup play and under their new manager, endeavours to make quick line-breaking passes out of defence in an attempt to transition rapidly into their offensive phase have been made. In this aspect of play Girotto has been a revelation – owning the highest pass completion rate on the team, as well as its second-highest long-pass completion rate.

The decision to move Girotto into the backline is, in and of itself, not the sole reason for Nantes drastic uptick in form in the second half of 2019, but it is hard to ignore the effect it has had on their overall success in the league table. After a career spent bouncing between clubs and positions it appears as though Girotto has finally found a home in the Nantes backline. Expect the Brazilian to continue to be a mainstay for in the club's starting eleven moving forward, as Nantes hope to defy expectations domestically.





**BORN:** 1990/04/12  
**CLUB:** OLYMPIQUE DE MARSEILLE  
**POSITION:** DEFENDER  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2016  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 31

*HIROKI SAKAI*

(-17)

72

Hiroki Sakai is well into his third year at Marseille, having joined on a free transfer from then relegated Hannover 96 in 2016. A remnant of a period of heavy austerity of Marseille, he is one of the few players from that era that maintains a place in the starting line-up at the Vélodrome. A wonderful 2018 that saw him star at the World Cup and grab *\*that\** goal against RB Leipzig en route to the Europa final had earned him some currency with the fans. Sakai, the smiling, hard-working if technically limited right-back had endured a tough start to the year.

As Marseille languished into crisis, winning only one of their first five league games of 2019 – Sakai was thousands of miles away in the UAE featuring in the Asian Cup. A strong showing there – at OM's expense – saw the Samurai Blues reach the final before ultimately falling at the last hurdle against Qatar. His return heralded a welcome stability in the defence as OM won all but one game in the month following his return, before they scuppered a point in another Le Classique defeat to PSG.

In Sakai's absence, they lost his best qualities – an industrious, balanced right-back who can attack and defend in equal measure. Sakai enjoys a strong understanding with his partner on the wing – Florian Thauvin – and the understanding benefits the exchanges of play that OM turn over on that side.

However, with Jordan Amavi's disappointing performances at left-back, Rudi Garcia utilised the versatility that Sakai offered by deploying him on the left-hand side. It was supposed to be a short term solution with Sakai not enjoying the same understanding with the likes of Lucas Ocampos or Nemanja Radonjic. Nevertheless, it worked to some extent as Marseille were relieved of the at times catastrophic performances put in by the former Aston Villa man.

As much as Sakai is loved by the Marseille faithful for his humility and hard-work, the question of whether he is suitable for a side that supposedly harbour Champions' League ambitions remains there. His 2019-20 campaign has been marked by a number of average and below par performances as OM became resurgent under André Villas-Boas. With Sakai shorn of his right-wing partner after Thauvin's long term injury, the Japan international endured even poorer performances when at left-back (defeats to Amiens and PSG and the draw at Metz). Villas-Boas had no choice to continue the experiment played by Rudi Garcia the season before as he pursued his own rejuvenation strategy to bench Amavi for a few games.

It worked, as the first-choice left-back performed a somewhat unexpected renaissance to walk back into the first team. With Bouna Sarr being used further up the field to make use of a lack of options in attack, Sakai has perhaps fallen to the same complacency that felled his team-mate last season. In 2020, Sakai may feel that his credit with the fans starts to run out.





**BORN:** 1988/05/17  
**CLUB:** STADE RENNAIS  
**POSITION:** DEFENDER  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2018  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 34

*DAMIEN DA SILVA*

(+24)

**71**

As for many at Rennes, it has been a very memorable 12 months for Damien Da Silva. The central defender has become an integral part of the Rennes defence under Julien Stéphan. During the first half of the year, Da Silva was partnered alongside Mexer and helped Rennes to enjoy a successful return to Europe as they defeated Real Betis and pushed Arsenal very close in the Europa League knock-out rounds, before earning the icing on the cake as Rennes secured some long-awaited silverware, beating PSG in the Coupe de France final.

Key to Da Silva's style of play is his awareness, dominance in the air and positioning. As a very strong defender, Da Silva can boss the backline with a style that worked well alongside the more graceful Mexer. During the summer and following Benjamin André's departure to Lille, Da Silva was made captain of Rennes in a clear show of faith from Stéphan that his leadership was to be key to Rennes in the new season.

With Mexer having also moved on from Rennes, Da Silva was partnered up with new faces. Stéphan initially experimented with a three man central defence with Da Silva alongside veteran Jérémy Morel and Jérémy Gélín. The athleticism of Gélín complimented well with Da Silva, whose biggest weakness is arguably his lack of pace. Following a run of poor form, Rennes switched back to the more familiar back four with Da Silva forming partnerships with the returning Joris Gnagnon and eventually becoming more settled alongside Morel. Having settled back into the system, the form of both Da Silva and Rennes returned as they climbed back up the table.

With a team containing a number of youngsters, Da Silva's experience is looking more and more important to this Rennes side. He has gained the respect from his teammates, young and old alike. Midfielder Romain Del Castillo noted "he talks a lot before the matches and at half-time. He is a good captain, who takes his role to heart. For us, he's a bit like the big brother of the group." Stéphan recognised his leadership qualities when appointing him the role, "I gave him more responsibility because he represents the values we want to have. He is someone of exemplary behaviour."

Da Silva himself acknowledges the importance of his role, "I attach a lot of importance to the armband, in the sense that you have to set an example on a daily basis, it's not only what you see on weekends. You have to be exemplary every day at La Piverdière (the training centre), even when things are not going well, you try to pick everyone up and encourage, especially in negative moments." His wise words continue, "the mentality is the most important. I repeat before matches, we are not Real Madrid, we need everyone to help the group and at the end, everyone comes out a winner."

Rennes have a history of appointing captains which the club and fans take to heart and after Romain Danzé and Benjamin André, Da Silva is fast filling that role.



**BORN:** 1994/01/14  
**CLUB:** STADE RENNAIS  
**POSITION:** MIDFIELDER  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2017  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 33

## BENJAMIN BOURIGEAUD (-34)

70

Benjamin Bourigeaud is best described as a jack-of-all-trades character in midfield who is incredibly tactically flexible. A player able to function in different positions and produce a consistently high performance level in almost all of them, Bourigeaud is one of the more important players at Stade Rennais. It is no surprise that he has been linked with about a dozen clubs in Europe in 2019, as he is the kind of player that would immediately improve most clubs in various areas. Liverpool, Atletico Madrid, Inter, Milan, Sevilla and Napoli make up a strong list of teams who have looked at him over the past year.

When one focuses on what he brings to a team, it is easy to see why he has been such a hit at Rennes since joining them in 2017. Blessed with superior technique, an eye for goal, good passing, sublime deliveries and well-rounded ability on and off the ball, Bourigeaud has shown growth in his game in 2019 as his responsibility at Rennes has increased. By the end of the 2018/19 season, he had played 52 games, the most in his career.

He played 106 minutes in the Coupe de France final against PSG as Rennes battled back from two goals down to win on penalties. Operating from the left side of attack, his battling, intelligent performance was key to Rennes getting back into the fixture. There was also the remarkable Europa League run in which Rennes went to Spain to knock out Real Betis. On that occasion, he played in central midfield in a double pivot with Clément Grenier for 75 minutes & put in a masterclass against Quique Setien's team. Perhaps his most important performance came in the next round in what was probably the biggest occasion of his career so far. It was a Europa League quarter-final first leg game at home against Arsenal.

Operating from the left, Bourigeaud brought Rennes level with a thunderbolt after Arsenal picked up a red card with half-time approaching. Arsenal had been the more dangerous of the two sides until that point and could have been two or three goals to the good. Bourigeaud's set-piece magic however turned the game around and Rennes went on to win 3-1. Bourigeaud's performance was imperious, as he buzzed around the Arsenal penalty box offering chances to his teammates, testing Petr Cech in goal for Arsenal and creating openings with his one-touch passing. It was the kind of performance that made Europe take notice, on such a grand occasion.

The departures of Hatem Ben Arfa, Benjamin André and Ismaila Sarr have meant more responsibility for Bourigeaud in 2019/20. So far, he has shown that he is up to it. Five goals, six assists, a Europa League quarter-final, a Coupe de France trophy and Rennes on the rise again in what has arguably been one of the greatest calendar years in the club's history, 2019 has been memorable for Bourigeaud and there is certainly more to come from him.



**BORN:** 1997/01/29  
**CLUB:** LILLE OSC  
**POSITION:** MIDFIELDER  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2019  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 34

**YUSUF YAZICI**

**(NEW)**

**69**

Following the unquestionable success of the signing of full-back Zeki Çelik in the summer of 2018, Lille were keen to exploit Turkey again to acquire further young talent and consolidate on Christophe Galtier's team achievement last season - topping the best-of-the-rest pile by finishing 2nd place behind PSG – and building on the squad's long-term prospects. They duly acted by sealing the signing of highly-rated attacking midfielder Yusuf Yazıcı from Trabzonspor on a five-year deal for a fee of €17.5m.

Four months into his spell in northern France and Yazıcı has grown to become an industrious and versatile offensive option for Les Dogues, recording one goal and three assists in his 16 appearances this season to date. Having previously never played outside of his home country, the 22-year-old was expected to endure a period of acclimatisation in the early part of the season in order to become accustomed to the dynamics of Ligue 1 football. However, it was clear from his first substitute appearance, in the opening league game at home to Nantes, that the Turkish prospect was an exciting, sparkling presence, producing a lively debut during the game's final quarter. He roamed freely across the pitch, dropping deeper and demanding the ball to initiate attacks, whilst displaying an element of admirable fearlessness by embarking on direct dribbles towards the opposition defence.

Yazıcı's imposing impression has continued in the first half of the campaign, notably being selected for a L'Équipe Team of the Week in October for his imperious performance that included his first Lille goal and two assists in the 3-0 home win over Bordeaux. One of Yazıcı's greatest assets is his enticing versatility that allows him to be used in a variety of positions, most commonly behind the striker with freedom to drift out to the right-hand side of the pitch where Galtier – and Trabzonspor beforehand too – have most frequently deployed him.

Whilst in no way replacing the pace and trickery that departed with Nicolas Pépé to Arsenal in the summer, Yazıcı's penchant for cutting in from the right and shooting or feeding fellow forwards – be it star striker Victor Osimhen or the supporting runs of Jonathan Ikoné and Jonathan Bamba – has and should continue to serve as a key provider to Lille's goals for tally. The combination of Yazıcı's strength – he seems to relish outmuscling defenders and using his upper-body strength to hold off defenders - and spatial awareness not only looks tailor-made for the physicality of French football but also well-suited to the interchanging dynamism of Lille's attack under Galtier. Far from the finished product, Yazıcı rawness, in and out of possession, and over-exuberance are certainly tendencies that will require some refining as he gains more top-level European football experience. This was evident in Lille's 2-0 defeat at Reims on 1 September where Yazıcı collected two needless bookings that led to Les Dogues conceding two goals and subsequently losing the game.

However, already a key member of the Turkish national team at 22, having collected 16 caps and recorded his first international senior goal in September's Euro 2020 qualifier in Moldova, Yazıcı is in line for increased continental exposure in the next calendar year, on the proviso that his form maintains the same trajectory.



**BORN:** 1992/05/11  
**CLUB:** PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN  
**POSITION:** FORWARD  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2019  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 31

*PABLO SARABIA*

*(NEW)*

**68**

Pablo Sarabia's journey to the top of European football has been a long one, the tale of a talented player who has worked meticulously on the tactical side of his game. Also one whose former coaches were able to mould into one of La Liga's most devastating players, and one of the summer's bargain signings. The reported €19.5m paid by PSG due to his low release clause seems a steal for a player who contributed to 39 goals last season.

Sarabia had been building his reputation as an effective, versatile winger, with former Sevilla coach Jorge Sampaoli using him in a variety of positions, helping him to become a more complete player. Nevertheless, last season saw him truly come into his own as a footballer capable of impressing in multiple areas of the pitch. Manager Pablo Machín often had him playing as a central or attacking midfielder in a 3-4-2-1 system, where he excelled. By the end of 2018, Sevilla were in the title race, and was Sarabia arguably the star man.

Things unfortunately fell apart for Sevilla in the New Year, burnt out after a demanding start to the season, and Machín's emphasis on lightning-fast transitions responsible. Sarabia's form however remained imperious. Sevilla faded, but Sarabia registered nine of his 17 assists, and scored eight times between January and May. Highlights include a goal in a 2-0 win against Barcelona in the Copa del Rey in January, and scoring and assisting against Lazio in the Europa League a month later. Both matches saw Sarabia score his signature goal, making an incisive run into the box at the far post and finishing in simple yet emphatic fashion. The Spaniard also helped his side to victory in the biggest match of the season, the Gran Derbi against Real Betis, delivering a typically precise cross to set up the first goal, before scoring himself as the Sevillistas' triumphed 3-2. The winger was in the form of his life, and even topped the La Liga assists chart alongside Lionel Messi, with 13.

Since joining PSG, the 27 year-old has had to accept a reduced role, playing the part of Tuchel's ace in the hole, rather than the team's primary creative source. Competing with Neymar and Di Maria for a starting berth has seen the Spaniard notch just 760 minutes of game time in Ligue 1 as of 6th December. While shining centrally for Sevilla, Tuchel doesn't seem to view Sarabia as a contender for a central role in his 4-3-3. That said, he has already proved his worth with an exceptional performance against Angers, scoring a terrific goal and setting up two. Most significantly, Sarabia came off the bench to score the equaliser in PSG's 2-2 draw with Real Madrid at the Bernabéu. The Spaniard can still be a difference maker.

Sarabia will have been well aware that moving to Paris would see his playing time reduced, and yet he's managed to take three international caps since arriving at the Parc des Princes. With his versatility and vision, in the press and finishing, he adds an exciting new level of depth and quality to the squad.





**BORN:** 1992/02/26  
**CLUB:** RC STRASBOURG  
**POSITION:** GOALKEEPER  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2018  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 37

*MATZ SELS*

(NEW)

67

As Strasbourg and fellow cup-winner Rennes captured the imagination last season, much was made of the club's marauding full-back, Kenny Lala, and the club's expansive style of attacking football, with Ludovic Ajorque and Lebo Mothiba playing starring roles in attack. The two strikers' fellow summer arrival, Matz Sels, however, may have flown under the radar, but in winning the fans' Player of the Season award last year, he showed that recognition of his consistency, even if it was not on a national scale, was more than just recompense even as his career has perhaps not reached the heights that he might have expected.

Decent in terms of his reflexes, and a commanding presence aerially as well at 6' 3", perhaps Sels' greatest asset is his distribution. With Lala and one of Lionel Carole or Anthony Caci providing width, whether it be in a 3-5-2 or a diamond 4-4-2, Strasbourg's pace on the counter has more often than not been successful because of the Belgian's impetus, offering testament to his willingness to continue to challenge himself despite having suffered the odd setback.

Winner of the Belgian league's goalkeeper of the year award in 2015/16 (and author of a heroic performance that allowed his Gent side to claim an unlikely draw against Lyon despite finishing with nine men), Sels made the move that summer to Newcastle. The move was ambitious, but the Belgian proved a peripheral figure with Karl Darlow becoming first-choice as the Toon gained promotion despite some uneven performances on Sels' part to start the season. Despite this setback, he proved his mettle and desire to play with a successful season on loan at Anderlecht before arriving in eastern France last summer for €4m, a figure that made him the club's second-most expensive signing of all time, behind José Luis Chilvaert.

For a club of modest means, the expectations could clearly weigh heavily on Sels, but he responded gamely, with Strasbourg not only winning the Coupe de la Ligue but flirting with the European places in the league for most of the season, before eventually finishing 11th. Marshalling a defence that struggled at times, especially in terms of its positioning, may have proved difficult for some, but Sels took things in stride, and has started the current campaign equally as strongly, keeping clean sheets in three of his six Europa League matches as Strasbourg moved to the brink of reaching the group stages, only to be undone by a gutting ten-man loss to Eintracht Frankfurt.

After some early season struggles, likely caused by navigating fixture congestion, Strasbourg seem to be close to being back to their best, with the emergence of Mohamed Simakan and the arrival of Alexander Djiku having done much to strengthen the team's defence, a bizarre 5-0 loss to previously anaemic Brest notwithstanding. Sels thus continues to be a solid presence at the back as he continues to operate on the fringes of his national team, having been called up for the Red Devils' most recent set of matches. Even if Thibaut Courtois is unlikely to relinquish being first choice, his inclusion, playing for a relatively small club in France, speaks volumes of his abilities.



**BORN:** 1991/08/21  
**CLUB:** NIMES OLYMPIQUE  
**POSITION:** FORWARD  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2017  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 36

*KALIFA COULIBALY*

*(NEW)*

**66**

In January 2019, Emiliano Sala, who had just completed a move to Cardiff City, tragically died in a plane crash near Guernsey. This dramatic incident, and all the media coverage that stemmed from it, logically overshadowed the fact that the attacking burden at Nantes fell squarely on Kalifa Coulibaly. Yet, the latter was, in a matter of weeks, fast-tracked from a second-choice striker to a fitting leader of the line, suppressing Nantes' need to find a Sala replacement in the market.

Coulibaly was formed at PSG. He never played for the first team, only appearing once on the team-sheet against Brest in the 2011-12 season. This lack of playing time led him to move to greener pastures in 2014 in the form of Jupiler League side Charleroi. The giant striker did not make much of an impression until the play-offs where, after having scored zero league goals, he fired five times in 10 matches. This sweet-spot of form earned him a move to KAA Gent where he would score six goals in all competitions during his first season, including one against OL in the Champions' League group stage and another in the Round of 16 against Wolfsburg.

In 85 games for the Belgian outfit, he scored 25 and assisted 10, playing mostly as a second-choice striker. After two years in Belgium, he eventually left for Nantes for €4.5m in 2017. In the Loire city, he oscillated between facing fierce competition and bad luck. Indeed, Emiliano Sala monopolised the central striking spot and Coulibaly contracted an adductor injury that sidelined him for 24 games. When he came back in April 2018, he progressively worked his way back into the first team, even playing alongside Sala in a couple of games and scoring against Strasbourg.

But the misfortune knocked on the Malian's door again at the dawn of the 2018-19 season. Indeed, he started the season upfront but did not make a great impression against AS Monaco. He then slowly lost his place to Emiliano Sala who would score 12 Ligue 1 goals between August and January. The Argentine was on fire before the feud that brought him into conflict with Nantes' president Waldemar Kita. This form inevitably banished Kalifa Coulibaly to the bench, as coach Vahid Halilhodzic had a penchant for systems that operated with one striker. This, as well as a charge of domestic violence levelled at the player, ensured that Coulibaly's time at Nantes appeared to be coming to an end. That was until Sala's tragedy.

Coulibaly probably knows that he would never properly replace Sala in the hearts of the Nantes' supporters. He had the hardest task, not only because of the Argentine's disappearance, but because the latter was on an incredible run of form before being unwillingly forced to leave for Cardiff City. The big Malian, who had an exceptional relationship with Sala despite them competing for the same spot and who Coulibaly has privately referred to as his brother, did very well in the second half of the season in difficult circumstances, scoring seven times and assisting three goals. Those statistics alone do not paint the picture of Coulibaly's defensive generosity, heading ability, science of placement and also, perhaps most surprisingly, his relatively impressive pace for such a tall player. This season, Les Canaris have been set-up hyper-conservatively by new boss Christian Gourcuff, but Coulibaly remains Nantes' leading light, finishing the first half of this campaign as top scorer with four goals. 2019 turned Coulibaly into a leader.



**BORN:** 1993/03/01  
**CLUB:** NIMES OLYMPIQUE  
**POSITION:** MIDFIELDER  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2019  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 35

ZINEDINE FERHAT

(NEW)

65

Nîmes' summer transfer exodus has left the club serious contenders for relegation this season. In a campaign that promises to be fraught with difficulties, Zinedine Ferhat represents a potential difference maker, a decisive yet somewhat frustrating player whose contributions will be a huge factor in les Crocos' bid for survival. In 2017/18, the Algerian broke the all-time assists record in Ligue 2, setting up 20 goals as Le Havre, perennially among the favourites for promotion, fell just short. In spite of his exploits, doubts remained as to whether Ferhat had the quality to make it in the top flight.

Last season saw the winger become a victim of his own success, achieving a respectable tally of five goals and nine assists in the league, yet receiving little fanfare as Le Havre disappointed. Ferhat was still one of the division's best attacking players, but his side were inconsistent under coach Oswald Tanchot, especially in 2019. A bright spark for the team, Ferhat has enhanced his reputation as a dead ball specialist this year with several terrific assists from free-kicks, notably against Lorient on the final day of the season, as well as a peach of a ball for defender Fernand Mayembo to head home in a 4-3 win over Valenciennes in January.

With his contract expiring, Ferhat was snapped up by Nîmes on a free in July: an astute signing, but not enough to make up for the departures of wingers Sada Thioub and Denis Bouanga, as well as creative powerhouse Téji Savanier. Players crucial to les Crocos sensational 2018/19 campaign were gone, and Ferhat, alongside fellow Ligue 2 winger Romain Philippoteaux, was charged with providing the creative spark for a side lacking in quality. Nîmes looked like potential cannon fodder for the rest of the league.

That being said, early signs were promising for both the club and for Ferhat, who appeared to adapt seamlessly. After defeats to PSG and Nice, les Crocos came from 2-0 down to draw against Monaco. Ferhat was electric, showing his strengths with two exquisite yet very different assists: a well-weighted dipping cross for Philippoteaux to control and then smash home, and a low-driven pass across the face of goal for youngster Kévin Denkey to tap in. The Algerian showed just why his best position is out on the right, and how lethal he can be when given space, proving this against Brest the following week with a tremendous breakaway goal: using his pace and excellent close control, the winger ran the length of the Brest half and slotted the ball coolly past Gautier Larssonneur.

However, Nîmes have since gone off the boil, sitting in 19th with just 12 goals scored at the time of writing. Ferhat's struggles have reflected those of his team as a whole in creating and taking clear-cut chances, with superior opposition often leaving him little space. In spite of this, the winger is eighth in the league for key passes per 90 minutes with 2.1, and still remains their best creative outlet.

Early declarations that Ferhat could fill the boots of the imperious Téji Savanier were premature. This Nîmes squad simply lacks the quality to get the best out of him. He has still however been one of their best performers, and if the team can find some form, the Algerian can still make the difference between survival and relegation.





**BORN:** 1994/02/25  
**CLUB:** RC STRASBOURG  
**POSITION:** FORWARD  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2018  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 35

*LUDOVIC AJORQUE*

(NEW)

64

It is a widely held misconception in football circles that tall strikers are not good with their feet. In recent years, we have seen Olivier Giroud become the face of the movement dispelling that, going from Ligue 2 to world champion with his unique skill-set. If Olivier is the face, then Ludovic could be the legs. Standing at just over 1.96m, Ludovic is very similar to Giroud, a player who does far more for his team than the numbers suggest.

Ludovic Ajorque was born on the island of Réunion where he grew up before joining Angers at 18. A man particular about family, Ajorque spoke to Racing's official website upon his return to the island to face their national team in a pre-season friendly: "It's my island. I spent 17 years of my life there, and I try to represent it in the best way possible. I do try to give a shirt to every member of my family. It's important for me, because they support me like crazy throughout the year. I want to make them happy. For evening games, they stay up really late to watch me play, even with the time difference. So if you go to Saint-Joseph, it's possible that you'll bump into one or two people wearing a Racing shirt."

Ajorque's breakout season came at Clermont Foot in Ligue 2's 2017/18 campaign. His 14 goals, three assists may not have been enough to get them into playoff positions - they fell short by two points - but it earned him a move up to Ligue 1 to Strasbourg. His first five months produced just one goal, as he was still settling in & coming off the bench. From January 2019 though, Ajorque started to show what he was about, starting the New Year with a goal at Lyon in the Coupe de la Ligue quarter-final which Racing won 2-1.

He scored again at Toulouse, before putting Monaco to the sword with two goals and an assist in a 5-1 victory at Stade Louis II. He was decisive again in the Coupe de la Ligue semi at Stade de la Meinau, scoring the equaliser as Racing got a thrilling 3-2 victory over Bordeaux to advance to the final. He played 105 minutes in the final against Guingamp which Racing won on penalties, bringing Ajorque the first trophy of his career.

2019 saw him produce 13 goals and four assists for Racing in Ligue 1 - 17 goals, six assists in all competitions. His form got the attention of Madagascar's national team - who offered him a chance to represent them at this year's African Cup of Nations, due to his Malagasy roots. He turned that down, stating that he needed to concentrate on settling at Racing as it was his first season. There have been whispers that Ajorque could come into the picture for France's EURO 2020 squad if Giroud's club situation forces Didier Deschamps to leave him out, because of the similarities between both players. For that to happen though, Ajorque must continue to grow and consistently deliver the kind of great, more-than-goals performances that would make Deschamps take notice.





**BORN:** 2002/11/10  
**CLUB:** STADE RENNAIS  
**POSITION:** MIDFIELDER  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2019  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 24

**EDUARDO CAMAVINGA**

**(NEW)**

**63**

At only 17 years old it is hard not to marvel at what Eduardo Camavinga is capable of on a match-to-match basis. The fact he has already established himself as one of the best defensive midfielders in Ligue 1 is staggering, and in so doing conveys, not only what a gifted footballer he already is, but what a profound talent he is poised to become.

A product of the Rennes academy, Camavinga moved swiftly through the ranks and into the first team – making his professional debut on 19th April 2019, and at the age of 16, becoming the youngest ever player to feature for the club. Nonetheless, it was not until the start of the 2019/20 campaign that the Angola-born, midfielder fully established himself as a starter in manager, Julien Stéphan's eleven.

That said, once given the chance Camavinga never looked back - making an immediate impact with a solid performance in a loss to Paris Saint-Germain in the Trophée des Champions. The teenager followed that up a week later with a man-of-the-match type showing against Montpellier, in which he racked up six tackles, five clearances, won nine ground duels and completed 97% of his passes. He would only have to wait one more week before getting his revenge against PSG, as Rennes shocked the champions with a 2-1 win - in a match bossed by the then 16-year-old in midfield. Firmly implanted in the Rennes starting eleven, on 31st October Camavinga was granted French citizenship, and on 11 November was called up to the U-21 national side for Euro Qualifiers – a staggering leap for a player, who less than a year ago, was playing for Rennes' U19 side.

It is Camavinga's overly developed defensive skillset that has allowed him to make such substantial jump at a young age. At present the Rennes product ranks in the Ligue 1 top 10 in tackles, duels won, and long-pass percentage. Camavinga's impressive physical attributes, as well as his advanced reading of the game, allow him to cover a remarkable amount of ground in midfield. He is extremely agile and possesses deceptive pace –able to constantly put pressure on the ball. It also goes a long way in explaining why he is so frequently fouled – seventh among all midfielders.

In the meantime, Camavinga continues to develop the offensive side of his game. His passing range is already something to be lauded, but he has yet to fully unleash his full arsenal – deft at close-control, pacey, and capable in chance creation. He scored his first and only Ligue 1 goal against Lyon in gameweek 18 – the result of a weaving run from midfield and a glimpse of what he is capable of providing going forward.

Rumoured interest from Real Madrid looks to be only the tip of the iceberg, as it seems an eventuality that a multitude of clubs will soon come calling for his signature. But for now, Camavinga is firmly affixed in the starting line-up at Rennes, and having only missed two matches so far this season, that does not look to be changing in the near future.



**BORN:** 1985/07/28  
**CLUB:** AS SAINT-ETIENNE  
**POSITION:** DEFENDER  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2018  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 28

*MATHIEU DEBUCHY*

(-14)

**62**

Going from strength to strength can be tough once you are past your thirties, but in a league that relies so much on defensive resilience, experience is often a quality that is very rarely overlooked in Ligue 1. St Étienne know that and have done well to retain in their dressing room vocal, sometimes even temperamental characters who are also role models for the new boys coming from the youth academy.

Mathieu Debuchy is enjoying a second calendar year in the Forez and 2019 was just as strong as 2018, if not stronger. Deployed sometimes on the right side of 3-4-1-2, sometimes as a right winger of said formation (a position that requires immense stamina) or simply as a right-back – his natural position – in a 4-2-3-1, the former Newcastle and Arsenal man is happy to keep playing wherever his coach wants him to. His attitude has always been second to none and is highly regarded by everyone connected to St Étienne.

His career path has not been the easiest but most Ligue 1 observers see a player that does not give up, despite having to deal with injury setbacks which often meant lengthy lay-offs with his club (especially at Arsenal for whom he played a grand total of 13 games) and not being called up for France for EURO 2016 or the 2018 World Cup (he subsequently retired a few months after Les Bleus' success in Moscow).

A Ligue 1 winner back in 2011 with Lille, he then impressed scouts to the extent that he became part of the French diaspora that arrived at Newcastle in January 2013 for €6.2m and needed only 18 months to make that money well spent for the Tyneside outfit as he was sold to Arsenal for €15m in the summer of 2014, having experienced a successful tournament with France in Brazil (the 2014 World Cup will remain Debuchy's sole international tournament) losing to the eventual winners Germany in the quarter-final stage.

Things were looking good for the up-and-coming defender in North London, but alas injuries prevented him from having a successful stay there. His reputation was not severely damaged, despite his limited playing time, once being the subject of an offer from Louis van Gaal's Manchester United.

Back in his home country, Debuchy is enjoying his football as he is generally injury-free and leading by example alongside fellow veterans Stéphane Ruffier, Yann M'Vila and Loïc Perrin. St Étienne is a working class club that identifies itself with Debuchy's values. It really was a perfect match when you think about it, Debuchy just needed to ensure that he stayed far away from the treatment table to make the move a success.

What is next for him then? Debuchy has not been vocal about his future but at 32, it looks like he is settled with Les Verts and will most likely continue playing regularly until a quality and more youthful right-back comes along. However, judging by his discipline, hard-work and determination, we still have another five or so campaigns of Debuchy to witness. With St Étienne or elsewhere.



**BORN:** 1992/03/01  
**CLUB:** STADE RENNAIS  
**POSITION:** GOALKEEPER  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2019  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 37

**EDOUARD MENDY**

(NEW)

**61**

2019 has been an excellent year for Édouard Mendy. A year in which he attracted a number of admirers, keen on his shot-stopping ability and aerial dominance. It was a year which began with Reims and finished in Rennes, with a UNFP Ligue 1 Goalkeeper of the Year award nomination thrown in for good measure.

Mendy played a hugely vital role in an impressive 2018/19 for Reims as his 14 clean sheets helped his team to an impressive 8th place finish. Only two goalkeepers kept more clean sheets than Mendy who narrowly missed out on the season's award for excellence in his position to Lille's Mike Maignan, one of the two to have kept more clean sheets than Mendy. Whilst those statistics can be in part credited to a strong, well-organised defence, Mendy deserves enormous praise for being a reassuring presence between the posts.

After such a strong season, Mendy looked likely to play an important role for Senegal at the summers' African Cup of Nations. Starting as first choice goalkeeper for coach Aliou Cissé, Mendy kept a clean sheet in the opening game win over Tanzania. Unfortunately for Mendy, he suffered a broken finger in the warm up for the final group game against Kenya and was ruled out for the remainder of the tournament, as Senegal made it all the way to the final, only to lose to Algeria.

Even after suffering a broken finger, that did not stop interest in him growing. He was linked to the likes of Aston Villa and Norwich City but it was Rennes who won out as he completed a €4m move to Brittany. The lure of European competition appeared to be the clincher with Mendy commenting, "this is an ambitious and humble club, which gives everything to achieve its targets, as we saw with the win in the Coupe de France and the successful European campaign. Everyone told me only good things about the club before my arrival."

Following Tomas Koubek's departure from the club, Mendy was quickly installed as number 1 for Julien Stéphan's side, although it was a few weeks before his debut as he recovered from the broken finger picked up in the summer. Despite not quite instantly hitting his best for Rennes, towards the end of the year it was becoming apparent that form was returning, especially once Rennes settled on a regular, consistent defensive line in front of him.

As previously mentioned, his shot-stopping reflexes and superiority in the air are his key strengths, however as was seen in the Europa League loss at home to Cluj and at a couple of times in league matches, he can be susceptible to a slight rush of blood to the head. Now this may have something to do with making up for lost time at a new club after his delayed debut and after missing a couple more games following a knee strain. He does still though remain a top quality goalkeeper and will only improve Rennes as he enters his prime.





**BORN:** 1996/11/18  
**CLUB:** STADE DE REIMS  
**POSITION:** FORWARD  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2014  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 37

REMI OUDIN

(NEW)

60

In 2019, Rémi Oudin reached new heights but still fell short of his own expectations. A series of goals early in the year put him in the national spotlight, but he never found the transfer to a bigger club he was hoping for. At the start of the year, both Stade de Reims and their right winger were approaching the peak of their form. A draw in Lyon and win at home to Marseille, both in January, revealed the extent of their potential. Altogether, Reims managed a 13-match run without defeat stretching into March, during which Oudin was the key attacking asset. He scored eight goals in that second half of the season, taking him to double digit figures overall, for his maiden Ligue 1 campaign.

Oudin's most glorious moment came with his brace against a habitually air-tight Montpellier, in a wild 4-2 away win for the Champenois. It was his third consecutive match on the scoresheet, and the win propelled Reims onto the doorstep of European football, for a time.

Going into the summer, the 23-year-old and his club had a gentleman's agreement concerning his departure: an offer of €10m or more would allow him to move on. But much time passed without any satisfactory offers. On deadline day, Oudin's agent woke him up to fly to Italy for a medical with Fiorentina. After hours of waiting for confirmation at the airport, it became clear the Florentines had duped him. The whole story was being used as leverage in the transfer of Rachid Ghezzal from Leicester, their real target.

The disappointment was massive for Oudin, and on the pitch it translated into inadequate performances. The day before, he had scored a direct free-kick in a win against Lille; after that, he went quiet for several months. His lack of form revealed another persisting issue. Tactically, his role with Reims is not ideal. As one of the most talented players, he does get to start, but no position in David Guion's 4-2-3-1 fits him perfectly into Reims' attacking play. The manager experimented with him on the left wing, and as number 10, neither of which worked. In a sense, Reims rely on Oudin to unearth chances and opportunities out of nowhere, rather than contribute to buildup. With his lethal left foot, even half-chances can become dangerous opportunities. Oudin, who was a U19 national champion with Reims, also serves well as a wide pivot and is often targeted on goal kicks. And, to his credit, he does put in a shift defensively, and is able to stay focused in front of goal despite very exigent efforts in his own half.

Eventually, things improved, and December treated Oudin well. An acrobatic goal against St Étienne followed by an opportunistic strike in Toulouse brought back his jovial smile. He gladly declared his confidence was back and that the failed transfer was behind him. It was around this time last season that his form started to reach its best level, and hopefully Ligue 1 watchers will get to see that again before he moves on.





**BORN:** 1992/08/22  
**CLUB:** OGC NICE  
**POSITION:** DEFENDER  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2018  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 24

*CHRISTOPHE HERELLE*

(+39)

**59**

Christophe Hérelle is a late bloomer. The tall defender took his time but has finally established himself as a safe bet in Ligue 1. Last year marked his first entry in the GFFN 100, in a year in which he had played the first half of 2018 for Troyes and the other for OGC Nice.

It is fair to say that things have continued to follow an upward trajectory for the Nice-born central defender. His 2019 started pretty much like 2018 ended: as a starter, at the heart of Nice's defence. On 12th January 2019, the Niçois won 1-0 against Bordeaux, in a game that saw Vieira's team produce yet another clean sheet. This solid, if unremarkable, victory showcased Nice's very good back line, made of Malang Sarr in an unnatural left-back position, Youcef Atal on the right and the centre-back pairing composed of Dante and Hérelle. This impenetrable back four of the 2018/19 campaign, bolstered by goalkeeper Walter Benitez, is Patrick Vieira's biggest achievement to date as OGC Nice boss, with Les Aiglons finishing the previous campaign with just 35 goals conceded. In other words, the second best league record, just behind Lille (33) and the same as PSG's.

It was no coincidence to see Hérelle be a guiding light in one of the best defences of the season. Indeed, he has drastically built upon the raw characteristics that made him stand out at ESTAC Troyes. His stature and propensity for winning duels that sometimes bring him to take positional risks immediately resonated with Patrick Vieira, who fielded Hérelle in 33 games in 2018-19. His appearances, in terms of the calendar year, have however been curtailed, due to a severe injury contracted at the end of August, in Le Gym's third league game of the season against OM. This represented a huge blow for Vieira who was forced to blood in the 19-year-old Andy Pelmar, who performed shakily at best. Hérelle's absence has been the key reason to Nice's abject form in the 2019/20 season to date. It was obvious to French football observers just minutes after he was forced off against Marseille, as Nice conceded a second goal that would see them lose for the first time this season. Hérelle even scored imperiously against Amiens in Nice's first league game.

The beginning of the 2019-20 season has been a period to forget for the French-Martinican. When he came back from a month on the side-lines, he was sent off vs. PSG. He eventually came back against Reims where he scored his second goal of the season, but faced another blow two games later. He was indeed forced to leave his teammates at half-time at the Groupama Stadium, having felt pain in his ankle. Nice ended up losing 4-1 against OL. 2019 was a strange year for Christophe Hérelle, who suffered two major blows between August and December that tarnished an otherwise excellent calendar year of performances. The defender will try to erase these nightmarish six months and come back stronger than ever. He definitely has the technical ability and the mental strength to do so.



**BORN:** 1993/12/10  
**CLUB:** RC STRASBOURG  
**POSITION:** MIDFIELDER  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2018  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 34

*ADRIEN THOMASSON*

(NEW)

58

Perhaps it is a function of his diminutive stature, standing at only 1.80m tall, but Adrien Thomasson's time in Ligue 1 has gone largely undervalued. The midfielder spent three seasons at FC Nantes, playing over 1900 minutes each year, while chipping in on the score sheet - yet was allowed to leave for Strasbourg in 2018 on a free transfer. At the Alsace club, Thomasson built on his emerging form putting forth an impressive year in 2019, which included collecting his first major trophy – scoring a decisive penalty in the final of the Coupe de la Ligue.

A traditional number 10, this past year Thomasson frequently found himself stationed behind Strasbourg's sizable strike duo of Ludovic Ajorque and Lebo Mothiba in manager Thierry Laurey's 3-5-2/3-4-1-2 formation. By its nature Strasbourg's attack is predicated largely on the advanced play of its two wing-backs and therefore, even within his own side, Thomasson's contributions can often go unnoticed. Nevertheless, the Frenchman's part in what was an historic 2019 for Strasbourg was sizeable – helping the club to an 11th place league finish, which was its highest since the 2004/05 season.

Thomasson's greatest influence came on the offensive side of the game where he led the team in assists through the latter half of the 2018/19 campaign – finishing 10th in Ligue 1 in the category, while nicking five goals in the process. In fact, Thomasson's proclivity in the final third meant he would finish the 2018/19 season 18th in the league in goals plus assists on a per-90 basis. What is more, the attack minded midfielder has collected four goals to start the 2019/20 season – putting him just one marker behind team leader, Ajorque, in non-penalty goals scored.

Beyond the tangible numbers, Thomasson possesses a tireless work-rate and is tasked with the largely thankless job of creating space for Ajorque and Mothiba. Throughout a single 90-minute start Thomasson will make innumerable third-man runs in order to clear a path for his attacking partners. What is more, his ability to oscillate between the wings and play combinations with the advanced wing-backs is an important part of creating space on flanks to deliver balls into the hulking Ajorque – an action that has made Strasbourg such a complex side to defend against. Nonetheless, without question the highlight of both the club and Thomasson's year came in the Coupe de la Ligue where Strasbourg fought their way past a number of hardened opponents including Lille, Marseille, Lyon and Bordeaux on their way to the final against Guingamp, where the midfielder played all 120 minutes, before doing his part in the penalties.

Thomasson's selflessness, as well as his technical ability in the centre of the park, allowed for Strasbourg to incorporate more nuance into their attacking play and in the process helped the club take another major step forward in 2019. The Savoie native has started all but three matches this season and is playing a more decisive role in front of goal – exemplified by his four markers. If Strasbourg is going to persist as a comfortable mid-table side it will need Thomasson to remain a consistent contributor going forward.



**BORN:** 1991/02/08  
**CLUB:** AS SAINT-ETIENNE  
**POSITION:** FORWARD  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2018  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 28

*WAHBI KHAZRI*

(-26)

**57**

5, 5, 3, 4, 5, 4 and 3; L'Équipe's typically exacting grades for Wahbi Khazri's first seven starts in 2019/20. At the time of writing an overall average of 4.44 ranks the Tunisian a lowly 194th of all Ligue 1 players with sufficient game time graded by the French sports daily, just below two Nîmes defenders who were recently mauled 6-0 by Bordeaux and the routinely diabolical Jemerson. Only nineteen players reside between Khazri and the unfortunate Malang Sarr, whose average of 3.56 places the Nice defender 214th and last, hardly an endorsement to be included here.

Fortunately for Khazri, this is far from the whole story. Khazri is a prime example of L'Équipe's famed player ratings drifting away from impartial analysis and toward a popularity contest. Despite his obvious quality and a stunning return to Ligue 1 after a disastrous spell with Sunderland, Khazri's cantankerous on-field nature, his berating of referees and a tendency to go down too easily seem to count against him. As do high expectations, notably Florian Thauvin and Julian Draxler, for example, have suffered similarly. Although not matching his SC Bastia and early St Étienne form, Khazri has continued to positively, but more quietly, affect games in 2019.

Despite just a solitary league goal and assist so far this term in a lean time for his club, Khazri's form is worth defending. After Jean-Louis Gasset retired this summer, having magicked Les Verts from relegation fears to European football in less than two years, his successor and former assistant Ghislain Printant fumbled the ball and, ahead of Printant's final domestic game at Nîmes in September, ASSE were bottom.

In that time Khazri remained St Étienne's most dangerous and creative looking forward, notably contributing a superb assist for Romain Hamouma's opener in a 2-1 win at Dijon and doing the same for Mathieu Debuchy's winner against Nîmes, ASSE's only league victories under Printant. Meanwhile the Tunisian's Europa League outings have been more profitable, scoring a screamer in a 3-2 loss to Gent before netting the opener at FC Olexandriya. Due to injuries, at the time of writing Khazri has only started twice in Ligue 1 since Nîmes but remains a potent weapon waiting to aid Claude Puel's revolution.

Last season Khazri placed 34th in L'Équipe's list of 156 players, but given that only four of his 13 Ligue 1 goals came after Christmas, the feeling persists that his form dropped away in the second half of 2018/19. However, aside from remaining St Étienne's creative hub alongside Rémy Cabella, he capped off a superb January with a thunderous strike to beat Marseille and a clever free-kick to see off Guingamp, before experiencing another purple patch in April in which Khazri may only have scored once but also saw him create three crucial goals as ASSE took 10 points from four games in their successful European chase.

Khazri may not be the most likable of figures, but he has remained more potent than he is given credit for in 2019, L'Équipe's marking notwithstanding.





**BORN:** 1986/08/18  
**CLUB:** ANGERS SCO  
**POSITION:** DEFENDER  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2015  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 30

*ISMAËL TRAORÉ*

(NEW)

**56**

'Underrated' is an overused word in footballing lexicon. For someone, somewhere, every player, manager or team is underappreciated. However, those who have lead Angers from Ligue 2 obscurity to Ligue 1 safety and maintained the Breton club's top flight status with a modicum of fuss while turning even fewer heads are amongst the few genuinely deserving to be labelled as such. Manager Stéphane Moulin, now the longest serving incumbent coach in Europe's traditional top five leagues, is perhaps the most under-the-radar success story on the continent, but not far behind is that of his courageous captain Ismaël Traoré.

Traoré has been there since the beginning. Signed from Ligue 2 and then 6th placed Brest in the summer of 2015, Moulin's Angers offered the imposing Ivorian centre back a way into the French top flight for the first time in his career. Having made the UNFP Team of the Season, Traoré fitted Angers' transfer policy perfectly as they hoovered up the standout performers from the second tier. Traoré was one of four players from that Ligue 2 strongest eleven to be drafted in to Moulin's quiet revolution at one time or another; alongside Karl Toko-Ekambi (eventually sold to Villarreal for £16m) and inspirational captain and 2015/16 top goalscorer Cheick Ndoye.

Toko-Ekambi and Ndoye may have caught the eye more readily but it was Traoré, a stalwart of Moulin's team, reliable and consistent, the warrior defender needed to survive in the physical French top tier, who deserves most acclaim. Routinely monolithic at the centre of a usually deep-sitting Angers back line over five consecutive Ligue 1 campaigns, outshining his initially more lauded partner Romain Thomas for some time, Traoré's astute reading of play, physicality, positioning and heading ability make him an imposing roadblock for any French forward line, especially at home where Angers and Traoré routinely bloody big club noses.

Such displays have recently catapulted Traoré from his quiet corner of Ligue 1 into the one time African Galacticos, the Ivory Coast national side. While he may have missed the generation of Didier Drogba and the Touré brothers, Traoré comfortably (and characteristically quietly) established himself during 2019 at the heart of the Elephant's defence. He was an ever-present during this summer's sweltering Egyptian AFCON, posting a pair of typically bullish performances familiar to Angers observers in two knockout encounters.

A later rise to the top than the player would have hoped, turning 28 as Le SCO's first Ligue 1 season since the mid 90s got underway, likely warded off some of Ligue 1's more established sides, but in hindsight that was ill-advised. Traoré has improved every season since his arrival at the Stade Raymond Kopa, where he is now their understated talisman, even at 33 and visibly slower to get up to speed after a lay-off. Nevertheless, alongside his club and coach, Ismaël Traoré - quietly brilliant over an extended period without meaningful acclaim, underestimated by his peers and overlooked by the rest - continues to embody a more apt use of one of football's most overused terms.





**BORN:** 1986/09/27  
**CLUB:** AS SAINT-ETIENNE  
**POSITION:** GOALKEEPER  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2011  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 35

*STEPHANE RUFFIER*

(-20)

**55**

It has been a landmark year for Stéphane Ruffier - the 33-year-old became Sainté's record appearance maker having surpassed Ivan Curkovic, the legendary shot-stopper who featured in the club's maiden European Cup final in the mid 70s. Ruffier remains an ever-present at the Stade Geoffroy Guichard where things are quietly chugging along.

For Sainté are neither a poorly run club or one that has realistic eyes on the Champions' League. Indeed, European qualification to the second-tier Europa League is an overwhelming achievement, as evidenced by their meek exit in 2019/20 to the likes of Wolfsburg, Oleksandriya and Gent, winning none of their six games. They've flirted with American ownership, the idea of becoming a club looking to further develop their strong domestic brand and history into what closely resembles a modern club. Things have even gone wrong over the course of the year, a poor start to the season which saw Ghislain Printant sacked and then succeeded by Claude Puel. And yet, they are where they are - quietly in the top half of the table, a potential run at Europe - nothing more, and nothing else.

Amidst all of that remains Stéphane Ruffier, one of the best Ligue 1 goalkeepers this decade who would do a top job in a top club, who continues to ply his trade in the Rhône valley and who brings a level of high quality to a changing side that never shows it more than in flashes.

Ruffier, now in his ninth year at St Étienne has produced an impressive 2019 between the sticks as his side saw perhaps a more turbulent 12 months then previously predicted. Under the tutelage of Jean Louis Gasset, ASSE finished fourth in the 2018-/9 campaign, losing only six times in the final half of that campaign - mostly to sides that finished in the top six, the other being a shock 3-0 reverse to future Cup winners Rennes. Ruffier highlighted no signs of decline, with some reputable performances - particularly in the narrow defeat to PSG as well as the initial wins over Marseille and Nice. The 33-year-old is renowned for his quick reflexes and aerial superiority and clearly resembles a 'last line' of defence when a sometimes chaotic Sainté defence have their stalwart behind him.

The club's annual budget had increased to €95m, a big increase from the year before, following European qualification, and almost double what it was five or six years ago. Yet it was in tatters quite quickly as Gasset's anointed successor, the former Bastia coach Printant, was sacked after winning just one of his six games. Ruffier, who appeared highly confident in the club's success this year, has seen his 2019/20 campaign marked by a number of poor performances - though this was mainly exacerbated by some completely shoddy defending from the likes of Harold Moukoudi, Loïc Perrin and Timothée Kolodziejczak.

In came Puel who enabled the team to stabilise its defence and change its game-plan. And it's gameplan - an efficient, defensive outfit marked by individual attacking brilliance - put Ruffier to work, but it allowed the 33-year-old to highlight his qualities. Narrow wins over the likes of Nîmes and arch-rivals Lyon, themselves in difficulty, illustrated just how good an in-form Ruffier can be.



**BORN:** 1995/06/15  
**CLUB:** FC METZ  
**POSITION:** FORWARD  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2013  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 39

*HABIB DIALLO*

(NEW)

54

At the winter break, yo-yo club Metz sit just outside the relegation zone – a position that they will gladly take at the end of this campaign as they look to avoid yet another immediate return to Ligue 2. Although Metz are guilty of giving away too many leads, the real issue is at the other end – only three teams have scored fewer than Metz's 17 goals. How much worse would that statistic be, however, were it not for star striker Habib Diallo.

Diallo is another product of Metz's successful partnership with Génération Foot in Senegal, which also produced the likes of Ismaila Sarr and Sadio Mané. But whereas those players hit the ground running, and Metz were unable to keep them long, Diallo has been a slow burner. For a while it looked like Diallo wasn't going to make the grade. Universally liked and recognised as someone very polite, modest and timid, he took his time to adjust to being away from home, the cold, the strict timetables. In his first two years in the reserves he scored just one goal. But his likability and work-ethic convinced the Metz staff to give him a one-year professional contract.

Diallo was given his first real chance in the second half of the 2015/16 season by Philippe Hinschberger. And the 20-year-old's nine goals in the final 12 games (including four braces) helped Metz gain promotion to Ligue 1. However, a feeling that he was still a little too raw for the top flight barred Diallo's route to the first team and he was loaned for the majority of the next 18 months to Ligue 2 club Brest. Developing under excellent coach Jean-Marc Furlan, Diallo scored 16 league goals, forming a productive partnership with Gaëtan Charbonnier and leaving a great impression on Furlan, who called him "a marvellous kid." Brest wanted to retain him but Diallo missed Metz and new Grenats coach Frédéric Antonetti wanted to bring him back. A great call as Diallo scored 26 goals and provided six assists as Metz were promoted last season as Ligue 2 winners, with Brest fittingly also promoted (and Charbonnier finishing as top scorer with 27 goals).

The big question for Diallo was whether he was ready to take the step-up to Ligue 1 – and a goalless pre-season did not bode well. However, Diallo – a tall, strong, elegant, hard-working centre-forward, imperious in the air and adept at holding up the ball to bring others into the game – has been excellent. While former team-mate Charbonnier has managed only one goal this season, Diallo sits joint-third in the Ligue 1 scoring charts with 10. Along with one assist, he has been responsible for 65% of Metz's goals this season – the highest proportion in the top five European leagues.

2019 has seen him score 21 league goals and earn his first international goal for Senegal. He has taken on more responsibility by captaining Metz more often than not, and he is improving all the time as a player – his last goal of the year vs Dijon, shrugging off a defender and calmly rounding the keeper rather than shooting on sight, shows how far he has come. It has taken some time but Metz chief of recruitment Philippe Gaillot sums it up well: "he is where he is today because he is a role model in terms of work, behaviour and performance. In short, he has become an adult."



**BORN:** 1994/05/03  
**CLUB:** MONTPELLIER HSC  
**POSITION:** FORWARD  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2018  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 39

**GAËTAN LABORDE**

**(NEW)**

**53**

If there was ever a trophy for “most improved player of the year”, Gaëtan Laborde would certainly be nominated for 2019. The striker played a big part in Montpellier’s good 2018-19 season, which has enabled him to feature for the first time in his career in the GFFN 100.

Formed as a youngster at Bordeaux, he really first broke out during his second loan-spell at Clermont during the 2015-16 season, where he scored eight goals in Ligue 2. These results earned him a move back to Aquitaine for the 2016-17 season, where he quickly became a regular starter, scoring 13 goals and delivering five assists in 42 games. Unfortunately for him, his good form was spoiled with a foot injury in October 2017 which left him on the side-lines for 10 games. The striker therefore scored just three goals in his second season at Bordeaux and started considering a move away to start over.

He consequently joined Montpellier in the summer of 2018, for a reported fee €3m. Quite ironically, the Mont-de-Marsan-born player, who never turned out to be the prolific striker Les Girondins had hoped for, scored two goals for Bordeaux against FK Mariupol in the Europa League just nine days before going south and signing for La Paillade. Electing to join Montpellier was certainly the best decision he has made in his career so far. He has drastically improved under Der Zakarian’s guidance and established himself as an industrious and consistently quality forward.

The Franco-Armenian manager has really made the most of Laborde by playing him alongside Andy Delort. The pair produced an irresistible on-pitch chemistry, scoring a combined total of 25 goals together in their first campaign alongside each other. Laborde ended the season with 11 goals and five assists, his most productive campaign so far, statistically speaking. Honing in on 2019, he was involved in seven goals after the winter break (four goals, three assists), which helped the MHSC reach the sixth spot in Ligue 1.

Past the statistics, Laborde is, above anything else, a hard-working player you can rely on. Indeed, apart from the first game of 2019 that he missed because of a small injury, he played the entirety of the league’s second leg (18 games), starting all of them and never being substituted before the 70th minute.

The beginning of the 2019/20 season has not been as impressive as the end of the 2018/19 campaign, the striker has only scored once in 13 games at the time of writing. But Delort also scored more than Laborde last season and that’s down to the latter’s style of play, who makes dummy run after dummy run to draw opposition defenders to provide space and time for his striking partner. Even when he is not scoring or assisting, Laborde is among the players his coach puts first on the teamsheet. Michel Der Zakarian has managed to turn the unfancied Laborde into one of the most altruistic and generous strikers in Ligue 1.





**BORN:** 1986/12/15  
**CLUB:** PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN  
**POSITION:** GOALKEEPER  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2019  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 21

*KEYLOR NAVAS*

(NEW)

52

Last season, the goalkeeping situation at PSG was not as clear-cut as most experts predicted it to be: Gianluigi Buffon was supposed to help the club reach the dizzy heights of the Champions' League quarter-finals (which was not even the end achievement that the Qataris are after) and establish himself as the world-class goalkeeper he is (was?) outside of Italy.

Only things did not go exactly to plan: Buffon conceded more goals than games played in the league (a first since Nicolas Douchez's eight goals conceded in five games back in 2014/15!) in sharp contrast to the form of his understudy, Alphonse Areola. The former Villarreal man played more games than the Italian world champion and conceded fewer goals than him. Buffon went back to Italy with his reputation tarnished, having failed in a task that looked right up his alley. PSG hence had a choice to make: keep Areola or find someone else...

The club parted ways with the youth academy product, on an initial loan basis, by swapping his services for those of Keylor Navas, an experienced Costa Rican international with World Cup appearances and more than 100 games played for Real Madrid, winning four major trophies (one league title and three Champions' Leagues) with Los Blancos. The scrutiny that comes with being PSG's #1 was always unlikely to faze Navas, who had been used to the sharp criticism of the Spanish media during his time in Madrid. The tough ask was going to be reproducing his Champions' League winning form in Paris.

Born in Costa Rica, his reflexes and good footwork made him a prime candidate for a career between the sticks. He started his career in 2005 at Deportivo Saprissa where he won six league titles. His big move to Europe happened in 2010, joining Spanish side Albacete. There, he was loaned to Levante who were so impressed with his performances that they bought him for €150k. Navas, then on a roll, never looked back and clinched a €10m move to Real Madrid two years later. In the Spanish capital, he began as Iker Casillas' understudy (unsurprising given the legendary status the Spaniard held in those days) but quickly established himself as heir to San Iker's throne.

The 2018/19 season may have been tough for Navas to bear following the arrival of Thibaut Courtois at the Bernabeu (the Costa Rican only played 10 games in 2018/19) but 2019 certainly ended better than it had begun for him. The swap deal between Areola and himself was not done until the deadline day of this summer window, hardly the ideal preparation for a season that has grand ambitions attached to it for Les Parisiens, but Navas has fitted like a glove. Navas came in with fellow La Liga goalkeeper Sergio Rico (who it was clear was always going to be #2 considering Navas' stature) and knows that he will be judged, like many custodians at the club before him, by the amount of mistakes he makes.

So far so few so good.





**BORN:** 1994/12/07  
**CLUB:** FC NANTES  
**POSITION:** MIDFIELDER  
**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2019  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 39

**VALENTIN RONGIER**

**(NEW)**

**51**

As the bulk of the squad drifted away toward the gym after an intense training game, only Valentin Rongier remained; cheerily waving 'Hello!' as he slowly lapped the tree lined pitch accompanied by the fitness coach. Rongier, however, had little cause for cheer. A disastrous knee injury had kept the young French midfielder from starting a Ligue 1 game for many months, and would do so for several more.

A Canaris academy graduate, Rongier had been thrust into the starting eleven as a direct replacement for Astom Villa bound Jordan Veretout at the start of the 2015/16 campaign. His quality and confidence in possession meant that Rongier asserted himself swiftly in the French top flight, rifling home 30-yard goal of the season contender at Troyes the week before rupturing a cruciate ligament against Caen in October. A cruel blow for a 20-year-old on the verge of establishing himself with his home town club, having joined Les Canaris as a 6-year-old.

Eventually Rongier recovered his fitness and shortly afterward his form, keeping his place at the start of the following season despite competition from Belgian international Guillaume Gillet, USA midfielder Alejandro Bedoya, now club captain Abdoulaye Touré and Amine Harit, currently exploding at Schalke. As the club's most consistent, impressive and important outfield player, Rongier was the natural successor to Léo Dubois' captaincy as the full-back left for Lyon in summer 2018.

Despite an average start to the season, Rongier, alongside Nicolas Pallois, admirably led his boyhood team through the turmoil of Emiliano Sala's tragic death and a relegation battle in 2019, the young captain particularly outstanding in key wins over Bordeaux, Dijon and PSG. Nevertheless it was difficult to escape the feeling that a move away was impending and Rongier's spell with the armband lasted just one season as long-standing rumours that both Olympico rivals were keen admirers finally led to an outright bid. Marseille eventually parted with upwards of €13m for Rongier at the start of September.

Now fully settled in at the Vélodrome after a bumpy start, 2019/20 is comfortably becoming Rongier's most impressive season to date. A perfect foil to the more forward-thinking Morgan Sanson ahead of him and the industry of Kevin Strootman or Boubacar Kamara behind, Rongier's ability to slowly take charge of a midfield battle with his metronomic passing and a subtle ability to dictate the pace of the game have made him indispensable to André Villas-Boas' quiet revolution at OM. Marseille, it should be added, are now clear favourites for the 'Best of the Rest' trophy behind PSG.

A quiet intensity and a keenness to assume responsibility are perhaps the most striking aspects of Rongier's body of work in 2019. Despite a poor outing as OM were routed by PSG in October, subsequent Man of the Match displays in wins over Lille and Toulouse came as part of a stirring run for both club and player - five consecutive wins cut the rest of the league loose. As his positivity and hunger in overcoming such a horrible injury, and his keenness to develop since, underline; Rongier is probably only getting started.

# 75-51 RECAP

75.	Presnel Kimpembe	Paris Saint-Germain
74.	Dimitri Payet	Olympique de Marseille
73.	Andrei Giron	FC Nantes
72.	Hiroki Sakai	Olympique de Marseille
71.	Damien Da Silva	Stade Rennais
70.	Benjamin Bourigeaud	Stade Rennais
69.	Yusuf Yazici	Lille OSC
68.	Pablo Sarabia	Paris Saint-Germain
67.	Matz Sels	RC Strasbourg
66.	Kalifa Coulibaly	FC Nantes
65.	Zinedine Ferhat	Nîmes Olympique
64.	Ludovic Ajorque	RC Strasbourg
63.	Eduardo Camavinga	Stade Rennais
62.	Mathieu Debuchy	AS Saint-Étienne
61.	Édouard Mendy	Stade Rennais
60.	Rémi Oudin	Stade de Reims
59.	Christophe Hérelle	OGC Nice
58.	Adrien Thomasson	RC Strasbourg
57.	Wahbi Khazri	AS Saint-Étienne
56.	Ismaël Traoré	Angers SCO
55.	Stéphane Ruffier	AS Saint-Étienne
54.	Habib Diallo	FC Metz
53.	Gaëtan Laborde	Montpellier HSC
52.	Keylor Navas	Paris Saint-Germain
51.	Valentin Rongier	Olympique de Marseille



*FLORIAN THAUVIN*

(-48)

**50**

**BORN: 1993/01/26, ORLEANS**  
**CLUB: OLYMPIQUE DE MARSEILLE**  
**POSITION: FORWARD**  
**AT CLUB SINCE: 2016**  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019: 18**

Though one of Ligue 1's most important talents, it was not the most memorable year for Florian Thauvin. It was certainly a come down after a glorious 2018, during which he partook in a Europa League final followed by France's golden adventure in Russia. He had returned to Marseille in blazing form, scoring six goals in the first six matches of the season.

Afterwards, he suffered in an Olympique de Marseille side whose season was less than inspiring: first round eliminations in the Europa League and both domestic cups, notably against fourth division team Andrézieux in the Coupe de France; and a 5th place finish meaning no European football this season. That dire month of January, with one win from five, ended with a red card for Thauvin, who was caught stomping on Lille's Youssouf Koné. But after a two-match suspension, he returned in some good form, contributing to OM's four wins in five matches.

The French international (10 caps) developed an encouraging relationship with Mario Balotelli during the Italian's six-month fling in Marseille. Occasionally, they started together in a strike partnership. In fact, Super Mario's fitness level required there be another striker next to him at any time, forcing Rudi Garcia to experiment. Thauvin's ideal position remains the right wing, from where he excels at the famous Arjen Robben trick of cutting in to shoot. In March, against St Étienne, he shone as a right winger in a 4-4-2, with Valère Germain and Balotelli up front. The 26-year-old scored one and delivered a corner for Manchester City's former striker to score. An even better performance came in May, with Garcia returning to a 4-2-3-1 in the absence of Balo. Thauvin netted a late brace in Toulouse, and the following week scored the only goal in the season's last match, against Montpellier. Total club stats for the season: 18 goals and nine assists. Even with a slump for near on six months, this was the second-best campaign in his career.

Thauvin's season finished with the June international matches. In Andorra, he started for his third cap of the year, and his best ever match in a French shirt. He delivered an assist to Wissam Ben Yedder, before going on to score his first goal for France, an overhead kick from a Kylian Mbappé cross. "Flotov" is still one of OM's most valuable assets, and there are regularly rumours of his departure (sometimes framed as the club seeking to cash-out). While the winger is one of French football's most potent goal-scorers, he lacks recognition beyond Ligue 1. This is maybe due to his national team performances, which have been sparse and mostly flat. Or maybe because of the reputation built around events in the earlier parts of his career; a petulant character that he has since grown out of, to his credit. In any case, the reported interest by Valencia over the summer came to nothing.

The current season presented obstacles very early on. In a summer friendly against Rangers, Thauvin sustained an ankle injury which meant he missed most of the pre-season. He returned in September, playing ten minutes against St Étienne. That has been his only appearance of the season: he then injured his knee and has been out since then. Medical experts with knowledge of the situation have underlined the uncertainty around Thauvin's current injury: the damage done to cartilage in his knee makes recovery time unpredictable. At the time of writing, he would be expected to make his first appearance in February.

In the meantime, Thauvin is rarely seen at OM's training ground, the Commanderie. He does much of his therapy at home, under the supervision of personal trainers. Nonetheless, he remains an important leader for the club on the public scene. TV cameras never fail to catch him seated at the Vélodrome. He also tweets his vivid encouragements when Marseille score, and after every match. Even in his absence, the demonstration that he is a good fit for the Southern club persists.

But his absence is quite crucial in the current squad composition of OM. Three players have alternatively occupied his position. One is Bouna Sarr, who is a winger but also one of only three members of the squad who can play at full-back. Maxime Lopez and Germain have also taken turns on the right wing, but the position is unnatural for both, although they have performed respectably in it. The return of Thauvin is hotly anticipated, not just to relieve the stress on other players filling his position but with hope that his goalscoring ability will flourish in OM's current form. Marseille have made a very strong start to the season under André Villas-Boas, reaching second place, and this without their best player. Based on AVB's good understanding with Dimitri Payet and other squad leaders, there is every reason to believe he can also bring the best out of Thauvin. When he returns, it will only boost them further in their challenge to reach Champions' League for the first time since 2013.





*ANDER HERRERA*

(NEW)

**49**

**BORN: 1989/08/14, BILBAO**  
**CLUB: PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN**  
**POSITION: MIDFIELDER**  
**AT CLUB SINCE: 2019**  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019: 15**

Summer 2019 marked a significant shift for PSG. Bombastic statement signings with volatile egos seem but a distant memory. Instead, the club made shrewd, practical signings, and perhaps none of their summer moves were exemplified by this more than the acquisition of Ander Herrera on a free transfer. The 30 year-old is not a glamorous galactico who will further raise the club's profile, but rather someone who can do a reliable job when called upon, and have an even more pivotal role behind the scenes, helping foster an ethos of dedication and hard-work in the dressing room.

Born in Bilbao, Herrera started his career in Spain's second division with Real Zaragoza. Despite not playing in the top flight, he still managed to be selected with regularity for his country's youth sides, no mean feat given the competition for places. After helping Zaragoza earn promotion, Bilbao came calling, a siren song impossible to resist for any player of Basque heritage; Herrera made the move in the summer of 2011.

While at the club, he was an integral part of a team that reached the finals of both the Europa League and the Copa del Rey, and his performances earned the notice of Manchester United, who took him to England's northwest in the summer of 2014 on a €36m deal. While at United, the club's fortunes were clearly on the wane, as their failure to properly replace Sir Alex Ferguson had left them rudderless in the transfer market and lacking consistency in leadership styles on the bench.

Through it all, though, Herrera, despite suffering some injury issues, approached life in England with determination and rigour on the pitch, even if he wasn't always the most successful under a variety of managers. In short, though, he is the sort of player PSG desperately need. The midfielder gives everything for his club, bringing a level of passion and commitment which has perhaps been found wanting amongst the club's more recent signings; unlike some of them, Herrera is already making a keen effort to improve his French, acknowledging that "language is very important for the team's communication." It will be tough to dislodge him from the club's good books.

It is clear from 2019 alone that Herrera is the consummate professional; his final season in Manchester was trying, as both he and the club struggled in what was a poor campaign. Missing nine games through injury, the Spaniard also had to contend with a managerial change, finding himself increasingly ostracised under Ole Gunnar Solskjær, making just three league appearances after February.

A highlight during this time was an excellent performance against Chelsea in the FA Cup, during which Herrera showcased his strengths: great positioning, adding zip to the midfield, making a nuisance of himself, before coming up with a goal. A low point was of course starting in United's 2-0 Champions' League defeat at the hands of his new employers. The Spaniard is not someone to pass the buck, admitting to The Telegraph that "75% [of United's shortcomings] is the responsibility of the players."

For Herrera, it was clearly time to move on. In addition to feeling disrespected by United's reluctance to meet his demands, the midfielder no longer felt valued given the club's new direction, telling Marca "there were differences regarding the project and my importance within it." The overwhelming disappointment amongst United fans at their 2016-17 Player of the Year's departure says everything about his quality and importance.

Injuries have so far restricted his time in Paris, but then nobody expected Herrera to start every match. Signed to add depth, he has done exactly that, delivering as expected when called upon. Herrera plays best as a box-to-box midfielder in a three, and so must compete with the likes of Marco Verratti, Julian Draxler and Idrissa Gueye for this position, often looking less effective in a two-man pivot. His versatility has already been handy, delivering his best performance for the club in a 4-0 win over Angers in October, whilst playing at right-back. Though sometimes inconsistent, with his tireless attacking movement and excellent defensive positioning, he constitutes a useful option in the long campaign ahead.

But ultimately his true value comes from his experience and positive influence on the team. "I'm here to help, to adapt and do what the coach asks me," he told Canal +, while he hopes that "he can be an example for the young people on the team." His footprint on PSG could prove invaluable.



*RUBEN AGUILAR*

(-4)

**48**

**BORN: 1993/04/26, GRENOBLE**

**CLUB: AS MONACO**

**POSITION: DEFENDER**

**AT CLUB SINCE: 2019**

**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019: 26**

After an excellent two-year spell with Montpellier, it was clear that 2019 would be the year that Ruben Aguilar reached for higher prospects. Having joined the Hérault club in 2017 from Auxerre, the right-back made his way up the Ligue 1 food chain by joining Monaco in the summer. While he has not experienced the most enjoyable results this year, his effort and contributions are never half-hearted, and we have continued to witness his learning and upward trajectory.

It is a rewarding rise for the 26-year-old. When he joined Grenoble in 2013, a third division side, he was doubtful of his prospects in football and fearing unemployment. The following year, after a run with the first team, he moved up to Ligue 2's Auxerre. With the Bourguignon club, he was fortunate to play a Coupe de France final in 2015, which his side ultimately lost to PSG (1-0). Then, with Montpellier, Aguilar was a key man in Michel der Zakarian's system, and among the most consistent full-backs in Ligue 1. Der Zakarian has always favoured defensive solidity, hence a 3-4-1-2 with very solid wing-backs. By no means was this role dispensed of any defensive duties. Without a question, it was an ideal setting for his progression.

His last months with Montpellier were not as complete as the early half of the 2018/19 season, hindered by a series of small injuries. The months of February and March were particularly difficult, as Aguilar participated in about every other game, and Montpellier conceded at least two goals in each match that he did play. The second half of that season was uncharacteristically permeable for Montpellier's defence, one of the most consistently solid in Ligue 1 these last few years. They finished the campaign with 42 goals conceded. One highlight was the 2-1 win over Toulouse during which Aguilar, playing extremely wide throughout, assisted both goals.

At a fee of €8m, it was a relatively good deal for Monaco. The native Grenoblois signed until 2024. He made the journey along with his Montpellier team-mate Benjamin Lecomte. The pair's arrival was supposed to be the beginning of an intense transfer window of business in the Principality. In the end, Wissam Ben Yedder for €40m aside, they were the only major signings. Over a busy summer, Montpellier had rejected various offers for Aguilar in particular and there was interest from midtable clubs of every major European league. In his first few months at Monaco, Aguilar has been suspended for four matches total, notably for two red cards. In the second match of the season, a 3-0 defeat to Metz, his misdirected aggression was aimed at Opa Nguette after just half an hour. Memorably, he smashed the VAR monitor with an angry kick after his second red card, on a night during which Monaco fell against St. Étienne. Although he does not usually have a disciplinary problem, the impact and rigor he typically plays with may have taken a bad turn in the context of Monaco's poor results.

With Monaco, Aguilar has found himself competing for the same position as Gelson Martins. Seeing as the Portuguese is usually more of an attacking player, this may seem a little surprising, but it is a consequence of the 3-5-2. Aguilar himself can be very impactful going forwards, providing width and making repeated efforts up and down the line. One problem for Aguilar and for others, however, has been the lack of direction in terms of organisation for Monaco. Jardim has experimented with positioning and players, although some of his favourites are guaranteed starters no matter what. It has not been easy to follow what the intentions are, and this uncertainty has been difficult for the players, no doubt. It is what has ultimately brought about his sacking.

Monaco have seen in flashes that the Aguilar who made his name with Montpellier is still lurking. In the Coupe de la Ligue, against Marseille, he scored his first goal in his new colours, a rebound from a save, while also assisting Jean-Kévin Augustin's first effort. Then the year finished on a high note. For the last match before Christmas, Aguilar put in unquestionably his best performance in a Monaco shirt. As ASM hosted 3rd place Lille, three goals in a thumping 5-1 came from his deliveries, officially granting him two assists. Two of these goals started with superb crosses from deep, a strong quality of his.

Contrary to an old popular Bolivian rumour, caused by an error in the popular football simulation game Football Manager, Aguilar holds no other nationality than French (but has Spanish origins). He has never been called up for France but has now been an outside contender for some time. Behind Benjamin Pavard, other competitors for the right-back position like Djibril Sidibé or Léo Dubois have lacked playing time or suffered injuries. The position has lacked in depth for several years and a strong run of form from any one contender could see a shake-up ahead of EURO 2020. If Monaco can improve their act in the second half of the season under exciting new coach Robert Moreno, Aguilar may have a chance.





*KENNY LALA*

(-1)

**47**

**BORN: 1991/10/03, PARIS**  
**CLUB: RC STRASBOURG**  
**POSITION: DEFENDER**  
**AT CLUB SINCE: 2017**  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019: 34**

The French national team is renowned for possessing extraordinary quantities of quality and talented players in virtually every position on the pitch. You could make a team of reserve players which would have enough quality to rival most of senior national teams. Despite all this in recent times, the depth of quality full-backs, more specifically right-backs, has been relatively shallow for the pool of players you would expect France to have. The French triumph at the World Cup 2018 consisted of a team in which both starting full-backs, Benjamin Pavard and Lucas Hernandez, were utilised as central defenders for their respected club outfits in the season prior. We all know how this panned out, with both full-backs stitching together strong tournaments, peaking with Benjamin Pavard's wonder-goal against Argentina.

Despite Didier Deschamps's relatively pragmatic approach to squad selection, there is always opportunity for fresh faces in the squad. Surely it would make sense for Deschamps to consider a player who produced one of the best full-back campaigns that the domestic league has witnessed in years. It is a bold statement but considering the most basic of statistics of nine assists and five goals from that position would impress anyone. Kenny Lala was vital to how Strasbourg played in the 2018/19 season, clinching a place in the Europa League qualifying rounds. With the loss of midfield pivot, Jean-Eudes Aholou and incoming defenders Stefan Mitrović and Lamine Koné, Strasbourg coach, Thierry Laurey, altered the primary formation to include three central defenders, at the beginning of the 2018/19. This led to the previous season's creative beacon, Dimitri Liénard, who previously operated in central midfield and on the left, to be dropped. His profile wasn't suited to playing wing-back, he just did not harbour the energy or defensive solidity.

Lala was installed as the permanent fixture at right-wing back and he excelled. The new role meant he had more of a licence to advance forward and occupy space high up the field where he could create dangerously. His crosses menaced many Ligue 1 defences, especially his deep-floating balls to find 1.96m forward Ludovic Ajorque. These were the key to Strasbourg's 5-1 rout away at Monaco in January. Lala drifted inside the Monaco half before directing a swooping cross to find a team-mate who headed home one of the best assists of the season. The Strasbourg story of the year was of course their triumph in the Coupe de la Ligue final and their subsequent Europa League qualification round adventure. Lala was key to their success, he provided the assist and secondary assist for the 2nd and 3rd goals in the semi-final clash with Bordeaux. It was all about the cup and luckily so because their league form plummeted once it was clear that they had a path to Coupe de la Ligue victory. Between their semi-final win and the final, a timeframe of two months, they failed to win a single game in the league and only won two of their subsequent nine games in the season.

It would not be fair to single out Lala because it was the whole squad that downed tools, perhaps believing that they were safe from relegation. After the best season of his career, there was a feeling that Lala would be snapped up by a team looking for a full-back. It is a more reasonably priced market when compared to other positions on the pitch. His asking price was known to be €15m, but it was a remarkably quiet window with supposedly little interest, Fiorentina aside. Perhaps the season was viewed as a one-off as Lala was not producing the same in previous seasons and him being a 27-year-old could have put potential suitors off.

Since then the form of Lala has been on the decline, he has not been producing anywhere near the level he had showed previously and has been hampered by a myriad of niggling injuries. It has seemed that since the early stages of the 2019/20 campaign, Lala has been playing with the handbrake on, perhaps because of his fear about irritating his already recurring thigh problem or he has eyes on an incoming offer.

In the last few months of the year, Lala has not shown the same desire and energy in both areas of the pitch. He currently has one goal from a penalty and zero assists to his name and has been at fault for several goals conceded this season. After a difficult 2nd half of the year, Strasbourg have shifted to a back four, where Lala's lack of production has been a factor in Laurey's thinking and has thus made the switch to try to focus on the Ajorque – Lebo Mothiba partnership in attack. If possible, Strasbourg will look to offload Kenny Lala and with their upcoming talent Anthony Caci on the left, they look to have found another dynamic full-back. 19-year-old Mohamed Simakan also seems a real gem and wants to play at right-back in the medium-term, currently filling in centrally. With his chances of a national call-up all but dashed, perhaps a winter move will fling Lala back into Didier Deschamps' consciousness. Lala will hope it is not too late.



*MBAYE NIANG*

(NEW)

**46**

**BORN: 1994/12/19, MEULAN**  
**CLUB: STADE RENNAIS**  
**POSITION: FORWARD**  
**AT CLUB SINCE: 2018**  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019: 35**

In modern football there has emerged a tendency to write-off promising young players, who, for one reason or another, do not achieve their said potential expediently, or within the narrow guidelines of 'appropriate development'. In 2019, and now 24 years old, M'Baye Niang is a prime example of how a one size fits all approach is folly and that it is a confluence of factors which lend to a player flourishing.

Niang began his professional career as a highly sought-after product of the Caen academy. At the age of 15 he was already capped by the first-team – establishing himself within the side the following season. A full campaign of Ligue 1 football brought many suitors to Caen's door and in the end Niang was sold to AC Milan and placed immediately into their first team with the expectation, that at only 17 years of age, he would make an impact in one of the world's most recognisable sides. Unsurprisingly, Niang failed to make a dent in the first team, at the time playing behind an in-form Stephen El Shaarawy, Mario Balotelli, Giampalo Pazzini, Bojan and Kevin-Prince Boateng. The following year he was loaned to Montpellier where he chipped in on the goal-sheet, but suffered from off-field issues, before being sent back to northern Italy.

In total Niang would spend eight seasons at Milan, enduring a plethora of loan deals, all while cycling through a new manager every six to twelve months. Eventually he would secure a permanent move to Torino, who then turned around and sent him to Rennes for the start of the 2018/19 campaign. By the time he arrived at Rennes he was still only 23 years old and had already played for six different professional clubs in three separate countries. Troublingly, Niang's first half-season at Rennes looked all too familiar, as the club failed to live up to expectations and he struggled to establish himself in then manager, Sabri Lamouchi's starting eleven – instead spending much of his time coming off the bench as a substitute, or starting as a left-winger/left attacking midfielder.

However, everything changed for the Senegalese international as the calendar flipped over to 2019 and Rennes parted ways with Lamouchi and appointed the promising Julien Stéphan as the club's new manager. Stéphan immediately switched to a 4-4-2 formation, which often morphed into a 4-2-2-2, or 4-4-1-1, but without fail featured Niang at centre forward. His emergence as a key player for Rennes led to his loan move being made permanent, as the club executed a €12m transfer clause – in the process signing him to a contract that would keep him at the club until 2023.

In his new role, Niang quickly established himself as the club's primary goalscorer and the attack largely revolved around getting him the ball in the box. In this system, Niang still had the freedom to drift toward the flanks where he retained the necessary abilities to remain effective. That being said, above all else, it became clear early on that in Niang, Rennes and Stéphan, had found a clinical finisher in front of goal. This is where Niang would live throughout the course of 2019. This position is untenable if a striker suffers from a lack of efficiency. Fortunately, the 24-year-old is nothing if not absolutely ruthless in the opposition box. Presently, in terms of touches within the box, Niang ranks all the way down at 17th in Ligue 1 and yet has notched eight goals - all of which have come inside the area. Meaning the forward averages a goal every eight box-touches.

Much of Niang's success in front of goal can be attributed to his ability to score off-balance, or with an awkward body shape. However, by-and-large it comes down to clever movement, which allows him the space and posture, which precipitates him scoring with such regularity – highlighted by the fact that he ranks near the top of Ligue 1 in percentage of shots on target. In fact, Niang's year of goalscoring has been so profound that a recent Opta statistic revealed that only one other Rennes player in the last 50 years has scored more goals in a calendar year.

It is not simply the forward's proficiency in front of goal, but also his ability to come through in big moments that has quickly engendered him to Rennes supporters. In the club's first Coupe de France championship winning run since 1971, Niang started in all three of the quarter-final, semi-final and final – contributing a goal in both the quarter and semi-finals, before adding a crucial penalty in the shootout that would ultimately hand Rennes the trophy over Paris Saint-Germain.

As the club moves forward into 2020 it looks as though Niang's presence in the side will continue to grow. At the time of writing, Rennes sit third in the table and Niang has already chipped in eight goals – a mere three shy of his total last season and with half a campaign still to play.





*EDINSON CAVANI*

(-33)

**45**

**BORN: 1987/02/14, SALTO**  
**CLUB: PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN**  
**POSITION: FORWARD**  
**AT CLUB SINCE: 2013**  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019: 18**

It has not exactly been the most successful 2019 for Paris Saint-Germain and you could say the same for the club's all-time leading goalscorer Edinson Cavani. It is difficult to encapsulate his year without heavily focusing on the barrage of injuries that has impacted his status with the French champions. 2019 was not supposed to be this way for the Uruguayan, considering the previous calendar year began with him overhauling Zlatan Ibrahimovic's total of 156 goals in rouge et bleu. Cavani's achievements propelled him into PSG folklore and he now stands as arguably the most popular current player amongst PSG's match-attending fanbase.

Cavani began 2019 with good intentions; PSG were careering their way to another Ligue 1 title and were preparing to face Manchester United in the last 16 of the Champions' League. However just three days before the first leg at Old Trafford, Cavani suffered a hamstring injury whilst taking and scoring a penalty against Bordeaux at Parc des Princes. He was subsequently substituted and missed three weeks of action for the reigning Ligue 1 Champions. The ex-Napoli man was brought back for the 2nd leg against United but in truth, it felt rushed. When Cavani was thrust into the action in added time in the hope of finding the goal to send PSG through to the next round, he resembled a forlorn figure, devoid of mobility and looking a long way away from full fitness.

Following the exit to Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's men, Cavani unsurprisingly broke down again with a reoccurrence of his injury, missing a further four weeks of action. Cavani did not return to full fitness until the beginning of May and by the time he once again put on the red and blue, PSG were in meltdown and playing dead-rubber games as the season petered out with a whimper. It was on international duty with Uruguay where Cavani has arguably felt most at ease in 2019. A number of excellent displays, including some spectacular strikes, gave him an enjoyment and freedom on the pitch that he no longer enjoys in Paris.

Cavani is very much a focal point of La Celeste and his partnership with Barcelona's Luis Suarez is as fruitful as ever, despite both players entering the summative stage of their careers. Coach Óscar Tabárez knows just how crucial Cavani is to his side's plans and utilises his strengths to benefit his efficient and hardworking team. Cavani had an effective Copa America this past summer with two goals in the tournament as Uruguay disappointingly exited the competition in the quarter-finals at the hands of Chile.

The Uruguayan international had an injury-free summer and returned to Paris hoping to put his fitness nightmares behind him. But just three games into the season, Cavani suffered a hip injury during PSG's victory over Toulouse, keeping him out for three weeks. At the time of Cavani's latest setback, there was still five days left of the summer transfer window and Tuchel was forced to admit privately that he could no longer rely on Cavani to remain fit. PSG subsequently swooped to sign Inter Milan's Mauro Icardi on a loan deal until the end of the season, further bolstering their attacking options and calling into question whether Cavani would continue to be Tuchel's first choice option as PSG's front man.

As Cavani was due to return, in mid-September, he experienced yet another setback and spent four more weeks on the sidelines, not returning until late October. During this time, Mauro Icardi was forming a deadly partnership with Kylian Mbappé and Ángel Di María and finding the net regularly for the Parisians. Since Cavani's return to full fitness, he has been starved of game time, making only cameo appearances from the bench. It is now as clear as ever that Cavani is no longer the first-choice striker at Paris Saint-Germain. If truth be told, Cavani is now third choice in the pecking order with Tuchel preferring either Icardi or Mbappé in the central role.

Muscular Injuries are normal at this stage of a player's career but the timing and extent of Cavani's injuries have plagued the Uruguayan and in doing so ultimately led to a premature demise at PSG. Always the consummate professional, Cavani has accepted his situation but continues to work and sacrifice himself for the good of the club. Cavani turns 33 in February and it looks increasingly likely that he will not be offered a new deal, with his current contract expiring in the upcoming summer. In addition, he has made it clear that he will not entertain the idea of a January move away from the club.

We are entering the final stretch of Edinson Cavani in Paris; a player that has left a legacy at PSG for all the right reasons, a player whose name will continue to be chanted long after his departure, the same way Pedro Miguel Pauleta's continues to be. With just a handful of goals required to break the 200-goal barrier for the club, the hope is that Cavani can stay fit and receive the necessary playing time to be able to reach this milestone before he leaves for pastures new.



*ALBAN LAFONT*

(NEW)

**44**

**BORN: 1999/01/23, OUGADOUGOU**

**CLUB: FC NANTES**

**POSITION: GOALKEEPER**

**AT CLUB SINCE: 2019**

**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019: 35**

It's been a bumpy year for the once touted young keeper. The former Toulouse prodigy, who broke into the first team and was regularly playing at 17 years of age in Ligue 1 got a move back to France after a disappointing campaign with Fiorentina in Italy. Indeed, Lafont only featured in just four victories despite being a near ever presence for La Viola in the first six months of the year. He was unable to arrest a run of five consecutive defeats in the spring that left Fiorentina dangling in 15th position, as well as only keeping three clean sheets - two of which came in the final month of the campaign against relegation threatened sides.

Perhaps it was unreasonably high hopes that curtailed Lafont's promising future at the Artemio Franchi, but the locals were unenthused by the youngster's performances despite having received rave reviews in France. Viola Nation points out that Lafont had been uncomfortable in settling in amidst the chaos of the club's boardroom. Everyone can understand normally that a player's positive development is best served by time, patience and most of all, stability. Despite some strong performances during the first half of 2019, many of which were crucial to keep Fiorentina above the relegation humdrum, these were not enough to see La Viola double down in placing their trust in him.

And Lafont was not short of suitors in France. There was even an idea that Marseille may have made an offer as they searched for a number '1bis' - ideally a keeper that would be second string for the first year or two before succeeding Steve Mandanda as the long term number one when the stalwart's career begins to wind down. But eyebrows were raised when FC Nantes snared the former Toulouse man - on loan. Nantes had parted ways with their star man Ciprian Tatarusanu in the close season, the Romanian moving on to Lyon in the misguided belief that the Rhône club were ready to make him their first choice ahead of Anthony Lopes. In came Lafont, now 20, to the Stade de la Beaujoire with some very big shoes to fill.

Lafont had hit the ground running, as did his team-mates under the stewardship of the newly appointed Christian Gourcuff. Aside from a narrow 2-1 loss to Lille on opening day, the goalkeeper was instrumental in helping his team-mates to hang Marseille to a 0-0 draw before they embarked on a strong run of six wins in seven as the Canaries rose to second place. Lafont himself had grabbed five clean sheets in that period and was the early pace-setter, certainly, for the best goalkeeper of the campaign thus far.

Results breed confidence, and no more was that encapsulated than in the 0-1 win away to Lyon at the end of September where the hosts, on the back of a resurgent Champions' League victory, were completely stopped in their tracks. Seven shots on target Lafont faced in that game, all of them repelled as they absorbed everything that Memphis Depay and co. threw at the visitors who held on for a memorable victory. Things soured from then on as Nantes suffered four straight defeats. With confidence being shattered, the team was looking beatable. The defensive rock that enabled them to rise to second, at one point two points behind PSG, had withered. They arrested that run against Brest away from home in November - yet it was Lafont's momentary lapse that allowed the hosts to equalise.

It was an error that saw his coach Gourcuff and team-mate Abdoulaye Touré to fume openly to the media. A frustrated Gourcuff lamented that the match was thrown away not by a collective error, but by "stupid" individual mistakes - an opinion that was shared by Touré. It was rare for a manager as affable as Gourcuff to target one of his players in such a way, much less publicly to the media. But it happened. What followed? A much better performance in the win against Toulouse as well as two further clean sheets as Nantes steadied the ship to close out 2019 in fifth position. Lafont may have struggled a little in adjusting to life in Brittany, but it is a testament to him that he has managed to absorb the criticism to perform well again.

The 20-year-old has since conceded that perhaps he did not want to leave Fiorentina after all, simply judging that his journey had come to an end despite feeling settled in Florence. Most tellingly was his admission that his first choice was not to return to France, but that it was something that happened anyway. And Lafont is all the better for it after a misstep in the Serie A, he is back slowly building his reputation as Nantes target Europe after what has been a difficult year for the club.

France boasts a glut of goalkeeping talent where the likes of Costil, Maignan, Lecomte, Larssonneur and Bernardoni are all targeting spots in national team. For now, Lafont - once touted the great successor to the likes of Lloris and Mandanda - is at the back of the queue. But he is in the perfect place to climb that ladder with an energetic and ambitious Nantes side.





*DARIO BENEDETTO*

*(NEW)*

**43**

**BORN: 1990/05/17, BERAZATEGUI**

**CLUB: OLYMPIQUE DE MARSEILLE**

**POSITION: FORWARD**

**AT CLUB SINCE: 2019**

**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019: 27**

While Dario Benedetto's move to Marseille may have been a surprise, the fact that his career has blossomed as it has verges on the miraculous. Having quit football as a 12-year-old after his mother tragically passed away following a heart attack at one of his youth games, Benedetto quit school as a teenager to become a bricklayer with his father. Not even owning a pair of football boots at 16, just over 12 years later Benedetto was incredibly scoring in a Copa Libertadores final and on his way to Marseille. Now 29, it took a while for European clubs to even take notice of Benedetto, rarely do South American players emerge as transfer targets for big European clubs so late in their career. As a result, the Argentinian top flight is made up of exciting young starlets, older returning heroes and a host of average players in between. Benedetto, however, has proven to be a rare exception.

After the shock death of his mother, Benedetto was eventually offered a route back into the game by Arsenal de Sarandí at 16. Following loans at Defensa y Justicia and Gimnasia in Primera B, Benedetto eventually found a home in Mexico after 12 goals in 36 games in the 2012/13 season back with Arsenal. In less than three years at Tijuana then Club America, Benedetto struck 49 times in 111 games and alerted Boca Juniors. Benedetto settled quickly at La Bombonera in 2015/16; his intense, powerful style married well with Boca's equally gritty ethos. His first full campaign saw him score 24 goals in 28 games and propelled Benedetto into the national side, somehow squeezing through the tightest of bottlenecks that is the door to the Albicelestes crowded frontline and four caps in 2017.

After goals in each leg of the mammoth Copa Libertadores final, and eventual defeat against perennial rivals River Plate in November 2018, and a creditable overall Boca record of 45 goals in 75 matches, 2019 did not start well. Despite another Argentina call-up, wastefulness characterised Benedetto's game after a stuttering return from long injury issues, including ACL damage, in 2018.

Partly as a result, upon Benedetto's €14m arrival at the Vélodrome, skepticism was rife. Despite high profile Libertadores strikes, his stock had decreased, Marseille's lack of funds necessitated the need to gamble on Benedetto and his lack of European experience and it was assumed that the Argentine's skill-set was too similar to fellow striker Valère Germain, who has enjoyed only fleeting success leading OM's attack. With André-Villas Boas set to deploy a 4-3-3, much as previous coach Rudi Garcia often had, Germain often became isolated and he lacked the ability to hold up play or to act as a focal point. As proven by far more productive spells at Monaco and Nice, the slight Germain is far more effective with a partner.

Benedetto however has shown that his hunger, bullishness and physicality allows him to lead the line astutely whether in scoring form or not. "I always play with the heart," the striker explained to OM's website. "You have to win the love of the fans. It does not only work by telling the camera, it must be proven in every game by giving your life for the jersey." With Benedetto leading the way, those around him improved too; Dimitri Payet, Bouna Sarr and Nemanja Radonjic have all looked dangerous this season after months of demonstrating attacking ineffectiveness. After fitness affected form during his final months at La Bombonera, Benedetto finally looks fully fit and a more clinical edge has returned. However, while clear chances are rarely missed, the more stoic and physical French top flight allows him far fewer opportunities, something Benedetto highlights, and a steady stream of goals is yet to truly coalesce.

Having woefully skied a late penalty on his full debut at Nantes in August, mirroring his Boca debut, Benedetto contributed four goals in the next three games. Clever interplay with Sarr and Morgan Sanson saw Benedetto round off a swift counter for the only goal versus St Étienne, a snap volley opened the scoring for a 2-1 win at Nice and a neat brace at Monaco completed a stunning OM fightback in a 4-3 victory. While Germain's technical ability makes him a solid finisher, Benedetto adds a poacher's nous, intelligent movement and the instinct required to be a lone striker. Although "Pipo's" importance to the efficiency of AVB's side remains obvious, having fostered a key understanding with his partners, since that autumn burst of goals, clear openings have been rare for Benedetto; adding just two more strikes in the 11 games that followed. He has work yet to do.

Dario Benedetto describes himself as "a striker of sacrifice" meaning, much as he did Boca Juniors, he fits Marseille perfectly, both in style and in attitude. Benedetto will only continue to sacrifice everything he can for his shirt, his teammates and their supporters. It is all he knows. Crucially, without a trophy since 2012, in an era of dour football, lesser seen owners and fan unrest, OM's passionate forward could also finally prove the catalyst for harmony and sustained success at the Vélodrome.



*LAURENT KOSCIELNY*

(NEW)

**42**

**BORN: 1985/09/10, TULLE**  
**CLUB: GIRONDINS DE BORDEAUX**  
**POSITION: DEFENDER**  
**AT CLUB SINCE: 2019**  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019: 31**



It was arguably one of the moves of the summer, at least in Ligue 1 circles. Laurent Koscielny had brought a sudden end to his nine-year spell in North London by unexpectedly joining a fairly unremarkable Ligue 1 club in Bordeaux. In trying to latch on to the 'quirky announcement video' trend, Bordeaux's media team managed to alienate Arsenal fans even more from their former captain in one 10-second video, showing the defender taking off and throwing away his Arsenal top to reveal his new club's strip underneath. However, this video aside, he will have done himself no favours with his former fans either in the way in which he forced through his transfer, refusing to take part in the club's pre-season in the US and going on strike.

On the pitch, the latter part of his final season with Arsenal was decidedly unspectacular, even if the Frenchman had retained the captaincy despite his absence for the first six months of the season with an Achilles injury. The previous summer, he had missed out on being a part of the eventual World Cup winning squad as a result of the injury, later admitting that this had taken a mental toll on him in a refreshingly honest interview to Canal + in which he admitted he had wanted Les Bleus to miss out on qualification out of jealousy.

On his return to the Arsenal line-up in the new year he presided over a familiarly lackluster and error-prone defence which oversaw the club's drift into 5th place, despite a favourable run-in, missing out on Champions' League qualification by a solitary point. He then captained a side which was comprehensively beaten in the Europa League final. Overall, even if his return to the side provided a boost – especially considering Arsenal's painfully average options in his position – holistically-speaking it had been a subpar year by his usually high standards. Despite being offered a new contract with the possibility of eventually joining the backroom staff, Koscielny turned it down, having reportedly been unhappy with Unai Emery's management of his recovery as well as the significant reduction in his wage that this two-year extension entailed. The Frenchman had claimed that after years of service he was entitled to a free transfer back to France, and eventually a move to Bordeaux materialised, albeit for a small fee.

There was little doubt that Koscielny was the new Bordeaux ownership's flagship signing of the summer, even if he did sign for a cut-price deal of around €5m. To little surprise, Koscielny's arrival has brought in above all a calming presence to an often-shaky defence, as well as a clearly identified leader alongside captain Benoît Costil. With the departure of promising centre back Jules Koundé to Sevilla, Bordeaux fans will have been wary of handing defensive duties to the likes of wildly inconsistent pair Pablo and Vukašin Jovanović. Koscielny not only provides a sense of stability, but also an outlet from which manager Paulo Sousa can implement a style relying more on building moves out from the back. As a more technically proficient player than his defensive teammates, Koscielny can be relied upon to play the ball out into the midfield and break opposition lines, in a system which he has himself praised the Portuguese coach for implementing based on its tactical diligence.

However, his waning athleticism has seen his error-prone nature – which was so evident in his early years at Arsenal before he struck up a successful partnership with Per Mertesacker – return to the fore of his game. While he will have been vindicated in his decision to wind his career down in a weaker league, the Frenchman might not have expected to jump into a division with the same level of intensity on the pitch as the Premier League. Far from having an easy ride, he is now responsible for making up for the shortcomings of his team in defensive situations, all the while juggling this with his own decline. So far this season, Bordeaux have been something of a mixed bag, often following up resounding wins with sloppy defeats, but overall their performances will have satisfied fans and currently have the club in contention for the European spots. In a twist of fate, Koscielny may even return to the Champions' League before his former club do.

Although his transfer did leave many perplexed, Koscielny can be commended for an ambition not often seen in players at the twilight of their career, in choosing to join a project in its infancy and taking a pay cut to do so. As it stands, the backroom turmoil at Bordeaux means that uncertainty is seeping through all areas of the club, down to the future of the manager and the supporters' mood. However, on the pitch the club's solid start to the campaign would not have been possible without the 34-year-old. If he is to see out the entirety of his reported bumper five-year contract, he will be crucial in giving Bordeaux a solid base from which to build whatever new project may come, whoever the owners turn out to be in the next couple of months.





*YANN M VILA*

(+27)

**41**

**BORN: 1990/06/29, AMIENS**  
**CLUB: AS SAINT-ETIENNE**  
**POSITION: MIDFIELDER**  
**AT CLUB SINCE: 2018**  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019: 35**

Gone are the days when Yann M'Vila made far more headlines for his off-field behaviour than his play on the pitch. The product of a rough childhood in the north of France, he told *The Guardian* in 2016, "My parents always made sure there was a meal on the table but we didn't have a lot of money. I saw lots of things which would turn your hair curly, things which really shook me up." Having started his career with Amiens, he soon joined Rennes' vaunted academy and became a key piece for a side that won the Coupe Gambardella in 2008, blossoming alongside the likes of Yacine Brahimi and Damien Le Tallec.

Despite that impressive win, however, M'Vila failed to impress then-manager Guy Lacombe with his attitude in training, and would have to await the arrival of Frédéric Antonetti in 2009. Under Antonetti, M'Vila became a first-team regular and signed a contract extension with the club, and was even named in France's preliminary World Cup squad following the season, though he was not taken to South Africa. The following season continued his upward trend, becoming one of the league's best midfielders and a regular for France as well.

Having amassed more than twenty caps for the senior side and been a part of the France team that reached the quarter-finals of Euro 2012, it seemed that the world was at his feet at the age of 22, with consistent links to the likes of Liverpool and Real Madrid serving to burnish the reputation of a player who had already been named to his first UNFP Team of the Year and been the engine for a very promising Rennes side. His performances, however, started to slip the following season, as he was unfairly scapegoated for Rennes' Coupe de France semi-final exit to amateur side Quevilly, and the next few years found him an outcast at every turn.

Things started with an ill-judged night out while on duty with Les Espoirs, an incident that saw him formally banned from the France squad. Left out of the World Cup squad in 2014, and with nary a hint of being called up in the time since, M'Vila's move to Rubin Kazan two months after that incident seemed to spell the end of his career at the highest level. When he clashed there with manager Rinat Bilyaletdinov, it seemed that no matter his talent, it would be difficult for the midfielder to outrun his immaturity, making a slow slide into obscurity all the more likely. Tumultuous loan spells at Inter, where he clashed with then-manager Roberto Mancini, and then Dynamo Moscow, where he reportedly trashed his apartment, never having played a minute, looked to be further evidence of his penchant for trouble.

When he rocked up at Sunderland in 2015, then, it seemed a desperate measure on the part of the Wearside club, a reclamation project gone wrong on the level à la El-Hadji Diouf, someone whose fiery temper had undone their career. However, M'Vila's time in the northeast was anything but controversial, and he blossomed, looking much the player he had been in Brittany under Sam Allardyce's stewardship. Following on from his fine campaign, M'Vila wanted to make his move permanent, but it was not to be as the club declined to pick up his option. Returning to Kazan, he looked set to fade back into the margins, despite having proven his quality over a full season in the Premier League.

If M'Vila has not quite escaped obscurity, at least by global standards, his return to France with St Étienne has nevertheless captured the imagination and made him once more one of Ligue 1's more formidable midfielders, adding veteran nous to a team that is still attempting to move on from the success attained under Christophe Galtier. M'Vila joined Les Verts in January of 2018 and immediately added dynamism, power, and vibrancy to the team's midfield, as he and fellow winter arrival Mathieu Debuchy were integral to a thirteen-match unbeaten run that saw the team move from flirting with relegation to the European places.

That run of fine form saw Jean-Louis Gasset given the job permanently, but between the departure of Rémy Cabella and a bedeviling injury crisis, the current season began as far more challenging under Gasset's successor, Ghislain Printant. The October arrival of Claude Puel has done much to right the ship, even if the team's attack is overly reliant on Denis Bouanga, a mercurial player at best. Despite having failed to progress from a Europa League group of middling strength, Saint-Étienne are back in the mix domestically, having progressed in the Coupe de la Ligue and sit within two points of the top six. Through it all, M'Vila has been a steady presence, showing no loss of his tackling ability whilst also displaying increased intelligence as he has come to rely more on his positioning, his once impressive pace having deserted him. He even played a match in defence, albeit in Europe, showing that there might be more to his dotage than may have initially met the eye.



*PEDRO MENDES*

(+1)

**40**

**BORN: 1990/10/01, NEUCHATEL**

**CLUB: MONTPELLIER HSC**

**POSITION: DEFENDER**

**AT CLUB SINCE: 2017**

**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019: 32**

If one is looking for a match which sums up Pedro Mendes' importance to Montpellier, one need look no further than MHSC's recent match at home to reigning champions PSG. At 72 minutes, Montpellier were a goal up and looking comfortable, when Mendes was sent off for a second bookable offence. Within two minutes PSG had equalised. And 20 minutes later, PSG had won the match 3-1. (For the record, Montpellier lost the follow-up match against Lille while Mendes served his suspension.)

Into his third season in the south of France, Pedro Mendes is an essential component of the miserly defence that forms the bedrock of Michel der Zakarian's team, which continues to challenge for European qualification despite relatively modest means. Whether playing in a back four or, far more regularly, a back three, Mendes can play across the back, usually working in synergy with veteran Daniel Congré and geriatric Vitorino Hilton in an age-defying unit. A relative spring chicken at 29, Mendes has taken the scenic route to where he is today, moving back and forth between Switzerland and Portugal as a child and as a young footballer, joining Real Madrid but failing to make the grade, representing Sporting, and spending time in Italy with Parma and Sassuolo before a move to France, beginning at Rennes.

Asked who his idols were, Mendes once replied that his role models are Alessandro Nesta and Pepe. In fact Mendes is a good mixture of the two defenders, a player who is strong in the duel and in the air (at both ends of the pitch) like his Portuguese compatriot, but who also has the anticipation, the reading of the game and the cultured ball-playing ability of the Italian legend. It is unsurprising that Mendes has been able to fill in, where necessary, as a full-back and as a defensive midfielder, such is his footballing ability.

Despite Portugal's recent international success, it is disappointing that Mendes has not received more international recognition. Capped 50 times at all youth age groups from U17 to U21, he has only received one full cap (a substitute appearance in a 3-1 win over Scotland). Perhaps this has something to do with a career which has rarely seen him remain at one club for an extended period of time. His current stay at Montpellier is the longest he has been at one club, and he certainly seems happy to have put down roots here, saying: "life here is like in Lisbon and I feel at home. There's the sea, the sun, a great way of life and I feel good." Of MHSC he adds "I feel that people have confidence in me, which makes me feel comfortable and confident. It's a friendly club – players don't only meet up at training and on matchdays."

And Montpellier are clearly reaping the benefits of Mendes' happiness with his surroundings. One need only look at the comparison of the team's stats in 2019, with and without him. Over the course of the second half of last season and the first half of this season, Mendes has played in 32 Ligue 1 matches and missed just eight games. With him in the team Montpellier have won 11, drawn 12 and lost nine, at an average of 1.4 points per game; without him they have won three, drawn two and lost three, at an average of 1.3 points per game. The difference is far more marked in terms of goals conceded: with Mendes in the team MHSC have conceded 34 goals at an average of just 1.06 goals per game (and this statistic is heavily and unfairly weighted against Mendes as it includes seven goals in two matches against PSG when, due to injury/red card, Mendes was no longer on the pitch); without Mendes they have conceded 14 in eight at an average of 1.74.

Perhaps the only criticism that one could level at Mendes is his disappointing contribution to the attack, considering his aerial prowess. Just three goals and two assists during his time at the Mosson is not particularly impressive and something that he could look to improve upon. However, this feels like quibbling for one of Ligue 1's most consistent centre backs, whose high level performances week in and week out seem to go unnoticed while headlines are monopolised by other teams further along the south coast and in the capital, and with Hilton's age-defying career deservedly hogging much of the attention that comes Montpellier's way.

Mendes does not appear too bothered. He has in the past said that "being a defender is above all about concentration. You need to be focussed and in control." Happy and loved and enjoying life with his family in Montpellier, he is able to maintain that focus, and, although it seems unfair that Mendes is not receiving the wider credit that he deserves, the fans of La Paillade must surely be delighted that their excellent defender continues to fly under the radar.





*THIAGO MENDES*

(+23)

**39**

**BORN: 1992/03/15, SAO LUIS**  
**CLUB: OLYMPIQUE LYONNAIS**  
**POSITION: MIDFIELDER**  
**AT CLUB SINCE: 2019**  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019: 33**

Looking back on 2019, is there any chance that Thiago Mendes will think he made a mistake in his career path? He will be very glad, to be sure, to have avoided a move to China in January, a possibility that was more real than most admitted in the media around the end of 2018. With a move like that, he would have missed out on the roller-coaster ride this year has been for him. An enchanted season at Lille carried them to second place in Ligue 1 and their first Champions' League qualification since 2011. After that, Mendes joined a bigger club in France – Olympique Lyonnais – whose results have been far less exciting.

Lille were wise not to cash out on Mendes in January, a key player without whom they struggled to find results. Systematically starting in the midfield two of Christophe Galtier's 4-2-3-1, Mendes was the "launching ramp" for Lille's counter-attacks, to use a French saying. His passing was the vector on which the supersonic BIP-BIP (Bamba-Ikoné-Pépé) trio built their fame. In defensive phases, the compact Northern block insured he would be within proximity of his teammates. The duo he formed with Xeka was tight and protected the defence impeccably. In the latter half of the season, Lille lost only twice. The highlight was of course the 5-1 win against PSG, during which Mendes featured as prominently as he did in all but two matches of the return phase.

With the end of the season came the certainty that Mendes would be a moving part in the transfer market. With a price tag of €22m, he became Olympique Lyonnais' 2nd most expensive player ever, though the fee was beaten twice in the following weeks by Joachim Andersen and Jeff Reine-Adélaïde's arrivals. It was a golden opportunity for OL to weaken a direct competitor, while re-strengthening their side after the departure of Tanguy Ndombele. For Mendes, there was the appeal of working with his compatriots Sylvinho and Juninho, the clubs' manager and Sporting Director, respectively. "If you go to Brazil and ask, it is obvious that people know Lyon. Lille, they are not too sure where that is," Mendes told L'Équipe, commenting both on the respective club statures and the historic ties OL has with Brazilian talent.

The Groupama Stadium had previously been an important landmark in Mendes' Ligue 1 career. In 2017, he scored a wonderful winner, having provided an assist earlier in the match, as LOSC beat Lyon 2-1. Maybe for this reason, Lyon fans had high expectations as to the offensive output of the player, whereas in reality the majority of his contributions are indirect, more in the construction. The strike in Lyon happens to still be his latest goal in Ligue 1. Last season, even though he was crucial in Lille's forward intents, he only totaled three assists. Under the gamble of Sylvinho, Lyon had a glorious start to the season – for two matches, anyways. In his debut, at Monaco, Mendes assisted two goals in a 3-0 win. Another assist followed against Angers, with OL winning 6-0. But two weeks later, he was sent off against Bordeaux, and Lyon embarked on an eight-match winless streak.

Mendes discovered that playing as a defensive midfielder is not as easy in a possession-oriented team, a term applied more in contrast to Lille than to describe the disoriented football played by Lyon this season. It was slightly predictable, seeing as one difficulty that Lille did encounter in the second half of the season especially was in facing teams that sat back and did not allow counters. With less space, the Brazilian's vertical passes to unleash a speedy attack were not an option. There were fewer planned moves in terms of attacking construction. When aligned as a lone #6 under Sylvinho, Mendes was too isolated on the ball and defensively, unable to count on support from his teammates.

With the arrival of Rudi Garcia came some experimenting. He benched Mendes and other summer signings for his initial Champions' League match against Benfica, losing 2-1 but with a strong showing from the 27-year-old in the last 30 minutes (Interestingly, the two Champions' League matches lost by Lyon were the two in which Mendes did not start). The former Marseille manager has tried different formations, with Mendes often played as one of two sixes alongside Lucas Tousart. Although this is not the most flamboyant combination possible given Lyon's squad, it brings a stability similar to the duo with Xeka (when the alignment is right). Mendes has expressed satisfaction with the managerial change at OL, while underlining how strong an effect results have had on the team's confidence and belief. He also acknowledged how Garcia has encouraged him to learn French, a task he had not fully confronted since his arrival at Lille in 2017.

OL are in an extremely uncomfortable position at the turn of the year. Results have been disappointing, key players are injured, and the fans are in open conflict with many members of the club. They need a very strong second half to the season to be able to qualify again for Europe, and of course have an important tie with Juventus coming up. Mendes, whose 2019 has been up and down, will need guidance to establish a strong relationship with his team-mates, and bring out the best of his talent.



*JONATHAN BAMBA*

(-10)

**38**

**BORN: 1996/03/26, ALFORTVILLE**

**CLUB: LILLE OSC**

**POSITION: MIDFIELDER**

**AT CLUB SINCE: 2018**

**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019: 36**



It is difficult not to conform to the cliché of a year of two halves when speaking about 2019 for Jonathan Bamba. He was an important component in the exciting Lille season in which they finished 2nd. Nicolas Pépé attracted most of the praise and in the process overshadowed the roles of Bamba and Jonathan Ikoné who provided linking play that was instrumental to the Ivorian's season and statistics clearly evidence this. In the 2018/19 season the best assist-to-goal scorer combinations in Ligue 1 were Ikoné to Pépé and Pépé to Bamba, both with five goals.

All three players possess great levels of agility, acceleration and close control which lent itself to quick passing combinations which prevented opposing defences the time to react. Bamba himself tended to drop a little deeper in his wide left position and focused more on the build-up before the ball reached the other attackers. Often Lille counter-attacks were initiated by him winning the ball in his own half.

Bamba was more a facilitating player than the other two; able to occupy pockets of space in front of the defensive line as a passing option for a darting one-two move. The risk passes and actions were left to Pépé, as Bamba tended to be safer with his passing.

The extreme goal-scoring form produced at the beginning of the season (seven goals in the first nine games) was never going to continue throughout the campaign. Even though Bamba was playing very well, it was clear he was overperforming. In 2019 it inevitably plateaued, Bamba scored five goals and assisted once for remainder of the season. He continued to produce strong performances and with the BIP trio (Bamba, Ikoné and Pépé) terrorised the league's defences. 2018/19 season finished with 13 goals and three assists for Bamba, bettering his season record and more importantly showing that he could be proficient away from the penalty spot, as over half of his goals in the 2017/18 season came from penalties. At Lille it was Pépé who took charge of the spot kicks.

He went into the Under 21 Euros with his best season behind him and was thought of as a starter for Sylvain Ripoll's team. Unfortunately, during the 1st game against England, Bamba's tournament was ended by Hamza Choudhury. Bamba had shifted onto his right foot about to shoot when the Leicester midfielder committed a reckless and dangerous challenge that, following a VAR review, resulted in a red card. The initial consensus was that his ankle could have been fractured or dislocated, but Bamba was very lucky as it was confirmed to be a ligament injury, still the first semi-serious injury in his career. Fortunately for Les Dogues, he was back for the first game of the 2019/20 season. It was even a surprise to some that he was able to recover and return to match fitness within just seven weeks. It might have been that he recovered faster than average, but it now appears that the effects have extended beyond his initial post-injury recovery.

Luis Campos, Lille's Sporting Director, orchestrated a host of new signings off the back of the revenue earned from the high profile sales of Rafael Leão and Nicolas Pépé to AC Milan and Arsenal respectively this summer. Heading into the new season fans and pundits alike believed that it would be Bamba to step up and fill the majority of the void left by Pépé. He had proven that he could do this back in his breakout season for St Étienne, where he was relied upon to both create and score for a team that lacked any recognised centre forward. This appeared to be the logical progression, but it has not worked out so far. Victor Osimhen was the unlikely candidate to bring the goals that have evaded the rest of the squad so far. As for Bamba, he has not been able to reproduce his past form and has struggled, alongside Ikoné, to adjust to life without Nicolas Pépé.

The gravitational pull that Pépé had allowed Bamba to operate in, wide areas with less traffic in front of him when he received the ball, no longer exists. Since the Ivorian's departure though, Bamba has been more focused on by opposing defences and his excellence in tight areas has been out of sync with the standard that he is capable of.

In general, Lille's build-up and transitions have been nullified by the departure of Pépé. Bamba has looked off the pace and an open goal eight-yard miss in the Champions' League home game against Ajax sums his second half of the year up. Bamba has yet to adjust properly to his new teammates and the summer injury may have had a lasting effect on his performance. He is less active with his defending and his usual snapshot attempts at goal have become somewhat tame. He is not alone in these tribulations - teammates like Ikoné have also not hit the ground running, but as the team begins to slowly forge together and with an upcoming break, we may see the early 2019 Bamba return to our screens very shortly.





*ZEKI CELIK*

(NEW)

**37**

**BORN: 1997/02/17, BURSA**  
**CLUB: LILLE OSC**  
**POSITION: DEFENDER**  
**AT CLUB SINCE: 2018**  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019: 30**

A new entry into this list, Mehmet Zeki Çelik may have been the bargain of the season in Ligue 1 last campaign. Signed for a paltry €2.5m from Istanbulspor, he may not have the flash of Youcef Atal, another (nominal) right-back who transferred in to Ligue 1 last season, but in many ways he projects as an incredibly complete player. He is as assured going forward as he is tracking back, his tackling acumen is a paragon of poise, having recorded the same amount of bookings as assists in the current campaign, a figure which has been carried on in the same ratio last season.

Born in Yıldırım in western Turkey, Çelik started at the academy of Bursaspor, a club who have nurtured several talents, but have struggled on a grander scale to break the recent hegemony of the Istanbul-based clubs. Enes Unal and Ozan Tufan have also recently emerged from the club's academy, evidence that even if they suffered relegation last year, they are still a formidable source of young talent. From there, he moved to Istanbulspor, where he impressed in the Turkish second division, an under-the-radar league but one which afforded him consistent first team football with little pressure.

His performances there were, however, no obstacle to his being called up to the national team, no mean feat for a player in the second tier, although helped by the relatively limited rules that govern the numbers of foreign players who can be included in matchday squads. He made his debut in 2018, and was soon signed by Lille, who would see him as the sort of attack-minded player who could replace Kévin Malcuit without the team suffering a drop-off in their attacking efficacy in that position.

While he of course took some time to get used to a much higher standard of play week-in week out, his performance and confidence grew throughout the season, his adaptation progressing at a near-exponential rate. Speaking last year, manager Christophe Galtier emphasised Çelik's poise and maturity as being the keys to his having made the step up to French football so quickly: "He's a reserved guy but he listens and observes everything. And he is already a mature person for his age."

For his part, Çelik sees his own familiarity with Ligue 1 as having been part of his growing up a football fan, recalling not only Lyon's dominance in the 2000s but also the star appeal of current players such as Neymar as fostering his appreciation of it. "The French league is more about tactics and speed. But it's also technical and there are some excellent players. In Turkey the game is more direct, and we're more aggressive on the pitch."

Thus, Çelik's coming to excel in France has been about the sort of alchemy which has seen him channel that tactical and positional awareness while retaining a raw and direct style that has served him well as a two-way player. Now in his second season at the Stade Pierre-Mauroy, his numbers across the board are down, if only slightly, from last season, no doubt a product of Lille's Champions' League exertions, as Galtier rarely rests him, a matter of the circumstance owing to Jérémy Pied's struggles with fitness and his own outstanding play.

The appointment of José Mourinho at Spurs has only increased links to a move abroad; João Sacramento, whom Mourinho had plucked from Lille upon his appointment in London is known to be a big fan of his erstwhile right back. Given this is a position where Tottenham have a dire need, and that Çelik's work-rate is likely to impress Mourinho, these links must be watched with no small level of anticipation. AC Milan have also been linked; along with his strong play for Lille, Çelik's consistent quality in helping his country qualify for next summer's European Championships will scarcely have gone unnoticed, with him having impressed in particular in a comprehensive defeat of France in June.

For the moment, though, despite Lille's rather limp exit from the Champions' League, Çelik is content to stay on and fight for a return to Europe's top competition, telling Fanatik, "I feel that I am at a very important club and want to achieve more." With Lille's elimination, a rather thin squad seems more capable of doing as much, and as the team's cadre of young players, including fellow Turk Yusuf Yazici (once recovered from a knee injury), continue to come into their own, more sustainable success for Galtier's charges could well be on the horizon. For now, though, Çelik looks set to continue to burnish his reputation in France — even if a move abroad does beckon, the chance to joust for European football with a place in the first team all but guaranteed ought to prove too strong an enticement to move ahead of a major tournament, allowing fans of French football to continue to enjoy the play of one of the world's most promising young right backs for at least another six months.



*DENIS BOUANGA*

(NEW)

**36**

**BORN: 1994/10/11, LE MANS**

**CLUB: AS SAINT-ETIENNE**

**POSITION: FORWARD**

**AT CLUB SINCE: 2019**

**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019: 38**

Denis Bouanga is enjoying himself this season. It's nothing new. A prolific prankster, the St Étienne forward has become equally exacting as a creative force in Ligue 1. Whether repeatedly nutmegging unsuspecting coaches in training, filling a teammates car with confetti and streamers or "ransacking" an opponent's hotel rooms before a game, "it's easy for him to settle because he is an extrovert," recalls that opponent, Bryan Bergounoux, to L'Équipe: "He does not hesitate to go to others and laugh, without ulterior motives or malice." In 2019, however, opposing defenders have been far from amused by Bouanga's on-field trickery.

Already 25, it took longer than most for Bouanga to emerge in the French top flight. A clear route only became apparent as the Gabonese forward's 20th birthday approached, moving from provincial CFA club Mulsanne-Teloche to Ligue 1 Lorient ahead of the 2014/15 season. Even then, Bouanga had to wait for first team action, starting three of the first four league games the following season before dropping out of the 18 entirely and joining then National Strasbourg on loan that winter. Like many past and present promising talents, Bouanga's formative years came in the lower divisions. Five goals in 18 games aided Strasbourg's promotion before 16 strikes in 36 matches the following year, this time in fighting relegation on loan with second tier Tours. Bouanga had finally done enough to convince parent club Lorient that he was worthy of a first team spot and was integrated into Mickaël Landreau's newly relegated outfit ahead of the 2017/18 campaign. Seventh place was not good enough for his club but nine more goals and four assists were sufficient for Bouanga to return to Ligue 1, newly promoted Nîmes' standout summer signing.

A handful of outings before Lorient were relegated aside, the move to Nîmes constituted Bouanga's first top flight opportunity and it was one that he relished. Amongst other highlights, the Gabonese forward's speed and trickery terrified Angers on the opening day in a dramatic 4-3 triumph; an eye-catching display and fizzed opener helped Les Crocos beat Marseille 3-1 the following week; a pair of supreme finishes contributed to a 4-0 win over Dijon in November, before dictating the 3-0 win over Amiens at the start of December.

Throughout the first half of the season, Bouanga was not just chief tormentor for a vibrant, gung-ho Nîmes outfit but one of Ligue 1's outstanding form players. However, as Bernard Blaquart looked for more balance, Bouanga's place became less secure over the winter; occasionally dropping out of the side or becoming a little isolated as the 4-3-3 was preferred to a 4-2-4. His form plateaued, much as it did in the second half of the previous season at Lorient, otherwise he may have been higher placed on this list. Nevertheless, the first half of 2019 still included another four league goals and key contributions to three goal victories over a usually watertight Reims and eventual Coupe de France winners Rennes.

After an impressive debut Ligue 1 campaign, Nîmes' key players were slowly picked off and St Étienne won the race to secure Bouanga's services in a €4.5m bargain. Despite an intermittent start under Ghislain Printant, under his replacement Claude Puel, Bouanga's form has exploded. In and out of Printant's eleven and unable to establish much rhythm, Bouanga has verged on the unplayable this autumn despite being moved around the side. Whether deployed at wing back, as a wide forward or and an all-out striker Bouanga's pace, skill, rasping shot and intensity make him difficult to contain and to nullify. As part of a fluid ASSE setup, in tandem with the equally slippery Wahbi Khazri, Romain Hamouma and Ryad Boudebouz, Bouanga and co. glide dangerously between opposition lines.

Despite not being one to shirk defensive responsibilities at wing-back, where he has often found himself, especially at the start of Puel's reign, Bouanga was the key contributor to an 11 game unbeaten run in all competitions that took Les Verts from relegation battlers to Ligue 1's podium. A standout display and injury time penalty winner saw off Bordeaux in October, another late strike beat Monaco, two more goals and another Man of the Match performance led to a 3-2 November win at Nantes and another brace aided an impressive 4-1 routing of Nice at the start of December. In total, six Bouanga goals and two further assists punctuated Puel's first eight league games at Le Chaudron.

Although St Étienne boast a competitive squad that includes wily captain Loïc Perrin, last season's standout performer Yann M'Vila, former France international Mathieu Debuchy, the evergreen keeper Stéphane Ruffier and mercurial forward Wahbi Khazri, Bouanga has quickly established himself as more important than them all and the team's new talisman. Heading into 2020, with Ligue 1 wide open, keeping Bouanga on song will be job number one for Puel if he is to propel St Étienne into the Champions' League at long last. All his joking aside, Bouanga's next task is a serious one: improve upon previous seasons and maintain his levels past Christmas to lead his club to their Champions' League promised land.





*STEVE MANDANDA*

(+53)

**35**

**BORN: 1985/03/28, KINSHASA**  
**CLUB: OLYMPIQUE DE MARSEILLE**  
**POSITION: GOALKEEPER**  
**AT CLUB SINCE: 2017**  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019: 37**

Steve Mandanda, the emblematic Marseille goalkeeper, had enjoyed a strong 2018 - his first season back in France after his false start in South London with Crystal Palace. Having surrendered the captaincy to Dimitri Payet, the France international still played key parts in Marseille's run to the Europa League final and won the World Cup with his national side.

A difficult 2018/19 season followed as performances of the whole team failed to match the 2018 highs. Right at the start of 2019, things barely improved as Marseille lurched to a shock 2-0 defeat to part timers Andrezieux in the Coupe de France, a fixture that Mandanda played the full 90 minutes in. Having lived through some of the wackier results OM had suffered in this decade - think Quevilly, Grenoble, Apollon Limassol - you would have thought that the longest serving player of the team would have been able to warn his teammates of the impending dangers of entering into a match complacent. It barely got any better in a tumultuous period for Marseille whose Champions' League hopes were effectively over in late January after winning just one of the five league games at the start of the year. Some of the goals conceded were goalkeeping errors, something that was uncharacteristic for a four-time Ligue 1 Goalkeeper of the Year Award.

The 34-year-old, who was at the time the current title-holder, had simply lost his performance, his mojo - similar to Adil Rami who may as well have quit football after the World Cup triumph but to a lesser degree. OM were listless, the defence below-par and the goalkeeper out of sorts. And out-of-sorts was clearly what the notoriously hard-to-please Marseille fans felt that Mandanda had become. Even in some of the worst periods in recent years that the club had to endure, they could count on the goalkeeper to become literally the last line of defence. Take a look at the hopeless 2015/16 season where Mandanda alone won more than a dozen points for his team with man-of-the-match performances.

Here was, they argued, a keeper that had given up. Some of the harsher comments that surfaced was that the 34-year-old had put on considerable weight, was no longer nimble, and was easily beaten in situations where he may had once foiled. Some questioned the wisdom of buying him back from Crystal Palace when options such as the highly-rated Ajax goalkeeper André Onana were available. Perhaps Mandanda was wounded by all of this. A player who was one of the first to confirm his intention to remain at OM after the departure of Rudi Garcia was seemingly intent on righting the many wrongs that elapsed over the course of the 2018/19 season. A picture of a gaunt but slim Mandanda emerging in July 2019 had shocked many OM fans.

For Mandanda had spent his off-season in a famous Italian health clinic known for enabling clients to drop their weight substantially in a short period of time. The speed at which this had occurred, some five or six weeks after the end of the season clearly underlined how much the goalkeeper meant business. How much he was ready to reinvest into Marseille's project. It was no surprise that new coach André Villas Boas handed him back the captaincy on the eve of the 2019/20 season. Mandanda had beat incumbent Payet, Luiz Gustavo (last year's vice-captain) and fan favourite Florian Thauvin to the job. Garcia had long made clear his preference to have an outfield player as captain but in the dressing room Mandanda had always been a vocal leader. More so, it seemed Payet was happy to be shot of the armband with the attacking midfielder uncomfortable with the burden of additional responsibility, particularly when things were going wrong.

In contrast, Mandanda relished being captain. It gave him a bit of extra will to perform well as much as Payet felt released by no longer being captain, focusing more on his own game than the overall well-being of the team. Curiously, under Rudi Garcia, Mandanda had been captain six times in the spring - and OM had won all but two of those fixtures which included a defeat to PSG.

And so in the 2019/20 season, the goalkeeper had put in strong performances as OM hurtled towards the top of the table. In particular, he had great games in the wins against Nice and St Étienne while also steadying the defence in the run of draws against tough opponents in Montpellier and Rennes. He also played every minute up to the 32nd minute of the 18th game of the season against FC Metz where he was injured. Mandanda has returned to the Mandanda of old, leaner, fitter and more focused. At 34, there perhaps is not a lot of time left in his top-flight career. But in 2019, where he became Marseille's all-time appearance maker and captain again, the fire still burns. He is in line to become France's goalkeeper at EURO 2020 if Hugo Lloris is unable to recover from his gruesome injury in time. Nonetheless, 2019 has been a year in which the goalkeeper is back in sync with his club, fans and national team.



*JOSE FONTE*

(+57)

**34**

**BORN: 1983/12/23, PENAFIEL**

**CLUB: LILLE OSC**

**POSITION: DEFENDER**

**AT CLUB SINCE: 2018**

**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019: 36**

It was Lille's exceptional youngsters who grabbed the headlines during their spectacular 2018-19 campaign, but without José Fonte, Les Dogues might not have made their leap from relegation candidates to the starlit arenas of the Champions League. In fact, both parties have enjoyed a mutually beneficial relationship. While the Portuguese centre-back has helped lead Lille to the title of best-of-the-rest, the northern club has completely rejuvenated the career of a man who seemed to have faded into obscurity in China, never to return. Instead, Fonte played in Europe's premier continental competition for the first time in his career at 35.

Fonte endured a torrid time in China at Dalian Yifang, playing just 800 minutes before his move to Lille in July 2018. If the latter half of that year was a surprise success, 2019 has truly been Fonte's comeback year, one of the greatest comebacks in European football in recent memory. Widely considered to be punching above their weight at the start of the season, Lille demonstrated in 2019 that they were definitively the second-best side in the league, in no small part thanks to the Portuguese's consistency.

Conceding eight goals on his debut in China became a distant memory. Fonte was the bastion of Les Dogues defence as they let in just 12 league goals after Christmas, and finished their exceptional league campaign with 33 goals conceded, Ligue 1's best defensive record. The side lost just twice in the New Year, with their defeat against Rennes coming after they had already secured second place. The defender even captained the side for the majority of their matches due to Adama Soumaoro's fitness issues, which Fonte continues to do to this day. A leader on the pitch and juggernaut defensively through his strength, tough tackling and exquisite ability to make key interceptions, his imperious performances gave Lille the solidity they needed to draw opponents in and frustrate them before launching forward on explosive counter attacks. These were often initiated by the Portuguese himself thanks to his impressive passing range. His crowning moment of the year, and that of the club, has no doubt been his commanding performance in Lille's 5-1 thumping of PSG in April to postpone the Parisians' title celebrations. Sturdy as ever in defence, making five interceptions and marking the occasion with a goal, Fonte had rolled back the years to hush any remaining naysayers.

But the 35 year-old's remarkable year doesn't end in L'Hexagone. Indeed, Fonte played a big role in Portugal's victory in the inaugural UEFA Nations League, delivering a rock solid performance in the final alongside promising youngster Rúben Dias to keep out a hungry, young Netherlands side. Though only drafted in due to Pepe's absence, such a performance at international level would have been inconceivable in 2018. The EURO 2016 champion was capping off a terrific season domestically by winning yet more honours at international level, and signed a contract extension with Lille soon after. Many expected that the club would drop off slightly this season, with European football to contend with, and significant changes in playing staff. There have been positives, as they impressed in spells in the Champions' League despite naivety costing them at crucial moments, and look set to challenge for a place in the top three domestically. Certainly though, Lille are weaker, and Fonte himself has not been as impeccable as he was last season.

Les Dogues have been relatively solid defensively in the league, especially more recently, with Fonte helping the side to a cluster of clean sheets in late November-early December, delivering his best performances against Lyon and Brest. They are however conceding more goals, and have found it difficult to translate their defensive solidity to Europe. Against Chelsea at home, Fonte was at fault for the first goal, losing scorer Tammy Abraham in the box through what looked like a lapse in concentration. The Portuguese also struggled in Lille's 4-0 drubbing at the hands of Valencia, making some good defensive interventions early on but fading as the match progressed, and giving away a penalty for handball (albeit through some questionable officiating).

In addition, despite the club's improved defensive displays in Ligue 1, he has still been less effective, averaging just 1.1 tackles and 0.9 interceptions per match and has looked less assured, making a rash challenge on Nîmes winger Romain Philippoteaux back in October to give away a penalty; a challenge the Fonte of last season would have avoided making altogether. However, make no mistake – Fonte is still a vital part of this team. Specifically as a leader and an experienced head to guide the young players around him. Young defensive partner Gabriel looks to be benefiting from his wisdom and composure, while the Portuguese has himself repeatedly stated that his main role is to guide the club's myriad of exciting young talent, "to show the way to the young kids we have." This is enough in itself to ensure that, whatever his form, the defender will retain an integral role with Les Dogues. After a remarkable year, Fonte remains one of the league's better centre-backs, a man who has defied expectations and is enjoying a true Indian summer at the twilight of his career.





*BENJAMIN LECOMTE*

(-17)

**33**

**BORN: 1991/04/26, PARIS**

**CLUB: AS MONACO**

**POSITION: GOALKEEPER**

**AT CLUB SINCE: 2019**

**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019: 38**

2019 was supposed to be the year of Benjamin Lecomte after 2018 ended on a high and it started really well for him. For months, Montpellier pushed for European qualification in a run that was built on their solid defence and an inspired Lecomte. Unfortunately, the cracks started to show around late March and early April. Inconsistent performances from him and some of his teammates ruined their hopes of European qualification and they eventually fell short, finishing 6th. In spite of the late dip, his reputation was intact and the summer brought renewed interest in him.

It was already widely-known that he was probably heading out of Montpellier if they could not secure a place in Europe for the 2019/20 season. That eventually happened when Monaco swooped in and secured his signing. They paid €13.5m for him, two years after Montpellier signed him for €2.5m from Lorient. The significance of the steep rise in price was the evidence that his stock had deservedly risen after years of impressive performances. More importantly, he was joining a team that had more media spotlight, which would help with his ongoing campaign to be a part of the French national team, to help a defence that had been battered all through 2018/19. Monaco were rebooting and he was going to be a huge part of it. That meant that he would finally be getting the plaudits his performances had not gotten while at lesser known clubs.

Unfortunately, these things are a double-edged sword. For all the plaudits that come with exceptional performances at clubs where the media spotlight is greater, there will certainly be equal or greater scrutiny for poor performances. Lecomte has so far found himself on the wrong side of it all. His first competitive fixture for Monaco on matchday one was as horrible as debuts come. A home game against Lyon turned into a match to quickly forget as Lecomte let in three goals, looking confidence-ridden and lost. Worse, his positioning for both Memphis Depay and Lucas Tousart's outside of the box strikes was awful.

Simply put, it was a baptism of fire. He improved in the next game away at newly-promoted Metz but still conceded three times, one of which was a penalty. The following round, he conceded twice more at the Stade Louis II and then another two away at Strasbourg. 10 goals conceded in his first four games for the club and things did not look to be getting easier. The next game was against Marseille at home and this was a chance for Lecomte to get some redemption and finally start repaying the faith placed in him by Monaco. Instead, it was another dreadful performance in which he showed a lack of aerial confidence, notably caught out by a sneaky Valère Germain header and Monaco lost the game 3-4. Five games into the season, he had let in 14 goals.

Since then, things have been a bit better for Lecomte and Monaco's dreadful defence, and it all started with a good clean sheet at Stade de Reims. Although Monaco have improved a lot defensively, Lecomte has still not consistently convinced yet. So far, his save percentage of 66% is the fifth worst in the league and only five clubs have conceded more goals than Monaco. Even his replacement at Montpellier, Gerónimo Rulli, is currently outperforming him.

A move that was supposed to see him elevated to a higher level now seems set to take him a lot longer to achieve a greater reputation on the European scene than previously hoped, but it is still early days. Lecomte remains an excellent shot-stopper on his day and he also possesses really clever distribution which has helped Monaco's build-up, notably via sharp counter-attacking goals finished by the mighty duo of Wissam Ben Yedder and Islam Slimani – both his throwing and long-passing have on occasion been a delight. He has also shown excellence in sweeper-keeper situations, with a strong record in one-vs-one situations. Where he must work harder is on his concentration when facing long shots and building his confidence to be more decisive from set-pieces.

There is a lot more to come from Lecomte and everybody knows it. He remains one of Ligue 1's best goalkeepers and there is a sense that when he really gets going more consistently, with a settled defence in front of him, he will elevate to the difference-maker status that he earned at Montpellier. Characters like Kamil Glik and Jemerson are not currently doing enough to protect him and it will be a tall order to alter Monaco's fortunes significantly to propel them into Champions' League places. They finish the first half of the campaign in 7th. Will the real Lecomte please stand up... more consistently in the coming year? 2020 might be what we all expected 2019 to be for him. Fingers crossed.



*JASON DENAYER*

(+48)

**32**

**BORN: 1995/06/28, BRUSSELS**

**CLUB: OLYMPIQUE LYONNAIS**

**POSITION: DEFENDER**

**AT CLUB SINCE: 2018**

**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019: 34**



The ever-itinerant Jason Denayer, whose loan spells from Manchester City included stops in Scotland, Turkey (twice) and England's northeast, appears at last to have found a home in Lyon. Having been capped a dozen times for his country (no mean feat playing alongside the likes of Jan Vertonghen and Toby Alderweireld), it has never been a matter of the Belgian's talent, rather him finding a team which suited his style of play. In Lyon, and in particular under the recently-installed Rudi Garcia, he has impressed with his composure, reliability and passing nous.

Slightly undersized for a centre back at just a shade over six feet, Denayer got his start in Anderlecht's youth ranks, playing at first as a striker, before moving to Jean-Marc Guillou's JMG Academy, a departure which allowed him to escape a difficult childhood in Brussels. Guillou's academies are well-known for being arguably the greatest incubator of West African talent, with alumni including Didier Zokora, Gervinho, and the Touré brothers, but his Belgian project has been rather less successful, save Denayer. At the academy, in the Antwerp suburb of Lier, he was placed into an intense regimen where each minute was strictly scheduled, instilling in him a sense of discipline which has been important to his development.

Speaking to the Daily Mail while on loan at Sunderland, he said of his time at JMG, "Football wise, it was excellent for me, it helped me understand the game in a different way. But also things like homework and just getting by, everything was my responsibility. That made me grow up a lot." That growth soon attracted the attention of Liverpool, but Denayer failed to agree terms with the club, and after a successful trial with Manchester City, he joined the club's academy in the summer of 2013. A regular with the Citizens' youth sides during his first year in England, a loan spell to Celtic the following season was what really served notice of his promise.

The move to Celtic Park saw him feature regularly in both domestic matches and Europe, and be named the Young Player of the Year in the Scottish Premier League. It was a difficult campaign for the Hoops, who finished bottom of their Europa League group after falling to Malmo in the Champions' League, but there was no doubting Denayer's talent and his importance to the team. Despite the club wanting to extend his loan for an additional season, he followed with the first of two seasons with Galatasaray. While he did not feature as regularly for the Turkish side, and injuries played their role in reducing his playing time, he was able to gain experience in the Champions' League and also showed he could do a job on the flanks, playing at right-back as well as in the centre of defence.

From there, he played an unhappy season on loan at Sunderland, where injuries also took their toll. With the Black Cats finishing bottom of the table, Denayer was in no mood to extend his spell there and instead returned to Turkey. While a thigh injury disrupted his second half of the season, Galatasaray comfortably won the league and his play did more than enough to attract the interest of other European clubs, with Anderlecht also in the mix. His move to Lyon was, at the time, seen as rather underwhelming, as Les Gones had also been in pursuit of Benfica's Ruben Dias, but Denayer ably lived up to the scrutiny at the Groupama Stadium.

Forming an impressive partnership with Marcelo, he steered a somewhat erratic Lyon side into third place, and quickly endeared himself to the club's hardcore supporters by scoring a dramatic header to win last season's first derby against St Étienne. This season saw him appointed captain by incoming manager Sylvinho and despite the team's uneven play under the Brazilian, Denayer has continued to be a reliable presence on the pitch, anchoring the defence even as Marcelo has come under fire from the fans and new signing Joachim Andersen has endured a rocky start to life in France.

Denayer is not the perfect defender, as he is sometimes accused of taking too many risks and trying to be too technical, but his play stands out for a number of reasons. Not the least of which is his discipline; he is yet to be sent off in his professional career, nor has he earned any type of suspension. His passing is also unerringly accurate, allowing Lyon's full-backs and dynamic midfielders the perfect platform to play on the counter. He also has decent aerial ability despite his somewhat short height, and balances a quick first step with good positional instincts, honed by his occasional spells in defensive midfield at Sunderland and Galatasaray. In partnership, then, with a bigger, more physical partner, he may not catch the eye as some might, but for an attack-minded side, he is the ideal fulcrum, especially with Anthony Lopes not noted for his distribution. While Lyon will have much to do to repeat last season's performance, given their struggles with injury, Garcia will be able to count on the Belgian's consistency as an important building block for the rest of the campaign.





*PREDRAG RAJKOVIC*

(NEW)

**31**

**BORN: 1995/10/31, NEGOTIN**  
**CLUB: STADE DE REIMS**  
**POSITION: GOALKEEPER**  
**AT CLUB SINCE: 2019**  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019: 33**

The “league of talents” is known for its elite youth academies from which many future world stars graduate. Other talents travel along frequent routes, be it from West Africa, Brazil, or even Belgium. But every once in a while, very successful targets are found in other places. Such was the case for Predrag Rajković, who Stade de Reims recruited from Maccabi Tel Aviv.

Reims have become specialists of identifying targets in non-traditional leagues. In January, they found the phenomenal Arbër Zeneli in the Netherlands, and during the inter-season Marshall Munetsi arrived from South Africa. For his part, summer arrival Rajković was preceded by a reputation among players of Football Manager, which hopefully is not the sole basis on which Reims took their chance. In any case, the club needed a replacement to elastic Édouard Mendy, gone to Stade Rennais over the summer. The club from Champagne were quicker to the punch than Montpellier, who had also approached him. The deal was made for the sum of €5m, with a contract lasting until 2023.

At 24, Rajković is already an experienced goalkeeper. His first season as a starter was at Red Star Belgrade, in 2014/15, aged 19. The following year he moved to Israel and spent four seasons with Maccabi, the latest of which was the most successful. Currently, Rajković is the substitute goalkeeper for the Serbian national team, behind Vladimir Stojković of Partizan. This year, he played the final EURO 2020 qualifier against Ukraine, a 2-2 draw which meant that the Balkan nation would not participate in the tournament. He was part of the 2018 World Cup squad, and has had 13 caps, the first of which was at age 17. With the national youth teams, he was crowned U19 European champion in 2014 and U20 world champion the following year, also earning the best goalkeeper award for that tournament.

His first half of 2019, in Israel, was quite phenomenal. Rajković and Maccabi finished the regular 2018/19 league season undefeated, keeping 14 clean sheets. In the Championship round, a mini-league between the top six teams, he played only five of 10 matches, but conceded just once. With those results came his first Israeli league title, his third league title when added to the two with Red Star. Across all competitions in that season, he obtained 22 clean sheets from 43 matches.

Since his move to France, the man with the shaved head has arguably been an even greater success in goal for Reims than Mendy. This is particularly impressive given that the Reims defence lost Björn Engels to Aston Villa and Ghislain Konan to frequent injury, in addition to Mendy; all without becoming less efficient. Mendy, a fantastic shot-stopper, made a few mistakes during the team's slump in the latter half of the season, notably in his distribution. Rajković has been near on faultless this far. He has kept 11 clean sheets in 19 appearances in all competitions, during the first half of the season. This includes matches against PSG, Marseille, Lille, Rennes, Monaco, or Montpellier. With 10 goals conceded in Ligue 1, Reims are tied with PSG for best defence in the top five European leagues.

In the last match of the year, the Serbian saved a late penalty from Moussa Dembélé to hold a draw against Lyon. Penalties are evidently a specialty for Rajković. He has saved both of the spot kicks that he has faced in Ligue 1 so far, the first one against Jonathan Bamba in a 2-0 win against Lille. In his career, he has saved eight of a total 19 penalties faced, including one from Eden Hazard in the Champions' League, when he was still with Maccabi. This is an improvement on Mendy, who saved his first ever penalty (in 13 attempts) for Rennes this season.

In truth, all forms of shot-stopping seem comfortable for the 1.92m man. He was named by several media outlets in the best XI of the first half of the season. It seems “Rajko” is destined for a very bright future. By his own admission, Reims will be a stepping stone for the Serbian. “I said I wanted to stay here for two or three years. That is still my idea,” he told L'Équipe in October. He added, “I like this club, and Ligue 1. It goes faster than in Israel, the players are more technical, there are more shots.” But Rajković has also communicated his ambition for SDR, aiming at a Europa League qualification for a club that has not seen European football since 1963. His previous clubs have all been title contenders and he has European experience: six matches in the Champions' League and 38 in the Europa League (including qualifiers). With Reims performing very strongly again, his experience will be beneficial in pushing his current teammates to a new summit. They would be wise to make the most of Rajković's presence, before the bigger clubs come knocking, not long from now.



*ANDY DELORT*

(NEW)

**30**

**BORN: 1991/10/09, SETE**  
**CLUB: MONTPELLIER HSC**  
**POSITION: FORWARD**  
**AT CLUB SINCE: 2018**  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019: 37**



Since September 2018, Andy Delort has revitalised his career. The forward was terrific for Caen in the 2015-16 season, but subsequently failed to match those levels of performance, and was coming off the back of a poor campaign with Toulouse. What's more, off-the-field issues had started to overshadow the striker's career, including charges for drink driving and, in August 2018, he was arrested after being the passenger in a vehicle involved in a police chase. Delort later received a two-month suspended prison sentence and €18,000 fine after reportedly insulting officers. It looked for all the world that the Frenchman would never match the levels of performance he had shown in Normandy.

However, since joining Montpellier initially on loan for the 2018-19 season, the now 28 year-old has thrived. 2019 has truly been a year of redemption for Delort on the pitch, as he has been crucial to coach Michel der Zakarian building La Paillade into one of the league's most consistent and well-drilled sides, boasting one of the most undervalued and potent attacking units.

Delort was an offensive powerhouse last season as Montpellier enjoyed their best league campaign since their 2012 title win, pushing for Europe before falling just short and finishing in 6th. The striker became a key player for the side, and experienced the most productive season of his career with 14 goals and seven assists in 36 league matches, with 11 of these 21 goal contributions coming this year. Unfazed by the big stage, Delort delivered in key matches, scoring the equaliser in the derby draw against rivals Nîmes in February, and equalising with a typically direct Montpellier goal against PSG in April: star midfielder Florent Mollet received the ball straight from a throw from goalkeeper Benjamin Lecomte, before flicking on to Delort who, exploiting a gap in the Parisian defence, carried the ball into the box and finished coolly past Gianluigi Buffon. MHSC went on to win 3-2.

One of, if not the key factor in the striker's renaissance has been his role in an offensive trio recently labelled by L'Équipe as the "infernal trinity". The creative wizardry of Mollet from attacking midfield is the engine, but the wheels come in the form of Delort and strike partner Gaëtan Laborde. When the latter arrived from Bordeaux shortly after Delort, he received a very clear message from his new team-mate, as Delort told the club's website: "...the day he signed, I sent him a message on Instagram saying that I thought we would form a good duet." They've done exactly that.

The two constitute arguably the best strike partnership in the league after Monaco's combination of Wissam Ben Yedder and Islam Slimani, and accounted for 25 of Montpellier's 53 goals last campaign. Each directly assisted the other twice, while very often the runs they make leave space for the other to grab goals. All in all, the pair are hugely complementary, and have a very fruitful relationship, as Laborde told Midi-Libre, "This is the first time I have such a relationship with another attacker. We make efforts for each other. We know that we will kill for each other... If our careers separate, it will be difficult to find a similar duo."

While Laborde has been less consistent this season, Delort has continued his fine form, scoring six in all competitions, with three assists to his name at the time of writing. The forward has continued his penchant for scoring a variety of goals: an acrobatic effort against Bordeaux in August, an emphatic half-volley against Monaco in October and an absolute thunderbolt from distance against Amiens in November. Turning and lining up the shot from 30 yards out, Delort unleashed a cannonball into the top right corner. Simply un-saveable. Indeed, the power he generates is one of his key strengths, and this, coupled with his finishing ability, means he is a threat from anywhere. Due to his quality heading and fast reactions, the 28 year-old is also a proficient penalty box striker, often able to capitalise on opposition mistakes or rebounds, as was the case against Nice this season. What ultimately suits his team's playing style so well is his strength, as he is able to outmuscle the opposition and hold up the ball, suiting Montpellier's direct, counter-attacking style of play to a tee. His recent goal against Metz saw him receive a long ball out wide, and completely shrug off powerful centre-back Stoppila Sunzu, before running the ball into the box and slotting home.

The year has also seen Delort's international career take off. The Frenchman's mother is Algerian, and so he decided to declare for the Desert Foxes, scoring on his debut in a friendly against Mali. Though he was not initially picked in their squad for AFCON, the forward was drafted in late as a replacement for Haris Belkebla. Playing a bit part role, Delort started against Tanzania, and scored a penalty in Algeria's vital victory over the Ivory Coast in the quarter-finals as his side went on to win the tournament. Once considered a flop, Delort has turned his career around, and is now one of the league's most effective attacking players, showing little sign of slowing down.





*HOUSSEM AOUIAR*

(-16)

**29**

**BORN: 1998/06/30, LYON**  
**CLUB: OLYMPIQUE LYONNAIS**  
**POSITION: MIDFIELDER**  
**AT CLUB SINCE: 2009**  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019: 35**

Ever since arriving on the scene in 2017, Houssem Aouar was considered the next big thing to emerge from Lyon's famed academy, an academy that has produced the likes of Karim Benzema, Anthony Martial and Samuel Umtiti. He was immediately likened to Nabil Fékir, another divinely gifted playmaker who could play in midfield or an attack, a Frenchman who was raised by Algerian parents, a player who could wiggle his way around defenders and weave together delicate passes like an expert seamstress. Aouar and Fékir combined to make magic in the 2017/18 and 2018/19 seasons, before Lyon, desperate to cash in on a player with an expiring contract, sold Fékir to Real Betis this past summer.

Since his departure, it has been a catastrophic season for Les Gones, who currently sit 12th in the table after 19 matchdays. A failure to adequately replace Ferland Mendy, Tanguy Ndombele, and Fékir, combined with a botched experiment with a rookie manager (Sylvinho) has put Lyon in grave danger of missing out on European football for the first time since 1996. Even with the extraordinarily low level of competition, neither Rudi Garcia nor Sylvinho have looked anywhere close to unlocking their squad's full potential so far, and Aouar's recent hamstringing injury, which has put him out of action for one month, certainly did not help matters.

It has been an inconsistent 2019 for the 21-year-old, a player who has had performances that have mirrored his role model Andrés Iniesta, and others that have mirrored Iniesta's nickname--the little ghost. One could point the finger at his various managers--Garcia, Sylvinho, and Bruno Génésio--who have shoehorned him into positions that minimise his assets and magnify his vulnerabilities. But Aouar, who is currently valued at around €60m, must improve in certain areas if he is to fulfill his potential and become a key player for Les Bleus' senior side. When played in a double pivot against Barcelona, Aouar was asked to operate in a holding midfield role to allow midfield partner Ndombele to go forward. He struggled to provide the midfield with security, and was dropped for the second leg. Lyon, who had grinded out a stalemate in France, lost 1-5 in the Camp Nou.

While he started Lyon's first five matches this season, he did not play a single minute of their Champions' League opener, a 1-1 draw against Zenit. But despite being frozen out once more against Brest, he showed Sylvinho what he had been missing on October 2, putting together an effortlessly smooth display as Lyon achieved a 2-0 victory over RB Leipzig. Lyon set up in a 3-5-2, with Thiago Mendes and Lucas Tousart guarding the midfield, and with Aouar tasked with combining with Memphis Depay and Martin Terrier on the counter. He took control of launching counter-attacks with his aggressive dribbles and picking out his teammates with pinpoint passes, as Julien Nagelsmann's side fell to their second defeat of the season.

When analysing Aouar's hot-and-cold year, one must not only take into account his precocious age and the fact that he has been played out of position at times, but also the fact that Lyon have failed to replace key players who departed the Rhône this year. Youssouf Koné and Thiago Mendes have nowhere near the same attacking presence as Mendy and Ndombele, who left for a combined fee of €110m, while Jeff Reine-Adélaïde, Aouar's teammate for Les Espoirs, has a long way to go before he is capable of replacing Nabil Fékir's impact. As such, Aouar has been burdened with far more responsibility both on and off the pitch. He wore the captain's armband during last month's Choc des Olympiques, before exiting in the 57th minute due to injury.

Aouar's performances have suffered when he has been utilised in a double pivot, and he has not offered enough consistency when playing as the left interior in a 4-3-3. His best games have come either in an attacking role behind two strikers (St Étienne and Leipzig) or on the left wing (Benfica and Toulouse). It's easy to see why Aouar modeled his game after Iniesta -- he cuts through teams like a knife through butter. He leaves opposition midfielders for dead with his acceleration, engineers counter-attacks with his deft vision and change-of-direction, and offers a respectable end product -- with five goals and 13 assists this year at the time of writing.

There's no doubt that Aouar has the talent and incisiveness to catapult Lyon back into the Champions' League places, the question is -- can he stay consistent enough to do so? His recent performances prior to injury -- which saw him operate on the left-wing -- gave the impression that he can flourish under Garcia, but without Mendy, Ndombele and Fékir, all of whom played essential roles in opening up defences and finding the back of net over the past two seasons, does he have the surrounding tools to get the job done? Should Aouar return to his best physical levels following his return from injury, expect him to play an increasingly consistent leadership role under Rudi Garcia, as Lyon attempt to reverse a catastrophic season and return to their rightful spot amongst the Champions' League places.



*JONATHAN IKONE*

(+57)

**28**

**BORN: 1998/05/02, BONDY**

**CLUB: LILLE OSC**

**POSITION: MIDFIELDER**

**AT CLUB SINCE: 2018**

**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019: 38**

One of the main actors in Lille's barnstorming 2018/19 season, Jonathan Ikoné is one of the many PSG academy graduates to have found fortune elsewhere after being let go too early by the Parisian club. Appearing in every league game of the campaign last term, he formed one third of Ligue 1's best counter-attacking trio in his partnership with Jonathan Bamba and Nicolas Pépé. Although he might have seen himself overshadowed by the Ivorian in the headlines last term, there is no downplaying the importance of the role Ikoné took on as the team's central playmaker in Christophe Galtier's 4-2-3-1 formation, notching nine assists – seven of which came in the second half of the season in which Lille lost only twice in the league. These numbers will have gone some way towards dismissing the criticisms regarding his final product, even if his goal tally does remain relatively low.

The French international was already showing promise in his time at PSG, often being tipped as one of the likeliest to succeed out of the Parisian academy. Nevertheless, for all his potential he would never be able to make inroads into the crowded field that is the PSG midfield pecking order and quickly went out on loan to Montpellier for a season and a half. His breakout came last season as financial restrictions saw Lille constrained to putting together a side made up of young players, many of which were brought in by Marcelo Bielsa, forming part of a side which played without fear in a free-flowing system.

What Ikoné offers is a unique profile in French football. While he has made his name as an attacking midfielder, it is clear when watching the way that Lille counter-attacks that he is able to take on a number of roles across the front-line, adapting himself to a host of specific situations. During the course of a game he can be seen just as often cutting inside from the wing as exploiting open space in the middle. Nevertheless, given his lukewarm spell at Montpellier where he was primarily deployed on the flank, his preferred position is decidedly in the number 10 role. Ikoné is able to change the pace of games through an agility on the ball which allows him to take out opposing defenders and create space for his teammates, thus carving out several goalscoring opportunities a game. Nicolas Pépé would often be on the end of a through ball from the Frenchman which would quickly put opposition defenses on the back foot. He is also able to break lines in carrying the ball through brisk drives forward, retaining an impressive level of ball control even at full speed.

A difficult introduction to Champions' League football and the departure of several of last season's key figures has meant that Christophe Galtier's side has struggled to kick on. This year, Ikoné has been left to assume a leadership role in the attacking department which has yet to be successful on the pitch. His game is also still lacking consistency in terms of his precision in front of goal – it's abundantly clear that his shooting ability is impressive, as was seen in his long-range free kick against Germany while playing for the U21 national team, but he has not yet strung together a consistent goalscoring run.

The absence of Pépé somewhat stilted what had been such a dynamic attack. While new signings Yusuf Yazıcı and Renato Sanches have showed promising signs, they have not yet struck up the kind of instant impact and understanding that made the Bamba-Ikoné-Pépé trio (the BIP, as they were known to fans) such a devastating force last year. Any chance of replicating last season's success is further complicated by the fact that opposition teams have largely worked out that playing a low back line goes some way towards nullifying the threat Lille poses on the counter and in open spaces.

While the new season has not started out as strongly as he might have hoped, the Frenchman has nonetheless seen himself rewarded with his first full international call-ups, coming on to score in his debut against Albania in September's EURO 2020 qualifier. Whether he was simply in the squad as the flavour of the month or as a permanent fixture of Deschamps' group remains to be seen, given that he faces strong competition in his position. Whatever the outcome this season, it is hard to imagine that he would follow the path of Nicolas Pépé in making a high profile move to the Premier League, given that at the moment his raw numbers are not enough to truly catch the eye of a big club. His focus will remain squarely on bringing Lille back on track in the league following their rather humiliating European campaign in the first half of the season. If Ikoné is able to impose himself as a leader in this team, then there is no doubt that he will find himself higher up on this ranking come the end of next year.





*WILLIAM SALIBA*

(NEW)

**27**

**BORN: 2001/03/24, BONDY**  
**CLUB: AS SAINT-ETIENNE**  
**POSITION: DEFENDER**  
**AT CLUB SINCE: 2016**  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019: 15**

2019 has seen William Saliba transition from a promising youngster into one of the hottest prospects in world football. The defender has seemed to improve with every game despite some frustrating setbacks with injury. For a player who had only made seven senior appearances prior to January, sealing a €30m move to Arsenal at just 18 is testament not only to Saliba's talent, but also to his sheer determination to make it to the top, with his former youth coach Fabio Frascioni telling Eurosport, "He wasn't necessarily better than everyone else, but I've never seen a kid who wanted to become a pro footballer more."

The year began with the young centre-back having to bide his time, competing against experienced defenders Neven Subotić and club captain Loïc Perrin for a place in the starting XI. St Étienne looked to be fading in the New Year following a tremendous start to the campaign, dropping out of the European qualification places. In March, Jean-Louis Gasset had Saliba cover for Perrin against Lille, who boasted one of the league's most devastating attacks. Despite starting his first match since early January, Saliba expertly demonstrated his natural tackling and ability to read the game by dealing with the energy and pace of Lille's red-hot attacking unit, and was instrumental in keeping them out until the 87th minute. Though St Étienne suffered defeat, the youngster had offered up a commanding display, and shown Gasset enough to warrant a starting berth.

Aided by injuries and a tactical reshuffle, with Gasset often opting for a back three, Saliba became an important player for the side. He demonstrated his versatility and starred out of position at right-back in Les Verts' 5-0 routing of Caen, the catalyst game for Sainté's strong end to the season. He was vital in Les Verts losing just once in their final ten matches of the campaign. Delivering a string of performances belying his age, Saliba was especially crucial in a 2-0 win over fellow European qualification chasers Reims, recovering the ball eight times over the course of the match. The side's 2-0 victory over Toulouse on a weekend which saw the 18 year-old play with the senior team instead of the U19s in the final of the Coupe Gambardella, was evidence that Saliba had truly outgrown youth football, not just physically but also mentally.

Indeed, Saliba's maturity is perhaps his most admirable trait. His progress in this domain has been perfectly encapsulated by teammate Loïc Perrin, telling L'Équipe, "When he arrived in the dressing room of the pros, he was reserved, but now he's started joking about with us. On the 2nd of May, we celebrated the U19s winning the Gambardella and before joining them, William let out in a serious tone, "Come on, let's celebrate the kids' achievement." It was funny, because only recently he was playing for them..." This season, it was the 18 year-old who led the post-match celebrations after Sainté beat Lyon in the derby in October. Ex-coach Frascioni was also keen to point out that, despite his recent success and big money move, "he has never changed, and that is a sign of enormous maturity."

A key factor for his development on and off the field has been working under Jean-Louis Gasset, a coach with vast experience and tactical nous, who gradually eased the 18-year old into life as a professional. Gasset's influence is not lost on Saliba, telling the LFP, "He taught me to be a man." The youngster signed a new deal with St Étienne in April, but after intense speculation over his future, he joined Arsenal, with Les Verts receiving their highest ever transfer fee in the process. Over the summer, Saliba was unfortunately injured in the build-up to the U20 World Cup. He has so far only been able to make one appearance at this level, during a friendly win over Argentina's U20 side in March.

Loaned back to Les Verts for this season, injuries have unfortunately persisted, limiting Saliba to just seven appearances. His first start in the league did not come until October 6th. Prior to that, the club's form had been abysmal, and coach Ghislain Printant had been sacked and replaced by Claude Puel. Drafted in for Puel's first match in charge, Saliba looked as if he had been playing all season as his side conquered bitter rivals Lyon for the first time in over two years. In fact, Saliba has arguably looked better than ever under Puel, putting in monstrous defensive displays against Bordeaux, Amiens and Monaco recently.

Nevertheless, Saliba again finds himself on the treatment table after suffering a metatarsal injury in early November. It will take some time to be back up and running in 2019. His raw technical and physical characteristics are so impressive that fitness seems the most urgent area that the youngster must address. Saliba has shown this year that he has the talent to make it to the pinnacle of the game. Injuries will be a concern, but when fit he is a force to be reckoned with. Given Arsenal's struggles this season, he already looks to have the quality to make an impact for the Gunners, despite his tender age. We've not seen anyone like this since Raphaël Varane.



*ISLAM SLIMANI*

(NEW)

**26**

**BORN: 1988/06/18, ALGIER**

**CLUB: AS MONACO**

**POSITION: FORWARD**

**AT CLUB SINCE: 2019**

**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019: 13**

It has been very much a case of getting a career back on track for Algerian forward Islam Slimani, who is finding his form again at Monaco. It is a move which has seen Slimani seemingly getting back to his best, to the surprise of many who felt his big money move to Leicester City and subsequent underwhelming loan spells with Newcastle United and Fenerbahce had taken their toll on the player.

It was clear that Slimani was struggling with confidence as he looked a shadow of the man who performed strongly with Sporting Portugal. With Monaco in desperate need of fresh faces after a hugely disappointing 2018/19 campaign, coach Leonardo Jardim and the club's hierarchy took a punt on Slimani and brought him in on loan. It reunited Slimani with his former coach from Sporting. Upon his unveiling, Slimani was pretty clear that the Jardim factor played a part; "I came here to try to score goals, to help the team and I will give my all. It is always good to work with a former coach. It was he who brought me to Sporting. I think he knows my qualities and why he brought me here."

It did not take long for Slimani to quickly become a rare bright spark for Monaco, who as a club again began the new season in mixed form. After 10 games, Slimani had netted six goals and assisted a further eight, including a superb performance against Brest where he scored one and created three. Jardim was quick to pounce on this, "when Slimani came, many criticised him but he is a team player who works. He always gives the best and he scores goals."

Key to Slimani's rediscovery of form has been his partnership with fellow new Monaco recruit Wissam Ben Yedder. The two have formed a potent partnership for the Principality side in a classic big man, little man pairing. They have combined together to score five goals as Slimani's strength perfectly complements Ben Yedder's speed and movement, the pair have become a lethal duo. Slimani joked about the success of their pairing, "maybe it's because we have Arabic heritage." He also added "Wissam is a smart, experienced player. We have different profiles and we are complementary. It's good for us and for the club."

The return of his confidence is clearly paying dividends for Monaco at the moment and with rumours that he could be available for only a little over £7m, Monaco would be wise to take that option up. Slimani is evidently enjoying his time at the Stade Louis II. Slimani emphasised this himself, "I feel good. At the beginning of the season, there were not many people who believed in me, but it suited me. I came to France and nobody knows me. I think it was good for me. The coach knows my qualities, he knows how to use me and give me confidence. That's very important for an attacker. He asks me to play as I know how to. When he brought me to Sporting, I was not often starting as it was my debut season in Europe. But he knew that if I play, or even if I do not play, I can always be relied upon. For me the most important thing is to give it all for the team. When you play well and you are confident you can more easily enjoy things."

Whilst no longer an automatic starter for Algeria, Slimani was still selected in the squad for the African Cup of Nations. He started a couple of group games and scored in the win over Tanzania. He also netted a crucial penalty in the quarter-final shootout victory over the Ivory Coast. He also made it onto the pitch as a late substitute in the victorious final win over Senegal. There were definitely signs that he still had lots to offer Algeria and his form for Monaco since his summer move will only go to further enhance his credentials for remaining in the national team set-up at least in the short-term future.

This has very much been a year all about rejuvenation for Slimani. At the start of 2019 things were looking downbeat, he was on loan in Turkey and struggling to impose himself. As has worked for many before him though, a spell in Ligue 1 seems to have been just the tonic for the player. It has allowed him to regain his confidence and in turn his perhaps now in the greatest form of his career, playing for a team that allows him to express his deft and surprising technical ability alongside his brute force. His partnership with Ben Yedder is flourishing and a rare shining light for the club. Credit must go to Jardim for bringing in his former player, but naturally the bulk of praise must be placed on the shoulders of Slimani who has worked incredibly hard since joining. If Monaco are going to move on from 18 months of disappointment, Slimani will be at the heart of this.



## 50-26 RECAP

50.	Florian Thauvin	Olympique de Marseille
49.	Ander Herrera	Paris Saint-Germain
48.	Rubén Aguilar	AS Monaco
47.	Kenny Lala	RC Strasbourg
46.	M'Baye Niang	Stade Rennais
45.	Edinson Cavani	Paris Saint-Germain
44.	Alban Lafont	FC Nantes
43.	Dario Benedetto	Olympique de Marseille
42.	Laurent Koscielny	Girondins de Bordeaux
41.	Yann M'Vila	AS Saint-Étienne
40.	Pedro Mendes	Montpellier HSC
39.	Thiago Mendes	Olympique Lyonnais
38.	Jonathan Bamba	Lille OSC
37.	Zeki Çelik	Lille OSC
36.	Denis Bouanga	AS Saint-Étienne
35.	Steve Mandanda	Olympique de Marseille
34.	José Fonte	Lille OSC
33.	Benjamin Lecomte	AS Monaco
32.	Jason Denayer	Olympique Lyonnais
31.	Predrag Rajkovic	Stade de Reims
30.	Andy Delort	Montpellier HSC
29.	Houssem Aouar	Olympique Lyonnais
28.	Jonathan Ikoné	Lille OSC
27.	William Saliba	AS Saint-Étienne
26.	Islam Slimani	AS Monaco



*JEFF REINE-ADELAIDE*

(NEW)

**25**

**BORN:** 1998/01/17, CHAMPIGNY-SUR-MARNE

**CLUB:** OLYMPIQUE LYONNAIS

**POSITION:** MIDFIELDER

**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2019

**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 34

It has been a breakout year for the former Lens academy player, who played on the right-wing for the majority of his 18 months at Angers. Coach Stéphane Moulin, when speaking about the player, mentioned that he was not physically prepared to operate in the centre of midfield. He showed plenty of promise but in the final third he often failed to make the correct decisions, resulting in a panic pass or in him being dispossessed. After an April injury to central midfielder Cheikh Ndoeye, Reine-Adélaïde replaced him for the regional clash at home against Rennes. Reine-Adélaïde finally delivered in that position with two goals and an assist in a thrilling 3-3 draw. The relief and joy in the Stade Raymond Kopa was palpable as he had scored his 1st goal for Le SCO.

Following this, he was a starting fixture in central midfield. He moved on to the U21 Euros with France where he was one of the few shining stars in what was a fairly poor French performance and in turn attracted the attention of Lyon Head Scout Florian Maurice. Building up to the start of the 2019/20 campaign, it was clear that "The Jeff" was to be the main man at Angers. After an opening day victory over Bordeaux Moulin stated: "We're not going to go so far as to say that we've built the team around him, but we're putting him in the best conditions in terms of team composition so he can express all his talent. Like others, but perhaps a little more."

In that game, Angers gave him a free rein to allow him to float across midfield, making him more difficult to track for the opposing defenders. The tactic was to create a one-vs-one opportunity for him and provide more space to operate, Jeff would drive past players, supported by forward runners thus disrupting the defensive shape and supplying Jeff with options and room to work with.

When dribbling, he mobilises expertly well and has great instinct to use minute, clever touches of the ball to extend beyond whoever is pressing him. He exudes an aura of elegance with almost anything he does with the ball, which satisfies the eyes of the spectator. His combinations with Flavien Tait and Angelo Fulgini for Angers were ruthlessly brilliant and caused dangers to any defence. Reine-Adélaïde is comfortable in receiving the ball in congested areas and trying to break through pressure to create a fast break or to relieve the team by drawing a foul or switching the play. He has a fast change of pace from standing positions, even more so when on the move and makes drifting past players look effortless.

€25m + €2.5m in bonuses broke the transfer record for both clubs who faced each other days later where Lyon ran out 6-0 winners with Reine-Adélaïde in the stands. Reine-Adélaïde's signing aimed to replace the press resistance and swift, transitional power of the recently departed Ndombele as well as the clever dribbling and 2nd wave attacker that was Nabil Fekir. Since he arrived at Lyon, it has not been the smoothest first couple of months, with Sylvinho almost refusing to start the midfielder in games. Reine-Adélaïde could have begun to regret his transfer. Unsurprisingly, the Sylvinho experiment turned out to be a catastrophically poor judgement by the club and he was dismissed in early October after a loss in the derby against St Étienne.

Sylvinho's replacement however has not gone down with the supporters of the club well, Rudi Garcia was hired and Lyon looked to restart their season. For Reine-Adélaïde, his game time was still lacking and there was a growing frustration with Garcia on top of what was already a challenging appointment that he was wasting a talented player on the bench. In recent months though, Reine-Adélaïde has started to accrue more and more minutes and scored his first goal for the club in a late October fixture against Nice. Despite the inconsistent game time, his raw talent always sparks fever from the fans of Les Gones, whether it is a mazy dribble through a congested midfield or a pinpoint pass. Lyon still do not look like a cohesive unit and it is the individual moments of brilliance from players such as Reine-Adélaïde that get them out of trouble.

A recent game against Rennes has however dealt a huge blow to his development, he has suffered an ACL rupture, which will see him miss the remaining games of the season. Reine-Adélaïde was beginning to integrate into the starting XI as a crucial element of Lyon's future attack. Hopefully for Reine-Adélaïde and Lyon, he will recover well and the injury will not affect his long-term fitness. Based on his talent alone, he is one of the best in his age group and is set to become a future star for both his club and eventually for the French national side. The best year of his career may have ended in huge disappointment, but there will be much more to come from one of France's best talents.



*ANTHONY LOPES*

(-2)

**24**

**BORN: 1990/10/01, GIVORS**  
**CLUB: OLYMPIQUE LYONNAIS**  
**POSITION: GOALKEEPER**  
**AT CLUB SINCE: 2000**  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019: 37**



The fact that Lyon goalkeeper Anthony Lopes features so low down this list is sadly unsurprising and in the image of the whole career of someone who is arguably one of the most underrated goalkeepers – if not players – in Europe. Perhaps the fact that Lopes, at 6', is a relatively short goalkeeper, is the reason for his under-appreciation – something also experienced by another of Hugo Lloris' successors (at Nice) David Ospina. The fact is, despite his exploits, he has still failed to win a trophy with Lyon. Perhaps his sometimes abrasive personality, allied to the fact that he plays for a club that many love to hate, simply means that he will only ever receive begrudging acknowledgement.

Whatever the reason, Lopes deserves more credit for his consistently excellent form over the past six years or so. Unlike most children who tend to want to play up front, Lopes immediately plumped for the goalkeeping role, no doubt wanting to follow in his dad's footsteps. Lyon born and bred, Lopes first came to people's attention as a kid: local youth team Olympique Saint-Genis Laval were a goalkeeper short for a tournament and the coach had no choice but to call up the child from the youngest age group; Lopes saved three out five penalties in the final's shoot-out to win the tournament!

Already the team star at the age of 7, Lopes came through the ranks of the local team which also produced Éric Abidal, while also developing his famous passionate side. In fact this almost ended his Lyon career before it started: OL scouts came to watch him play against their youth team and Lopes' side had a perfectly good goal disallowed. Lopes was so furious that he told the Lyon staff that he would never play for them!

Luckily he changed his mind and worked his way through the Lyon youth ranks, all the while battling constant doubt from the club about his relatively small size, working extra-hard on the aspects of his game that he could effect, such as his physical presence (for better or worse), his speed off his line, his strength and agility, and his kicking game. In 2012/13 he overtook Mathieu Gorgelin (ironically the keeper who kept him out of France's youth sides, prompting him to opt for Portugal, the country of his parents) as Lyon's number two, playing a couple of cup matches, and stepping in at the end of the season, as Rémy Vercoutre suffered a long-term injury. Making his league debut in the derby against St Étienne, he impressed sufficiently to remain number #1 when Vercoutre returned, and has been Lyon's starting keeper ever since.

During that time, despite upheaval off the pitch (in Rudi Garcia he is now playing for his fifth coach), and seeing his team-mates – many of whom also came through the Lyon ranks – leave on a regular basis, Lopes has been a model of consistency, as Lyon have maintained European qualification year in, year out. In recent years, with OL's form more patchy, it has often been his performances which have turned a potential defeat into a draw; one point into three. Perhaps as importantly as his on-pitch heroics, Lopes is also a true Lyon fan, who grew up watching the team on the Kop at the Gerland. As the change of stadium, the selling of homegrown talents and the recruitment of "outside" coaches risk the club losing a sense of tradition, Lopes is loved by the fans for being one of the last remaining links. His adoration for Lyon has had its up and down sides. It has manifested himself in shedding tears after a bad performance vs Bordeaux. It has led to bans for crossing St Étienne's name off a Coupe de France commemorative shirt and for getting involved in a fight with Marseille staff. But he always gives his all.

On the international stage too, Lopes is perhaps under-appreciated and under-used, and he has therefore taken a hiatus from the Portugal squad – although not before winning a EURO 2016 winner's medal. 2019 has, in the image of Lyon as a club, been a bit of a rollercoaster. In the second half of last season he kept only four Ligue 1 clean sheets (as well as one against Barcelona, before conceding five in the second leg) – but also excelled as Lyon downed PSG. This season began with haggling over a new contract, as well as Ciprian Tatarasanu coming in to challenge his #1 status. However, Lopes negotiated a contract extension and a pay-rise befitting his status, as well as ensuring that the #1 spot remained his. Lyon have struggled with form and injuries and Lopes has not escaped the dip – big errors against Toulouse and Benfica could have been costly but turned out not to be. Five more league clean sheets behind a defence that seems to change personnel from one match to the next is a reasonable return in the circumstances.

As players come and go, there has been little talk over the years of Lopes leaving Lyon. Whether this is because he has no wish to leave his beloved club, or because no one has shown sufficient interest, is unclear. Whatever the reason, Lopes' ability and passion are integral parts of Lyon's strong identity; should he leave, the club's fall could be far more dramatic than many may expect.



*NICOLAS PALLOIS*

(NEW)

**23**

**BORN: 1987/09/19, ELBEUF**

**CLUB: FC NANTES**

**POSITION: DEFENDER**

**AT CLUB SINCE: 2017**

**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019: 35**

For many years it seems French football has been getting Nicolas Pallois all wrong. After the most impressive year of his career, exuding fierce leadership, defensive intelligence and unerring consistency, it is difficult to understand how the centre back struggled to break out of the amateur ranks of France's sprawling lower leagues before touring three second tier clubs in a bid to establish himself. A former carpenter, lacking the polish of a modern day academy grad, Pallois has been painted as a brutish workhorse; an uncomplicated blunt instrument. The truth is rather different.

A decade ago the now 32-year-old Nicolas Pallois was a long way from Ligue 1. Having started his career with Caen's B team, Pallois dropped down to the amateur CFA fourth division at the end of the 2007/08 campaign. Many young French players unable to impose themselves at a top club follow a similar path, but few return. Despite being one of Ligue 1's standout defenders in 2019, it took a while even for Pallois.

Initially Caen's mistake seemed to have been underlined as a sole season with tiny Quevilly was enough to convince Ligue 1 Valenciennes that Pallois should be playing top flight football for the 2010/11 campaign. However, after just 11 league outings Pallois was again bounced back down the pyramid. A loan with new Ligue 2 outfit Laval led Pallois to the routinely average Niort. Here however, Pallois found himself, starring in a rare flirtation with the promotion places during the second of two seasons. Perhaps tellingly, it was here that Pallois would meet great friend Emiliano Sala, Sala's 18 league goals complimenting Pallois' defensive nous.

Despite their club suffering a narrow promotion miss, both men were on the up that summer as Bordeaux signed Pallois and Sala returned to Les Girondins after a loan. Despite turning 27 that September, Pallois had a third chance at top flight football and he took it. Ever-present when fit, Pallois' solidity covered for other injuries and suspensions to those around him, as Bordeaux sealed a European place on the final day under Willy Sagnol.

Overall, Pallois was party to an erratic three years at the club which lurched from Sagnol to Jocelyn Gourvennec amid swathes of injury crises, fan unrest and bizarre rollercoaster campaigns. Throughout however, Pallois remained a rare pillar of commitment and consistency, despite a three month ban after an altercation with an assistant referee at Rennes. Allowed to leave for Atlantic derby rivals Nantes in 2017, something Gourvennec now regrets, Pallois would again team up with Sala; both players would find the best form of their careers at La Beaujoire.

Despite his honest and modest nature, and largely impressing for some time, Pallois has often been cast as a clumsy hard man and notably poked fun at by Julien Cazarre on now discontinued Canal + Sunday night show J+1. Pallois was typically philosophical on the matter in an interview with Ouest-France however, explaining that "If he can make a buzz thanks to me, let him continue. I do not watch, often it is the teammates who tell me about it." Regardless of Cazarre's characterisation, Pallois is described as anything but rough and rudimentary by others. Frédéric Weis described his former teammate to L'Équipe as a "teddy bear, sweet and kind," while Nantes coach Christian Gourcuff said "we knew about his athletic impact but it's not just that. Tactically, he's made no mistakes."

A dry wit is often obvious too; Pallois jokingly announcing his international retirement this autumn having missed out on Didier Deschamps France squad, despite never playing for Les Bleus. Meanwhile having been forced to train with the reserves during the short stint of Miguel Cardozo as coach at the start of last season after the pair fell out Pallois sarcastically joked: "He was at three clubs in six months, that's exceptional."

Passion, honesty and commitment define Pallois as a person and as a player. "I will defend the colours as long as I am wearing the jersey. I will fight for this club," he told Ouest France upon arriving at Nantes. That attitude, exemplified by his roaring celebration having won an injury time tackle in the derby against Rennes, quickly helped convince fans that Pallois was on their side despite his Bordeaux past. Although his game and personality may be more nuanced than commonly accepted, Pallois does not hold back with his opinion. "I am a frank person... Maybe it didn't help, it hurt me, but I won't change. If it happens again, I will do the same."

Pallois' 2019, sportingly the best of his career, is cast in sharp relief by the tragic death of close friend Sala. "It haunts me every day," Pallois explained. "He's always in my head." Physical strength has often been deemed Pallois only quality, but the mental strength he has shown to handle the passing of Sala, having helped carry the coffin at his funeral and been the man to drive his friend to the airport before the tragic flight to Cardiff has been superhuman. It is obvious from his displays that Pallois now plays for his friend. 2019 has forced many to reassess their misconceptions of Pallois' style and persona, it may be time for Didier Deschamps to consider doing the same.



*FLORENT MOLLET*

(+44)

**22**

**BORN: 1991/11/19, FONTAINE-LES-DIJON**

**CLUB: MONTPELLIER HSC**

**POSITION: MIDFIELDER**

**AT CLUB SINCE: 2018**

**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019: 35**



Largely ignored by the French press for praise but often quietly brilliant, Florent Mollet's 2019 mirrors that of his club's. With Mollet installed as Michel Der Zakarian's creative fulcrum, playing as a number 10 behind an imposing strike pair of Andy Delort and Gaëtan Laborde, Montpellier finished a very creditable 6th last term and challenged for Europe but without much recognition. At one stage MHSC were Ligue 1's form side, playing effective, efficient and, at times, uncharacteristically dynamic football. When Mollet shone, so did Der Zakarian's team.

Mollet's under the radar performances are nothing new. Despite Metz's abject 2017/18 season, just 26 points saw Les Grenats finish bottom, Mollet was routinely a standout performer despite, bizarrely, failing to hold down a guaranteed spot for much of the year. Meanwhile, the previous season, Mollet also on the fringes, was only the orange haired creator's first top flight campaign at 23. Having failed to establish himself in three seasons with Dijon in Ligue 2, ten goals scored in 34 second tier games throughout 2015/16, despite another relegation for his then club Creteil, had convinced Metz of Mollet's worth. Again praise was not forthcoming however. Mollet missed out on the UNFP's Team of the Season for example despite being Ligue 2's top scoring midfielder and managing that feat for the 19th placed club.

His creative abilities, recognised by Der Zakarian, feeding Laborde and Delort while contributing goals himself, Mollet led Montpellier's charge for the top six after Christmas this year. Highlights included brilliantly dictating a 3-2 win over PSG in April, a graceful outside of the foot lob in beating Strasbourg 3-1 a week earlier and a Man of the Match display in victory at St Étienne in May. Thanks to Mollet's form, MHSC's goal was achieved but without reward. Sixth often equals a European place thanks to PSG's recent dominance of the cups but Strasbourg and Rennes' unexpected knockout triumphs meant that Montpellier missed out.

Usually a painfully pragmatic and conservative coach, Der Zakarian's long standing search for balance between attack and defence, the lack of which cost him success at Nantes and Reims, was finally realised largely thanks to Mollet and his understanding with Delort and Laborde. Surprisingly mobile, Mollet's quality and vision on ball from wide positions, as a deep lying playmaker, in and around the area or even from set pieces afforded Montpellier an ability to cut through, especially when given space on the counter when MDZ's front three were often aided by flying wing-backs.

Since the summer however, both Montpellier and Mollet have become a little more intermittent. Having won, drawn and lost league games in equal numbers across their first 18 outings, keeping Montpellier in mid-table, Mollet has even dropped out of the side in recent weeks despite some typically magnetic displays. A controlling Mollet display (which included a rare headed goal) saw off Monaco 3-1 in October plus a cute touch and finish for the winner against Nice in September nevertheless proved to be highlights for club and player. Largely thanks to strong competition across midfield, notably heightened by the arrivals of Téji Savanier from Nimes - arguably Ligue 1's premier performer in 2019, Mollet has only completed 90 minutes five times this season. He has also suffered from the idea that he is something of a luxury player and that means that he tends to perform better against the bigger name sides while both struggling for lack of space and perhaps the same levels of commitment against the rest of the league.

Der Zakarian, with his defensive mindset, has also pointed out areas of development for his number 10 in 2019, despite some match-winning displays. "He has a lot of room for improvement in terms of efficiency," explained the Armenian in October. "His long ball, his right foot and he has to score more." Der Zakarian also suggested that his front three work far better at home. "Apart from the defeat against Rennes, they are very successful [at home]," explained the Montpellier coach after beating Monaco. "They eliminate defenders and combine well but we have to reproduce this away from home."

Mollet too admitted that he could be more consistent, explaining during a slight dip in form at the start of 2019: "I have been a little worse but I'm human, I cannot do 38 games of very high level so there are inevitably matches where I will be less good," Mollet said. "If you expect me to be éépé or Neymar, we are wrong about the player I am. I'm a team player who must make others play and be at the service of the collective."

Nevertheless, Mollet, now 28, still has ambitions outside France. "I have character and I have ambitions. I want to go to the top of the top but it will necessarily get through a lot of work," Mollet told RMC. His favourite league? "Very sincerely the Bundesliga. It's total football... The stadiums are always full, the supporters are always behind the team." Although Mollet cannot do it all alone, when everything is working for Montpellier and their number 10, they're quietly one Ligue 1's most compelling attractions and, despite their lack of coverage, are well worth keeping an eye on.



*JUAN BERNAT*

(NEW)

**21**

**BORN: 1993/03/01, CULLAT**  
**CLUB: PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN**  
**POSITION: DEFENDER**  
**AT CLUB SINCE: 2018**  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019: 30**

Occasionally, an unexpected but pleasant surprise can suddenly appear out of nowhere and when it does, you may just end up with a real bargain on your hands! Moreover, when that surprise is a Spanish international full-back with big game experience at a cost of approximately £4.5m, even world football's biggest spenders look favourably upon it. Paris Saint-Germain, known widely for breaking international football transfer records, conducted an astute and smart piece of business on the final day of the summer transfer window in 2018.

With compatriot Yuri Berchiche departing the French capital for Athletic Bilbao and Layvin Kurzawa continuing to prove untrustworthy in more ways than one, PSG were facing uncertainty at left-back ahead of the 2018/19 season. With FFP continuing to prove menacing, the French champions opted for the out-of-favour Bayern Munich defender to solve their left-sided dilemma. Bernat was deemed surplus to requirements with the German champions, spending more time on the bench than he would have liked. But to add insult to injury, Bayern Munich president Uli Hoeness publicly hit out at the Spaniard shortly after a Champions' League tie against Sevilla saying "When we played in Seville, he was the only reason that we were close to being eliminated, that same day we decided that we would sell him for his s\*\*\* play!"

That was the final nail in the coffin for Bernat and his move to Paris the following summer could not have been better timed. It was a very left field signing from Tuchel and one out of the blue. After all, Bernat was not a big name signing - something PSG's fanbase had become accustomed to in recent years. Upon signing in Paris, Hoeness had another public dig at Bernat when asked of his thoughts on the signing. Hoeness said "I am happy that the nightmare is over, for some time now his play has been rubbish." In classy fashion, Bernat did not respond to such provocation, instead opting to focus on what was in front of him. A new start and new responsibility at world football's most ambitious project. "I'm very happy to be here, at Paris Saint-Germain, in a great team," Bernat said. "I'm here to earn my place and I'm really looking forward to playing with my new teammates." "I feel really good, I'm ready to play, 100 percent. The coach will decide who'll be on the pitch, but I'm ready."

In fairness, Bernat looked anything but ready and evidently struggled with match sharpness in the early stages at PSG after such little playing time in Bavaria. He quickly started to adjust to French football and gained the momentum that he was missing in the early stages. He made the left-back berth his own owing to a long-term injury to Kurzawa and even chipped in with some key goals and assists as the Champions' League group stage went down to a nail-biting game six finale to qualify for the knockout stages. Strikes against Liverpool and Napoli in the Champions' League group stage and again against Manchester United in the knockout rounds cemented the idea that Bernat was very much developing into a big-game player for PSG. As 2019 transcended, Bernat improved tenfold with a plethora of impressive performances to enhance his profile and cap off an incredible riposte from the wilderness.

The pint-sized full-back quickly enforced himself at PSG's first choice left-back ahead of the injury-prone Kurzawa and immediately developed a harmony with both Neymar and Kylian Mbappé by regularly supporting in attacking transitions and providing key passes and making defensive interventions when required. Juan Bernat has provided PSG with an unlikely talisman and trustworthy player at a fraction of the price most clubs would have to pay for a player with his experience and technical ability.

Paris Saint-Germain have provided the ex-Valencia man with the tools to revitalise his career amongst world class players and with that, providing a solution to one side of their well-documented full-back problems. After a collectively difficult end to the 2018/19 season, Bernat has begun this season well with some fine performances particularly in the Champions' League. The big games in the big competitions seem to bring the very best displays out of the Spaniard and with PSG's players historically freezing on the big stage, this will be a welcome boost for Tuchel.

As Bernat heads into 2020, he will be looking to continue his fine form for PSG but in truth should look to develop greater consistency particularly in some Ligue 1 games where he can be accused of coasting on occasions. The next six months are key; as Bernat was recently the beneficiary of a re-call to the Spanish national team, the onus on him is to perform well in Paris to be in with the best possible chance of making Luis Enrique's squad for EURO 2020 in June. There is no longer a glass ceiling for Bernat; he is in full control of his own destiny at PSG and with him now into the second year of a three-year-contract, expect to see an extension to his Parisian adventure sometime soon.



*LEO DUBOIS*

(+73)

**20**

**BORN: 1994/09/14, SEGRES**  
**CLUB: OLYMPIQUE LYONNAIS**  
**POSITION: DEFENDER**  
**AT CLUB SINCE: 2018**  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019: 32**



Modern football has given greater importance to full-backs and very few in world football right now exemplify that better than Léo Dubois. Signed from Nantes on a free transfer in one of the bargains of 2018, Dubois has gone from strength to strength since then, contributing in attack and defence as Lyon finished third once again in Ligue 1 and held their own for long periods against a Messi-inspired Barcelona in the 2018/19 Champions' League Round of 19.

In an era when full-backs are either good in attack and deficient in defence or good in defence and deficient in attack, Dubois is a breath of fresh air as his competence in both attacking and defensive phases make for a very balanced, modern footballer in this position. Balance is not the only thing that Dubois brings, versatility too. In the past, he has operated in different positions from defence to midfield while maintaining a high level of performance. In truth, it still feels like Dubois is criminally underrated. One wonders how much more lauded he would be if he had the charisma to command the internet "hype" like many of his contemporaries. A down-to-earth, exceedingly uncontroversial man, who loves his job and leaves everything he has out on the pitch on a weekly basis.

2019 began with an unremarkable draw at home against Stade de Reims, a game in which Dubois operated as a wing-back in a 3-4-1-2; one of those matches where Lyon unnecessarily dropped points as Genesio continued to tinker his way out of the Lyon job. The next time Dubois would step onto the pitch was at St Étienne where he came on for Kenny Tete with 10 minutes to go, making a goal-line clearance and assisting an injury time winner from Moussa Dembélé – a rambunctious way of making an impression against your team's fiercest rivals. It was the kind of cameo that the occasion needed, especially considering who the opponents were, and it signaled the start of a memorable year for the man born in Segré. His great attacking form continued in the next few weeks – a goal against Amiens came in the Coupe de France and an assist for Dembélé's equaliser against PSG in a Ligue 1 fixture they won soon followed.

Léo's form eventually caught the eye of Didier Deschamps who called him up to the French squad in May, ahead of the friendly matches against Bolivia and the EURO 2020 qualifiers against Andorra and Turkey. He made his debut at half-time against Bolivia, coming on for Benjamin Pavard. He finally made his first competitive start against Andorra, playing all 90 minutes as France ran out 2-0 winners. He received plaudits for his assured performance, having more touches of the ball than every player that featured bar Ferland Mendy. Didier Deschamps had spent nearly the best part of a year wondering about who to replace the then hapless Djibril Sidibé, but in May it was time to stop doing so. Dubois was that guy.

A promising summer was soon followed by a fine start to the season as Lyon racked up nine goals, conceding none, in their first two Ligue 1 games of the 2019/20 campaign under new manager Sylvinho. Things then started to go horribly wrong from that point and Lyon's form plummeted. In spite of that, Dubois remained one of the bright spots in the side even though some inconsistency started to creep in. This earned him another call-up for France and he delivered a great performance against Andorra again. The arrival of Rudi Garcia to replace the sacked Sylvinho has not changed much at Lyon but they seem to be turning the corner, even if extremely slowly.

Going into 2020, Lyon sit 12 points behind 2nd placed Marseille – a rapid turnaround will have to be achieved. Dubois' intelligence and understanding of space could be invaluable for them as they try to put together a consistent run and rise up the table. The positions that Dubois takes up in attack often lead to successful penetration of space between the opponent's left-back and left-sided central defender. He has also provided width when Jeff Reine-Adélaïde drifted into half-spaces, although that combination will not occur again this season after the winger suffered an ACL injury. It is not just the positions that Dubois takes up that gives Lyon greater impetus in attack, but the timing of his runs as well. He executes them without leaving Lyon exposed at the back.

With EURO 2020 on the horizon, Dubois will be hoping to keep his place in the French team and make the final squad. A lot will depend on how Lyon's season eventually pans out, and his role in it. Playing for a team like Lyon who have competed in the Champions' League each year since he joined has ushered him onto a bigger stage. So far, he has handled that remarkably well and stepped up to these increased demands. While he will look back on 2019 as the year when Dubois finally became a France international, it might also be reflected upon as the year when Europe really started to take notice of his immense talent.



*YUNIS ABDELHAMID*

(NEW)

**19**

**BORN: 1987/09/26, MONTPELLIER**

**CLUB: STADE DE REIMS**

**POSITION: DEFENDER**

**AT CLUB SINCE: 2017**

**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019: 37**

Surprise became the norm at Stade Auguste Delaune in 2019. But perhaps more unexpected than Reims' top six charge, inexperienced coach David Guion's success or an eclectic group of players upsetting the establishment was the continued presence of Yunis Abdelhamid. Having had just one previous, and underwhelming, Ligue 1 season with Dijon in 2016/17, Abdelhamid's development under Guion has been remarkable and remains one of the least talked about but most impressive breakthroughs for a centre back across Europe in recent times.

Signed on the strength of solid displays with Ligue 2 outfit Valenciennes, Abdelhamid won a promotion of his own in joining Dijon as they followed champions Nancy up to Ligue 1 in the summer of 2016. Despite impressing with VAFC as a defensive leader, the Moroccan failed to find a regular place and barely made Olivier Dall'Oglio's 18 towards the end of the season. Having started the first six league games, a poor performance away at PSG, and resulting half time substitution, proved irreparable for his reputation at the club. A second chance as November became December played out in much the same way.

As a result Abdelhamid was forced to back into Ligue 2, Reims and the newly installed David Guion were his lifeline. Having struggled for creativity in 2017/18 under the famously pragmatic Michel Der Zakarian, only five teams scored fewer goals despite finishing 7th, Guion placed his faith in a more vibrant and forward thinking group of players. Alongside emerging forwards such as Rémi Oudin, and (latterly) Mathieu Cafaro and Boulaye Dia, that faith that extended to the more experienced Moroccan defender. Reims were runaway champions. Abdelhamid, returning to his Valenciennes form, marshalling the league's best back line, was himself Ligue 2's standout defender across the campaign. Tellingly, while other experienced stalwarts such as sentinel Denilson da Cruz and winger Diego Rignonato were moved on, Guion retained Abdelhamid for another shot at the top flight.

With previous partner Julian Jeanvier whisked away by Brentford, the pair had made the UNFP Team of the Season together, Belgian centre back Björn Engels was parachuted in from Olympiakos. Nevertheless, despite different personnel and a higher standard of opposition, little changed for Guion's defence. Although three teams (the top two: PSG and Lille, plus Nice) conceded fewer goals, their wall-like defending was still an impressive feat for a promoted side, as Reims' rearguard again proved to be the best in class considering their relative stature.

Expertly drilled and meticulously organised by their coach, the power and intelligence of Abdelhamid and Engels in a stoic, deep sitting team won Reims many of the points that at one stage pushed them toward Europe and eventually 8th place; traditional heavyweights Marseille finished only six points better off come May. Once again Abdelhamid quietly shone as Ligue 1's best centre back (outside Paris), his remarkable consistency helping to maintain Reims' position despite a slight unbalancing of Guion's formula after Christmas in the search for a more expansive style.

Abdelhamid played every minute of Reims' league season. Highlights included a practically faultless outing in coaxing a clean sheet and nullifying the marauding Ismailia Sarr as Reims won 2-0 at Europa League-participating Rennes; a pair of monolithic defensive displays in taking four points off Lyon - Abdelhamid even steaming forward at Parc OL in search of a late winner; his superb aerial nous shutting out Marseille at the Vélodrome, while aiding a 2-1 home win in the reverse; as well as imperious form in keeping out a gung-ho Nîmes and aiding a 1-1 draw away to Nicolas Pépé's Lille. To date, Abdelhamid's 2019/20 form has proven just as imposing and equally consistent. Despite the loss of Engels to Aston Villa - some may argue they signed the wrong centre back - and the introduction of previously third choice Axel Disasi, at the time of writing Reims have conceded the fewest goals in Ligue 1 - just nine in 16 games.

Although goals are again being scored economically at the other end (only relegation battlers Nîmes and Dijon have fewer) Reims are once more pushing for a top six spot and proving frustratingly obdurate for the bigger sides. A 2-0 win in Paris was not undeserved. For such success they again have their resolute back four and commander-in-chief Abdelhamid to thank. Undoubtedly, 2019 has been Abdelhamid's career defining year. Taking Ligue 1 this calendar year in isolation, Marquinhos is perhaps the only defender who can claim to be the now 32 year old's equal, and the Brazilian has been used largely in midfield.

Across Europe, few defenders have matched Abdelhamid's consistency, leadership, strength and intelligence at the heart of any defence. The Moroccan has proven that his improved displays are no fluke but he is continually overlooked by bigger clubs, despite forcing his way back into the Morocco squad of late. If three more seasons at this level were to follow for Reims' under-the-radar star, struggling Lyon, out-of-their-depth Lille and a porous Monaco should reassess the merits of this giant of a defender. They could, and have done, far worse.





*YUCEF ATAL*

(NEW)

**18**

**BORN: 1996/05/17, BOGHNI**

**CLUB: OGC NICE**

**POSITION: DEFENDER/FORWARD**

**AT CLUB SINCE: 2018**

**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019: 28**



Many people like to describe OGC Nice's approach to games as "Give it to Atal and pray," so without an obvious style of play has been Patrick Vieira's tenure to date. Although such things are often said in jest, there is a lot of truth to it - at least the implication that Nice only really look devastating when Atal is running things. Not many players in world football can affect a game from right-back and then also have the capacity to impact the same game from the left side of attack. Of the few, Atal is one. It is hard to place the 23-year-old into any box - he would probably dribble his way out anyway - and that unpredictability about him is what makes him feared and already sought after by some of Europe's elite.

Atal's rise to the consciousness of the football world has been quick and loud, with many suddenly taking notice of a player who was relatively unknown not so long ago. Nice signed him for €3m from Belgian club KV Kortrijk who had just signed him permanently from Algerian club Paradou AC for €550k after a successful loan spell. Right from his debut against Stade de Reims, he was already looking like a bargain. Playing on the same side as Allan Saint-Maximin - a well-known volume dribbler - as a wing-back in a 3-4-3 or full-back in a 4-3-3, Atal showed glimpses of his immense potential within weeks. By the end of 2018, everyone had Atal's name on their lips as Nice rose up the table.

2019 has been the year of Youcef Atal. This year, he became African champion as Algeria lifted the African Cup of Nations trophy. Atal had been a key part of that team until an injury ended his tournament prematurely during the quarter-final against Côte d'Ivoire. Before then, he had been one of the shining lights of an impressive tournament by an Algerian team whose day of glory had been long overdue. He returned to Nice to start the season and build on the previous campaign where he had scored six goals and was one of their most potent attacking threats.

In April, playing from the left side of attack in a 4-3-3, alongside Saint-Maximin and Ihsan Sacko, Atal grabbed a hat-trick against Guingamp. It was one of those jaw-dropping performances where everything just clicked and Atal walked away with the match ball. By the next week at PSG, he was playing on the right side of attack and delivering an absolute masterclass - monsterclass, if you like. Juan Bernat was on the receiving end, repeatedly getting skinned by Atal who constantly headed to the byline. There was one specific run that went viral in which he took the PSG defence for a ride, completely bamboozling the hapless Juan Bernat and leaving him flat on the floor. That play saw him eventually create a glorious chance for Saint-Maximin, who faced an open goal and hit the post. Atal had also created another opening in the first half for Danilo who also hit the post with a stinging shot. By the end of the game (1-1), everyone was waxing lyrical about Atal's performance.

This season has not been impressive at Nice as many cracks have started to show. In truth, Vieira's heavy reliance on the individual brilliance of the likes of Atal, Christophe Hérelle and Walter Benitez in goal was never sustainable. Despite Nice's big investments following the lingering board issues that have been mostly resolved with respect to on-pitch matters, things were expected to pick up with Atal again at the centre of things and with Saint-Maximin sold. That notwithstanding, Atal's rich vein of form has continued into December. However, he has had a few stinkers like the Coupe de la Ligue game against Le Mans in which Nice were 2-0 down after 13 minutes. There was also the game against St Étienne in early December when Atal got continuously roasted in defence and also have away a penalty. He was taken off after 58 minutes in an eventual 4-1 defeat.

Atal will not get the opportunity to make up for these mishaps anytime soon as he suffered a serious knee injury in the next game against Metz. He had to have knee surgery and is expected to be out for around five months. It remains to be seen if he will immediately return to the same level he has shown in 2019 when he gets back or how long it will take him if he cannot immediately return to that level.

Youcef Atal still has a lot to improve on, especially defensively. Speaking to Canal Plus, Manchester City winger and his Algerian national team teammate Riyad Mahrez gave him pointers: "The only thing that I would say to him is that when he goes off on one of his dribbles, that he needs to lift his head. Because he plays like this (motions head down). He has a huge future and I hope that he will go to the very top." Atal's future is perhaps in a more attacking role devoid of defensive responsibility. What is clear at the moment is that he has frightening potential that if shaped properly will make him Algeria's latest phenomenon.



*VICTOR OSIMHEN*

(NEW)

**17**

**BORN: 1998/12/29, LAGOS**  
**CLUB: LILLE OSC**  
**POSITION: FORWARD**  
**AT CLUB SINCE: 2019**  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019: 36**

If you ask Victor Osimhen if he believes in miracles, he will most likely scream 'yes!' before you even finish the question. It would be the answer of a man who has lived it, from when he was a kid in Lagos, Nigeria up until now. When you break the single tournament record for goals in an U-17 World Cup, a lot is expected from you really fast. Sometimes, it might take a year or two but you simply have to start showing enough to remain on the minds of many. That is not how Osimhen's story has gone. After that tournament, Osimhen signed for Wolfsburg where he had a torrid time, barely got sufficient minutes and never scored. 14 games, no goal, stock dropped.

Although 2018 was the official start of Osimhen's redemption, 2019 has been the year of his revelation. From going back to obscurity in the sport to becoming one of the most talked about names in Europe, 2019 has easily been the best year of his life. The first six months of it were spent in Belgium where he played for Charleroi on loan from Wolfsburg. He quickly set about driving his new club into Belgium's Europa League playoffs. His brace earned them a win over KV Kortrijk but his goal against Royal Antwerp FC in the next stage was not enough as Charleroi lost 3-2. However, his 20 goals in 36 games earned him Charleroi's Player of the Season award and made them activate the €3.5m buy clause in their agreement with the Bundesliga club. Exactly a month later, he was holding up a Lille shirt, their new €12m signing.

Lille lost a lot of goals in the summer when Nicolas Pépé and Rafael Leão were sold to Arsenal and AC Milan respectively. The arrival of Osimhen along with the likes of Yusuf Yazici and Timothy Weah was intended to replace those goals. Although club Sporting Director Luis Campos has one of the greatest eyes for obscurity with world class potential in the game, even the most optimistic of Lille fans must have felt that it was going to take a while before they started to see the objective achieved. Victor Osimhen clearly did not read that script. It took him just 19 minutes on his debut against Nantes to slam one in. A long ball - clearance, really - from José Fonte landed on Osimhen's chest and he guided it forward before putting the ball in the back of the net. The Stade Pierre-Mauroy erupted, but he was not done yet. Late in the second half, with the score level at 1-1, Osimhen popped up again to score the winner. A cross from Zeki Çelik landed at his feet and he guided it forward with his foot before slamming a shot into the roof of the net. Three points, two goals, a debut to remember for Osimhen.

Osimhen has shown no signs of stopping since that debut, scoring regularly while constantly being a menace for opposition defenders. By the end of September, he was named UNFP Player of the Month, an accolade that no one could argue that he did not emphatically deserve. Within weeks, talk on the terraces of the Stade Pierre-Mauroy was about Lille's overreliance on him. As it is, an Osimhen off-day is often a Lille off-day. With Jonathan Bamba not looking as dangerous as he did last season, and Yusuf Yazici still settling in, Osimhen's goals and overall play have been invaluable for Lille who have not had the luxury of waiting for the team to work. In games where they have underwhelmed, Osimhen has often been the difference. In the Champions' League, he scored against Chelsea and Valencia, proving that he is unfazed by the greatest European stage.

For his national team, 2019 was also something of a breakout period for Osimhen. He started the year as a prospect and is ending it as the undisputed #9 for Nigeria. However, at this summer's AFCON, he featured for only 45 minutes. But in those minutes, he gave a preview of what Nigerians could expect from him as he stepped into the shoes of the retiring Odion Ighalo who had finished tournament top scorer. When he did feature again for Nigeria, he bagged his first goal for his country against Ukraine. During the qualification games for the next African Cup of Nations, Osimhen scored three goals in two games and added two assists. The plaudits flowed, with his names praised to the high heavens. In Belgium, France, the Champions' League and for the Nigerian national team, Osimhen has kept up his excellence.

When you start the year barely receiving any attention in Belgium and end it by being linked to clubs like Barcelona and FC Bayern, you know you have had a year to remember. It is already looking like Lille will not be able to hold onto him past this season. 26 goals and five assists in 2019 for club(s) and country at the time of writing are some of the reasons why. Wherever Osimhen goes to after Lille, it looks like he could truly reach the pinnacle of the sport. 2019 will be the year that really put him on the path there.





*BENJAMIN ANDRÉ*

(+8)

**16**

**BORN: 1990/08/03, NICE**

**CLUB: LILLE OSC**

**POSITION: MIDFIELDER**

**AT CLUB SINCE: 2019**

**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019: 30**



Benjamin André got his big move to a Champions' League club this summer. Admittedly, it may not have been to a club as illustrious as those with a legitimate shot at making an impact in Europe's biggest competition, however there is no doubt his joining Lille has turned a few more heads than might have been expected when he made his professional debut more than a decade ago with Ajaccio. Born in Nice to a Senegalese father and a French mother, he started his career with Stade Raphaëlois, a club which has since been absorbed into Étoile Fréjus Saint-Raphaël, before making the leap to Corsica in 2006.

Initially trained as a centre back, when he ceased growing at just 5'10", he was moved to right-back, then further forward into midfield. Small but possessed of a wiry strength, he made his professional debut for Ajaccio early in the 2008/09 season under Gernot Rohr, but the former Bordeaux manager left shortly thereafter, following a disagreement with club president Alain Orsoni. His replacement, José Pasqualetti, was not as enamoured with André; when he did play, it was often wherever needed: at right-back, on the right-wing, or as a number ten, but rarely in the central midfield role in which he has made his name. Strangely, this proved not to merely be a proclivity of Pasqualetti's, as Olivier Pantaloni did the same, also experimenting with André on the left-wing as well.

It is hard to argue with Pantaloni's decision; in winning promotion in finishing second in 2010/11, playing a defensively sound brand of football with little in the way of attacking impetus, he played André as a regular starter again in a variety of roles. His grit and determination were already in evidence, lending steel to these myriad positions, but he still seemed to be a role player in that he was yet to have nailed down a regular starting role. This was the case despite him having won a handful of caps for France's U21s, no small matter for a player in the second division, even as he was finding his path there blocked by the likes of Maxime Gonalons, Clément Grenier, Benjamin Stambouli, Morgan Schneiderlin and Moussa Sissoko.

Non-plussed either at continuing as a jack of all trades or in having much of a future for his country, promotion to Ligue 1 saw little in the way of competition for André arrive that summer outside of Mehdi Mostefa, and he made the step up to the top flight with ease as the Corsican side began the first of what would be a surprising three-year sojourn in Ligue 1. Played more often as an attacking midfielder in the top flight, André duly responded with impressive goal and assist totals. These have of course ceased to be important parts of his play at present, with the likes of Jonathan Ikoné and Yusuf Yazici driving the Lille attack forward but every now and then he will offer a potent reminder of this, as he did against Bordeaux in late October.

With Ajaccio's relegation, then, he had no shortage of suitors looking to keep him in France's top flight, and he soon signed on with a Rennes side led by Philippe Montanier, where he looked to be the ostensible successor to Romain Danzé. A thigh injury suffered early in his time in Brittany, coupled with the emergence of Steven Moreira, meant that he would have a new role in central midfield upon his return, playing in a 4-3-3 as a box-to-box midfielder, as Montanier relied on the likes of Kamil Grosicki and Paul-Georges Ntep to facilitate the attack.

While Montanier has often been a much-maligned figure in France (and, indeed, abroad) of late, there is little doubting his shifting André to that role has worked out for the best. The next season, Rennes became one of France's more exciting teams with the emergence of Ousmane Dembélé, and André was at the heart of it all, offering a reliable presence in breaking up play and recycling possession whilst also evincing a surprisingly strong aerial threat, perhaps harkening back to his training as a centre back. A Coupe de France win and a memorable Europa League campaign in the first half of 2019 only served as further evidence of his ability to seamlessly rise to the occasion against more ballyhooed opposition, and his move to Lille, lacking a midfield presence such as his after Thiago Mendes' move to Lyon, seems a natural progression.

Always a born leader, dating from his earliest days at Nice, André is no longer the club captain that he was at Rennes, but one has to feel that his preternatural composure and consistent focus could readily see José Fonte pass on the armband when the Portuguese decides to make his exit. For now, though, the challenge remains to get Lille back into the top three; with Marseille, his former club Rennes and Monaco looking the most threatening opponents in this regard. Given all that he has achieved to date, if Les Dogues do once more hear the Champions' League anthem next season, there will be little doubt that André has been instrumental in getting them there.



*MAURO ICARDI*

(NEW)

**15**

**BORN: 1993/02/19, ROSARIO**  
**CLUB: PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN**  
**POSITION: FORWARD**  
**AT CLUB SINCE: 2019**  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019: 24**

As in most years since the QSI takeover, stories connected with PSG dominated many of the summer transfer window headlines. These mainly centred around the Neymar saga, the fact that PSG were actually building a midfield, and the first rumblings of a Kylian Mbappé to Real Madrid move. But perhaps the reigning Ligue 1 champion's most significant business of the window could prove to be a deadline day deal which felt at the time like a last-minute, relatively risk-free gamble. Leonardo, as is his wont, looked to Italy – and more particularly to Milan – and came up with a season-long loan – with purchase option – for controversial Inter striker Mauro Icardi. At the time, the general consensus was that he clearly had the potential to add something on the pitch. The question was whether the potential ego problems and baggage that he (and his wife) brought with them to Paris would have a still more negative effect on what was already a fragile Parisian changing room.

Icardi's pedigree has never been in doubt. Born in Rosario, Argentina – the same city that produced Lionel Messi and team-mate Ángel di María – Icardi moved with his family to the Canary Islands at the age of nine and joined youth team UD Vecindario – where he scored an outstanding 384 goals in six seasons. His goalscoring exploits attracted the attention of Barcelona and Icardi joined the legendary set-up at La Masia. It did not work out for Mauro there however, with Icardi's explanation perhaps hinting at the strong independent character that he would demonstrate later in his career: "Barça was an important step in my career but when you're young, it feels like being in a prison. You're constantly watched, you need to play well and score goals – but you also have to behave impeccably and have good marks at school. It's like being in the army. Out of 70-80 players, not all can accept the rules that are put in place. I was one of them."

Instead, the 18-year-old Icardi moved to Italy, joining Sampdoria, who were then languishing in Serie B. An excellent return of 19 goals in 23 matches for the reserve team in 2011/12, propelled him into the first team squad and a late-season debut as a substitute, 10 minutes into which he scored a crucial winner to take Sampdoria into a successful promotion play-off. In his first season in Serie A, Icardi was used across the line of a 4-3-3, scoring 10 goals in 31 matches – but catching the eye with a quadruple against Pescara and two matchwinners against Juventus. The inevitable move to one of Serie A's big boys came, with Inter winning out. And over the course of the next six seasons, Icardi left an indelible mark on the Nerazzuri, leaving a trail of destruction behind him, both positive and negative, on and off the pitch.

A record of 124 goals in 219 matches, hat-tricks and late match-winners in Milan derbies, capocannoniere awards, Champions' League stunners, the youngest foreigner ever to reach 50 Serie A goals (and among the 10 youngest of all time), the youngest ever player, at 25, to reach 100 Serie A goals. Club captain at only 22. His long list achievements should have guaranteed him legend status at Inter. However, a trail of controversial off-pitch incidents marred his time in Milan and his legacy. His reputation was originally tainted by his marriage in May 2014 to Wanda Nara, ex-wife of Icardi's best friend at Sampdoria Maxi Lopez – Icardi rubbing salt into the wound by getting tattoos of Lopez's kids!

Then in 2015, he began a feud with Inter fans after he threw his shirt into the crowd following an Inter defeat – and the shirt was thrown back. Unsurprisingly, his and the fans' accounts of the argument that followed differ greatly. Nara meanwhile became his agent, but her regular public interventions in his favour have rarely helped diffuse situations. Then earlier this year, in the midst of bitter contract negotiations, Icardi was stripped of the club captaincy and also forced to serve a six-match ban – despite his protestations that his absence was due to a knee injury.

Unsurprisingly, then, PSG's gamble was not universally seen as a positive move. However, Icardi has kept his head down, Nara has (mostly) kept quiet, and Icardi has done all his talking on the pitch. The archetypal fox in the box (95% of his career goals have been scored in the area) who is not only a replacement but an upgrade for the injury-prone and aging Cavani, Icardi, has fitted perfectly into the PSG team. While Tuchel is rightly unprepared to play all four of Mbappé, di María, Neymar and Icardi, since none are interested in helping to defend, all four are in great form and proving very effective whatever the combination, often hiding poor PSG performances with their clinical attacking play. The first six months of 2019 at Inter were understandably underwhelming. But since joining PSG, Icardi has nine goals and three assists in 11 Ligue 1 matches. He played in all six of PSG's Champions' League group games, scoring five. In October alone he recorded seven goals in five matches. As is always the case, PSG will not be judged on domestic affairs so it is far too early to reach any lasting conclusions. But at this half-way point of the season, the Icardi gamble has certainly paid off, and bodes well for the first half of 2020.





*WALTER BENÍTEZ*

(+68)

**14**

**BORN:** 1993/01/19, GENERAL S. MARTIN

**CLUB:** OGC NICE

**POSITION:** GOALKEEPER

**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2016

**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 37



Walter Benítez, nicknamed "The Wall," by OGC Nice's supporters, has quietly put together another fine year for Les Aiglons, even if he has not quite been to the level of last year. The Argentine has time and again kept Patrick Vieira's side in matches, despite playing under the cloud of being available on a free transfer come the summer, having failed to reach an agreement with the club on an extension, despite last summer's takeover by INEOS. That the club have failed to reach an extension with Benítez looks increasingly to be quite embarrassing for Nice, as his talent has been unquestioned throughout his time in the first team.

Born in the northern city of General José de San Martín, Benítez came to prominence with Quilmes, a Buenos Aires club with a fine history but little to speak of in the way of titles of late, having been somewhat of a yo-yo club in recent decades. While there, he was able to break into the first team in 2014, having already impressed for his country in the previous year's U-20 South American Championships. However, playing in Argentina's second division was hardly enough to satisfy Benítez's competitive drive, and he soon looked abroad for a bigger challenge.

Out of contract in the summer of 2016, Benítez joined Nice on a free transfer, despite interest from Boca Juniors, eager to stake his claim for a first-team place at a club who had been one of the first in France to look to Argentina as a source of talent. He would have to wait his turn, however, as a tibial fracture saw him consigned to the treatment table for his first few months at the club. Too, there would be a challenge to see off on the pitch, as the club already had a pair of hotly-tipped youngsters in the form of Yoan Cardinale and Mouez Hassen, his back-up. In Benítez's first season at the club, indeed, Cardinale's form was instrumental in seeing Les Aiglons make an unlikely tilt at the top three in France.

The following campaign, however, was less kind to the young Frenchman, and Benítez, with Hassen out on loan, was made first choice in the fall of 2017, after a combination of a galling run of four heavy defeats in all competitions and injury on the part of Cardinale. Nice immediately made a turnaround both domestically and in Europe, winning six of ten matches in Ligue 1 and progressing to the Round of 32 in the Europa League. Things continued well that season for Les Aiglons, and while they were disappointed to have lost out on a place in Europe by a single point, things augured well for the club, even as Lucien Favre, the architect of much of the team's recent success, was replaced by the relatively inexperienced Patrick Vieira on the bench.

The change of manager seemed to make no difference to him, though, as last season was Benítez's finest by some distance; in late autumn he strung together six consecutive clean sheets, part of a league-leading sixteen over the entire campaign, and took a Nice side who were, to be charitable, middling in attack to the verge of Europe, no mean feat for a side relying on the likes of Youcef Atal and Allan Saint-Maximin for goals, with Vieira remarking to Goal, "He's a great goalkeeper and our ranking is due to his performances, what he's doing right now." While Nice have struggled a bit more this season, sitting in mid-table after some early difficulties, none of the blame for that should go to the Argentine. He has had to deal with tactical uncertainty as Vieira has switched among various formations, as well as lengthy injury absences on the parts of Dante and Christophe Hérelle, the team's ostensible first-choice centre back pairing.

Nice's struggles this season notwithstanding, Benítez has been unwavering in his desire to play for his country. With Sergio Romero 33 next year, La Albiceleste would do well to look at a younger player who similarly has a modicum of experience, a profile which matches that of the Nice player. It is, however, this pursuit that may ultimately see Benítez, as he had done with Quilmes, pursue greener pastures in the hope of the exposure that would come with playing in England or for a club who are Champions' League regulars.

INEOS' focus on buying attacking talent this summer, in the form of Alexis Claude-Maurice and Kasper Dolberg, combined with his lack of exposure vis-à-vis playing for his country, have frustrated Benítez. There were links this summer with Porto and Wolves, both clubs who are not short on ambition, and even if INEOS do express a desire to challenge for the Champions' League in Ligue 1, it seems his patience has worn thin. Fair play to Benítez, then, no matter his destination this summer, as he continues to project as a player who has the talent necessary to make a difference at a major club in the near future.



*BAPTISTE SANTAMARIA*

(+68)

**13**

**BORN:** 1995/03/09, SAINT-DOULCHARD

**CLUB:** ANGERS SCO

**POSITION:** MIDFIELDER

**AT CLUB SINCE:** 2016

**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019:** 39

Angers are known as a team that, using their specialised and impressively sophisticated scouting network for a club of their size, can recruit talented players from lower French league clubs. These talents nestle under the wing of Stéphane Moulin whose experience in developing young players is similarly highly regarded. The club has a profile based on continuity in almost every aspect from coach Moulin, a former player, who has been back at his club since 2005 and the first team coach since 2011. General Manager, Olivier Pickeu, also at the helm since 2005 and his brother, Benoît, as the fitness coach for almost as long.

This continuity trope permeates into the squad as well. The current starting defence and goalkeeper has cost the club a grand total of zero in transfer fees and apart from 18-year-old, Rayan Aït Nouri, started in the 2-0 victory of matchday one in 2015, the club's first game back in France's top flight for two decades. The is an almost unheard of achievement in modern football but it has been developing year on year into a bigger issue. While Moulin tactics and setup can mask some of the individual deficiencies of the defenders, Baptiste Santamaria is the primary reason that the defence as has enjoyed such longevity, he has been quite literally sweeping it all under the carpet.

Operating as the midfield pivot in a 4-1-4-1, Santamaria is the sentinel in black and white. Combined with his tremendous athletic endurance, this makes the 24-year old one of the best midfielders in France and has earned him the nickname "4X4". With a passion for horse riding, Santamaria's endurance levels must have been inspired by his own race horse, Déesse de Bouillon. In the 2018/19 season, no player covered more distance than the Frenchman as he averaged 11.65km per match and this season he has somehow bettered this.

In a recent article last month by Ligue1.com, Santamaria's average distance covered was recorded at 12.3km per match, Angers themselves are always high in these athletic rankings but Santamaria is their jewel in the crown. However, this is not mindless chasing of the ball; his positional intelligence is of high quality and come the end of the season he regularly features in the top players with the most interceptions. This clever timing and judgement has been displayed across his years at Le SCO. Across his four seasons he has been fouled more times than the number he commits (1.4 per 90 to 1.3), he has never received a red card and only been handed 11 yellow cards!

It is not only his defensive and athletic abilities that continue to improve, Santamaria's passing has always been centred around keeping the flow of possession smooth and comfortable. He has kept these principles while developing into an astute long passer, someone who is able to switch play with ease and when under pressure. As his teammate, Thomas Mangani, has slowly begun to regress; Santamaria will often help distribution in a double pivot alongside the veteran midfielder. With the departure of Jeff Reine-Adélaïde to Lyon at the beginning of the most recent campaign, Angers began to miss his ability to work in tight areas and demonstrate strong ball carrying ability. There have been times where the current midfield partnership has been dysfunctional in this aspect and Santamaria takes it upon himself to do fill the void. Previously used as a winger before joining the western outfit, his solid dribbling ability has lent itself well to this task.

There is almost never a drop in performance from game to game from Santamaria. His consistency is one of his assets that people tend to forget about. Since joining the club in the summer of 2016 he has only missed seven league games. No outfield player in Ligue 1 has missed fewer in that time. Despite all the incomings and sales at Angers over the years, he has remained the cornerstone of the club's overperformance every year.

There was interest in the summer from a host of clubs. Aston Villa made a €10m bid and offered four times his current wage, but Angers rejected this wanting more. It is common to see a player's performances and intensity drop after failing to get their desired transfer, but there has been no sign of this whatsoever. This will almost certainly be his last season at the club, with Santamaria stating in recent interviews that he would like to play at a higher level.

Recent interest from Atalanta reflects the notion that the 24 year-old deserves to be playing with a club in Europe. Angers, most likely will aim to get around €20m for him, a very reasonable fee for a player who has never had any injury problems and has gained four full seasons of experience, developing into one of the most underrated midfielders across Europe. Angers will aim to finish the season in a comfortable mid-table position, with Santamaria continuing to excel. Replacing his function in the squad will be the hardest task for Pickeu and his scouts, but if anyone can do it, Les Scoistes can.



*MIKE MAIGNAN*

(+39)

**12**

**BORN: 1995/07/03, CAYENNE**  
**CLUB: LILLE OSC**  
**POSITION: GOALKEEPER**  
**AT CLUB SINCE: 2015**  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019: 38**



Marcelo Bielsa is arguably the Marmite figure of world football – while some think he is a genius and a saint who gets the very best out of his players, others see him as a serially under-achieving hypocrite who leaves his clubs in the lurch and ruins as many careers as he creates. No prizes for guessing the opinion of Vincent Enyeama, the Lille goalkeeper who was unceremoniously dropped from Bielsa's first team squad. The view of Mike Maignan – the young man whom Bielsa anointed as his number one – but whose career he almost ruined before it started – may be a little less clear.

Having moved from Guyana to France at the age of eight, Maignan joined Parisian regional club Villiers le Bel JS, originally as an outfield player, before his coaches identified his goalkeeping skills. Although he was pushed back to his goal-line, his coaches continued to encourage his footwork, his coach Romain Damiano saying: "he always had a good kicking game, even as a kid. Look at the top keepers – they play higher up the pitch. They're like old-school sweepers and I asked Mike to play like that when he was young."

His ability with hands and feet attracted PSG, the club signing him as a 14-year-old. There too, he continued to hone his football-playing skills, often going to the indoor courts with the likes of Adrien Rabiot and Presnel Kimpembe to play pick-up matches against all comers. Maignan signed his first professional contract with PSG in 2013 and made fleeting pre-season appearances. However, with QSI's millions meaning that star transfers were increasingly being prioritised over young homegrown talents, he realised that his future lay elsewhere.

In the summer of 2015 Maignan moved to the Nord, joining Lille to serve as understudy to the excellent Vincent Enyeama. His first team opportunity came earlier than expected as Enyeama was sent off during a match against Rennes in September 2015 (thanks to a Giovanni Sio dive). Maignan was brought on, his first professional act to face a Paul-Georges Ntep penalty ... which he saved, diving right but stopping the ball down the centre with his feet! Amazingly, a week later as he continued to deputise for the suspended Enyeama against Reims, Maignan repeated the feat, diving right and low to palm out David Ngog's spot kick!

Despite those feats, Maignan returned to the bench for the most part of the next two seasons, until Bielsa was appointed Lille coach and one of his first acts was to banish a group of Lille's reliable – but too influential for his liking – professionals to "the loft". Joining the likes of Marko Baša was Enyeama, with Maignan promoted to number one keeper. His tenure started poorly however, petulantly getting himself sent off in only the second match of the season by throwing the ball at Strasbourg's Corgnet's head.

That set the tone for a disastrous 2017/18 campaign, for Bielsa, for Lille and for Maignan, as les Dogues battled relegation all season. Maignan – despite another penalty save from Nabil Fekir to secure a shock 2-1 win at Lyon – lost all confidence – perhaps trying too hard to be the ball-playing keeper that Bielsa was pushing him to be. As his first coach Damiano observed: "I got the impression that he was always looking to begin moves from the back, clean and short, and sometimes that put the team in trouble." By the time Christophe Galtier took over from Bielsa in 2018, Maignan's form had dropped off to such an extent that he was even dropped for a few matches, replaced by Hervé Koffi.

However, he was reinstalled for the 2018/19 season and, excelling under the tutelage of goalkeeping coach Nuno Santos (who himself has impressed so much that Tottenham have now poached him, much to Galtier's anger), Maignan was a crucial part of Lille's superb season. An ever-present as Lille finished a surprise second, he kept 17 clean sheets, saving four more penalties and winning the UNFP award for Goalkeeper of the Year. As Damiano noted: "this year he now knows what to do when it comes to releasing the ball, whether or not to take a risk. It's a form of maturity and it shows a real progression in his reading of the game."

Galtier, too noticed a change in his keeper: "He used to struggle to maintain high standards and concentration. I feel that he has changed lots of things and is much more open to listening to the advice of others." That progress, maintained into this season, has seen Maignan become arguably the most complete goalkeeper currently in Ligue 1, a great shot-stopper, imposing at crosses and, of course, adept with the ball at his feet. 2019 has seen him keep a total of 16 Ligue 1 clean sheets – particularly impressive since this season's Lille team is so changed from last campaign's line-up. It has seen him maintain his penalty-saving percentage at an incredible 31%. And it has seen him deservedly promoted to France's senior squad, with many seeing him as the next long-term number one, the role which for so long seemed destined to go to his former PSG team-mate Alphonse Areola. Under Mike Maignan, France's goalkeeping situation is in very safe hands.



*NEYMAR*

(-8)

**11**

**BORN: 1992/02/05, MOGI DAS CRUZES**

**CLUB: PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN**

**POSITION: FORWARD**

**AT CLUB SINCE: 2017**

**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019: 15**

There can be little doubt that 2019 will go down as the most difficult year in what has been a stellar career so far for Neymar. Injuries, controversies and personal disappointment have punctuated the past 12 months, and the man once viewed as the difference maker, the talisman to take PSG to the summit of European football's elite, now finds his stock far lower than anyone could have foreseen. But it could all have been so different. In January, PSG looked in a far better position than in recent seasons to go the distance in the Champions' League; despite deficiencies in certain areas. The star quality of Neymar, Kylian Mbappé et al. coupled with the tactical nous of Thomas Tuchel meant that the side were in excellent shape. After a tenuous, bordering on toxic relationship with Unai Emery, the Brazilian finally had a coach he believed in.

Nevertheless, it was a depressing case of déjà-vu as the Brazilian missed a decisive stretch of the season through injury for the second season running after suffering a fractured metatarsal against Strasbourg at the end of January; the very same injury that had kept him on the sidelines the previous year. The Coupe de France tie was a feisty one, and had seen 'Ney' take his fair share of kicks from the opposition. Insult was literally added to injury with the controversial and borderline classless comments from Strasbourg personnel, with midfielder Anthony Gonçalves accusing Neymar of "blubbering", and coach Thierry Laurey's remarks effectively suggesting that the Brazilian deserved the tough tackling due to "showing off". The moment was perhaps a new low for the €222m man, as his teammates would go on to limp out of the Champions' League, and towards a thoroughly anticlimactic end to the season. The forward missed the next 18 matches for his club.

The negatives did not stop there. During his spell on the treatment table, Neymar managed to pick up a three-match suspension in the UCL for criticising officials on Instagram following Manchester United's shock comeback in March. A domestic ban followed after footage emerged of the Brazilian appearing to hit a fan following PSG's disappointing Coupe de France final defeat to Rennes. And just when he looked to be back to full fitness, the forward missed his country's victorious campaign as Copa America hosts after rupturing ligaments in his ankle in a friendly against Qatar. This, just days after being removed as Brazil captain for ill-discipline. A poor season on the pitch, then, which paled in comparison to the tribulations the Brazilian would face over the summer. In May, Neymar was the subject of rape allegations, a case which was only dismissed in August, when his accuser was charged with fraud and extortion.

During this time, the Brazilian was also embroiled in the summer's most high profile and laborious transfer saga. After failing to show up to pre-season training, it emerged that the forward was keen on a return to Barcelona, and as if his behaviour had not already incensed the club and supporters alike, further strain was put on the relationship when, in a July interview with Oh My Goal, he claimed his favourite on-pitch memory was "when we won against PSG with FC Barcelona." The existing question marks looming over his commitment to the club were compounded, and it seemed whatever would transpire, Neymar's time in Paris was over. The damage seemed irreparable. However, the move did not materialise. Barcelona lacked the out-and-out financial muscle to force PSG's hand, having already broken the bank for Antoine Griezmann, while they failed to meet the club's specific demands in a players-plus-cash deal. 'Ney' was set to stay, and it looked for all the world like club and player alike were in for a tumultuous campaign.

Suspension, reported fitness issues, and prudent management from the club meant that Neymar only made his first appearance in mid-September, starting at home against Strasbourg. Many supporters had already been voicing their disdain, but with the Brazilian now directly in the line of fire, the Parc des Princes was a cauldron; a sensory overload of jeers, offensive gestures, insulting banners and chants of "son of a b\*\*\*\*." But as the cliché goes, it was written: the Brazilian won the match in injury time with a stunning bicycle kick. Vindication. Despite the vitriol from the fans, he had helped defeat the very team who had injured and insulted him at the start of the year. He showed then what he has since made abundantly clear: he does not need to feel love to be the difference maker.

Having since stressed his commitment to the club, and acknowledged that things are "better with the fans", Neymar has fought tirelessly on the pitch to make things right, and has shown exactly why, when fit, he is still one of the very best in the world. He has scored vital late winners this season, notably away at Lyon, where, surrounded by opposition defenders in the box, he took the ball masterfully, deftly working it into a shooting position through some clever footwork before cleanly striking the ball in at the far post. Few players on the planet are capable of such close control. And though only fit for a handful of games in the latter half of last season, the forward's genius was never in doubt, especially when, coming up big in the Coupe de France final, he set up one and then scored with a sumptuous and audacious chip. Neymar still seems otherworldly with the ball at his feet, and able to deliver on the grandest of occasions.

Back again after yet another spell out with injury, we are left to wonder whether we will ever see a consistently fit Neymar again. Moreover, Mbappé and even Di Maria have now overtaken him in terms of their importance to the team. That being said, he has proven himself a fighter, able to overcome gruelling adversity. It remains to be seen whether his time at PSG will be overshadowed by persistent injuries and disciplinary issues. If he disappoints, his time in the capital may prove to be little more than a PR triumph.



*TEJI SAVANIER*

(+73)

**10**

**BORN: 1991/12/22, MONTPELLIER**

**CLUB: MONTPELLIER HSC**

**POSITION: MIDFIELDER**

**AT CLUB SINCE: 2019**

**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019: 29**



Luminous orange and deep navy, Téji Savanier stands at ten feet tall. This Téji Savanier however is not the stocky mid-field general but a striking mural painted in his honour on the walls of his Montpellier neighbourhood. Despite being many an observer's pick for Ligue 1 Player of the Season last term and garnering interest from across Europe, separating the graceful yet imposing Savanier from his hometown and its people was never going to be the player's preference. It would appear that, despite switching from one side of a fierce local rivalry to another, that feeling is very much mutual.

Téji Savanier's impact on Nîmes' gung-ho return to Ligue 1 can't be underestimated. Having finished a distant second behind Ligue 2 2017/18 champions Reims, Les Crocodiles returned to the top flight for the first time since 1993 without a proven top flight goal-scorer or a particularly solid defence, even for the second tier. Both of these attributes persisted after promotion. Despite an attacking 4-2-4 set-up and a vibrant, forward-thinking style, Antonin Bobichon and Renaud Ripart's eight league goals proved to be a high watermark while a 58 in the against column was only exceeded by bottom club Guingamp (68) and 18th placed Dijon (60) who scraped through a relegation play-off with Lens.

Blaquart however boasted the most secret of weapons. Central midfielder Savanier, in his first top flight season at the age of 26, made up for nearly every shortcoming in Nîmes' ranks to carry the club - who had been as low as National as recently as 2013 - to a glorious top half finish in 9th. On football's great Venn Diagram, Savanier's style falls somewhere in the minuscule overlap between bulldog and ballerina. The grace and guile of Xabi Alonso somehow amalgamated with Arturo Vidal's presence and physicality. Although a devilish dead-ball ability, supreme technical quality, a visionary range of passing and a thunderous shot meant that Savanier stood out whenever Nîmes played, it was his leadership, stamina, ferocious attitude and apparent midfield omnipotence that proved just as crucial for Blaquart's upstarts. Despite little midfield reinforcement for Blaquart's carefree style and being deployed as nominally the deepest midfielder, Savanier somehow managed to fulfill the roles of sentinel, trequartista and dynamic all-rounder.

Although marauding wide forwards Denis Bouanga and Sada Thioub plus the sharp reflexes of young goalkeeper Paul Bernardoni also deserve much credit for Nîmes' shock run into the top half, the 5-0 defeat away at Lille on a rare average outing underlined Savanier's ubiquitous influence on Les Crocos. Incredibly, Savanier led a side that had little to no top flight experience. Bouanga and Bernardoni, two key signings, had impressed for Lorient and Clermont alongside Blaquart's Nîmes in Ligue 2 during their promotion run.

As a result, on paper, Nîmes looked like a Ligue 2 team, and one with a few gaps. Captain and centre back Anthony Briançon struggled for a consistent partner all season and despite Umut Bozok and Achid Alloui's combined 41 goals in the second tier, both were unable to wholly adapt to Ligue 1 life like Savanier did, with Blaquart rotating his forwards regularly. Nevertheless Nîmes' impressive total of 57 goals scored was the seventh best in Ligue 1, only Strasbourg, Marseille and the top four outscoring Les Crocodiles. For this Blaquart again has Savanier to thank. The stocky midfielder's thirteen assists made him French football's leading goal provider in 2018/19, contributing two more than Lille's Nicolas Pépé (despite playing less minutes thanks to an utterly ludicrous five game ban for tripping Kylian Mbappé) and Ángel Di María of PSG. Many of Savanier's setups came from his pinpoint crossing and dead ball deliveries. "For me, I've always said, it's more beautiful to make a pass than to score," Savanier told L'Équipe this summer.

This is not to mention Savanier's six league goals, outscoring all four of Blaquart's out-and-out strikers, although admittedly aided by his penalty record. A short run up and whipped free kick in the 4-0 thrashing of Dijon was superb but the highlight, and arguably the goal of last season, came in the return against Dijon in February. Fed by his then midfield partner in crime Jordan Ferri after Dijon's possession broke down, Savanier led the counter over the halfway line. Ignoring the supporting Ripart, Bouanga and Bobichon, Nîmes' talisman spotted Bobby Allain meandering back towards his goal from the edge of his area and arrowed a rasping drive (the shot too flat to be termed a lob) over the keeper's head and into the far corner from close to 50 yards. It was a goal that summed Savanier up; supremely confident with glorious technical ability.

Perhaps the biggest surprise of all was that Savanier had managed to avoid catching the eye of a top club over nearly a decade as a professional. The simple answer being that Savanier, despite his dominance and prodigious ability on a football pitch remains a humble family man off it, unwilling to move too far from his considerable routes and extended family. "Our tradition is to stay together." Savanier told L'Équipe in 2018, "It would make me sick to leave the neighborhood... I play for my family." Even so Savanier admits that his competitive spirit remains, telling L'Équipe that he's even desperate to win against his children. "I want to play all the time and beat them. I do not like losing, even against them."

That neighbourhood which Savanier mentions is Figuerolles, a short walk from the centre of Montpellier. Less than affluent, dusty and a little frayed around the edges with plain buildings and narrow streets. When most footballers would have extricated themselves from Figuerolles after a rise as dramatic as Nîmes' midfield general, Savanier comes home from training every evening to his wife, children, parents and siblings. Over the course of his career, Savanier has rarely left the city. Having started his career with Nîmes' fierce Languedoc rivals Montpellier HSC in their B team, before returning again this summer, Savanier's only excursion was up the Rhône to Arles-Avignon in 2011. Nevertheless, despite just an hour's car journey home, Savanier only rented a flat in Avignon because his mother agreed to come too. Having been a Ligue 2 regular since, firstly with Arles before joining Nîmes in 2015, Savanier, now 27, enjoyed a breakthrough campaign as Les Crocos were promoted back to Ligue 1 at the end of the 2017/18 season.

This calendar year however will likely prove career-defining for Savanier. Having topped Ligue 1's assist charts, Savanier's average L'Équipe game rating of 6.16 placed him third behind Kylian Mbappé and Marquinhos last season and he made WhoScored's team of the year with their second highest rating, behind Mbappé. Comically, the Nîmes man missed out on the UNFP awards entirely despite comfortably outperforming Marco Verratti for example in every regard, other than stature of employer. Despite Nicolas Pépé's explosion and Kylian's Mbappé's goals, it was Savanier who truly deserved to be heralded as Ligue 1's best player in 2018/19.

It was clear that a move was in the offing, regardless of Savanier's home bird nature. Interest was reportedly forthcoming from the likes of Galatasaray but a deal failed to emerge. The fact that a club like Marseille, to whom Savanier would be perfectly suited, did not look to install him as their midfield leader given the price tag remains baffling. Perhaps Marseille or a club of similar size did propose a deal but a move anywhere beyond the greater Montpellier area remained a deal-breaker for Savanier. Given his eventual choice of club, that certainly seems plausible. Montpellier and Nîmes are separated by less than an hour's drive and have long been fierce rivals but just how fierce remained largely forgotten across 25 years without a top flight meeting. The first Derby du Languedoc in any competition for a decade in October 2018 however left France in little doubt. Halted more than once as Montpellier ultras vaulted barriers between their stand and the pitch, the most notable stoppage came after rival Nîmes ultras unveiled a stolen banner that usually adorned the MHSC group Palisade 91's end of La Mosson. Riot police were needed to halt their advance.

Such was the animosity, a move between the two clubs seemed implausible, especially for someone so crucial as Savanier, even if he was a former Montpellier player. Michel Der Zakarian and MHSC however paid the €10m for Savanier's services in July. Nîmes have not been the same since. Although quality replacements were not forthcoming for Bouanga, Thioub and Ferri either, it is the lack of Savanier's leadership and vision that has seen them sink to the bottom of Ligue 1 despite some creditable performances. Regardless of a wondrous first top flight season, Savanier's move to Montpellier posed a number of questions. No longer is Savanier the clear leader and standout performer in the smallest of Ligue 1 ponds. The 2012 champions are expected to charge for Europe, many away sides will frustrate and suffocate them, Florent Mollet, Damien Le Tallec and old friend Ferri provide fierce competition for places, while Michael Der Zakarian's infamously pragmatic style could allow fewer opportunities and less space for Savanier to pick passes and dictate as before.

It is difficult to underestimate the impact Savanier could have on Montpellier but for now that 'could' remains the operative word as injury severely hampered Savanier's start to the season. A first Montpellier start did not present itself until late October after 10 games on the sidelines, an unfortunate break that perhaps prevented him from climbing further up this list. Nevertheless, early signs are promising. Despite just one assist so far with Savanier deployed a little deeper than usual, a pair of typically booming long range strikes against Toulouse and Amiens have proven major highlights.

The man of gypsy origins has also slowly started to take control of midfield battles and assume responsibilities as a leader and creator in Der Zakarian's side as underlined by typically influential outings against Dijon, Lille and St Étienne. Languedoc rivalries aside, Nîmes fans jokingly posted doctored pictures of Savanier's mural on Twitter featuring a red shirt, Savanier's move back to Montpellier carried the sense of homecoming, the fact that he never left Montpellier geographically notwithstanding. Reunited with fellow local and boyhood friend, striker Andy Delort, Savanier explained that "nobody could have imagined this trajectory, but we are here, proud to wear this jersey and to be part of this team." Where Delort's career however has taken him to much of France, Wigan and even Mexico, leaving home it seems was never an option for Savanier. As competing love from fierce rivals etched on the walls of Montpellier shows, the two are intrinsically linked.



*MOUSSA DEMBELE*

(+36)

**9**

**BORN: 1996/07/12, PONTOISE**

**CLUB: OLYMPIQUE LYONNAIS**

**POSITION: FORWARD**

**AT CLUB SINCE: 2018**

**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019: 38**

Moussa Dembélé's trademark wide-eyed stare may not be too far off of the reaction that you, dear reader, may have in seeing the Lyon striker placed so highly in this ranking, despite his being just behind top scorer Wissam Ben Yedder in France. While it is true that a raft of departures left Ligue 1 in the summer, only perhaps two of those, Nicolas Pépé and Tanguy Ndombéle would conceivably have placed higher than the former Celtic forward. Florian Thauvin, too, were he not to have barely been seen on the pitch this season, would likely bump Dembélé down a peg, but make no mistake, his placement in this table is thoroughly deserved after a year in which he scored 27 goals for club and country.

That is not, however, to say that Dembélé does not have areas to improve in, despite his goal record. His Champions' League career for Lyon, for example, shows more bookings (two) than goals (one), and he also offered up a lacklustre set of performances at last summer's European U-21 Championships. Despite all this, though, there is the sense that even as he played his first minutes with Fulham in the Premier League at age 17, he is still a player finding himself, still rising to meet new challenges, and that persistent links to clubs even bigger than Lyon will continue to come, bringing further vindication to his slow-but-steady rise.

Growing up on the outskirts of Paris, he joined Paris Saint-Germain at a young age, arriving into the club's academy well before Qatari investment had done much to change their profile and ambition, both in France and on a global scale. While there, he enjoyed no small amount of success, and earned his first call-ups to the French international youth sides at roughly the same time that the QSI takeover happened. Here, then, Dembélé's story begins to take a familiar path, with the exception, perhaps, that he recognised quickly how difficult raising his profile could be given the magnitude of player that the club's new owners were seeking to install in the first team.

Speaking to Lyon's website shortly after his arrival last year, he averred, "I left because the club took on a new dimension with the arrival of the Qataris. It was complicated for young players. PSG wanted to keep me but I was not sure I had the chance to play in the first team. That's why I went to Fulham, which at that time had the best academy in England. I made this choice with my family and agents and it paid off."

And pay off, it did; he was a prolific scorer with Fulham's reserves and even made a few fleeting appearances with the first team the following season. While the Cottagers were battling relegation that season, and it was easy for the club to take a flyer on a young player, there was no doubting his promise, and he doubled down on those flashes in the Championship. In 2015/16, Fulham were scrapping in the lower reaches of midtable, going through three managers over the course of the season, but Dembélé quickly became an integral part of the team, playing in a 4-4-2 alongside Ross McCormack.

While the Scot has never taken to the top level of English football, his return next to Dembélé was impressive, with the Frenchman playing as an aerial presence alongside him, allowing him to make runs off of him. Indeed, in addition to his fifteen goals that season, Dembélé recorded seven assists, showing a good eye for a pass and an unselfish nature while also profiting from McCormack's own creative abilities; five of his goals were set up by the Scotsman and were it not for a rather for a leaky defence (only relegated Bolton and Charlton conceded more), Fulham might have made a better fist of earning promotion. It's true that the Championship is hardly the most testing of leagues, and statistics are often considered in a vacuum, but in that season, Dembélé, at 19, was already evincing the sort of ability that would come to define his style of play. He showed not only a willingness to work for the team in being a bustling, physical presence alongside McCormack playing the role of a poacher, but also a decent eye for goal himself, something which would come to the fore more prominently with Lyon.

His performances for Fulham had not, of course, gone unnoticed to the north, and when Celtic, with a chance to win trophies and play regularly in Europe, came calling, Dembélé leapt at the chance, even if the level of opposition which he would face in a given week would possibly seem to be at a lower level, going by the financial imbalance which has typically marked the Scottish Premier League of late. Having joined up with the Bhoys early in the transfer window as they sought to negotiate three rounds of play-offs to reach the lucrative Champions' League group stage, his start to life in Scotland was somewhat uneven, as he adjusted to playing as a lone striker in a 4-2-3-1. A hat-trick in an Old Firm derby win firmly announced his arrival in early September, and a brace in a thrilling 3-all draw against Manchester City at Celtic Park two weeks later showed his capacity to succeed on the biggest stage of all. Even though Celtic finished bottom of their group, his performances throughout the season were more than creditable, scoring ten goals in the two domestic cups to help the team to a treble.



While playing at the front of a 4-2-3-1 would not seem to do much for Dembélé's assist numbers, the scoring prowess of Scott Sinclair saw him record eleven assists. Together with 26 goals, his totals were more than impressive, even as he missed what was effectively the last two months of the season with a thigh injury and sundry other physical issues. It was more of the same the following year, but even with success seemingly at his feet in Scotland, Dembélé knew that to continue to push his career forward, he needed to play at a higher level, week-in, week-out.

His answer to that was to return to France, becoming Lyon's most expensive signing since the ill-fated arrival of Yoann Gourcuff. While nominally a replacement for Mariano Diaz, who had returned to Real Madrid following a solid if unspectacular season at the Groupama Stadium, Dembélé failed to make the same instant impact that the Spaniard had, owing in large part to his eleventh-hour arrival. The timing of his move, to be fair to both sides, was not down to parsimonious haggling on either side (despite Jean-Michel Aulas' reputation), but rather that Celtic desired to keep him to aid in their bid to qualify for European competition.

Dembélé's first start for Lyon did not come until mid-September, and his form in the league and in Europe was patchy, but the turn of the calendar year seemed to spark a rapid upturn in form, scoring 11 of his 16 goals in the campaign's second half. Among those performances were a brilliant last-minute header to win the Rhône derby and a win over Paris Saint-Germain in which he scored and drew a penalty. That upturn in form, of course, was in no small part aided by Bruno Génésio's tactical meddling, the then-manager having settled on a 4-2-3-1 not so dissimilar to the one deployed by Celtic, with Memphis Depay playing the role of an inverted left winger with a propensity to cut inside and have a shot on goal.

Even with Dembélé arguably playing third fiddle to both Depay and Nabil Fekir, by season's end, only Kylian Mbappé had scored more goals from open play, and only the teenager and Edinson Cavani proved more effective in terms of goals per 90 minutes, an important statistic given he came off the bench with some regularity, as Génésio seemed to favour his ability to change a game à la Romelu Lukaku. The current season has been more of the same, as being an undisputed starter sees Dembélé jousting with Wissam Ben Yedder for the title of scoring leader. Even if his performances in Europe have been more subdued from a scoring perspective, looking only at that would be somewhat misleading as the metric by which to consider his role within the team.

Olivier Giroud's track record is clearly much more impressive than Dembélé's to say nothing of his far more cultured approach to his hold-up play and linking with his fellow attackers. However, there is nonetheless something by which to compare the two strikers in the way that each can not only be a brawny, physical point of reference for the talented attackers around them, whilst not sacrificing a striker's necessary ability to score.

And while the Chelsea striker is somewhat limited tactically, despite Dembélé being at his best in a 4-2-3-1, with inverted wingers, he has also prospered playing as part of a two. Like he had at Fulham, and on occasion at Lyon, playing just ahead of Memphis and allowing the Dutchman the space in which to create with his own scoring ability keeping defenders honest. Indeed, there has even been some suggestion that Lyon might be best-suited to play a 4-4-2, with Houssem Aouar and Jeff Reine-Adélaïde played as inverted wingers, with Depay and Dembélé forming a striker partnership.

All of this, works, of course, because of Dembélé's willingness to do what suits the team, something which could yet find him answering a call from Didier Deschamps, as it seems at this point a battle between he and Sébastien Haller (West Ham United) to replace Giroud as the physical presence who leads the line for Les Bleus. Key for Dembélé in this battle is that he is fairly mobile despite his size, and continues to be unselfish in the current campaign.

While his first touch could use some work, as could his defensive contribution, the feeling here is that Dembélé has still not really been given the chance to be the focal point of an attack, and with Depay and Aouar seemingly the key men for Lyon at the moment, that's not likely to change imminently. In that, light, perhaps, his goal-scoring record is even more impressive, and he is thus, despite what is surely no small level of incredulity, thoroughly deserving of his placement here.



*MARCO VERRATTI*

(+26)

**8**

**BORN: 1992/11/05, PESCARA**

**CLUB: PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN**

**POSITION: MIDFIELDER**

**AT CLUB SINCE: 2012**

**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019: 26**

Signed from Italian side Pescara in 2012, Marco Verratti has arguably been pound for pound the most fruitful signing of the Qatari era at Paris Saint-Germain. In a period that has been characterized by big spending and world-record deals, PSG's swoop for the then teenage prodigy has proved to be a real bargain. Carlo Ancelotti recruited the talented but raw midfielder with the intention of developing him into a world class midfielder. Initially, with the likes of Blaise Matuidi and Thiago Motta to learn from, Verratti was in good hands as his PSG journey began. He has then gone on to be a key player under both Laurent Blanc and Unai Emery and today, Thomas Tuchel is finding himself the latest beneficiary of Verratti's unique skillset.

Fast forward to 2019 and Marco Verratti is still as key to PSG as he was back then. Now 27, the little Italian is a mainstay in the French champion's midfield. His presence is as fundamental to PSG as the effect that his absence has and when Verratti is not available, PSG are a completely different team. Verratti is the heartbeat of PSG, the midfield talisman and a well-respected presence within the squad. The Italian international also provides PSG and its supporters with a rare entity by being a big-named, highly paid player in the peak of his career who clearly wants to commit his long-term future to the club.

Verratti loves the city of Paris and is fully dedicated to the Qatari project. At a time where the same cannot be said of one or two of his team-mates, it will be seen as refreshing that Verratti sees only Paris in his future plans. The Italian said recently "I think I'm coming to the most important moment of my career. At 27 you know a lot, you have more experience, I'm really happy to continue here in Paris." Verratti has seen a great deal of success since his move to PSG, winning six Ligue 1 titles, four French Cups and enjoying five French league cup triumphs.

But it the Champions' League that Verratti has his sights set on this season after three years of disappointment at the last 16 stage: "I feel that I play for a team with big ambitions. That's the key thing for me because I want to win as much as possible. Here, we have that possibility because we have a great team and a great coach. We can do great things together." PSG looked better primed for Europe this season and that has had a bearing on their league form, with three defeats already recorded in Ligue 1 by early November. PSG comfortably topped their Champions' League group ahead of 13-time winners Real Madrid and Marco Verratti was a key reason for that with some efficient and superb performances.

Indeed it is Verratti's influence on games that is the most impressive thing about him. PSG's number 6 is regularly involved in the play and boasts regular pass completion and pass accuracy numbers of over 90%. Those who have regularly watched Verratti's style of play will know that he possesses a tenacious and combative off-ball style in addition to an elegant and silky on-ball approach. Verratti flourishes in tackles and recoveries and regularly provides assists with accurate and perfectly weighted passes culminating with quick thinking. Credit must go to PSG's hierarchy who recently swooped to tie Verratti down until 2024. With some of Europe's biggest clubs regularly showing an interest in him, PSG have managed to continue to keep the Italian happy despite some cataclysmic failures in Europe. Verratti recently hinted that he could be willing to end his career at PSG, shunning the opportunity to ever play in Serie A in his homeland.

2020 holds great hopes for PSG's gifted midfielder. The French champions are gunning for a clean sweep domestically, but more important than that is their assault on the Champions' League as Thomas Tuchel's men are hell-bent on attaining three years' worth of redemption. With no overwhelming favourite for this year's title, Verratti will only know too well that this could be the breakthrough year where PSG finally go deep into the latter stages of Europe's premier competition.

The classy midfielder will also have one eye on this summer's European championships, with a resurgent Azzurri arguably back to their best, boasting a new crop of young talent waiting to be unleashed against Europe's very best. Verratti possesses a wealth of experience and is already one of Italy's undisputed leaders. After a disappointing early exit at EURO 2016 and Italy failing to qualify for the 2018 World Cup in Russia, he will be eager to show his talents next summer for Roberto Mancini's side. Whilst Verratti is regularly head and shoulders above most of his opponents domestically and contributes positively to PSG in the Champions' League, we are still eagerly waiting on another defining game from him. The last one was back in March 2015 when PSG drew 2-2 with Chelsea at Stamford Bridge, a result that knocked Chelsea out of the Champions' League at the last 16 stage. That night, PSG were down to 10 men after the early dismissal of Zlatan Ibrahimovic but what then followed was nothing short of a midfield masterclass.

In essence, Verratti took on the role of two midfielders. He hurried, pressed, closed down and strung together a plethora of attack-based passes. He continued to break down menacing Chelsea attacks whilst being heavily outnumbered and provided the legs needed to compensate for the tiring, aging Thiago Motta. Always with an eye for a quick, short or long range assist, Verratti was at the heart of everything positive PSG did that night and this was perhaps the game where he introduced himself to the world.

It has been nearly five years since that textbook performance at Stamford Bridge and whilst Verratti has performed consistently well in various big games, there has not been a display from him that has matched his efforts in West London. If PSG are to advance in 2020 then Marco Verratti will need to produce something on that level to ensure that the Parisians do not end up with egg on their face for a fourth straight year.

Time is very much on his side and there is little doubt that Verratti is enjoying his football. With the exception of some mild flirting with Barcelona in the summer of 2017, the Italian has continued to show his loyalty to Paris Saint-Germain. He speaks the French language well and despite so much domestic dominance, he has not become bored, disinterested or disillusioned with French football or life in the capital. The key to his happiness is feeling as though he is in a team that can compete and win: the only time that Verratti thought about moving on from Paris was in 2017. This was off the back of a disappointing season where PSG surrendered their Ligue 1 title to AS Monaco and were dumped out of the Champions' League in a 6-1 defeat to Barcelona. PSG responded to that campaign of disappointment by signing Kylian Mbappé and Neymar and from Verratti's perspective, all talks of a possible departure were forgotten and it was back to business as usual.

Marco Verratti has the world at his feet and now is the time for him to push on to the next level – he is not yet incontrovertibly one of the best midfielders on the planet, something that ex-boss Laurent Blanc recently alluded to in an interview with *Le Parisien*: "He is not a world class player yet. At one point I had my doubts, he was stagnating." The responsibility of this just doesn't fall on the shoulders of the Italian midfielder, PSG, Thomas Tuchel and his staff are also accountable for his development. In comparison to previous seasons, Verratti now has an abundance of quality around him. There is more support in central midfield of players that compliment his level of ability.

Leandro Paredes, Idrissa Gueye and Ander Herrera have all been signed in the past year to bolster what was previously deemed a problematic position for the French champions. Essentially this has proved to provide Verratti with a flexibility that he has not had in the previous couple of seasons where he was given the role of multi-tasking between positions in the midfield three due to the lack of a true 'number 6.'

Already we are seeing the benefits coming to fruition as this season so far, Verratti looks fitter, sharper and comfortable in his role. It feels like his reincarnation and so far he is having a stellar season in rouge et blue. There remain a few things that he will need to improve on to become a better and more well-rounded footballer. One area is his discipline: he can commit some of the most comical fouls you will see in European football. Whilst this, married with his constant chastising of officials, is often entertaining, it can also cost PSG dear. This occurred in 2018 in the second leg of the club's Round of 16 tie with Real Madrid, when Verratti was sent off as Les Parisiens tried to chase down the goal deficit in vain.

In the league, this translates into picking up meaningless yellow cards that when accumulated, have ensured that he has missed some important fixtures for PSG. Also with the colossal injury list at the club and the previously threadbare cover in midfield, he has occasionally added an unwanted headache to Tuchel's plans. If Verratti can eradicate some of these mishaps from his game then this will only benefit him and the team particularly in the Champions' League this season, where the procedure for suspensions differs from domestic football and the room for maneuver that Verratti has is reduced.

On his day, we are looking at a top three midfielder in world football. He is admired from afar but only fully recognised by those that regularly watch him play. Despite such talent, Verratti is yet to be fully acknowledged by the decision-makers at the top of the game. Verratti seemingly has to play in a team that is producing at the highest level to be really taken seriously from all quarters and maybe this is the year when it comes to fruition in the Champions' League? In the meantime, those who regularly tune in to Ligue 1 will fully appreciate what a fantastic footballer Paris Saint-Germain and the division has at its disposal.





*MEMPHIS DEPAY*

(+3)

**7**

**BORN: 1994/02/13, MOORDRECHT**

**CLUB: OLYMPIQUE LYONNAIS**

**POSITION: FORWARD**

**AT CLUB SINCE: 2017**

**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019: 31**

While Memphis Depay's 2019 has come to a stinging, premature end in the form of a cruciate injury that has likely ended his season and made his potential participation in next summer's European Championships a matter of doubt, there is no denying that his form for club and country this year was something to behold, despite Lyon's rather saw-tooth performances in the league. Whether played as a second striker, on the left, or leading the line on his own, the Dutchman has more often than not been Les Gones' saving grace, and his record for goals and assists with the Netherlands, most often playing as a centre forward, has also been staggeringly strong.

Viewed through the myopic eyes of the typical English fan, Depay's having flamed out at Manchester United speaks to a player who is something of a flat-track bully, able to rack up goals and assists in the Netherlands or in France, but unable to get it done when the chips are down in more prestigious competitions. His performances for his country (seven goals and ten assists in ten matches), and in the Champions' League (five goals in the group stage, one in each match in which he figure, joint-fourth in the competition) quickly put lie to that. And if his numbers in the league in the calendar year (fourteen goals, but only five of those were recorded in 2018/19) are slightly less impressive, there is an unshakeable feeling that this injury comes at the cruelest possible time.

Installed as captain under Rudi Garcia upon the former Lille boss' arrival, Depay's powerful physique and willingness to keep pushing despite things not always coming off has become a hallmark of his play, his doggedness an exemplar to his younger team-mates. A recent last-minute winner against Toulouse and his dramatic equaliser against RB Leipzig in the Champions' League are perhaps the most impressive manifestations of this, but his increasingly direct style of play, if not his willingness to attend to his defensive duties, speak to a player who is much-improved from the slight winger who rocked up in Manchester on the heels of a stellar season in the Eredivisie. He may be pilloried for his hip-hop ambitions and outward embrace of material culture, but there is no question that 2019 has been the year in which Depay, at 25, has most emphatically delivered upon his promise.

Born in the unassuming southern Dutch town of Moordrecht, Depay, the child of a Ghanaian father in a Dutch mother, had a difficult childhood, with his father, Dennis, having abandoned his family when Memphis was just four years old. As a youngster, his family having been torn asunder, Depay was a petulant child, but eventually learned to channel his energies into football, at the behest of his grandfather, Kees, moving first to Sparta Rotterdam before joining PSV Eindhoven at the age of 12. PSV, the club where legends such as Ronaldo, Arjen Robben, and Ruud van Nistelrooy had made their name, proved to be the ideal framework in which he could make an impact, such was the team's attacking ethos, and indeed, that of Dutch football writ large.

His breakthrough came in the 2013/14 season, when his strong form under recently installed manager Philip Cocu propelled PSV to a fourth-place finish. The following season was more of the same, as Depay, on the back of having become the youngest Dutchman to have scored at a World Cup in the summer, was the league's leading scorer and PSV won the league title. There remained, of course, flashes of his immaturity, as a training ground tussle with Robin van Persie while on international duty saw both he and the striker dropped from the squad for Die Oranje's next set of fixtures.

But that immaturity seemed not to be too much of a stumbling block for Manchester United, as the club secured his services in the summer of 2015 for €34m. He started out well at Old Trafford, proving decisive in a Champions' League play-off tie against Club Brugge with a brace and an assist in a 3-1 win, and following that up by scoring against his former club in the group stage. However, the unrelenting schedule and physicality of English football soon took their toll on the player, and his performances nose-dived, denied as he was his preferred freedom in attack under the pragmatic Louis van Gaal.

Things only worsened in the following season, with Depay's flash approach to life both on and off the pitch doing him no favours in the eyes of new manager José Mourinho. The Portuguese's more negative approach, coupled with the emergence of Marcus Rashford, a player who was a direct competitor for Depay's position, saw him ever-marginalised, failing to start even a single league match in the campaign's first half. His move to Lyon was a surprising one, given the Rhône club's modest means, but at that point in time, Depay, still just 22, was at a crossroads and in dire need of a change of scenery if he hoped to make anything of his talent.

Upon Depay's arrival at Lyon, he was thus rightly seen a somewhat mercurial talent who was to be a complementary piece for Les Gones, rather than a player around whom a team could be constructed. With Nabil Fékir and Alexandre Lacazette still the team's focal points in attack, Depay was a fairly peripheral figure, ineligible for the team's Europa League matches and fleetingly influential in the league, despite recording an impressive eight assists in his first half-season, and notching a memorable late winner against Paris Saint-Germain.

The departure of Lacazette that summer seemed that it would perhaps open more of an opportunity for Depay, but rather than step into the void left by the striker, he remained on the periphery, content to let Fékir be the main man and even at times ceding his place in Bruno Genesio's eleven to the up-and-coming Houssem Aouar. In the run-in to that season, though, he finally started to evince something of the player he could become for Lyon, scoring ten goals in the season's final nine matches, including a hat-trick in the final match to secure a top three place for his club.

Last season was rather more uneven, but he still offered some memorable performances, even as the tactical indecision of Genesio hampered his ability to play in a consistent role, with the emergence of Moussa Dembélé as an effective lone striker meaning that Depay could not operate with the same sort of freedom which he can for his country. Fékir's departure for Real Betis this summer, along with that of Genesio, however, seemed to have flipped the switch for Depay, at least to some extent. While Aouar, Dembélé and new arrival Jeff Reine-Adélaïde remain potent attacking threats under Garcia, there is little doubting at this juncture upon whom Lyon look to when the chips are down.

The arrival of Sylvinho and Juninho bears some consideration in this discussion as well; for all that the manager's brief tenure was ill-fated, it was he who placed faith in Memphis' style, recognising that Moussa Dembélé, for all of his gifts, was unlikely to yet be ready to be the focal point of attack for a truly ambitious side. The Brazilian saw that Memphis' style, be it leading the line or, as he may be most comfortable in Lyon, playing as an inverted winger on the left, had a level of unpredictability to it that could pay real dividends.

Able (and willing) to take players on off the dribble, Depay also can foster one touch-passing in and around the box, something which was not always in evidence in England or indeed in his home country, with goals being his primary asset. Becoming a creative asset rather than a shoot-on-sight winger speaks volumes as to his improving maturity and ability to see the match from a wider perspective. Superb, too in his set piece delivery as well as when shooting from range, it is true that a decent part of what comprises Memphis' style of play is hardly reliable in terms of its potential to affect a match but, outside of Paris, there is arguably no player better than he at conjuring something from nothing.

Of course, he can also be maddening because of this; for much of that aforementioned draw with Leipzig, he was regularly trying to do too much, cheaply conceding possession and neglecting to make an obvious pass. However, where Sylvinho was still feeling his way tactically and wanted Depay to play as more of an orthodox winger, Garcia has experimented with him in a number of roles, showing faith not only in his drive to succeed, but his potential to affect play in numerous ways. In this manner, Depay remains key to the team, but the likes of Aouar and Reine-Adélaïde can still make a positive contribution as well.

While we will have to wait until next season to see how all of this plays out on the pitch, there have been a few recent incidents that have allowed Garcia's giving Memphis the captaincy to look like more of a sensible decision. Key among these was a fan coming on to the pitch in the wake of that draw against Leipzig, holding a banner decrying Brazilian defender Marcelo as a donkey. Garcia was quick to defend Depay, averring "He's a real captain and he's acted and spoken like a captain, it shows the strength and unity of this team."

While rushing to confront a fan in such a manner shows a bit of rashness in Memphis' character, that he would act so quickly to defend a teammate also speaks to an improved maturity, finally acquired after some three years in the French game. Given his importance for his country, and how much of a loss he appears to be for the Netherlands, Ronald Koeman, his national team coach, has expressed similar sentiments to Garcia; "He's now more experienced and what he's showed and what he has done for the national team is great and I'm really glad that we have that kind of player in our national team." If Depay can make his return physically, continuing to carry that developing maturity will serve him well to get back on to this list come next year, and indeed, perhaps off of it beyond that if a club bigger than Lyon comes calling.



*IDRISSA GUEYE*

(NEW)

**6**

**BORN: 1989/09/26, DAKAR**  
**CLUB: PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN**  
**POSITION: MIDFIELDER**  
**AT CLUB SINCE: 2019**  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019: 27**



Since the departures of Thiago Motta and Blaise Matuidi over the last couple of seasons, PSG have looked lightweight in midfield. Despite boasting one of the best forward lines in world football and an embarrassment of riches elsewhere on the pitch, the team's inability to dominate matches in the midfield has proved costly, especially in the Champions' League. Les Parisiens have been crying out for midfield reinforcements, but especially for a top-tier defensive midfielder able to provide balance to the team, to shield the defence, win back the ball and power the side forward. Thomas Tuchel himself has spent most of his tenure crying out for such a player, and he finally looks to have his man in Idrissa Gana Gueye.

2019 of course began with the club attempting to bring Gueye to the Parc des Princes. Everton however rejected their reported £26m offer. The Senegalese midfielder was devastated, telling L'Équipe in February that the move was "...a dream which sadly did not come true." Left out of the squad for the final January match against Huddersfield, and then for the following game vs. Wolves, many players would have downed tools and struggled to recover psychologically after such disappointment. Gueye however took this in his stride, "I am going to work even more so that they come back to me. Maybe it is not finished with PSG." Work he did, and finished it was not.

Over the following months, Gueye proved not only his class on the pitch, but off it as well, putting his personal frustration aside to deliver a string of imperious displays which were fundamental to Marco Silva's side turning their season around and finding consistency. The then 29 year-old, as was the case throughout his time in the Premier League, quietly went about being one of the best midfielders in the league to little fanfare.

In April, Everton beat top-four chasing Arsenal at Goodison Park and Gueye was the best player on the pitch, producing a dominant display. The midfielder went on to be named Everton's joint Players' Player of the Season, alongside French international Lucas Digne, topping off an exceptional few months for a man who could easily have struggled for motivation after having his dream move thwarted. The Senegalese international was commended by his coach and by fans for his professionalism, and proved that he could be exactly the kind of character necessary for a PSG side struggling with indiscipline and commitment issues.

Indeed, with Gueye's work ethic and prowess in midfield, it is remarkable to think he was not snapped up sooner. Since joining Everton in 2016, no player has won more tackles in the Premier League, 55 tackles more than Leicester's Wilfried Ndidi in second and a whopping 82 more than World Cup winner N'Golo Kanté. Gueye made 142 successful tackles in the league last season, with only Ndidi achieving more (143). With 75 interceptions (an average of 2.2 per match) last season and a tackle success rate of 71.39% since his arrival in the league (more than any other player), Gueye truly was a colossus in the centre of the park, and one of the most overlooked central midfielders, somehow simultaneously underrated and yet so highly regarded. As teammate Morgan Schneiderlin, frequently his partner in the midfield pivot, told the official Everton website in April, "Gana is just amazing at what he does."

Following the conclusion of the domestic season, and with fresh speculation surrounding his future, the midfielder joined up with Senegal ahead of the 2019 Africa Cup of Nations. Les Lions de Teranga, with a squad boasting the likes of Gueye, Sadio Mané, Kalidou Koulibaly and Ligue 1 regulars MBaye Niang and Ismaïla Sarr, were tournament favourites. Gueye was instrumental in the side reaching the final, scoring the winner in a tense quarter-final showdown with Benin and registering an assist along the way. It was not to be, however, as Algeria were worthy tournament winners in another devastating blow for the midfielder, whose 2019 was not breaking his way. Despite the disappointment however, it was still a competition to remember for Gueye personally, making it into the AFCON Team of the Tournament, and matching his impressive statistics from the domestic campaign.

In a year of highs and lows, Gueye reaped the reward for his performances when PSG did indeed come back for him, with Everton accepting a reported £30m bid shortly after the conclusion of the tournament. Jubilation for both parties as the Senegalese, joining on a 4-year deal, finally had his "dream" move, and as stated by RMC, "Thomas Tuchel finally has his number 6." Players often bill transfers to teams in the upper echelons of world football as 'dreams come true', but with varying degrees of sincerity. Gueye's sentiment however was clearly heartfelt, telling the club's official media that his new teammates were "very great players [who] we usually see on TV. Now I'm going to rub shoulders with them." His enthusiasm was infectious.

So far in Paris, Gueye has shown that he may indeed be exactly the player the Parisians so desperately coveted; not a match-winner in the same way as a Neymar or an Mbappé, but a game changer. Domestically, he has been one of the best players in the league: as of the 6th of December, he has the third highest average rating in the league on WhoScored (7.71) after Di Maria and Mbappé. Truly the team's engine, his tireless efforts to win the ball back for his side see him placed third for successful tackles per game (4.1), while he tends to receive and recycle the ball extremely efficiently, placing second for passes per game (85.8) after teammate Marco Verratti and fourth for pass completion rate (92.9%). The midfielder was especially dynamic in PSG's hard-fought win over Bordeaux in September, making 90 passes and recovering the ball six times, and was irresistible in PSG's 4-0 thumping of a very solid Angers side. Le Parisien compared him to the "X-men" following the match: "a mutant benefitting from both the magnetism of a wild beast and the power of a tornado," while Tuchel referred to him post-match as "a key player." His impact has been instant and tangible.

Overall, he has been excellent, with RMC labelling him as "the key element" of PSG's midfield. Few can match his troika of abilities to press the opposition, win the ball back and propel the team forward. But this more attack-minded component of his game is something which he has significantly improved upon this past year.

Gueye described himself when arriving at PSG as a "defensive midfielder" but he is more than that. The Dakar native was already a top-class sentinel, but his time under coach Marco Silva has helped him develop his offensive game, as the coach told the Liverpool Echo, "He showed clear improvements on the ball, his decisions on the ball, he was playing more forward than before because all of the other things Gana had already – that physical capacity, fast and strong in the challenge, tackles..." Schneiderlin also tells of how the midfielder "added a new dimension to his game. Before, you could see his main point was getting the ball back, but now he likes to drive forward with the ball and take people on. He is using all his qualities now."

Statistics confirm a higher percentage of forward passes were played by Gueye last season than in previous campaigns, and that fewer were played backwards. He is now a more well-rounded player who can, by his own admission, play different roles, telling Goal France after PSG's win over Nantes, "6 or 8, I don't have a preference." Indeed, Gueye's games for PSG this season have actually seen him play of a box-to-box role, differing somewhat from his time at Everton. Despite what many speculated, Tuchel has persisted with Marquinhos playing as the team's out-and-out defensive midfielder, while Gueye often operates on the right side of central midfield in a 4-3-3, making fewer interceptions than he did at Everton, but producing more passes and tackles further up the pitch. In this role, he has shone.

Just how well-rounded he is in this new role was clear in arguably the best performance of his career, in the biggest game he has played in thus far: PSG's 3-0 win over Real Madrid at the Parc des Princes in September. Gueye was absolutely monstrous, harassing and pressing Los Blancos' midfield, fighting to win back every ball. He brought people into the game, drove the team forward and created several key chances, including the second goal, scored by Di Maria. Overall, he made four tackles, three interceptions, three key passes (including the assist), completed 74 passes, and won the ball back six times. Gueye looked completely at home on the grandest of stages, emphatically demonstrating that he could step up to another level, that he could be the missing link to help PSG finally go the distance in Europe. Captain Thiago Silva seemed dumbstruck at full-time, "Idrissa... it's incredible. I do not have words...", while Tuchel shared an emotional embrace with his midfielder in the middle of the pitch. A crowning moment of recognition for a less glamorous player, often overlooked. Now he was centre stage, on the biggest stage.

More recently, Gueye's form has taken a downturn. He struggled to have the same impact in the reverse fixture, lacking in the urgency and dynamism of the first leg, and was overrun by the Madrid midfield. PSG won a penalty when 1-0 down; however the decision was overturned by VAR as Gueye was ruled to have fouled Marcelo in the build up with a needless shove. The midfielder was replaced by Neymar at half-time. His more recent league performances have also been slightly muted, proving very solid defensively against Nantes at the start of December but contributing little going forward. "My dip in form? I'm aware of it and I think that everyone else sees it too. I'm only human and everybody experiences lulls," he told Yahoo Sport FR after the match. A fair assessment from a man who is perhaps being expected to operate consistently at superhuman levels, and who has also had some trouble with an ongoing groin issue. Gueye has been magnificent for the vast majority of his start with the club, and will no doubt be able to turn things around. It certainly won't be the last time we see a world-class performance from the 30 year-old.

Gueye's year has been exceptional. Despite the obvious disappointments and frustrations, it has been a triumphant 12 months for a man who has been one of the hardest working and most undervalued players in Europe for several years. Time will tell if Gueye really is the final piece to help PSG realise their ambitions and conquer Europe, but he is certainly one of the best signings of the year, and PSG's best acquisition for what feels like an age.



*THIAGO SILVA*

(+9)

**5**

**BORN: 1984/09/22, RIO DE JANEIRO**

**CLUB: PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN**

**POSITION: DEFENDER**

**AT CLUB SINCE: 2012**

**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019: 28**

Signed by Paris Saint-Germain in the summer of 2012, near the beginning of the QSI “project”, and still at the Parc des Princes seven years later, having seen the likes of Zlatan Ibrahimović come and go (and Leonardo go and come!) Thiago Silva is the keystone of nouveau PSG – and arguably epitomises the contradictions of his club throughout that time. A player capable of reaching sublime highs one minute and embarrassing lows the next. Someone who has overcome extreme tests of character, yet can sometimes still be found wanting mentally. A gifted footballer who has an almost unrivalled number of winner’s medals in his collection – yet it could still be argued that he has underachieved in his career. If ever a single player mirrored his club, Paris Saint-Germain’s Thiago Silva is surely it.

That Silva has even achieved his original dream of becoming a professional footballer and then successfully plying his trade in Europe is already a great achievement in itself. As a child growing up in Rio de Janeiro, Silva was born into poverty, his father having left a young family and his mother struggling to put food on the table. Meanwhile the young Thiago, although in love with football from an early age, had to overcome crippling shyness to finally one day pluck up the courage to play outside with other children: “I would watch the other children playing from my window but didn’t dare to join them. Then one morning something snapped, I sprinted out of the house and I played with the others. That day changed my life.” Even then, his family’s predicament meant that Silva, whose first present as a five-year-old was a football, would often play in bare feet, in order to protect the studs on his boots from wear and tear.

As Silva began to be recognised for his nascent footballing ability, he continued to suffer setbacks, as he tried and failed at numerous trials with various Brazilian clubs. At the age of 20 and having finally had a chance to settle at one club – EC Juventude – to enable him to showcase his ability – he was spotted by reigning European champions Porto and made his move across to Europe, in the hope of forming a central defensive partnership with Pepe. His career seemed destined to take off. However, his form at Porto dropped off and he failed to make it into the first team. Loaned to Dynamo Moscow there was no improvement and it was only then that he was diagnosed with tuberculosis, putting a temporary but lengthy stop to his career progression: “that was without a doubt the toughest moment of my life. Just imagine, being laid up in a hospital in Moscow for six months!”

Once recovered and having effectively lost two years of his young career, Silva returned to Brazil, essentially to start his career again from scratch, returning to first club Fluminense. A reborn player, Silva quickly re-found his best form, helping his team to the Brazilian Cup and to the Copa Libertadores final, earning acknowledgement as the best defender in Brazil, winning his first Brazil cap (during the Beijing Olympics) and becoming a cult hero among his club’s fans. Europe came calling again and, at just turned 24, Silva this time moved to Italy, joining AC Milan with the difficult task of replacing the legendary Paolo Maldini and forming a partnership with Alessandro Nesta.

Silva quickly began earning rave reviews, the likes of Maldini himself observing that “he has the physical and technical qualities of a champion.” Despite having to constantly battle with a variety of annoying injury niggles, Silva established himself in the centre of the Rossoneri defence, and played a crucial part in the team that won the Scudetto in 2010/11. Silva was recognised as Milan’s player of the year, Gazzetta dello Sport’s Serie A Player of the Year and the winner of the Samba d’Or – the best Brazilian playing in Europe. More injury niggles came the following season as Milan finished just four points behind Scudetto winners Juventus – with many saying that it was the two months that Silva missed which prevented Milan from defending their title.

At the beginning of July 2012, Silva signed a contract extension and looked set to continue his love affair with the San Siro fans, but only 12 days later, amid growing financial problems, Milan agreed to sell Silva to PSG, for a then-record Ligue 1 transfer fee of €42m plus bonuses. Despite it meaning that he would be reunited with coach Carlo Ancelotti and team-mate Zlatan Ibrahimović, Silva was clearly heartbroken to leave and made it clear that it was not his decision. Overcoming this new disappointment, Silva quickly settled into the PSG line-up, and by November had already taken over as club captain, despite Ancelotti’s original intention to give the armband to a Frenchman. Under his leadership, PSG went on to win their first title of the QSI era and – despite giving interviews expressing how much he missed Milan – the PSG fans quickly took O Monstro – who was shortlisted for the UNFP Player of the Year award – to their hearts. Silva also received positive reviews for his performances in PSG’s Champions’ League quarter-final exit to Barcelona – despite his being responsible for one of the goals as the Parisians went out on away goals. The beginning of a trend...



2013/14 was another classic Silva season and perhaps the one that really highlighted his strengths and weaknesses. Again, imperious domestic performances, his brilliant reading of the game (meaning that he rarely needed to commit a foul), his strength on the ground and in the air and his excellent distribution being a crucial factor in PSG winning the domestic treble (quadruple if you really think the Trophée des Champions counts). However, in the Champions' League, PSG again went out on away goals, this time to Chelsea, the crucial away goal coming from the needless concession of a penalty at the Parc des Princes – by Silva himself. That season then ended with Silva captaining Brazil on home soil in the World Cup. A clearly nervy captain, Silva set the tone for a nervy Brazil throughout the tournament. They failed to convince in the group stage. Then only came through the second round against Chile after a penalty shoot-out win during which Silva, rather than step up and take some responsibility, sat crying, alone from the rest of the squad, with his back to goal. Then in the quarter-final, despite scoring, Silva earned himself a suspension with a needless yellow card – a pitiful dereliction of duty, which paved the way for the most comedic footballing performance in history from David Luiz in the 1-7 semi-final demolition at the hands of Germany.

As a result, Silva was forced to endure an exile from the Brazil team, tellingly less for his actual performances than his seeming to lack that extra strength of character to help push his team to reach their full potential. Silva eventually returned to top form the following season, prompting Maldini to call him the best defender in the world, as PSG retained the treble. In the Champions' League, PSG finally overcame Chelsea – Silva this time scoring the crucial extra-time goal that put his side through on away goals – though only after he had almost lost it for the Parisians with the concession of yet another needless penalty. In this season and the next, however, despite continued domestic success, PSG were unable to go past the quarter-final stage of European competition.

2016/17 was another bad year for Silva. PSG missed out on a fifth consecutive title, an exciting young Monaco team romping home. And another Champions' League disaster befell the club – without Silva, PSG smashed Barcelona 4-0 in the second round first leg; but with Silva back in the side, and albeit with a lot of help from the referee, Barcelona staged a stunning remontada to win the return leg 6-1. Much like Brazil 2014, Silva rightly attracted criticism, not for his play but his weak leadership, dropping further and further back as the game went on, seeming totally to lose his nerve and inviting Barca pressure.

Serial failures – and his absence from PSG's stand-out performance – suggested that Silva's time, as well as that of some of PSG's other long-term players, could be drawing to a close. However, in the last two years, Silva has continued his consistently excellent PSG form. Whether forming a formidable partnership with Marquinhos or stewarding younger talents such as Kimpembe and Diallo, Silva has continued to set the standard, rarely looking flustered – in domestic football at least.

2019 has seen Silva win his seventh league title in nine years – his sixth in seven years with PSG. Before a meniscus injury cut short his 2018/19 Ligue 1 season, he presided over nine wins, one draw and just two defeats in the first half of the calendar year – although those two defeats were against PSG's closest challengers Lyon and Lille. The first half of the 2019/20 Ligue 1 season has seen PSG go down to three defeats and, perhaps tellingly, two came in the only two matches that Silva has missed – again highlighting how much he is missed, as a player and as a captain, in Ligue 1 action. 2019 has also seen Silva receive a Copa America winner's medal after working his way back into the Brazil set-up.

There has been disappointment, however, in both domestic and European cups – and PSG's embarrassing second leg capitulation against Manchester United raised the same questions of Silva's leadership as after the Barca remontada. Now that PSG actually have a functioning midfield and some strength in depth up-front, they are arguably better placed than in previous years to go far in the Champions' League. And Silva, 35, with his current contract expiring at the end of this season and with the club yet to have made considerable strides towards offering him a new deal, may yet lift the big trophy as his final gift to PSG. Until then, he runs the risk of being remembered as an exceptionally gifted footballer who bestrode the domestic leagues in which he played, but was not quite able to take that elusive step to lift his teams and himself to truly great status.



*MARQUINHOS*

(+11)

**4**

**BORN: 1994/05/14, SAO PAULO**

**CLUB: PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN**

**POSITION: DEFENDER/MIDFIELDER**

**AT CLUB SINCE: 2013**

**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019: 31**

"I want to be the best defender in the world," Marquinhos told L'Équipe in November. The Brazilian said he would look to emulate Sergio Ramos, Virgil Van Dijk and Thiago Silva while explaining "it's a personal goal which can also help achieve team goals." However Marquinhos neglected to acknowledge that, despite a stellar 2019, only five of his first 20 starts this season came in his natural role of centre back. Nevertheless, becoming the world's greatest defender is an achievable goal for 'Kaiser Franz,' but a stunning transformation into a holding midfielder this year suggests it may not be one worth pursuing.

Marquinhos' remarkable form and consistency in his new role is underlined by the considerable acclaim he has received in 2019. Only Kylian Mbappé bettered his average game rating of 6.23 from the usually harsh L'Équipe over the 2018/19 Ligue 1 season, although admittedly Marquinhos is perhaps the only player the paper could be accused of being overgenerous towards. Again putting Mbappé aside, Marquinhos was the only PSG player to be shortlisted for the 2019 Ballon d'Or (Neymar's omission being understandable due to injury, Ángel Di María's rather scandalous). Meanwhile, perpetual big name bias notwithstanding, the UNFP also included him in their team of last season.

Such praise has come despite a fundamental change in position. Although Marquinhos had been used by previous Parisian coaches to sure up a midfield late in games when needed (often playing even further forward in those cases with Thiago Motta or Marco Verratti behind him), his experience remained limited. As a result, having moved forward to anchor Thomas Tuchel's midfield almost immediately after the German joined PSG, the Brazilian was still a long way from being the complete defensive midfielder. And it showed. When Tuchel initially moved him into what French football observers would call the sentinel role, Marquinhos gave the impression of a natural centre back trying to play in midfield. Adaptation was far from swift. A little lacking in composure, often too keen to dive in when he needn't and understandably a little out of sync with the smooth midfield passing that has characterised PSG for much of the QSI era, Tuchel's experiment seemed destined to be just that. Especially given that Tuchel hinted the switch came partly out of necessity with a lack of midfield options a regular source of frustration often highlighted by the PSG coach at press conferences.

However, Marquinhos' all-round quality began to tell. As 2019 dawned, Marquinhos began to glide around the Parisian midfield, expertly and efficiently protecting his back four while picking some sumptuous passes alongside Verratti (an expert example to follow) both from deeper areas and in and around the box, even providing a couple of Ligue 1 assists last term. It took a little while, the fact that PSG were again run away leaders in Ligue 1 gave him a chance to quietly learn his new trade without much pressure, but in that time Marquinhos quietly adapted to become one of Europe's best holding midfielders without anyone really noticing. Such has been his transformation that it is difficult to make a case for any other Ligue 1 sentinel to have performed better so far this season or in 2019 as a whole.

As a result, defensive midfield is fast becoming Marquinhos' best position and the switch may even prove to be a defining moment in his career. Despite undoubted high level quality as a defender and being a massive talent generally, Marquinhos' development had begun to stall at PSG before Tuchel's arrival. Although an all-round ability and greater understanding of the game at centre back had clearly coalesced since his arrival from Roma in 2013, where a burgeoning talent was obvious, issues nevertheless remained.

Although Marquinhos, nicknamed Kaiser Franz in reference to legendary German sweeper Franz Beckenbauer by his Paris team-mates, would often motor across to cover a gap and serenely dispossess a forward before calmly popping the ball off and nonchalantly strolling away like Beckenbauer and many other greats have all done (unsurprisingly similarities between Marquinhos and a peak Thiago Silva are abundant), consistency in the bigger games failed to emerge. With the Champions' League an all-consuming obsession for PSG, and domestic dominance assured, good or bad European displays are magnified considerably at the Parc des Princes. He has a rap sheet: a clumsy display away at Bayern Munich in a 3-1 defeat, Marquinhos at least partly culpable for one of the goals, and a pair of unsure outings in both autumn 2018 draws with Napoli, again the Brazilian being at fault for the second Naples goal at home, while L'Équipe criticised him for lacking serenity that he is clearly capable of when defending one on one.

As a result, it could be argued that Tuchel's decision to force him into midfield has revitalised Marquinhos' career given his lack of improvement at centre back under Unai Emery, despite his youthfulness being a sizeable caveat - the Brazilian is still only 25. It now seems that it will be the midfield role that will come to define Marquinhos' career. Impressive defensive displays have by no means disappeared but a slight nervousness in defending still often persists which can be accentuated when under pressure.

Regardless of his emergence as a world class midfielder, little has changed for Marquinhos the defender and his worst displays of 2019 have come when switching back to centre back. Clumsy defending for what turned out to be a consolation goal at Nice in October having come on at half-time for Silva, shaky and ponderous for the November loss at Dijon - even drawing a rare (for him) 3/10 from L'Équipe - and sent off in a narrow win at Angers back in May all came in games with Marquinhos returned to what is supposedly his natural role. Although a lack of consistent pressure for PSG defenders in domestic games may have eroded Marquinhos' (and others) defensive rigour in recent years, his international form at centre-back remains much more secure. Despite struggling with diarrhea while marking Lionel Messi in Brazil's Copa America semi-final win over Argentina, the Seleção eventually triumphantly lifting the trophy as host nation after a 3-1 final win against Peru, Marquinhos was superb. As he was throughout the tournament alongside club mate Silva, starting every game as Brazil only conceded once all competition.

However, Copa triumph aside, Marquinhos' 2019 club highlights have nearly all come in midfield. An evening spent shutting down Paul Pogba during PSG's imperious first leg Champions' League last sixteen win at Old Trafford (before the traditional second leg Parisian collapse) and a mature and accomplished performance in an imposing 3-0 PSG win over Real Madrid in September underline his suitability and quick adaptation to the role. This is despite the Bleacher Report stating in March that those close to him suggest he is unhappy playing as a sentinel.

Although his reputation as a defender remains a lofty one across the continent, a little more open-mindedness on his future in midfield could help him in the long run. That being said, his supposed displeasure has yet to manifest itself on the pitch, Marquinhos always proving to be a consummate professional and keen team player. Tuchel, however remained coy on where Marquinhos should play in February, when asked in which role the Brazilian was better Tuchel, offering glowing praise, told Le Parisien: "Phew! I don't know, he is very, very strong in all positions. He is very strong when he plays with Marco [Verratti] in the middle, or alone at number six. He is one of the best defenders in the world, but right now he is one of the best players in midfield in the world. He can always improve and wants to improve every day. He is an incredible player, with his personality and his quality. He is always ready to do things for the team and he is attentive during every game. He is incredible, incredible..."

When questioned by L'Équipe in November, Marquinhos however was a little more frosty towards a midfield role. "It's hard to say," responded the Brazilian when asked if playing as a sentinel was a drag or an asset for his game. "To be the best defender in the world, you must above all play at your position... But in the coach's philosophy, this is not the time for me to think only of playing in defence. Especially since he sees that I'm doing my job well in the middle, that's why he hasn't changed my positioning. The time I spend in the middle, I will make the most of it, and when I go back to defence, I will do my best too."

What is clear, at least for now, is that club and player are committed to each other. Speaking to the AFP in November, Marquinhos admitted that he would happily spend the rest of his career with PSG. "Yes I could easily do that," he explained, despite adding something of a qualifier. "If everything continues to go in the right direction, if I continue to feel happy here with the project, and everything that we are aiming for, and I keep the love of the fans, why not?" During the summer the story was little different however with Juventus heavily linked with PSG's number five while Barcelona as well as Manchester United also reportedly continues to be long term fans. For a while, a move seemed very plausible.

Despite some conjecture over his position and even his future, the approachable and charismatic Brazilian has become a central figure in the Paris dressing room, having quickly learned French upon his arrival. Vice-captain to Silva and the clear favourite to succeed him as club captain should he stay; Marquinhos has regularly captained PSG in 2019 with Silva (now 35) often rested, suspended or injured. Quite the change from previous Parisian eras as David Luiz in particular provided a serious roadblock to the first team, or meant Marquinhos was shunted out to full-back, that then lead to intensified speculation over a potential move. But Tuchel, and Unai Emery to his credit, put their faith in Marquinhos the defender and have been rewarded.

He may be understandably reluctant to commit to a full time change of position, but Marquinhos' outstanding 2019 shows that the Brazilian could be better off in the long-term if he embraces a career in midfield. Rather than looking to Van Dijk, Ramos and Silva, it may be wise to start comparing himself to the likes of Casemiro, N'Golo Kanté and Sergio Busquets. He may already be on the verge of surpassing them all.





*WISSAM BEN YEDDER*

(NEW)

**3**

**BORN: 1990/08/12, SARCELLES**

**CLUB: AS MONACO**

**POSITION: FORWARD**

**AT CLUB SINCE: 2019**

**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019: 37**

Although he and his strike partner Islam Slimani represent a dramatic deviation from AS Monaco's previously stated policy of bringing in young players who will have potential sell-on value, there is little doubting that Wissam Ben Yedder's start to life back in France has been one of the more auspicious arrivals to the Principality in recent years. With eleven goals through his first fourteen matches, the striker, signed from Sevilla in the summer for what seemed an eye-watering €40m, has been an instant hit, showcasing a deft touch in the area while engaging with Slimani in some sublime examples of the classic little man-big man strike partnership. The league's leading scorer as of this writing, 2019 has been perhaps the finest year of Ben Yedder's career, both for his clubs and for his country, and shows the value of persistence for a player who had come of age in the shadows of a Ligue 1 that was undergoing seismic changes in the form of the QSI takeover at Paris Saint-Germain.

The striker arrived in Monaco just days after his 29th birthday, and while Ben Yedder has hit the ground running, the team definitely have not, as their defence, once such a hallmark of Leonardo Jardim's various sides, has completely abandoned them. After flirting with relegation for much of the beginning of the season, things seemed to have settled down somewhat at the Stade Louis II, and with a tightly-packed table, Ben Yedder and Monaco can now get down to business and climb back toward the sort of league position that one might expect given their summer outlay, allowing him to play, as he had in Spain, on Europe's biggest stage once more.

Born, like so many other players who have been key to France's recent brilliant form on the international scene, on the outskirts of Paris, Ben Yedder, the son of Tunisian immigrants, had a late start in football. Growing up in the commune of Sarcelles, where he counted Riyad Mahrez among his childhood friends, he was clearly talented but failed to catch the eye of any of the area's biggest clubs. Speaking to UEFA in 2017, he reflected on his upbringing, "I had a pretty difficult childhood; not many people succeed, there are lots of talented young players and lots of players with huge potential and so it's hard to come looking for players there. It's really tough because there are lots of players who, unfortunately, just lack a bit of success."

It seemed for quite some time than Ben Yedder might be among that number who lacked a bit of luck to be spotted. Rather than being plucked from the banlieues to play at Clairefontaine or to be nestled away on the books of a professional team's academy, he had a scrappy start to life, and evinced far more talent playing futsal (a sport that has clearly helped with his close control and work in tight spaces) than he did football, earning his first caps for the national team in that sport at the age of just twenty. Making the leap to eleven a side did not come easy for Ben Yedder, who started his career with amateur side UJA Alfortville in 2010, but drawing on his memories of his upbringing gave him the desire to keep working toward his dream.

His performances in the fourth-tier Championnat did enough to get him noticed by Toulouse, and he made the move to the Occitan club in 2010. Toulouse are not well-known for their academy structure, but the chance to train with a club in Ligue 1 seemed too good to pass up for Ben Yedder. Too, as Toulouse had just sold André-Pierre Gignac, there even seemed to be potential to become a part of the first team in relatively short order. Instead, and perhaps unsurprisingly, his early years at the club were spent largely with the reserves, playing only a handful of minutes in his first two campaigns and getting on the scoresheet just once for the first team.

That all changed, however, when the club sanctioned the exits of Emmanuel Rivière and Umut Bulut in the summer of 2012. The pair had been signed at considerable expense (indeed, Rivière was the club's record signing until this summer), but neither was able to make much of an impression, scoring just ten goals between the two. With their departures, Ben Yedder seized the chance given to him by Alain Casanova with both hands, scoring fifteen goals and becoming an integral part of a Toulouse side that, had it had a better goalkeeper, could have challenged for Europe.

That season in France, the narrative was all about Paris Saint-Germain, and the arrival of Zlatan Ibrahimovic, with Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang's breakout campaign also garnering some headlines, but Ben Yedder's dogged performances saw him finish fifth in the scoring charts. He would top that the following year by finishing joint second, with 16 goals, before adding 14 and 17 in successive seasons, his scoring prowess becoming a byword for consistency despite his team's midtable position. Toulouse, under Casanova, continued to struggle, however, to make any meaningful progress in the league, as Ben Yedder's attacking talent was thwarted by a leaky defence and the continued sales of key players such as Étienne Capoue, Moussa Sissoko, and Serge Aurier.

In the summer of 2016, when Sevilla beckoned with the prospect of playing in a better league, with regular European football on the table, the choice was easy to make. Toulouse were, of course, reluctant to let the player go, not only owing to his performances but also for his passion for the club, a characteristic that he has continued to exhibit in his two stops since. Upon opening the scoring for Monaco in his return to Toulouse in December, he refused to celebrate and made a point afterward to acknowledge a banner calling him "Prince of the Stadium for Eternity."

However Sevilla, with venerated sporting director Monchi having had an eye for Ben Yedder for some time, looked an ideal destination not only for the exposure that the club would offer, but also for their style of football. His father averred as much, telling ABC "Whenever he asked me about Sevilla I would tell him 'go there, this way of playing football will suit you'." Suit Ben Yedder it did; he hit the ground running in that first season in Spain, getting on the scoresheet in a madcap 6-4 win over Espanyol in the season's opening fixture.

However, besides a brace against Alaves, goals were not forthcoming for Ben Yedder, nor was regular playing time in the Champions' League, here he made just two starts in the club's eight matches. Things improved somewhat after the turn of the year, but with the Andalusian club pushing to bring in competition in the form of Michy Batshuayi, Ben Yedder's status as the club's most important attacker was hardly a sure thing, as evinced by the decision to bring in Luis Muriel for a club-record fee the following summer.

Undeterred, Ben Yedder responded forcefully to the arrival of the Colombian, and raised his star significantly, scoring home and away against Liverpool in the group stage of the Champions' League before famously hitting a brace at Old Trafford to dump Manchester United out of the competition in the Round of 16. A quarter-final matchup with Bayern Munich was not as accommodating, but Ben Yedder finished the year on 22 goals in all competitions, and looked well on his way to making what had been a rather uneven first year in Spain all but a memory.

Last season was more of the same; Sevilla slipped out of the top four, a lengthy run in the Europa League and the same in the Copa del Rey badly stretching the squad's capabilities, but Ben Yedder notched 30 goals in all competitions, and added a further 11 assists, showing a creative side of his play that was rarely in evidence in his previous two seasons at the Sanchez Pizjuan and made him that much more attractive as a proven attacking outlet, something that would prove instrumental in Monaco's approach for the player. His play in Spain didn't go unnoticed by Didier Deschamps, either; despite a wealth of attacking options, Ben Yedder earned his first call-ups with Les Bleus and has been an important part of the squad in the time since, even starting the odd match.

His future for France is, of course, a matter of some speculation, as Kylian Mbappé will be the team's centrepiece going forward, and Antoine Griezmann likely has at least two more tournaments in him before retiring, but Ben Yedder's goalscoring record and consistency, especially when contrasted to the likes of those who would be his competition, players such as Anthony Martial and Kingsley Coman, makes him difficult for Deschamps to leave out.

Now a key player for club and country, Ben Yedder is no longer a prospect operating in the shadows, but has become one of Europe's best strikers, period. Possessing a remarkable accuracy in front of goal and a skillful eye for a pass (his four assists see him ranked in Ligue 1's top ten), he has also displayed increased levels of responsibility and maturity for the Principality club, an acknowledgment of not only his massive price tag and status as a French international, but also of a his role as a senior player on a team whose raft of arrivals in the summer lead to the aforementioned rocky start.

As he said in October; "I can be a leader. When things don't go well, I don't hide anymore; I don't hide at all in fact. I don't want to retreat into myself anymore; when things go wrong, I say so. I can even yell at people a bit — I arrived in Monaco with a new status. I have to do even more. It's not natural for me to bring out what's inside me, but I have found a way to do it just the same."

And it's that new status as a leader, and as the player who has been the most consistent among any of his fellow entrants on this list that Ben Yedder has earned this ranking. With the top half of the table tightly packed and Monaco not having much in the way of distraction from other competitions, there could yet be even further progression from the former futsal star.



*ANGEL DI MARIA*

(+5)

**2**

**BORN: 1988/02/14, ROSARIO**

**CLUB: PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN**

**POSITION: FORWARD**

**AT CLUB SINCE: 2015**

**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019: 31**



Ángel Di María isn't easily persuaded. Despite enjoying a rapid start to life in Paris, an intense display against Real Madrid at the Bernabeu stood out as did an impressive domestic goals and assists record in his first season, but eventually his form plateaued and he started to fade from view. While his workrate has never really been in doubt, there was a sense that he needed some convincing. Was Paris really right for him? Did he truly believe in the QSI project? Were PSG even a big enough club? Now however, a big name attack minded manager, £400m spent on a pair of world class forwards and a serious threat to his place in the team later, Di María finally looks fully invested and has just produced the footballing year of his life.

An initial burst followed by a slow malaise is a pattern Di María has experienced before at other clubs. A 2014 move to Old Trafford to partner Wayne Rooney, Robin Van Persie, Juan Mata and Falcão under Louis Van Gaal was an attractive proposition, but Di María's stay in Manchester lasted just one season. As October became November, United's £60m man was the Premier League's form player but injury in December derailed his rhythm and after a silly March sending off against Spurs, he only started one more game. Manchester just was not for him. His 11 assists in 27 top flight games have now been largely forgotten.

Despite some career-defining form in the last 18 months and seemingly finding a home in Paris, this being the Argentine's fifth season at PSG, his longest spell at any club, Di María has continued to fluctuate and frustrate overall since leaving United. Where best to use Di María is perhaps the toughest quandary a host of previous managers have faced. The simple answer is now obvious: on the wing. But the fact that the Argentine has been used successfully in a variety of roles adds uncertainty to that debate. Struggling to balance Kylian Mbappé, Neymar, Edinson Cavani, Julian Draxler, Mauro Icardi and Pablo Sarabia besides, Thomas Tuchel has flirted with the idea that Di María's overall quality could be repurposed for another position to the benefit of all.

Under the German coach alone, Di María has been used on both wings, up front centrally, as an attacking midfielder, a second striker and even, on one occasion at home to Angers last season, at wing-back. Given previous excellent displays in the latter stages of the Champions' League as part of Real Madrid's midfield three to boot, you could make a case (tongue a little in cheek) for Di María to be one of European football's best utility players. Phil Neville finally has a successor. Oddly however, despite his nomadic nature under Tuchel, Di María has previously proven resistant to being used outside his favoured right wing role, reportedly falling out with Unai Emery for playing him on the other flank.

Whatever his nominal position, Di María is most effective when allowed to play as something akin to an old fashioned inside forward and pick up the ball in space on the front foot on an inside right-hand channel. With PSG unlikely to deploy a shape that allows for such a position anytime soon, this is perhaps why he favours the right wing role as he can cut inside, skip past a defender and fire off a shot or cross with his left foot - a skill practically obligatory for a modern wide player, especially one at a Champions' League contending club.

Of late however Di María has focused on his ample vision and awareness in possession in these areas as Mbappé and co run beyond him, especially in Tuchel's intense and somewhat gung-ho 4-2-4 formation. A setup used considerably last term but less so this, although it has started to re-emerge in recent games. Having started his PSG career with a glorious reverse pass assist in a 3-0 win at Monaco, many more of similar quality have more recently followed. A sumptuous weight of pass and the ability to anticipate both general play and the movements of his teammates, not to mention the licence he often enjoys to drift between opposition lines wherever he is deployed, has turned Di María into Tuchel's creative fulcrum. Only Téji Savanier with 13 beat his tally of 11 league assists last term and the Argentine has already produced nine more in all competitions so far this term.

Creating goals is nothing new for Di María of course, 18 was his league zenith in 2015/16 in Ligue 1 which matched his 2013/14 La Liga outlay with Real Madrid, but the responsibility that Di María has assumed in 2019 is striking. His form and influence have been such, although perhaps also partly due to other's injuries, that it is now Di María who dictates pace and tempo in attack and PSG look to him before anyone else to create something in trickier games. That may change in 2020 if Neymar can avoid another lengthy injury or suspension for example, but in 2019 Paris have been Di María's team creatively. Whether that remains the case will be an interesting subplot to PSG's latest desperate charge for European glory but Di María has proven himself indispensable to Thomas Tuchel this year regardless and he posed a very strong case to top this list. It is not an overstatement to say that, at 31, the last 12, or even 18, months have been comfortably the best of Di María's distinguished career.

2019 highlights have included; an audacious outside of the foot lob over Walter Benitez as part of a brace and a Man of the Match display at Nice in October; five assists in six days including a hat-trick against Club Brugge in the Champions' League and leading PSG to a thumping Le Classique 4-0 win this autumn; another demolition of Marseille at the end of last season in which he scored twice and provided a delicious assist for a 3-1 win; running the show at Old Trafford and providing both assists in PSG's first leg UCL last 16 win (before the usual second disaster); not to mention a combined tally of 40 goals and assists in 44 games across all competitions this calendar year.

It hasn't always been like this for Di María in Paris however, despite 78 goals and 80 assists in just 203 games across four and a half seasons with PSG at time of writing. With the title all but gone as Di María, dejected and frustrated, trudged from the pitch at Nice's Allianz Riviera back in April 2017, it seemed as if the end of his PSG career was in sight. An intelligent Nice under the wily Lucien Favre had routed PSG 3-1 with Di María sent off for an angry slash at Arnaud Souquet late on. Inter Milan were heavily linked with the Argentine that summer and with the usual turnover likely, he was a prime candidate to move on, to create space for other players and bring in funds to appease FFP.

However, akin to the rest of Europe, Di María's opinion of PSG changed in the summer of 2017, when the club spent an unprecedented €400m on Neymar and Kylian Mbappé. Suddenly PSG had a forward line to rival, or even beat, the continent's best. However with Cavani, Julian Draxler, Javier Pastore and Lucas Moura to compete with, Di María was a long way from Emery's first choice. PSG's hierarchy seemed to agree and offered him and a handful of others to Monaco. All refused to go to the Principality.

Nevertheless with the MCN strike-force of Mbappé, Cavani and Neymar ensconced at the start of Emery's second and final season in Paris, Di María largely found himself on the bench. However, a combination of injuries and suspensions after Christmas gave him the chance to start eleven consecutive games - an opportunity he seized.

Such was Di María's form during that run, speculation was rife that Emery would drop Mbappé to keep Di María in the team for the Real Madrid last 16 Champions League tie. Di María started neither game against Madrid in the end but he kept his place for the rest of the domestic campaign and helped win a domestic treble. Di María, a common theme since the arrival of Neymar and Mbappé, played like he knew his place in the side was under threat, whereas before it was all but guaranteed.

Although Emery left at the end of 2017/18, despite that treble, Di María's outstanding form had impressed the incoming Thomas Tuchel. The German's faith in PSG's number 11 was obvious, seemingly intent on treating him equally to Neymar, Mbappé and Cavani - always looking for a way to squeeze all four into his team. Hence the brief stint at wing-back. Crucially, Di María was willing to adapt to whichever role Tuchel tasked him with, a change in attitude compared to disagreements with Emery over playing on the right or the left.

Whether Di María simply needed the arrival of Neymar and Mbappé to push him out of his comfort zone or Tuchel has been able to motivate him more than other coaches or he is just now entirely convinced that PSG are genuine contenders and real heavyweights, it is clear in 2019 that the Argentine forward is fully invested in what Tuchel, QSI and his teammates are trying to achieve at the Parc des Princes. And that has brought out the best in him.

So much so that, although Mbappé's golden boy status and the perpetual circus engulfing Neymar divert attention elsewhere, Di María has arguably been PSG's most important player under Tuchel. Pivotality, with the club's gaze fiercely set on winning the Champions' League, some of his best performances have come on European nights. With Mbappé, Cavani and Neymar all missing, it was Di María who led the charge for the visit of Real Madrid in September, scoring twice in a 3-0 triumph.

Incredibly, Di María has engineered a situation where he is now theoretically the untouchable one in PSG's attack, which was unthinkable two years ago. Although Mbappé and Neymar continue to cause havoc, it is difficult to escape the feeling that it is Di María who now truly makes PSG play and that this is becoming his team.

While the coming year may challenge that notion with Tuchel initially reluctant to use all of his current 'fab four' from the start now each are fit, it is certain that Di María has finally been persuaded that Paris is for him and player as well as club are all the better for it. In the last three years, PSG have spent over half a billion euros looking in vain for the player to deliver European glory at long last, but he might have been there all along.



*KYLIAN MBAPPE*

(-)

**1**

**BORN: 1998/12/20, BONDY**  
**CLUB: PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN**  
**POSITION: FORWARD**  
**AT CLUB SINCE: 2017**  
**LEAGUE MATCHES IN 2019: 29**

It is true that it did not include becoming a World Champion, but suffice to say that Kylian Mbappé's 2019 was not far off from his 2018, and perhaps even exceeded it on a personal level. Continued struggles with injuries on the part of Edinson Cavani and Neymar saw him come increasingly to the fore in how Thomas Tuchel set up his team, and Mbappé responded in kind, leading the league in scoring with 33 goals from 29 matches, all but one of those from open play.

Whether played through the middle on his own, on the flank in a 4-3-3, or, as Tuchel as experimented with in recent weeks, in a partnership with Mauro Icardi in a 4-4-2, he has scored with aplomb, showing deference to the Argentine when necessary whilst also filling his boots himself. Persistent rumours of a mooted move to Real Madrid never seem far away, but even as he has shown the occasional display of petulance, his displays on the pitch have been near-uniform in their consistency and level of excellence.

A player who last month averred to FIFA's website that "Football is not just a job for me. My dream came true when I started playing football and turned professional, and I get to live that dream every single day. I watch all the games in all the leagues and I never get bored," is indeed living his dream. His narrative has been fairly well-trodden since his bursting onto the scene just under three years ago with AS Monaco, a determined rise that shows his dedication and why he plays with a smile on his face.

Born in Paris to a father from Cameroon and a mother from Algeria, his being the child of immigrants is typical of many of the top players in France, as is his emergence from the capital city's banlieues, an area so rich in talent that it has spurred many a punchline wondering how the city might fare were it to field its own team in the World Cup. He got his start in football, famously, at AS Bondy, where he showed not only an eye for goal but also a nascent creative ability, being as equally eager to run at opposing players with the ball at his feet and to set up teammates as he was to put the ball in the back of the net himself.

After his spell at Bondy ended, Mbappé joined the celebrated institution that is the national football academy at Clairefontaine. There, his zestful play was honed and moulded, and following pursuit from a number of clubs, he eventually signed on with Monaco in 2013. He scored with regularity for the side's various youth teams, playing both on the left flank and through the middle, held back only by his small frame vis-à-vis the rigours of playing against players older and more physically developed than he.

Breaking into the first team at the Principality, though, was still seemingly a distant dream, proving that, despite his success with France, things were not always so easy. There were fleeting appearances in the 2015/16 season, but he failed to make much of an impact, with the club itself struggling to cope with a raft of injuries and the late departure of Anthony Martial to Manchester United that summer. While Monaco eventually recovered to finish third, Mbappé appeared sparingly, and even then he was played on the wing, with Leonardo Jardim playing a 4-2-3-1 and Guido Carrillo, Lacina Traoré or winter signing Vagner love often being preferred to the youngster. With Bernardo Silva, Thomas Lemar, and Nabil Dirar impressive on the flanks, it was thus understandable that Mbappé would be living off scraps.

Despite a sparkling performance for France's U19s the following summer, leading the team to a comprehensive European Championship win despite being a year younger than most of his teammates, he was not able to quickly translate his international success to strong performances in Ligue 1. That next season, 2016/17 looked initially to be uneven for the youngster as well, as the returns of Radamel Falcao and Valère Germain from their respective loan spells augured poorly for his ambitions of receiving more playing time, even as Jardim had set out his stall in a more attacking fashion.

A concussion suffered in the season's first match against Guingamp kept him out for the better part of three months, and with Monaco jousting with PSG at the top of the table and Germain playing a brilliant foil for Falcao at the top of a 4-4-2, it looked like Mbappé, however strong his summer had been, would have to perhaps go on loan to secure regular playing time, despite having been picked to start that first match. After a month on the sidelines, however, Mbappé was back, and slowly re-entered the fray, making his second start of the season against Montpellier in late October. In that match, in which Monaco lined up in their now-classic eleven, Mbappé drew a penalty, had an assist for Germain and scored himself with a header, showing at once his breathless skill and nascent ability to affect a match in myriad ways, his pace and unselfish style of play proving a near-perfect foil for Falcao's power and aerial ability.



From there, Mbappé has scarcely looked back, scoring six goals in the knockout rounds of the Champions' League as an unfancied Monaco side made the semi-finals, putting out Borussia Dortmund and Manchester City along the way. In the league, he was similarly impressive, winning the UNFP Young Player of the Year award in finishing with 15 goals and 11 assists in the league as Monaco won their final twelve matches to clinch the title at a canter, scoring a staggering 107 goals in the process. That team, of course, was quickly picked apart, with Silva and Tiemoué Bakayoko making their exits, and Mbappé soon joining them for a fee that made him the world's second most-expensive player, despite having yet to reach his nineteenth birthday.

While many were quick to castigate the capital side for poaching their biggest rival's most promising player, it was never a question of his transfer being one of money, but rather a return to his banlieue roots. He told the club's website shortly after his arrival, "I felt at home here straight away; it's been really ideal for me to settle in to a new team. Everyone has talked to me, we joke about as if we've known each other for years already. The guys have also looked to protect me, they've really tried to do everything possible to enable me to focus on giving my best on the pitch."

His time, in Paris, then, has been an unmitigated success, save, of course, the club's proverbial albatross in the form of the Champions' League. While Mbappé clearly has a personality and is unafraid to express himself both on and off the pitch, his positional versatility, both for his club, and for France (more on that in a moment) have made him indispensable, especially as playing wide on the right may be the position in which he is least suited, no matter his having recorded fairly impressive statistics whilst stationed there. He was willing, however, to make the move, with Neymar and Edinson Cavani clearly installed as the first-choice centre forward and left-sided attackers respectively. Despite having only played there fleetingly (he was used more often on the left flank at Monaco), he quickly made the position his own, and his obvious ability there saw him also become first choice for his country as well, playing as a hybrid third forward/winger as Les Bleus won the World Cup that summer, Mbappé and Blaise Matuidi's mutable roles being integral to their success.

A change in his club manager had preceded France's success in Europe, however, with Unai Emery being replaced by Thomas Tuchel that summer. The former Borussia Dortmund boss' tenure has seen some feathers seemingly ruffled on Mbappé's side, with the youngster giving his manager the cold shoulder upon being taken off against Montpellier recently. That said, there must be, on the part of Mbappé, a willingness to recognise the German's drive and focus, and his potential to allow the club to push on in Europe. Despite the former Dortmund manager having had some (relatively) middling results domestically, comfortably topping a group with Real Madrid in it takes some doing and underscores the capital side's potential in the competition going forward.

For his part, Tuchel was quick to downplay the incident, averring "Kyllian is not too hard to manage, however, yes, he does have a special mentality! That is normal with his state of mind -- his ambitions and his titles. He always wants to win and never likes to leave the pitch." This dovetails nicely, then, into how PSG are set to continue moving forward with their impressive summer acquisitions; the trio of Keylor Navas, Abdou Diallo, and most importantly, Idrissa Gueye give Tuchel's charges a level of focus, determination and tactical versatility that is the envy of perhaps every club in Europe. Mbappé's ambitions, having already reached the pinnacle with his country, centre around Europe's biggest prize and he must recognise that the way that PSG as currently constructed gives him perhaps his best shot at adding a Champions' League medal to his already bulging trophy cabinet.

Speaking again to FIFA's website, he described PSG's development and summer moves as such: "We're going to work hard and go about it calmly too. We've got great players here and we're aiming to create a real team. I think we're on the way to doing that." While he would of course never be seen to not be toeing the party line here, his frisson with Tuchel ought not to be taken as a manifestation of his ego but rather that of a player who wants the best out of himself and is still, having only just turned 21, maturing. The German may project a rather frosty character, but his success in his country offers a reminder that he, unlike Emery, is an ideal leader and can reinforce a needed level of discipline in Mbappé without mitigating his joie de vivre.

To wit, then, it is precisely that evinced pleasure in playing the game that has made Mbappé a talent who bears watching. Rarely without a smile on his face, his seeming effortlessness on the pitch goes hand-in-hand with what we hold football to be at its core; something that is fun, rewarding, and entertaining. With that, then, he retains his position atop this list, combining talent, personality and ability in a uniquely irrepressible way that is more than deserving of the honour.

# THE GFFN 100 2019: TEN TO WATCH

## Yacine Adli | 19 | Bordeaux | Midfielder

The former Paris Saint-Germain youngster has been a regular within France's youth setup for some time, but it wasn't until his January move to Bordeaux and Paulo Sousa's subsequent implementation of a 3-4-2-1 that Adli has really blossomed. Playing alongside Nicolas De Préville in a free attacking role, he has been given a long leash and readily shown his ability with the ball at his feet, his powerful shot (three goals), and creative instincts (three assists this season). His lanky frame allows him to easily find space and he already looks a good value at €5.5m

## Anthony Caci | 22 | Strasbourg | Defender

The versatile Caci was impressive last season in limited playing time but has come on leaps and bounds this season, supplanting Lionel Carole as the first-choice left back. Also able to play in central defence, the rangy youngster has contributed four assists this season, while also impressing in the Europa League. A fine crosser of the ball, he adds balance playing opposite Kenny Lala and his continued inclusion in the eastern side's first team has had much to do with their improved form of late, his play even earning him a pair of caps for France's U-21 side.

## Mounir Chouiar | 20 | Dijon | Forward

Despite not turning 21 until January, the current campaign marks Chouiar's fourth in professional football, having broken through with Lens early in the 2016-17 season. His move to Dijon in the summer saw him take some time to settle in, but his play under Stéphane Jobard has often been a thing of unalloyed joy to watch. Part of a cadre of younger attacking players added in the summer, Chouiar has replaced Naïm Sliti as the club's attacking fulcrum, playing, like the Tunisian, as a left-sided winger but has adapted well, using his pace and tireless running to harry opposing defenders.

## Axel Disasi | 21 | Reims | Defender

Reims gained a deserved reputation as one of Europe's most parsimonious sides last season, but the departures of Bjorn Engels and Édouard Mendy this summer meant that David Guion would have his work cut out for him in replicating that in the current campaign. His choice to partner the experienced veteran Yunis Abdelhamid, Axel Disasi, has been a prescient one indeed, as the youngster, who had first played professionally with Paris FC, has used his coltish energy and pace as the perfect complement to Abdelhamid, the pair's size and aerial ability key to the Champagne side's continued push for Europe.

## Ibrahima Diallo | 20 | Brest | Midfielder

Younger brother of Paris Saint-Germain's Abdou Diallo, Ibrahima is also a product of Monaco's academy, and after helping Brest to promotion while on loan last season, the Breton club moved quickly to make him a permanent signing in the summer. While often being used as a defensive shield for the defence, Diallo has far more than that in his locker. Surprisingly quick, and adept with the ball at his feet, he adds dynamism and drive to midfield, something that has also seen him impress with France's various youth sides, including at this summer's U-20 World Cup.

# THE GFFN 100 2019: TEN TO WATCH

## Wesley Fofana | 19 | Saint-Étienne | Defender

If this list were the precursor to an eleven of France's best young talents, we would have to play with five at the back, to acknowledge the depth Ligue 1 currently has in terms of its young defenders. William Saliba may be the darling of the scouting cognoscenti, but his teammate Fofana is also deserving of a mention, as the Arsenal loanee's injury struggles have allowed him more first-team football. A near-manic presence at the back for Les Verts, Fofana will need some fine-tuning to progress, but judged on his instincts, he is already a player to behold; only Pablo has won more headers in the league than him this season.

## Gabriel | 22 | Lille | Defender

The hulking youngster, one of a raft of Brazilians brought to Lille of late, may not have the flash or name recognition of some of his teammates, but he has been head and shoulders the best of them. As assured in the air as he is going to ground, it's been less than a year since he made his first start in the league, but his inclusion in the team, initially as cover for the injured Adama Soumaoro coincided with Les Dogues' run up the table, and he's scarcely looked back, keeping Soumaoro on the bench as he and José Fonte have formed one of Ligue 1's best defensive partnerships.

## Imran Louza | 20 | Nantes | Midfielder

Born and raised in Nantes, having been with the club's academy since the age of seven, attacking midfielder Louza has been hugely impressive this season, his form even seeing the team move towards a 4-2-3-1 so as to better accommodate both he and summer arrival Ludovic Blas. A left-footed player who is able to readily swap roles with the former Guingamp man, he has thrived in midfield going forward while still showing a great deal of eagerness to get stuck in and press from the front, demonstrating his willingness to play in a very modern way, despite his somewhat archaic position.

## Gautier Larssonneur | 22 | Brest | Goalkeeper

Despite his young age, Larssonneur is already in his third full season as Brest's first choice goalkeeper, playing with an assurance that belies his age. Having been an integral part of the Breton side's promotion last year, he has looked equally at ease in the top flight, having kept six clean sheets as the Stade Francis-Le Blé has become one of the most difficult places to go in the division; only Paris Saint-Germain have come away with a win. Brest are likely to struggle this season, given their middling attack, but in Larssonneur, the team have a commanding presence who is unlikely to return to Ligue 2 with them.

## Mohamed Simakan | 19 | Strasbourg | Defender

A towering presence at 6' 2", Simakan has taken to life in the top flight like a duck to water, becoming a regular starter despite having only played his first professional minutes in this summer's Europa League campaign. Adept at both right back and in central defense, his pace, size, and ability with the ball at his feet make him able to terrorise opposing attackers with ease. Of course, he is sometimes guilty over-estimating his ability, cheaply conceding possession, but it's too easy to look at Simakan's physical prowess and confidence and see a star in the making.

# THE GFFN 100 TEAM 2019

Adam White

Kale Stockwell

Adrien Dryll

Lee Davey

Charlie Dale

Mohammed Ali

Christian Nourry

Pierre-Paul Bermingham

Clinton McDubus

Philip Bargiel

Eric Devin

Raphaël Jucobin

Grant Maitland

Rich Allen

Hal Walker

Thomas Wiseman

Jake Smales

Zach Lowy

Jeremy Smith

\*data provided by Get Football  
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Squawka & WhoScored