

The
GFFN



100
2020

In a year unlike any other, we're happy and proud to have come together to bring you the Get French Football News 100 2020. In a year when many may have endured heartbreak, loss, dejection, and grief in very real terms, putting what has happened on the football pitch in stark relief to the world around us. It is true, of course, that what we should be prioritising in a difficult time is our mental and physical health, as well as that of those around us, rather than football. But even if there are more important things in life (and there are), we should also acknowledge the positive role that sport can play in our lives.

Even if virtually, fandom brings us together, connecting us with a global network of supporters, each of us as eager as the last to debate the merits of Memphis Depay, agonise over Dimitri Payet's inconsistent form, or get into a lather over how Kylian Mbappé — isn't — top of this list. To that end, we welcome debate and conjecture over these players rankings and inclusions, albeit with the caveat that with such a small sample size (most French-based teams played just 26 League Apps 2020), there is necessarily more variance, and a good (or poor) run of form stretching a half dozen matches or so can have an outsize effect on a player's placement.

Still, though, this was once again an enjoyable exercise in what was an historic year for French football, given the success of Paris Saint-Germain and Olympique Lyonnais in the Champions' League. French football's talent level in many ways has never been higher, and while yes, there is a capital-heavy sense to the upper reaches of our rankings, the brilliance of the likes of Lyon, Rennes and Lille mean that there is much quality to be found outside of Paris as well: whether it be in the teenage brilliance of Eduardo Camavinga, the all-action play of Benjamin André, or the ebullience of Andy Delort at Montpellier.

Too, the relative youth of many players on this list is also a potent reminder of the continual churn of talent emerging from France and exceptional ability to spot the best up-and-coming players. Gabriel, Wesley Fofana, Ibrahima Diallo, player who we selected last year have, in the twelve months since, moved to England and become integral parts of their sides, while others continue to be tipped for a move abroad. Which players among this year's list will be the next to take a big step forward? While we're not blessed with a crystal ball, we are uniquely positioned to be able to spot the next big thing in France more readily than most, and it's similarly an enjoyable part of this guide.

To conclude, for those interested, here is a bit more about how we have done these rankings:

The Get French Football News 100 comprises our selection of the top one hundred talents that French football has to offer, judged solely on their performances in 2020. 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 2020.

Players that are eligible are judged on all their professional appearances in 2020, regardless of whether or not they were playing abroad for a part of the calendar year. This applies to the international appearances they might have accumulated as well. Players are ranked in descending order: with the highest-rated talent ranked 1st and the 100th highest-rated talent ranked 100th.

A negative (-) sign with a number next to it shows that the player has dropped in ranking compared to last year's performance and by how many places, and vice versa with a positive (+) sign. "NEW" denotes a player who is making a new entry into the Get French Football News 100, not historically, but in comparison with last year. A dash "-" shows that the player's ranking is unchanged from last season.

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Chief Features Writer
Get French Football News



Mounir CHOUJAR

Club: Dijon FCO

Born: 1999/01/23

Position: Winger

At Club Since: 2019

League Apps 2020: 20

100
(NEW)

Ligue 1 is well-known as a hub for talent production, including the continual discovery of attackers who excel at dribbling from an early age. The most recent exports from this group have been that of Allan Saint-Maximin and Marcus Thuram, now of Newcastle United and Gladbach, who have made significant impacts at the clubs they left Ligue 1 for. Mounir Chouiar could end up following the same trajectory very soon as he proved in 2020 that he is the next up in the line of talented young dribblers to emerge from France.

It is fair to say that the suspension and ultimate truncated end of the 2019/20 campaign due to COVID-19 benefitted Dijon, who were fixed in a relegation battle with Chouiar, who had become the sides creative fulcrum, out with a sprained ankle until the end of March at the very least. Without his attacking, it was likely that DFCO would have slipped into the relegation zone. L'Équipe reported late in the summer transfer window that Chouiar was not part of the squad in a home game against Brest because of transfer reasons, having been targeted by Premier League outfits such as Leeds, Arsenal and Wolves.

Despite Dijon's poor start to the 2020/21 season, Chouiar has continued to display why he is a key player and one who they will rely on for Ligue 1 survival. Only Reims and relegated Toulouse scored less than Dijon's 27 goals in 28 games in 2019/20 where surprisingly, Chouiar did not register a single assist. However, looking at his underlying numbers it is clear that the reason for this lack of assist production was more related to his teammates' finishing, rather than the quality of his chance creation.

In that season, the former Lens winger laid on an average 2.6 key passes for his teammates, fifth best in the league. Those key passes are bolstered by the fact that Chouiar takes the majority of his side's set pieces and often delivers well into dangerous areas with a good use of dip on the ball. It is impressive to find that only Dimitri Payet created more shot actions from dead balls in 2019/20.

However, it is Chouiar's dribbling ability that really makes him stand out and leads to chances for his side. He completed an average of 4.5 dribbles last season with a very strong 67% success rate and sat sixth for creating shots from dribbles in the league per 90 minutes. It is clear that Chouiar is dangerous going forward in a number of ways and should he continue to post similar numbers in his second top flight season, he will rightfully earn a move further afield come the summer.



Vincent PAJOT

Club: FC Metz

Born: 1990/08/19

Position: Midfield

At Club Since: 2020

League Apps 2020: 15

While 2020 has been a year of frustration and stagnation for many, Vincent Pajot may look back with more fondness than most. Apparently well past his best, he has this year re-established himself as a reliable, talented player deserving of his continued presence at the highest level.

At the beginning of his career, Pajot was destined for greater things. Joining Rennes just before turning 17, he soon won the Coupe Gambardella alongside the likes of Yann M'Vila and Yacine Brahimi. While captain of the reserves, he signed his first professional contract before being sent for a loan spell at Ligue 2 club Boulogne. His performances earned him France U21 recognition and persuaded then-Rennes coach Frédéric Antonetti to give him his first team debut. Over the next four years he became a regular for the "Rouge-et-Noir", serving as the centre point of a three-man midfield and providing the key transition between defence and attack. This successful period was, however, also held back by the first handful of the 20 injury lay-offs that Pajot has endured throughout his career.

After another disrupted season, Pajot moved to Saint-Étienne in 2015, enjoying three further campaigns of solid if unspectacular football, injuries preventing him building up a real head of steam: the fact that Pajot has never managed 30 Ligue 1 matches in one season speaks for itself. After a disappointing 18 months at Angers during which he failed to hold down a first team slot, his career seemed to be petering out.

His loan move to Metz on the final day of 2019 was therefore not met with huge excitement by "Grenat" fans. However, under former coach Antonetti's oversight, Pajot has been – to an extent – reborn. The team was 18th in the table at the turn of the year but, thanks in great part to Pajot's guile and metronomic performances in the centre, he even provided three rare assists, the club's form turned around, Les Grenats ending the shortened season in 15th, clear of the relegation zone and frustrated not to have the chance to push higher up the table.

Metz took up Pajot's purchase option and the beginning of the 2020/21 season has followed a similar path: despite frustrating narrow defeats to Monaco, Lille and PSG, Pajot helped Metz to wins over Reims, Lorient and Saint-Étienne. Frustratingly, the spectre of injury has returned in recent weeks with a thigh strain and tendonitis in his heel keeping him out for most of the past two months. His importance to Metz, however, is borne out in the statistics since he arrived: when he has started, Metz have 1.86 points per game; when he has not, that number goes down to 1.1. It is the story of his career but, if only the injuries could stay away, Pajot still has a lot to give.



Seko FOFANA

Club: RC Lens

Born: 1995/05/07

Position: Midfield

At Club Since: 2020

League Apps 2020: 30

98
(NEW)

Seko Fofana's €10m move to RC Lens from Udinese this summer was perhaps the transfer that was most emblematic of Ligue 1's lucrative new domestic TV deal, a deal that has since crashed and burned. The fact that a newly-promoted side were able to spend that amount of money, and lure a player of Fofana's quality back to France from under the noses of the likes of Inter and Atalanta, was considered a thrilling success that left many bemused.

Though Fofana has not yet lived up the potential he demonstrated as a youngster that prompted a move to Manchester City, the 25-year-old had become a key player in Udine, and played an integral role in last season's survival bid. After being ostracised by coach Igor Tudor in 2019, with the side hovering precariously over the relegation zone at the end of the year, caretaker Luca Gotti stepped in, reinstating the box-to-box midfielder to the starting XI, a decision which paid instant dividends.

Fofana helped I Friulani to a crucial win over relegation rivals Lecce, before setting up two goals in a 3-0 drubbing of Sassuolo to kick-start 2020, demonstrating what he does best: intelligent, devastating runs on the counter. He would also score and assist in a 2-2 draw against Genoa after the restart, another side fighting for survival.

But the moment of Fofana's year came against champions-in-waiting Juventus. With their survival still in the balance with three games to go, Udinese had managed to keep the game at 1-1. In the 92nd minute, as the Bianconeri pushed for a winner, the midfielder latched onto a loose ball in his own half and stormed forward into space, shrugging off a challenge from Alex Sandro, nutmegging Matthijs De Ligt and firing a driven shot past the onrushing goalkeeper. Cue bedlam. "That run from midfield was like a scene in The Last Dance, my final gem in the Udinese jersey", Fofana told La Gazzetta dello Sport, "That goal shows all my character, as I took the ball and just went for it." Just like that, the team were safe, and largely thanks to the Ivorian's two goals and five assists since the start of the year.

Sadly, Lens' record signing has not yet had an extended opportunity to display his qualities in northern France. Struggling with injury, he managed just 27 minutes against Bordeaux in September, before an injury relapse that sidelined him until November. With a couple of starts under his belt, his first full 90 minutes came in an impressive 2-0 away win over Rennes, in which the Ivorian international set up Ignatius Ganago for Les Sang et Or's second.

This is hopefully only the beginning for Fofana at Lens. His new club have been the surprise package so far this season, and the box-to-box dynamo looks like the perfect fit for their all-action play. Much like the TV deal that made his signing possible, his start to this season has been turbulent, but unlike with the deal, things are looking up.



Vitorino HILTON

Club: Montpellier HSC

Born: 1977/09/13

Position: Defender

At Club Since: 2011

League Apps 2020: 20

97
(-16)

Hilton is with Montpellier for another season after signing an extension to stay with the Occitanie club. At a time of such inconsistency, seeing another Ligue 1 season with Hilton leading the back line of Montpellier is comforting. As one of the real veterans of Europe and Ligue 1, Hilton at age 43 has managed to do something that very few in any major European league has done: staying effective at such a senior age in his career.

That sort of fight against the cold hands of “father time” is rivalled only by the great Zlatan Ibrahimovic but both Hilton and Zlatan’s effectiveness can be explained in the same manner. Both players are obviously not the same, but they are sharper than ever in respect to their positioning, reading the game and utilising what they still have to maximise their play.

On the pitch, Hilton is not only Montpellier’s last line of defence, but he starts their offensive attack while positioned in the most traditional sense as a centre half in a three-man back line. Hilton has a sense of where everyone is on the pitch at all times and is able to exploit the defences of his opponents with his reading of the game and his famous long ball. Taking advantage of his depth and spacing, Hilton also has a wide range of passes in his arsenal that he utilises to feed the midfield with a very high completion percentage.

However, the two-time Ligue 1 champion may be showing the first signs of rust in the gears. Though still early in the Ligue 1 season, the aged “libero” has been declining in several categories and has two early red cards this campaign, arguably due to his slower reaction time. Hilton has also uncharacteristically given up goals against Nîmes and a lost pass when playing out the back against Dijon. Without failure, Hilton’s mind for the game and experience rallies the defence as a cohesive unit against the high press of Ligue 1 attacks, making him an important, but no longer irreplaceable, figure for Montpellier this season.

After 15 plus years of playing in France, Hilton may be lacing his boots for his last season. At the end of this campaign, Hilton will possibly have played over 500 Ligue 1 matches, won two league titles, earned four selections for Team of the Year and a two-time Coupe de la Ligue champion. If this is the last season for “The Immortal Hilton,” he will certainly be remembered by Marseille and Montpellier supporters as a champion and by Ligue 1 for his years of service. Players like Moussa Sissoko and Hilton bring qualitative rather than quantitative bonuses to their team and teammates. Unfortunately, this type of leadership is a declining trend in world football and an area in which he will be missed the most.



Facundo MEDINA

Club: RC Lens

Born: 1999/05/28

Position: Defender

At Club Since: 2020

League Apps 2020: 15

96
(NEW)

The transfer market in France this summer was a different one indeed — even the promoted clubs were getting involved in the wake of the (now ill-fated) new broadcasting agreement. Lorient and Lens were no strangers to opening their checkbooks this summer, and the northern side twice broke their transfer record, first on Ignatius Ganago, and then on Seko Fofana. The young forward has been a smash success, even factoring in a spell on the sidelines with injury, and while the Ivorian has yet to come good as he works his way back to full fitness, the pair aren't alone in being key parts of Le Sang et Or's strong start to life back in the top flight.

One wouldn't necessarily expect an Argentine international (his first cap having come just last month) to rock up at the Stade Félix-Bollaert, but in Facundo Medina, signed for €3.5m from Talleres, manager Franck Haise has just that. A product of River Plate's vaunted academy, he joined the Córdoba side in 2018 to no great fanfare, but quickly became a regular there under Juan Pablo Vojvoda, albeit playing as a left-back. After further improvement there, including winning the CONMEBOL pre-Olympic tournament in February, he made the move to Europe, continuing the rich tradition of Argentines playing at France.

While Medina had won that Olympic title playing as a left-sided centre back, his experience also playing as an orthodox left back has seen him be used on the left side of a back three at Lens, anchoring a 3-4-1-2 alongside Loïc Badé and Jonathan Gradić. A rapid and aggressive player, his ability to cover a lot of ground makes him an ideal foil for the team's enterprising wing-backs, Issiaga Sylla and Massadio Haidara. That said, he is also a "young", rapid and aggressive player, and as a result is no stranger to the referee's notebook, having been booked five times in his first ten appearances. Discipline being an issue is nothing new for Medina — he was carded at a similar rate in Argentina, but it is something which will require improvement if he is to continue his progress.

Somewhat undersized in terms of his height, Medina has used his pace as a weapon to counter being shrugged off the ball, and he will need to continue to work on his positioning and anticipation, but his weaknesses are by and large subsumed by his fine build-up play. Comfortable with the ball at his feet, and ambitious (if not always successful) with his passing out of the back, Medina has needed some time to adjust to the speed of play in France, but remains a player with good instincts. His combative nature and dogged play have already made him a favourite of Haise, who has praised his maturity, and the hope here is that as he continues his acclimation to Ligue 1, he could soon be a more regular selection for his country.



Benjamin BOURIGEAUD

Club: Stade Rennais

Born: 1994/01/14

Position: Midfielder

At Club Since: 2017

League Apps 2020: 26

95
(-25)

Despite being one of Rennes' most important players, Calais-born Benjamin Bourigeaud is still a Sang et Or (Lens fans' nickname) at heart and embodies the hard-working, never-say-die attitude that transpires from the club situated in the north of France.

He has been coined the French David Beckham in the past, but beyond his delicate right foot that is useful in delivering crosses (not his main attribute unlike Becks) and score from long-range, Bourigeaud has an impressive physical condition that enables him to drop deep and look for inter-changing positions with his teammates. He is also capable of playing between the lines (very important when you play in Ligue 1 as most sides defend deep) and press. All this demands strong physical attributes which the midfielder possesses. Take his performance at Chelsea for example in the Champions' League: he knew he would have N'Golo Kanté on his back all game so he dropped deep (very deep as he was playing between the centre-backs to get the ball) so as to avoid the world champion pressing him which enabled some time on the ball, a bit like a trequartista. With Eduardo Camavinga, he has an up-and-coming talent with whom he needs to make the most of before the partnership is broken. However, injuries to the youngster have prevented them from building genuine chemistry, so Bourigeaud has turned to Clément Grenier in midfield and they have been terrorising defences. If only the end product was as good from the club's attackers...

Indeed, Bourigeaud is coming to a certain age where more is asked of him and doing things that more experienced players do (dive in the area, moan to the referee) would not hurt his development. At the time of writing, Rennes are the only side yet to have been awarded a penalty in 2020/21. Maybe a more mischievous approach is needed from Bourigeaud.

For all his striking stamina, Bourigeaud very rarely hits the target, which is a problem for such a player. It is great to see a player play deep, pass with intent and shoot from distance, but you feel that his efforts should be better rewarded with stronger finishing on his part. The northerner is one of the league's fittest players who does not get his name discussed enough because his movement is often made to no avail. As a #10, he should be achieving more efficiency and less huffing and puffing.

This analysis is of course overshadowed by the player's generosity on and off the pitch which has made him linked with top European clubs. 2020/21 was Bourigeaud's first foray at Champions' League football which means that interest in his performances should not wane, on the contrary. Bourigeaud has played with the same verve and energy against European powerhouses Chelsea & Sevilla as he would in a Coupe de France tie against an amateur side. His attitude is applauded by all not only at Rennes, but also at Lens, where it all started.



Toma BASIC

Club: Girondins de Bordeaux

Born: 1996/11/25

Position: Midfielder

At Club Since: 2018

League Apps 2020: 25

Toma Bašić's Bordeaux career has come a long way since his signing in 2018. In just one of a litany of backroom errors that summer for the Marine et Blanc, the Croatian was accidentally left out of the club's squad list for the upcoming Europa League campaign. The circumstances surrounding his arrival were chaotic - with Bordeaux in the midst of a handover in ownership to American businessman Joe DaGrosa, and a new manager coming through the door every other week, the context that the midfielder was arriving in could not have made things more difficult. He would need to wait three months before making his first full start, against Dijon, which he made the most of by scoring his first goal.

By the new year, his fortunes had changed. The former Hajduk Split man had worked to dispel his manager's criticisms regarding his commitment to earn himself a place in the Girondins' starting eleven. Initially, there had been concerns regarding his ability to adapt to a markedly more physical league and the need for a change in mentality and application in training in order to impose himself - the Croatian responded accordingly, going as far as turning down an offer to go out on loan and working harder in practice sessions to make his presence felt.

Nevertheless, the first half of Paulo Sousa's time as manager - essentially the majority of 2019 - saw the midfielder left with scraps for game time, save for an initial honeymoon period. The turning point would come with the new year, with Bašić becoming a consistent starter from January up until the COVID-enforced break in March.

In Bordeaux's usual set-up, the Croatian acts as the counterweight to Otavio's overly conservative style of play in the centre of the pitch. More adventurous going forward than his Brazilian midfield partner, Bašić is eminently adept at driving the ball forward and breaking through the lines.

Although it comes at the cost of some wastefulness, he is generally an adventurous and forward-thinking passer, with his lofted through balls from deep often a catalyst for Bordeaux attacks. His technical prowess and runs from deep make him a valuable asset for Jean-Louis Gasset's men. For now, though, he lacks the metronomic passing style and rhythm that a top midfielder should be aspiring for, at times showing a lack of precision in more conventional exchanges in the centre of the park.

That said, Bašić deserves full credit for making the most of Aurélien Tchouaméni's departure in January and has largely managed to hold down his place in the starting lineup. What's clear, though, is that the midfielder still has some way to go before he hits his ceiling - however, having become a consistent starter in the last year, there is enough evidence to suggest that it's only a matter of time before he irons out the imperfections in his play.



Martin TERRIER

Club: Stade Rennais

Born: 1997/03/04

Position: Forward

At Club Since: 2020

League Apps 2020: 21

93
(-16)

Younger players are usually given special forgiveness for lax performances with the excuses being put on their age, lack of experience and so on. And this is how it should be, many of them have not come into their body yet, some would not even regard themselves as adults but now that Martin Terrier has turned 23, it should not be too harsh to ask for a bit more from him.

Go watch his early seasons at Lille and Strasbourg and you can see the talent: quick, agile, a nice passer and a better dribbler, his contributions in Strasbourg's 3-0 win over Bordeaux in the December 2017 being a fantastic example of this. However, after an extremely impressive 2018/19 season where the Frenchman netted nine league goals, he has left a bit to be desired. Despite playing a similar number of minutes and starting just a few less games, Terrier could not shine in an admittedly rotten Lyon side last season. He failed the ability to drag the team through the rough early spells of Sylvinho's reign and as a result, he went from bagging nine goals to only getting on the scoresheet once in the 2019/20 season.

At the start of the current campaign, Terrier was sold by Lyon for €12m, €1m-€2m more than he had been bought for two years prior but have we seen his market value go up that much since he was bought as a talented youngster in 2017? Probably not. It would be naive to think that there is not a correlation between Terrier's goal tallies of the last two seasons and the general performances of the team. Brilliant players do not need their team to be performing well around them to have an effect on a match.

Look at some of Terrier's games in the past year and you cannot find too many examples of someone taking the game by the scruff of the neck. Eleven completed passes in 61 minutes against Chelsea. One missed shot and zero dribbles in a 2-0 win away to Metz, a team placed 16th at the time. Zero shot assists, zero dribbles and zero shots in 58 minutes against a pretty dire Bordeaux side. Perhaps this is being a bit harsh on Terrier as his talent is obvious, but in too many games he goes missing. Perhaps the best example of this being Rennes' match against Saint-Étienne in September. Nine passes, zero successful dribbles and zero shots as a left winger in a game they won 3-0. Pretty awful.

However, Terrier has gone to a great club in Rennes, one very much on the up and with lots of talent around him, he has every chance of becoming one of the main men at Roazhon Park. He's coming into a good age and as he has shown in the past, especially in some excellent games for Lyon as well as his fantastic performance at home to Brest in October, he is a very talented player. Consistency and impact is only what can be asked of him going forward.



Hatem BEN ARFA

Club: Girondins de Bordeaux

Born: 1987/03/07

Position: Forward

At Club Since: 2020

League Apps 2020: 16

92
(NEW)

Hatem Ben Arfa is one of French football's most high-profile 21st century enigmas. The now 33-year-old, on his day, is one of the most devastating dribblers in world football. However, with exceptional talent always comes great responsibility – responsibility that HBA has consistently shirked throughout his career owing to a mixture of his temperamental personality, which resulted in a total breakdown in relationship with Unai Emery at PSG, and fatalistic transfer decisions at pivotal moments, such as his decision to leave OGC Nice, where he was enjoying the best form in his career in a tactical set-up built around him, before deciding to join the French capital side.

2020 began for the Hauts-de-Seine born winger in Spain, after making the decision to join Brazilian Ronaldo-owned Spanish outfit Real Valladolid on a six-month contract. The move was virtually fruitless, owing to the player's disappointing physical condition, riddled with back problems, and the pandemic bringing about an extensive stoppage in football competition. Ben Arfa would start just twice for the La Liga outfit, in games against Sevilla and Valencia, and failed to provide any goals or assists in his five appearances overall for a team that would finish 13th.

Ben Arfa was unattached for the second summer running, having been let go by Rennes in the summer of 2019, and his camp must have thought that the French international would have to remain that way for another six months, just like was the case before arriving in Spain. However, in October, Jean Louis Gasset would change all that, insisting to the Bordeaux board that HBA was worth the considerable salary outlay despite the club's cash-strapped status to bring him in, in October. Gasset notably worked with Ben Arfa as an assistant coach when Laurent Blanc selected the then Newcastle United talent.

Pundits in France questioned the move and the player's ability to deal with the ever-increasing physicality of Ligue 1. As has often been the case in Ben Arfa's career, he has begun to rout the doubters in emphatic fashion. It took Ben Arfa four games without goal contributions to get going at Les Girondins, but HBA has now installed himself as the creative fulcrum in an otherwise highly-structured, defence-first outfit. From 20th November onwards, the deft, dribble-happy attacking midfielder went on a hot-streak, producing six goals or assists in seven Ligue 1 games. This run included a man of the match performance at the Parc des Princes against PSG, with a sensational assist as FCGB held the Paris side to a draw. Ben Arfa has, in just a matter of weeks, established himself as the undisputed starter and pushed highly-promising 20-year-old French youth international attacking midfielder Yacine Adli back onto the bench.

Wherever HBA goes, you better make sure to watch.



Mihailo RISTIC

Club: Montpellier HSC

Born: 1995/10/31

Position: Defender

At Club Since: 2019

League Apps 2020: 18

91
(NEW)

Born in Bijeljina, eastern Bosnia, but a Serbian international, Ristic is not a newcomer to Ligue 1 but has worked to be recognised as an integral part of Michel der Zakarian's plans in a valiant Montpellier side. At 25 years old, Ristic has played in four different countries including France and is making his way back into the international fold (he played in the Euro play-off semi-finals but not the final against Scotland). Highly regarded in his youth, making his full Red Star Belgrade debut aged 18 as a defensive midfielder, Ristic established himself in his current position early on which is left-back/left-wing back (as he is commonly used by der Zakarian). A big money move (by eastern European standards) of €2m to Russian side Krasnodar earned him valid overseas experience and a European debut (the 2017/18 Europa League) but turned sour as Ristic only played four games in Russia. As a result, he was loaned to Czech Republic giants Sparta Prague but that stint was also unsuccessful with very little time spent on the pitch (just two games). 2017/18 was certainly a season to forget for Ristic.

Some wide players can play on both flanks, Ristic clearly favours the left. In early 2019, his move to Montpellier was confirmed and the Serbian international was determined to make this third overseas experience a more successful one than the previous two. After three substitute appearances where he barely played, the left-footer made his full start for La Paillade in February at Lille on the right of a 3-4-1-2 (Ambroise Oyongo being preferred on the left) and was substituted at half-time. However, his next start (a 2-0 win against Guingamp) was on his preferred left side. As it turned out, he was not substituted and even scored! Montpellier finish sixth and Ristic suddenly has his foot in the Mosson door.

In 2019/20, the season was cut short by COVID-19, but Ristic proves himself to be an ever-present as the left-winger in der Zakarian's 3-4-1-2. He also filled in as a defensive midfielder when needed but primarily coming off the substitutes' bench (he only started in that position once). A valuable asset when your side is in the lead. If Ristic's first full season in France saw him given more starts, the current one is the confirmation that he is der Zakarian's "guy on the left". Up until 2020/21, Ristic was mainly used as the left-winger in a three-at-the-back system. Right now, Ristic is also Montpellier's first-choice left-back following the gaffer's tactical switch to 4-3-3 in late November. Not only can Ristic play in more than one position, he can also adapt tactically which is crucial in this day and age.

Personally, Ristic openly admitted that he struggled to adapt to life in France but the family atmosphere at La Paillade helped him settle and first team appearances forged his confidence. It does seem like he has turned a corner after failed forays in Russia and the Czech Republic as he is enjoying being part of free-scoring Montpellier side. One final note on his discipline: Ristic has only two bookings in 39 games for the South Coast outfit and of course no sendings off. We've seen worse records than that for a defensive-minded player!



Danilo PEREIRA

Club: Paris Saint-Germain

Born: 1991/09/09

Position: Midfielder

At Club Since: 2020

League Apps 2020: 24

Danilo Pereira finds his way to our top 100 players list in his first season with PSG. The long-time FC Porto man left his former club not only as a champion, but as a player with some of the best defensive stats in Europe over his five-year tenure with the club. Pereira is not just a big physical mass in the midfield. His frame and style have received comparisons to that of the great Patrick Vieira. Pereira's skill-set to win the ball through tackles and his gift of intercepting the ball is complemented by his conservative style of passing ability to start a counter-attack.

It is no surprise that he was on PSG's radar when they pulled off a late move to sign Pereira on loan with the option to buy during the summer window. What was a surprise was the now-fired German tactician Thomas Tuchel making the decision to swap Marquinhos and Pereira to fill each other's natural positions, with the Portuguese midfielder playing as a central defender and Marquinhos in defensive midfield. Tuchel has preferred Marquinhos in the midfield for some time now, but what was seen as an initial move to make up for injuries, now seems puzzling. As a defender, his efforts in defence shine through without question, even if he has struggled to adapt to the new position, speaking out in October to French press: "I am not a central defender." His size and athleticism have however allowed him to eliminate aerial threats of incoming crosses and he has the required technical ability to get out of tight situations in his own third, although his lack of pace does slow him down.

To evaluate Pereira today at centre back, would be doing so with a handicap. Pereira is unable to utilise his movement off the ball and aggressive nature in his current position. Pereira came to Paris for a challenge, but having to rein in his physical and gutsy interception-attempting nature has not benefited his early adaptation in the capital.

At 29, Pereira is in his prime. Although his efforts and attitude have been exemplary, no player wants to make such a radical position change at this stage in their career. However, Pereira is a highly intelligent player. If Tuchel's replacement continues to play Pereira as a defender, Pereira will be able to operate there at a high level.

For Sporting Director Leonardo, it made sense to have a player who has the flexibility to be utilised in different roles, although the Brazilian thought that he was bringing in a man who was finally going to be a fully-fledged midfield stopper and allow Marquinhos to return to his natural centre-back position. If playing him at centre-back was an attempt from Tuchel to punish the club for not signing another defender at Pereira's expense, it is truly sad for someone of Pereira's quality, especially because Pereira has taken on the challenge wholeheartedly.



Florent MOLLET

Club: Montpellier HSC

Born: 1991/11/19

Position: Midfielder

At Club Since: 2018

League Apps 2020: 25

89
(-67)

Montpellier HSC are probably one of the best run clubs in the French top flight. Since Michel der Zakarian's enthronement as Montpellier's new coach in May 2017, the club has been on a path of constant progression. From finishing in 10th spot in DZ's first season to currently sitting in fifth place in the league after 15 games, Montpellier are now a credible contender for Europe. A player who symbolises what Montpellier have become: Florent Mollet.

The pocket-rocket #10 brilliantly encapsulates his club's stability, attacking-minded philosophy, and consistency in Ligue 1. Despite being somewhat recognised by the most meticulous Ligue 1 followers as a very interesting playmaker, he still suffers a lack of larger audience exposure. This is somewhat of a crime as he has been a key man in Der Zakarian's success in the South of France.

In 2020 at the time of writing, Mollet played 17 Ligue 1 games, scored three goals and assisted one. In a sport driven by statistics, those figures would probably earn him the title of "average Ligue 1 midfielder." But what the high-level data does not show is that Mollet is a player that has a much larger influence on the game. His ability on set-pieces is one of the most impressive in the league, just like the quality of his vision and passing technique. He is a very reliable player, generally not an individual that you want to substitute if you require attacking risk-taking and creativity. Before the season was cut short in March by the pandemic, he had played more than an hour in six of his eight games. After the virus-induced break, it took him some time to come back and settle in Montpellier's starting eleven.

But his recent games show that Mollet has managed to find a spot in a new-look midfield. Indeed, after losing 4-0 at home against Reims on October 25th, Michel Der Zakarian decided to switch from his beloved hybrid 5-2-1-2 that had recently saw him choose Téji Savanier over Mollet, to a more conventional 4-3-3. This formation made the co-habitation of Mollet and Savanier possible, with ex-OL man Jordan Ferri in the holding position, and a real success, as Montpellier won their three league games in style immediately following the switch.

Mollet, known for being quite hot-headed, could have let his emotions get the better of him after one of his ultimate Ligue 1 purple patches was cut short by the pandemic in March and being initially squeezed out of the XI by Nîmes hero Savanier. But he kept on working, despite a lack of game time, and assured France Bleu that there was "no negative competition" between him and Savanier. Another piece of proof of the resilience and class of the ex-Dijon man.



Nicolas PALLOIS

Club: FC Nantes

Born: 1987/09/19

Position: Defender

At Club Since: 2017

League Apps 2020: 19

88
(-65)

2020 has been a fairly middling and typically Nantes year, despite winning only once in their last eight games leading up to the premature end of the 2019/20 season due to COVID-19, they were still a healthy 10 points away from Nîmes in the relegation play-off position.

Under Christian Gourcuff, the Breton side were not often dynamic or exciting to watch but they tended to get the job done and accrue enough points to be in a relatively comfortable position at the end of every season. They do have notable talents and potentially dangerous players, including Ludovic Blas, but many of these are too often ineffective and have not been able to string together long periods of good form. No doubt that Gourcuff's tactics and setup did somewhat hamstring these more creative talents.

2019/20 was the same again however due to injuries for key defenders they did struggle and were reliant on loanee in net, Alban Lafont, to rescue them from any heavy defeats. One of those injured early on in the year was veteran defender Nicolas Pallois, who has been a regular for Les Canaris since his move in summer 2017. Pallois has never been a reactionary defender and often needs to rely on his centre-back partner, in most cases Andrei Girotto, to step out of the defensive line to win back possession. However, when it comes to his one vs one ability, the former Caen player is often prone to be exposed by attackers who are able to shift the ball quickly. There have been several occasions where Pallois has been left on the ground due to the twists and turns of an opposing attacker, or because of fast attacking moves he doesn't step up quick enough and plays attackers onside.

It makes sense that Nantes, in their very limited summer business, went out and signed Jean-Charles Castelletto as another option at centre-back to cover and perhaps instigate competition for Pallois and Girotto. At 33, Pallois might be looking at Castelletto as his eventual replacement.

When Nantes do perform well defensively Pallois is always right in the centre of action, making important blocks or clearances for his team. In possession, he is fairly successful when hitting long passes into the striker or down the channels, where he completed more long passes per 90 (8.4) than his goalkeeper (8.2) in 2019/20. However, Pallois can surprise opponents and watchers alike with disguised passes into midfield or to his full-back that reminds you of prime Sergio Busquets. With the sacking of Gourcuff, Pallois as captain will have to lead his teammates and ensure they transition into their next coach successfully, as the fans hope that the Nantes situation will improve.



Andrés CUBAS

Club: Nîmes Olympique

Born: 1996/05/22

Position: Midfielder

At Club Since: 2020

League Apps 2020: 17

87
(NEW)

Despite largely deft recruiting since their promotion to Ligue 1, Nîmes struggled to find a consistent starter in the defensive midfield position. That all changed with the surprise acquisition of Andrés Cubas in the summer of 2020. The Paraguay international, brought over from Argentinian side, Talleres, has made an instant impact in the Nîmes team – matching the club's truculent style, while bringing the tactical nous sorely needed in the heart of midfield.

Having played a mere nine matches in France thus far, the fact Cubas is already nestled in this list of top 100 players is testament to his abilities. A cultured passer, Cubas has fit seamlessly into a more nuanced Nîmes side now under the stewardship of Jérôme Arpinon. The new skipper replaced the long-serving, Bernard Blaquart over the summer and with him brought a new formation and a, if only slightly, more controlled version of the smash-and-grab football Nîmes have leaned on since promotion two years ago.

In order to apply this new tactical approach, Arpinon has moved decisively toward a 4-3-3 formation, for which a metronome at the base of midfield is imperative. The transfer of Cubas over the summer addressed the new manager's quandary in the position, the Paraguayan now fundamental to Nîmes' ball progression and comfort controlling possession in tight space or under pressure.

Even with a more versatile tactical approach, Nîmes still rely heavily on their energy; physicality and tenacity to see them past better funded opponents. In this respect, Cubas is a brilliant fit: the midfielder leads the club in tackles and pressure per 90 minutes – completing an immense number of defensive actions on a per-match basis.

Cubas's play at Nîmes earned him a call up to the Paraguay national team in November for the first time since his debut in 2019. Unfortunately, he was forced out of the line-up after suffering an injury in a loss to Angers just prior to his scheduled trip to join the squad in Ascension. Nonetheless, it appears that the 24-year-old is very much in the plans of national team manager, Eduardo Berizzo, for future World Cup Qualifiers. Paraguay are presently fourth in the table and in position to reach their first FIFA World Cup since 2010.

Though Cubas's time in the top division has been brief, his footprint in the south of France has been significant. With time still remaining before entering his prime, Nîmes will hope the new recruit can continue to improve and become a focal point for a club still looking to firmly establish themselves in France's top division.



Ludovic AJORQUE

Club: RC Strasbourg

Born: 1994/02/25

Position: Forward

At Club Since: 2018

League Apps 2020: 24

86
(-22)

Ludovic Ajorque has had what can only be described as a stop-and-start career up to this point. Whereas some strikers strut their stuff at youth level, glide onto the scene at senior level and then catch their plane to one of the other top five leagues where their goal clips will get more retweets and their bank accounts more zeroes, Ajorque has had to toil to get to where he is now.

Born on the island of Réunion, just off the coast of Madagascar, Ajorque found it difficult to get noticed during the formative stages of his career. As you can imagine, trying to join a top French team can be difficult when you live 9000km away from the country. However, when you have a former player as a father, you rarely are allowed to relax as his dad Jean-Noël constantly pushed him on to achieve even more than he had achieved in the game. After the start comes a stop though, as trials at Nantes and Lens ended in rejection letters. Soon another start came through in the form of Angers who allowed him to get a taste of high-quality football, then being sent on loan to Vendée Poiré-sur-Vie Football and Luçon, scoring twelve goals across the two spells in the third tier of France when still only 21.

After this learning experience came an electric few years for the striker with two years at Clermont Foot in Ligue 2 bringing him 19 league goals and a move to the top flight of France. Strasbourg splashed out €2m on Ajorque as part of their summer transfer window as they aimed to strengthen the squad following a successful first year back in Ligue 1 since 2009. A lot of pressure was on the shoulders of Ajorque with this move since it was Clermont's biggest sale for seven years, but despite the questions regarding his ability to step up to Ligue 1 quality, he put in some tremendous performances, rounding off the 2018/19 season with 9 goals, almost a third of Strasbourg's total strikes that campaign.

His 2020 has continued to be impressive with seven goals in twenty league appearances. With Ajorque standing six feet and six inches tall, one may assume him to be a battering ram, with brute strength and primal aggression getting him his plaudits, but this is not the case. A lanky figure matched with a terrific spatial awareness and an uncharacteristic first touch, his quality with the ball at his feet is what has got him on this list. His ability to bring others into play while also manhandling a defender or two makes him an extremely interesting figure, and one who could be in with a very outside chance of getting into the national team if Olivier Giroud starts to finally grow old and the Madagascans stop their attempts to recruit Ajorque.



Leandro PAREDES

Club: Paris Saint-Germain

Born: 1994/06/29

Position: Midfielder

At Club Since: 2019

League Apps 2020: 15

85
(NEW)

Since the departure of Thiago Motta in May 2018 and Unai Emery's failure to make academy graduate Adrien Rabiot his natural successor, Paris had been desperately looking for a "numéro six". A long fruitless quest that, with all due respect to the PSG fans, was ironically quite mirrored bitter rivals Marseille's search for their "grantatakan" ("great striker"). Indeed, as seasons went by, PSG's board never managed to fill Motta's void. More worryingly, they bought a series of flops in Yohan Cabaye, Grzegorz Krychowiak and Lassana Diarra that were never able to either be a plan B when Motta was still playing, or a credible replacement when he finally retired.

PSG eventually got their man in January 2019: Leandro Paredes. The Argentine, bought by now departed Sporting Director Antero Henrique for an estimated fee of €43m, on the outset appeared to be yet another "panic buy" as the club ran out of time in the window to strengthen in midfield. Paredes came from Zenit and was quickly deemed too expensive and with little experience at the highest of levels as it pertained to challenging for the Champions' League.

Paredes took some time to settle in Tuchel's team, his lack of consistency probably costing him a safe spot in the starting eleven, with slow reflexes and a lack of focus bearing out in his passing. However, 2020 turned out to be completely different for the San Justo-born midfielder and one competition would change his destiny: the Champions' League. He had played several games in the group stage, but his rather convincing performance against Dortmund in February, that progressed the club to the quarter-finals, really made him a pre-eminent option for Tuchel. In an empty Parc des Princes, he brought impact and personality. That night, PSG discovered that they had, in Leandro Paredes, the warrior they had been missing for several years to advance in Europe's premier competition.

As far as the "ball" is concerned, he did not "dictate" PSG's tempo like Motta used to do, but really aided PSG with flashes of long ball, passing brilliance. The perfect example of this came against Atalanta, where he only played for a handful minutes but immediately fluidified PSG's game. This very convincing entrance sealed his place in the starting eleven for the rest of the Final 8, where he helped PSG reach their first ever Champions' League. Paris didn't win it, but that campaign showed that Paredes could really be an asset to the team – with a mixture of grinta and passing verve.

The 2020/21 season started in strange fashion for the Argentine. After his exploits with PSG, he tested positive for COVID-19 while on break in Ibiza with his new best friends Neymar and Costa-Rican goal-keeper Keylor Navas. The virus led him to miss the opening fixture against Lens (a game PSG would eventually lose). His comeback against Marseille was shortened by a rather stupid red card due to his involvement in the mass brawl that occurred during the Olympians' first win since at the Parc since February 2010. A future club cult hero? The jury is still out.



RAFINHA

Alcantara

Club: Paris Saint-Germain

Born: 1993/02/12

Position: Midfielder

At Club Since: 2020

League Apps 2020: 30

84
(NEW)

Rafinha's fate is intimately linked to PSG's. Just like Neymar, he is one of the few players to have played in both of the teams involved in the infamous (from a Parisian perspective) "Remontada." Just like Neymar, Rafinha started this game and participated in PSG's most embarrassing European moment. But perhaps the most prescient thing about Thiago Alcantara's brother's involvement in this fixture is that, when he left the Camp Nou pitch in the 76th minute of the game, he shook hands with... Sergi Roberto, the man who would score the winner in the final seconds of the encounter.

When PSG signed Rafinha for free in October 2020, nobody really knew what to expect from a player that had kind of lost sight of his own abilities since returning to Barcelona after an unsuccessful loan at Inter in June 2018. "Little Rafael" as his nickname suggests arrived in the French capital in the final minutes of the summer transfer window. After coming back from Italy, he failed to find a spot in Barça's first team and spent his 2019/20 campaign in Spain at Celta Vigo. He made 29 appearances in Galicia and played a major role in the club's successful fight against relegation (Vigo finished the 2019/20 campaign with 37 points, just one more than relegated Leganes). As a result, his initial arrival at PSG was nothing more than a footnote in the French daily papers the following day.

And that, honestly, suited Rafinha just fine. Since joining PSG in October, the pocket-rocket midfielder has at the time of writing played in 16 games and he has certainly impressed all observers who held no expectations for him. More than that, he has become a beacon of creativity in a PSG midfield often lacking in inventiveness. In the league, he has appeared 10 times, all but one of them from the start, incidentally the home loss vs Lyon being the odd one out, and delivered four assists. With every passing match, he grows in influence and confidence. In PSG's victory at Old Trafford in the Champions' League, a competition in which Rafinha has appeared exclusively as a substitute barring the home clash vs Istanbul Basaksehir, he came off the bench and assisted Neymar for the third goal in style: a nice move into the box followed by a very altruistic assist in front of United's David De Gea.

This decisive entry was followed by a Ligue 1 masterclass against Montpellier three days later. He had the hard task of acting as one of the team's main creators alongside Angel di Maria... and did it perfectly. He'd already showed what he was capable of in his first game for the club against Nîmes. But at La Mosson, he really took his responsibilities as Paris comfortably won 3-1. The little Brazilian's box-to-box hyperactivity was impressive. In the 77th minute, he assisted Moise Kean after having won the ball back with a swashbuckling interception. Overall, a very nice surprise for Thomas Tuchel, who will never spit at a new versatile midfielder capable of coping with his tactical variances, especially owing to the injury-prone nature of PSG's midfield.



Jordan AMAVI

Club: Olympique de Marseille

Born: 1994/03/09

Position: Defender

At Club Since: 2017

League Apps 2020: 18

83
(NEW)

Jordan Amavi entered 2020 with small signs that his reputation among the Marseille faithful was changing. Long the only recognised left-back at the club since Patrice Evra's unceremonious departure in 2017 and Marseille's continuous failure to bring in a rival in the position left the former Villa man as a scapegoat for the team's poor results in the first half of 2019. Rejuvenated by André Villas-Boas as Marseille secured morale boosting wins over rivals Lille and Lyon at the back end of 2019, the 26-year-old repaired his reputation so well that OM in effect felt they could go on a little longer without signing a left-back and not stretch already scarce financial resources.

Amavi featured in every minute of competitive action in the second half of the 2019/20 campaign, bar the French Cup quarter-final defeat to Lyon in February and the Round of 64 game in January against amateurs Trélissac, as the eventual COVID-19 pandemic hit the French domestic game. Indeed, OM certainly missed him in both games, but it was necessary to give him a well-deserved breather. Right-back Hiroki Sakai replaced him on the left-flank as a makeshift option, and despite featuring on occasion on the left flank over 2019 and 2020, Sakai never looked assured.

It certainly marked a change for Amavi, as all of a sudden OM missed his attacking rigour. His playing style changed with an increase of confidence and specific management and support for him from the Portuguese tactician, who noticed that Amavi was historically the main scapegoat for the team and perceived weak link because of the fact he had no choice but to play nearly every game. Amavi repaid the coach's confidence with a number of top performances to cement his standing as one of the top three full-backs in Ligue 1. Far more assured on the ball and linking well with Payet on the wing, the former Villa man had cut out errors in his play – errors that once allowed opponents to exploit his defensive naivety and encroach on the space behind him. More concentration and more precision were the stand-out traits for Amavi as OM eventually finished the season in second place.

The 2020/21 season was more chequered for Jordan Amavi as Marseille negotiated Champions' League football for the first time in seven years. Indeed, as the side were lambasted for their poor quality in Europe, the left-back was part of the squad that were rising in Ligue 1 through the winter period.

He struck in the 3-1 home win over Bordeaux to cap a man of the match performance while contributing heavily to positive results at Paris Saint-Germain, Lyon and at home to Lille. It was in the former that a moment of madness saw him kick out at a provocative Layvin Kurzawa, earning him a three-match ban in which Marseille struggled to replace him through makeshift options in Hiroki Sakai, Yuto Nagatomo and Leonardo Balerdi. As 2020 ends, Amavi has gone from the most maligned Marseille player to arguably their third most reliable after Florian Thauvin and Steve Mandanda. They have only won just one game in seven without his involvement so far this season.



Arnaud SOUQUET

Club: Montpellier HSC

Born: 1992/02/12

Position: Defender

At Club Since: 2019

League Apps 2020: 16

82
(+1)

Fresh off a memorable 2019 in which he had played superbly with Gent in Belgium and settled in well at Montpellier, Arnaud Souquet seemed on course for a year in which he would earn plaudits in Ligue 1, especially with Montpellier growing stronger by the week. He had established himself as a starter in Michel der Zakarian's 3-4-1-2 system, a right-wing back with fine attacking qualities despite some defensive flaws. Up until the league abruptly ended due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Montpellier were solidly in the hunt for a European spot with Souquet playing his part in their run. Eventually, they only missed out by a point.

The new season promised a lot for Montpellier and a lot was expected from Souquet, widely regarded as one of the better wing-backs in the league. An opening day loss to Champions' League campaigners, Rennes, aside, Montpellier started really well. Three wins on the trot, following that defeat, meant that they were already positioned around the top of the table. He was not particularly anything special in those games - his defensive frailties showing up every now and then - but he did what was required, even scoring against Angers in a 4-1 win. The team looked very dominant and all seemed to be well.

But then came a draw away at Dijon, followed by a shocking home defeat to Nîmes, and then a draw away to Monaco with 10 men. If der Zakarian had been unbothered about the Jekyll & Hyde Montpellier of 2019/20 resurfacing, he was about to have a rude awakening. The next game against Reims turned out to be a disaster. First, ageless Hilton got sent off after seven minutes, then Reims went 3-0 up and then Damien Le Tallec got himself sent off, their fourth and fifth red cards of the season and Hilton's second. That game ended 4-0 and der Zakarian finally decided that something had to change.

The formation changed, as did some of the personnel. From playing three at the back with Hilton at the centre, along with two wing-backs forming a line of four with two central midfielders, he switched to a back four and 4-3-3. Hilton was sent to the bench along with Souquet, whose strengths would no longer be as optimal in the new formation and whose defensive weaknesses would come to the fore. Junior Sambia became the starting right-back, and for the next six games, Souquet did not get a single minute of action. In that time, Montpellier won five games, with their only loss coming against PSG, a game they really could have won. Sambia impressed throughout, getting praise from fans who expressed delight at having a full-back who actually gave La Paillade defensive solidity, something Souquet could never consistently give them. Souquet must be now wondering what the future holds for him at Montpellier, with the way things have gone recently. As it is, it is hard to see a way back for him in the team. A year that promised so much ends with him now firmly second choice and a benchwarmer. If he chooses not to accept this new situation, he will certainly seek a solution in the form of a new club in 2021.



Idrissa GUEYE

Club: Paris Saint-Germain

Born: 1989/09/26

Position: Midfielder

At Club Since: 2019

League Apps 2020: 22

When Idrissa Gueye dominated the midfield against Real Madrid in September 2019, it looked for all the world like Paris Saint-Germain and Thomas Tuchel had found the player they had been crying out for, a midfield dynamo capable of both shielding the defence and propelling the team forward, the missing piece required to turn Les Parisiens into Champions' League winners. They did make the final in his first season, but Gueye was merely an unused substitute.

The Senegalese international has perhaps not enjoyed the PSG career many predicted during his early time at the club, with persistent injuries and inconsistency of performance levels preventing him from becoming an undisputed starter in the side. At the time of writing, he has played 560 minutes of a possible 1170 in the league, having to compete for a place in a midfield with newly-acquired rivals, Danilo Pereira and Rafinha. Prior to the pandemic, the 31 year-old did start every Ligue 1 match in 2020, proving quietly effective in big wins over Montpellier and Lille, before having one of his worst matches for the club in a 4-4 draw against Amiens, giving the ball away for the opposition's first goal, and being substituted at half time with the side 3-1 down.

Nevertheless, the domestic season was undoubtedly a success for Gueye overall, powering PSG to a treble, starting both cup finals, and ending the Ligue 1 season in the top ten for successful tackles per 90 (3.3) and pass completion rate (92.7%). In the Champions' League, where Gueye's impact would truly be measured, the midfielder played all 180 minutes of the Round of 16 clash against Dortmund, proving particularly impactful in Les Parisiens' 2-0 home victory, stifling the BVB attack and winning all eight of his attempted tackles. With the tournament's resumption in August, the Senegalese was unspectacular against Atalanta in the quarter-final, failing to progress the ball consistently, and was an unused substitute in both the semi and the final, where Bayern Munich ran out 1-0 winners.

The ups and downs that have punctuated Gueye's stint in the French capital so far have continued into this campaign. He has been a bit part player in Europe, starting only twice in defeats to Manchester United and Leipzig. In the former, he was substituted at half time, and in the latter, he was given an unfortunate but avoidable red card.

However, his best qualities have also been on show. Gueye's relentless energy and hunger to recover possession were essential in PSG securing a late 1-0 win over Metz despite having just nine players on the pitch. "Gana ran like a crazy person", Tuchel told Téléfoot Chaîne after the match. He also played an important role in victories over Nîmes and Montpellier, winning the ball back an impressive six times against the latter. The 31 year-old remains an important part of the PSG squad as a whole, and on his day, is still capable of bossing the midfield against most opponents – domestic or continental.



Stéphane BAHOKEN

Club: Angers SCO

Born: 1992/05/28

Position: Forward

At Club Since: 2018

League Apps 2020: 23

80
(NEW)

After a strong first season in Angers with 11 goals, Stéphane Bahoken's second season was not as memorable. He was hamstrung by injuries for much of the campaign and struggled to return to full fitness, while new signing Rachid Alioui took his spot as the starting striker. Bahoken did eventually return and his final two goals came in 1-0 wins against Montpellier and Stade Brestois in late February, which helped Le SCO recover from a very poor start to 2020.

Angers kicked off the 2020/21 season with the same 4-1-4-1 setup that regular watchers of Ligue 1 have become accustomed to with star player, Baptiste Santamaria, as the midfield pivot. Bahoken was not at full fitness and Wilfried Kanga took his place; Kanga failed to impress and eventually left for free to Turkish side Kayserispor. More importantly, Santamaria left for Freiburg in what was an inevitable transfer which left the team without their most important player and no adequate replacement. After trying but failing with the same 4-1-4-1, Angers coach Stéphane Moulin made a tactical shift to a 4-2-3-1 to try and compensate for the loss of their defensive midfielder. Bolstered by new attacking options with the incoming transfers of Sofiane Boufal and Jimmy Cabot, this made even more sense.

This change has led to Bahoken producing some of his best performances in the black and white of Angers, as their all-around attacking output is significantly better than what they were previously known for, with Bahoken already besting his previous seasons tally with five goals. So far he has avoided injury which he has put down to his almost 100% vegetarian diet; and the inspiration of Zlatan Ibrahimovic and Cristiano Ronaldo when it comes to looking after their body and being more attentive to the slightest glitch.

In good form, Bahoken has now begun to form a deadly partnership with Angelo Fulgini who is the attacking midfielder in this reimagined Angers setup. Bahoken's constant runs punch in behind and stretch the backline, creating space and he is regularly targeted by long passes from central defender Ismaël Traoré. When asked about this he stated: "In this system, we have a little less defensive tasks to do, so we are fresher when it comes to attacking. With Angelo, we have become more and more complimentary. We combine a lot."

It is this combination play that allows Bahoken to bring in more players to the attack, while he regularly will shift across the backline to try a different angle of attack. In comparison to his attacking competition, Alioui, Bahoken is much more of an adept finisher inside the box, which gives the side much more of a focal point to hone in on. Bahoken will look to continue his strong run of form as Angers continue adapting to a more dangerous attacking style.



Dimitri PAYET

Club: Olympique de Marseille

Born: 1987/03/29

Position: Forward

At Club Since: 2017

League Apps 2020: 18

79
(-5)

If 2020 has showed anything, it is that Olympique de Marseille are currently an absolutely terrible footballing outfit to watch... who just happen to have Dimitri Payet.

Kicking, screaming, whining; these are the things Payet had to put up with as he near single-handedly dragged Marseille to the second spot in Ligue 1 last season. Despite being publicly-derided for being overweight and one of the squad's oldest members, his performances across the 2019/20 season were nothing short of exemplary. By all means, Marseille should not have finished second and would not have, had it not been for the heroics of Payet.

Dismissed as finished years ago by much of the British media, but French football fans have still been enjoying his brilliance for the past few years. Or at least his brilliance in every other game. Inconsistency has been his biggest criticism in parallel with the supposed idea that he needs a carrot hanging in front of him in order for him to perform to his highest level. Look back through his career and you can see that evidence, with his best form always coinciding in the months before a major national tournament. This year has been no different, but if that is what he needs for us to enjoy his magnificent performances then who are we to complain?

It is often quite difficult to judge a player over the course of a calendar year as the European campaign revolves around the summer-to-summer pattern. Therefore, Payet's performances in 2020 need to be put in context with those of 2019 also. In the campaign just passed, Marseille played 28 Ligue 1 matches, 10 short of the usual tally due to the obvious COVID-19 restrictions. In those 28 games, Payet appeared 22 times in which OM displayed a win rate of 64%. In the six games without the Frenchman that win rate fell to 33%. Obviously, the difference in sample size has to be appreciated, but look at some of those games and you can see that a team finishing second should not have struggled. 0-0 against 20th placed Dijon, 1-1 against 9th placed Rennes, 3-1 defeat against 16th placed Amiens, 0-0 against 10th placed Angers. Many of these were extremely winnable games but the lack of their talisman was evident.

Often in one's absence their presence is appreciated more than ever and we have seen that with Marseille this year. Rarely do we see one player so key to a team as Payet. No disrespect to the rest of the Marseille team but rarely do you see a team finish second in a top five European league and still no super-club wants to touch any of their players with a barge pole. This insult is probably the best compliment I could ever bestow on Payet.



Yusuf YAZICI

Club: Lille OSC

Born: 1997/01/29

Position: Forward

At Club Since: 2019

League Apps 2020: 16

78
(-9)

The term 'mercurial' is an overused cliché in modern footballing lexicon. But few across European football, despite considerable competition, embody its meaning like Lille forward Yusuf Yazici. Having arrived from Turkish Super League club Trabzonspor in August 2019, much was expected of the Turk after an explosion in form for the then 22-year-old forward during the second half of a breakout season. A significant part of the Trabzonspor side in previous years, the pony-tailed Yazici had struggled with inconsistency but morphed into a key creative and play-making influence in 2019.

Despite some underwhelming statistics overall, only four goals and two assists in 30 games that campaign, Lille were convinced to spend close to €20m to secure Yazici's services. Infuriating inconsistency returned however. Despite the departures of Nicolas Pépé to Arsenal and Rafael Leão to AC Milan, marquee addition Yazici was unable to hold down a regular starting place. Outstanding displays like that in the 3-0 win over Bordeaux in October were balanced out by ineffective, limp outings such as in the draw with Nice a month earlier. An ACL knee injury in the 5-1 loss at Monaco before Christmas ended Yazici's meandering opening to life in France, after only starting one of the previous six games.

As a result, Yazici missed much of the sporadic football played over the next six months, either side of the initial COVID-19 outbreak and the ensuing lockdown. His next start did not come until a 4-1 Europa League win at Sparta Prague in October 2020, but it was worth the wait. A devastating Yazici hat-trick won Lille the game, the first goal being a thunderous long-range strike. Two weeks later, Yazici equalled that feat, this time to win the game for Lille at AC Milan, with the coolly stoked home third underlining the Turkish forward's simple yet graceful style. Lorient were next to get the Yazici treatment in late November. A brace and accompanying domineering display resulted in a 4-0 triumph.

Yazici at his best carries an air of authority, that he is capable of nonchalantly winning the game with any one sublime pass or rifled shot while giving the impression that such feats are really nothing to get excited about. At his worst however, when his ideas do not come off or he is successfully shut down by opponents, he cuts a slow and forlorn figure and is often a passenger at best. Although 2020 was cut short for Ligue 1 generally and Yazici on a more personal level through injury, his devastating best was far more commonplace. The only problem is, given the pattern of his career so far, it is very uncertain that Lille fans will enjoy the same player on a similarly regular basis in 2021.



Valentin RONGIER

Club: Olympique de Marseille

Born: 1994/07/12

Position: Midfielder

At Club Since: 2019

League Apps 2020: 23

77
(-26)

Valentin Rongier was one of two relatively costly signings for Marseille in the André Villas-Boas era, the other being Dario Benedetto. The former Nantes captain joined OM in September 2019 for €15m and immediately slotted into a three-man midfield that AVB deployed alongside Morgan Sanson and Boubacar Kamara. Indeed, ever since, he has been nearly ever-present for Les Olympiens as AVB's primary choice in a three-man midfield. The technical midfielder shone in his early moments at the Stade Vélodrome as Marseille earned a second-place finish in Ligue 1 for the first time in seven years.

Adept in the transition of play and relaying the ball to the creative outlets of the team, he impressed as one of the better players in the squad in early 2020 as Marseille lost just the one game until the end of the season – ironically the defeat came against Rongier's previous team, Nantes. At Marseille, he has been utilised less in attacking phases of play than he was at Nantes, where the 26-year-old was positioned at times in attacking midfield. He has been a little criticised for being less dominant in the final third: as of December 2020, he is the person with the most attempts at goal without scoring for Marseille amongst the team's current midfielders and attackers.

The start of the 2020/21 season saw Rongier finally enjoy a European adventure with the commencement of the Champions' League campaign. The group stage saw Rongier start all games bar the final dead rubber at Manchester City when qualification hopes were long erased. It was in this competition which perhaps saw the first vestiges of Rongier's frustration as André Villas-Boas oscillated between a 4-4-2 diamond, 4-3-3 and even a 3-5-2 formation to nullify the likes of Olympiakos, Man City and FC Porto.

Indeed, it was the match against City that earmarked Rongier's limitations when the game was opened for Pep Guardiola's side as a result of the midfielder's lapse in concentration – the sort of moment that is routinely punished in the top competitions. It did not get better in the following heavy defeats against Porto as Rongier opined that it "was a little difficult" in finding stability in these formations.

The 26-year-old finally did find the back of the net in a 2-1 defeat vs Angers in the final game of 2020 – a looping header on the edge of the box that opened his account. Rongier's place in the OM squad is no longer as absolute as it was this time 12 months ago following the signings of Pape Gueye and Michaël Cuisance in the Marseille midfield, though like Boubacar Kamara he has been employed in every match thus far, underlining his status in André Villas-Boas' eyes. Marseille remain in the hunt for another shot at the Champions' League in 2021. In the meantime, Rongier must improve on his attacking endeavours as the goals dry up elsewhere in the squad.



Andrei GIROTTTO

Club: FC Nantes

Born: 1992/02/17

Position: Defender

At Club Since: 2017

League Apps 2020: 23

76
(-3)

It's been low-key but few players have developed as significantly in Ligue 1 over the last few seasons as Nantes centre-back Andrei Girotto. When the Brazilian joined FCN in August 2017 from third tier club Tombense, he was not even a defender, rather a fresh-faced, slightly flimsy 25-year-old defensive midfielder. To that point, Girotto had led something of a nomadic existence across the sprawling Brazilian football scene, even finding time for a left-field loan spell with Japanese second division side Kyoto Sanga. Little was expected in Western France.

Tombense had loaned Girotto to traditional Serie A powerhouse Palmeiras and, the season before his move to France, to Chapecoense where Girotto was an ever-present. Chape eventually finished a miraculous eighth less than a year on from the devastating plane crash that so tragically killed 71 people including nearly all of Chapecoense's squad and staff. Despite promising displays in wins over Montpellier and Caen in his first months, the Girotto that joined Nantes was easily outmuscled, despite an obvious tenacity, as well as worryingly inconsistent. Girotto struggled to hold down a regular start in his first 18 months, even falling out of the squad entirely for nearly two months at the start of the 2018/19 campaign.

Two major changes drastically altered Girotto's journey. Firstly, the hapless Miguel Cardoso was replaced with the wizened 'Coach' Vahid Halilhodzic in October that season. From no minutes in nine league games, the Brazilian started six in a row under Coach Vahid and impressed in ably protecting his back four. A 25-yard screamer in the 5-0 win over Guingamp only helped his cause. Faith in the player had been restored, even if his proclivity for picking up cards and suspensions accelerated with three sendings off in six games in the spring. Christian Gourcuff brought the second - a move to centre-back.

Diego Carlos and Edgar Lé were not directly replaced after their departures for Sevilla and Trabzonspor that summer but Girotto seamlessly slotted in next to veteran Nicolas Pallois to quickly form one of Ligue 1's most physical and reliable partnerships. Steadfast defensive displays aiding 1-0 wins over Reims and Nice in autumn 2019 underlined Girotto's transformation. The Brazilian seemed broader, stronger and calmer while retaining a willingness to throw himself in front of anything. Although far from perfect, discipline also improved.

That form has unerringly continued since and, in truth, Nantes and the now sacked Christian Gourcuff have Girotto, Pallois and cat-like keeper Alban Lafont to thank for their very limited successes in 2020. Behind an unimaginative midfield and a series of inconsistent, flakey forwards minus a reliable source of goals, the solidity, maturity and consistency that triumvirate provide has kept Nantes afloat. They're the difference between a dull mid-table existence and a relegation battle. Without the new bulked up, astute and consistent Girotto, 2020 may have been very different at the Beaujoire.

100-76 RECAP

100.	Mounir Chouiar	Dijon FCO
99.	Vincent Pajot	FC Metz
98.	Seko Fofana	RC Lens
97.	Vitorino Hilton	Montpellier HSC
96.	Facundo Medina	RC Lens
95.	Benjamin Bourigeaud	Stade Rennais
94.	Toma Basic	Bordeaux
93.	Martin Terrier	Stade Rennais
92.	Hatem Ben Arfa	Bordeaux
91.	Mihailo Ristic	Montpellier HSC
90.	Danilo Pereira	PSG
89.	Florent Mollet	Montpellier HSC
88.	Nicolas Pallois	FC Nantes
87.	Andrés Cubas	Nîmes Olympique
86.	Ludovic Ajorque	RC Strasbourg
85.	Leandro Paredes	PSG
84.	Rafinha	PSG
83.	Jordan Amavi	Marseille
82.	Arnaud Souquet	Montpellier HSC
81.	Idrissa Gueye	PSG
80.	Stéphane Bahoken	Angers SCO
79.	Dimitri Payet	Marseille
78.	Yuzuf Yazici	Lille OSC
77.	Valentin Rongier	Marseille
76.	Andrei Girotto	FC Nantes



Bruno GUIMARÃES

Club: Olympique Lyonnais

Born: 1997/11/16

Position: Midfielder

At Club Since: 2020

League Apps 2020: 19

75
(NEW)

Bruno Guimarães' name has been one of those on the lips of European football fans for a while but due to his career prior to coming to Lyon being entirely in Brazil, few had actually seen the man play. Silky with the ball? Deadly with a pass? Hard in the tackle? No one really knew what Guimarães was or what he could bring to any of the numerous clubs he was linked with. And just as there was a shroud of mystery around the Brazilian, so too was there a leap of faith for Guimarães as he got ready to set sail for the new land of Europe. Benfica, Arsenal, Atlético Madrid and Lyon were all clubs reportedly interested in him but with so many clubs lacking consistency these days, the decision for who Guimarães was going to join definitely was not an easy one.

However, the key factor that separated Lyon from the rest was their Sporting Director, Juninho Pernambucano. Brazilian footballing legend, free-kick extraordinaire, Vasco Da Gama icon and this latter attribute is what made him even more special to Guimarães as he and his whole family are devout supporters of the Cruz-Maltino. So, when Juninho himself called Guimarães and his family to convince Bruno to come to Les Gones, you can imagine how easy it made the decision.

Guimarães arrived in France with a lot of hype around him due to this Brazilian layer of mist as well as his transfer fee: £18m made him one of Lyon's most expensive ever acquisitions. However, Guimarães very quickly showed that he was up to the test of top tier European football. His first two matches for Lyon were complete opposites in terms of stature but they both showed the Brazilian's key attributes. Due to commitments with the Brazilian U23 national team, Guimarães' first outing kept the Lyon fans waiting, but after twelve days of angst, he strutted out onto the pitch at the Stade Saint-Symphorien.

Metz has been a notoriously difficult away day for top clubs in recent years with PSG finding it tricky amongst others. In Guimarães' first match against Metz, Lyon were awful. They hardly created anything and barely won the game, only by virtue of a penalty and a shot into an empty net in the dying embers of the game following a late corner. In the match, Guimarães was fine but it was the game five days later that announced him as a real talent.

Juventus at home in the first leg of the Champions' League quarter-final. It was very early in his Lyon career but he ran the show. In a midfield two, he held everything together with the second most touches, most passes, most tackles and second most dribbles of any Lyon player. Granted, Guimarães was less impressive in the following Champions' League games, but he can be forgiven considering the opponents. Due to COVID-19, he has had a stunted start to life in Lyon, but if 2020 has shown anything, it is that he should be in Les Gones' starting line-up going forward. Do that and Lyon could pocket many millions of euros in a few years' time.



Fabien CENTONZE

Club: FC Metz

Born: 1996/01/16

Position: Forward

At Club Since: 2019

League Apps 2020: 25

74
(NEW)

Ask your average Metz fan what they think of Lens and you probably will not get a positive answer. The denouement of the 1997/98 title race still hurts (a lot) and the Coupe de la Ligue final a year later just rubbed salt into the wound. However, in gifting Fabien Centonze to Metz, Lens may have won back some favour.

Centonze began his professional career at Evian Thonon-Gaillard, ETG coach and PSG legend Safet Susic hand-picking him from the youth team to join the senior squad as a winger. To solve a personnel crisis, Susic – to whom Centonze says he owes everything – played him at right-back for his league debut in the 2015/16 season-opener against Nîmes. It went well and Centonze went on to play 30 Ligue 2 matches, impressing at right-back, left-back, right-wing or left-wing. Despite his performances – including four goals – Evian were relegated and Centonze joined Corinne Diacre's Clermont, asking to be played at right-back so that he could begin to establish himself in one set position.

Two positive seasons attracted the attention of Lens where, encouraged by coach Philippe Montanier, he continued to grow in stature: "[Montanier] would set training sessions just for me, where if I didn't vocally direct my defence, we wouldn't change training exercise". Lens missed out on promotion, losing the play-off final. However, newly-crowned Ligue 2 champions Metz purchased Centonze to replace the outgoing Ivan Balliu. Centonze was immediately made the starting right-back and, in the image of the team, began slowly: "I struggled at first. No offence to Ligue 2 but you can get away with things in matches. In Ligue 1, if you lose concentration for a few seconds, it's over. The guys facing you don't need 50 chances to score".

However, he quickly acclimatised to Ligue 1 football and has grown to become one of the league's best right-backs, missing only 90 minutes in Ligue 1 since his Metz debut, and allying good positional play, reading of the game and tackling ability with the attacking instincts and excellent crossing developed in his youth. A return of just two assists in 2020 is slightly disappointing but is also down to the form and injuries of his attackers; he is nevertheless an important part of Metz's offensive games, his great engine enabling him to cover the flank all match. He has also quickly become a fans' favourite (including winning lots of friends when, after a controversial loss to Lyon, he said "take away their penalties and they're an average team").

Unsurprisingly, rumours have begun to swirl, with Tottenham and Marseille linked and many Metz fans campaigning for a France call-up. At 24, and in the prime of his career, 2020 will hopefully be the launchpad for even bigger and better things.



Loïc BADÉ

Club: RC Lens

Born: 2000/04/11

Position: Defender

At Club Since: 2020

League Apps 2020: 21

73
(NEW)

Snapped off the Le Havre production line over the summer, Loïc Badé has made a smooth transition into the RC Lens first eleven and Ligue 1 football. The 20-year-old has found a home in the centre of manager, Franck Haise's three-man defence and one of France's most historic sides. His range of passing and comfort on the ball puts Badé in a class of modern, young French defenders, which includes such names as Wesley Fofana, William Saliba and Jules Koundé and whose abilities have become the envy of Europe.

After only playing seven first team matches for Le Havre in 2019/20, Badé was highly sought-after during the summer transfer window. All of Saint-Étienne, Montpellier and OGC Nice were said to be vying for his signature. In the end, Lens won out and neither Badé, nor his new club, have looked back with the youngster leading all Lens outfield players in minutes so far this season.

At a young age, Badé's talents were largely overlooked - with Get French Football News reporting that he was turned away by all of Sochaux, OGC Nice, Paris Saint-Germain and Rennes's youth academies. Instead he landed at lesser-known, Paris FC, before ultimately finding his way to Le Havre in 2016. The journey seems to have served him well and perhaps contributed to his mature playing style. Badé is unflappable in the Lens backline and is part of a spine of young, vibrant Lens players, which includes teammates, Cheick Doucouré and Ignatius Gangao.

Lens ball progression often focuses on the wing and therefore Badé's progressive numbers do not leap off the page, but his ability to mop up play and take control of possession at the back is clear. The 20-year-old presently leads the club in tackles per-90 and is second on the team in total touches. He also has the fewest mis-controls of any Lens player and has been dispossessed the second fewest times. Fervent competition in central defence means Badé was never capped for France at youth level and remains something of a 'free agent' in that respect. However, if he maintains his form, it is difficult to see how France under-21 manager, Sylvain Ripoll, can continue to leave him out of his selection.

Badé's professional career is still young, but his obvious talents, coupled with the recent departures of other youthful and similarly qualified French defenders, portends a truncated stay at Lens. And yet, for the time being the fit looks perfect and if Lens can somehow find a way to sneak into Europe, Badé's stay may be happily extended.



Kevin VOLLAND

Club: AS Monaco

Born: 1992/07/30

Position: Forward

At Club Since: 2020

League Apps 2020: 24

Monaco are slowly returning to a more balanced approach to recruitment that served the club so well during the early part of the Leonardo Jardim/Vadim Vasilyev era; signing burgeoning talents ready for first team football alongside a smattering of older heads to lead and guide. Kevin Volland, now 28, is starting to emulate Falcao and João Moutinho as a key role model for his younger peers. His arrival, and recent form, is a promising sign in predicting whether he will emulate that duo in succeeding at AS Monaco.

Volland's start to Principality life was an inconsistent one; it took him seven games to score and he was dropped to the bench for the 4-1 loss at Lyon in October. Niko Kovač knew he would need "one or two months to adapt... I assure you that he will show his best side," and more recently a now fully settled Volland has indeed gradually morphed into a key player and leader. A chest out, committed presence in attack, his finishing of late and link up play throughout have proved pivotal to Monaco's slow resurgence under Niko Kovač in 2020.

Alongside Wissam Ben Yedder, Volland starred in the bulldozing of Bordeaux (4-0) in November - a fluid and clinical Monaco performance - netting his first goals for the club. He was the slippery presence in attack, assisted by the vision of Cesc Fàbregas, as Monaco miraculously fought back to beat PSG. Here, he again bundled home a brace while adding an assist in the 3-2 triumph. Although often guilty of some wayward finishing across his time in the Bundesliga with both Bayer Leverkusen and Hoffenheim, Volland's form in general over this and last season has been impressive. While his arrival was greeted with little fanfare in Ligue 1, the addition of the German international was in fact an under the radar coup for the league. Monaco capitalised on the player's frustration over stalling extension talks with Bayer.

The Bundesliga's loss is very much French football's gain. Although a ligament injury kept him out either side of lockdown, affecting the striker's progress overall, by December 10th Volland had managed a goal contribution (goal or assist) every 104 league minutes across 2020. That amounts to a stronger record than Timo Werner (115 mins), Kai Havertz (106 mins) and teammate Ben Yedder (119mins) at the same point.

Volland's first dozen games with Les Monegasques underlines their quiet recent progress. His arrival shows that the club can and will compete for bigger name players while the steepening curve of progression demonstrates Niko Kovač's low-key ability to eek the best out of his charges, both youthful and experienced, as he did so gloriously with Eintracht Frankfurt. With the quality of Volland, Ben Yedder and Fàbregas leading the likes of Aurélien Tchouaméni (20), Youssouf Fofana (21) and Sofiane Diop (2), Volland's arrival may have quietly signaled the start of Monaco's next great cycle of player production and success. Key your eye on the Principality in 2021.



Yvan NEYOU

Club: AS Saint-Étienne

Born: 1997/01/03

Position: Midfielder

At Club Since: 2020

League Apps 2020: 16

71
(NEW)

In January, Yvan Neyou was worth £250,000. His market value is now almost ten times as much. The Cameroonian midfielder has had a meteoric rise this year, from playing in the Portuguese third division, to impressing in the Coupe de France final against Paris Saint-Germain. Such a trajectory could be expected from a promising teenager, but at 23, and with just a handful of Ligue 2 matches on his CV, his signing has proved a masterstroke.

Trained at Clairefontaine, Auxerre and third-tier Sedan before joining Laval in Ligue 2, Neyou moved to Braga in January 2019, but never played a minute for the senior team. Instead, he was a regular for the club's reserves, featuring in most matches in 2019/20 in the third tier before the season was cut short. Gaining attention from clubs in Ligue 2 and Switzerland, the 23 year-old was incredulous when his agent told him of Sainté's interest, recounting the moment on ASSE TV, "Why are you telling me? I hardly play in the first team in Braga and I will go to ASSE?" Doubt persisted even after receiving a call from Claude Puel, while his mother didn't believe him until after his debut. "After the final, my mother had tears in her eyes. To see my whole family happy, it finally made me proud."

Signed initially on loan, Neyou was thrown in at the deep end, coming on at half-time in the aforementioned Coupe de France final in July, with Les Verts 1-0 down to PSG, and down to ten men. Despite his inexperience at the top level, the midfielder looked instantly at home, his qualities on show for all: composure, a tirelessness and relentlessness in his attempts to win back the ball, tidy passing, tricky dribbling in tight spaces, and a fearlessness to run at players. Saint-Étienne lost, but they had uncovered a gem.

Neyou was part of the youthful revolution at ASSE that seemed to explode into life at the start of the season, with Les Verts winning their first three matches. He looked to settle in immediately, starting every game and performing consistently. Primarily lauded for his defensive abilities, he has proved more than a typical defensive midfielder with his forward-thinking play. In a 2-2 draw with Nantes, he was picked out making a smart run into the box, and duly slotted the ball across goal for Adil Aouchiche to tap in.

Sainté have since been appalling, losing seven and drawing three, and looking in real danger of relegation. Despite this, Neyou has remained a consistent performer. In their narrow 2-1 derby defeat to Lyon, he was their best player, bright with the ball, successful in 82.8% of his passes, while making eight tackles and four interceptions. It was no surprise when the club made the deal permanent in November. "Saint-Étienne offered me the opportunity to kickstart my career and I am doing everything I can not to mess it up", Neyou said on signing. It is fair to say he looks in no danger of messing up, proving a brilliant spark in an otherwise dismal campaign.



Morgan SCHNEIDERLIN

Club: OGC Nice

Born: 1989/11/08

Position: Midfielder

At Club Since: 2020

League Apps 2020: 17

70
(NEW)

The typical Ligue 1 business model often sees youngsters being brought into an academy, playing good football and making their dream move to a Premier League powerhouse club. However, quite a few French players try their luck in the English second division, the Championship, get promoted and succeed in plying their trade in English football's top division. Schneiderlin opted for the second route.

Things did not start all that well though as Alsace-born Morgan Schneiderlin suffered two relegations in his opening two seasons as a professional. He was given his chance at Strasbourg in the 2007/08 season in the derby against Metz, but could not bring a stop to the horrible form the hosts were in (they ended the season with 11 defeats in a row!). The club needed funds so sold Schneiderlin to then second tier outfit Southampton for €1.5m, where he experienced another relegation. Despite offers from Nantes that summer, Schneiderlin was determined to become an ever-present in the Saints side and stayed with them in the dark times of League One (all two seasons of them). He was instrumental in their promotion to the Premiership in 2011/12 and finally tasted English top-flight football aged 23. His seasons at Southampton were consistently being successful, even in the top flight, so much that it earned him a call-up by Didier Deschamps for pre-tournament friendlies to prepare for Brazil 2014. Schneiderlin made the plane and even started the final group game against Ecuador which finished 0-0.

Back to domestic matters, Schneiderlin kept going strong for Southampton but was denied a move to Tottenham which soured his relationship with the Saints board. He ended up making a big-money move (€35m) to Manchester United which effectively ruined his international career. While playing often in his first season at Old Trafford in 2015/16 (25 starts and four substitute appearances), manager Louis van Gaal restricted his movement in midfield, with a very structured role, which was never the case at Southampton. His impact as a box-to-box player was limited and he grew frustrated. Louis van Gaal logically got the boot for playing turgid football but things got worse for Schneiderlin under Mourinho in 2016/17 (zero starts, three substitute appearances in the first half of the season). Everton paid €23m to buy Schneiderlin that January which got him out of jail but his stint at Goodison Park was soured by instability in the hot-seat (four managers between 2016 and 2019). It was time to come home.

Back in August, the Nice project under Patrick Vieira sounded appealing but things have not gone well lately with a horrid European campaign which saw the outfit humbled by Slavia Prague. However, the much-travelled midfielder is of course a pillar in the squad given his status. He has started every game and has never been substituted in games, be it under Vieira or new boy Adrian Ursea. No matter the situation, Nice can rely on a strong box-to-box midfielder. Their problems lie elsewhere.



Ignatius GANAGO

Club: RC Lens

Born: 1999/02/16

Position: Forward

At Club Since: 2020

League Apps 2020: 23

Sometimes it takes a move to the right environment to unlock the potential of a young player. This was certainly the case of Ignatius Ganago this year, who crossed France from south to north, leaving Nice behind for Lens. Nice may have more resources and in recent history better results than the northerners, but it was away from the stagnating attack of Patrick Vieira's side that Ganago showed Ligue 1 of what he was capable.

From the Anglophone city of Douala in Cameroon, Ganago was spotted by Nice in a Cameroonian football academy in 2017. He has made three international appearances to date for the Indomitable Lions. The 21-year made 52 league appearances in his first three professional seasons, at Nice, many of which came as a substitute. Under Vieira at Nice, Ganago regularly played on the left-wing and right-wing, positions that were not exactly natural for him. His true position is as a number 9. For these reasons, he only amassed six league goals in three years, and it was becoming apparent that a new project would be beneficial for his development.

RC Lens acquired Ganago's services on a four-year contract for a fee €6m, an advantageous move for all parties involved. Nice were handsomely paid for a player they were not planning on relying on as a regular. And Lens did not wait long for a return on their investment. In his first six matches, Ganago scored four goals and provided two assists. He fits well into the style imposed by Franck Haise on this Lens side. Lens play ambitious football for a promoted team, and have had no trouble finding goals. There is a belief and energy in their way of attacking and pressing.

A good example of that would be Ganago's first goal for the club, which came against PSG. Leaping onto a weak pass from goalkeeper Marcin Bulka, Ganago then shouldered Marco Verratti before blasting the ball back past the Polish shot-stopper. Lens won the match 1-0, their first Ligue 1 fixture at their iconic Stade Bollaert in nine years. Similarly, two weeks later, against Bordeaux, Ganago made use of a poor backpass from Rémi Oudin to round the keeper and score into the empty net.

The opportunism of his goals reflects as much on Ganago's determination as it does on any opposition errors leading to them. That is evident in some of his higher quality goals too: against Lorient or Rennes, Ganago concluded counter-attacking moves in which he was faster, stronger, and more decisive in the duel than his adversaries. He is an explosive player who has also grown in physicality since arriving in the French league and deserves the meteoric rise that he is currently enjoying as one this season's true breakout stars in Ligue 1.



Gautier LARSONNEUR

Club: Stade Brestois 29

Born: 1997/02/23

Position: Goalkeeper

At Club Since: 2017

League Apps 2020: 26

68
(NEW)

Ligue 1 has shown in 2020 its strong pool of goalkeepers who consistently outperform when it comes to their shot stopping ability. A quick analysis of Post shot xG performance in 2019/20 backs this up. This statistic measures how likely it is for a goalkeeper to save their shots when compared to all historical data. In 2019/20 across all of Europe's top 5 leagues, there were three Ligue 1 goalkeepers in the top 10 who outperformed their PSxG the most.

In just his first season in the top flight, Gautier Larsonneur is third on this list of Ligue 1 keepers while in between the sticks for the newly promoted Stade Brestois. The Breton side finished seven points off the relegation play off place, but it could have been a much different outcome without the shot-stopping ability of the young keeper. While their form in those final months before Ligue 1 was suspended was mediocre, with 12 points from nine games, it was the earlier stages in the campaign where they and Larsonneur surprised many. While certainly on the smaller side for a goalkeeper at 1.81m, the Brest academy product has made it his trademark to produce outstanding cat-like reflex saves and demonstrate agile movement across his box to make up for this.

Brest head coach Olivier Dall'Oglio's favoured style made Brest an intriguing team to watch with successful build-up play that includes Larsonneur, who has been comfortable with passing out from the back as opposed to launching the ball. However, their expansive setup can leave their defence exposed as displayed in 2019/20 where Brest conceded the fourth most shots on target in the league and this has continued into their second season back in the top flight. While Predrag Rajković was selected by many as Ligue 1's best goalkeeper in his first campaign with Reims; when it comes to the importance and impact a goalkeeper makes, Larsonneur, contributing heavily to Brest maintaining their Ligue 1 status was arguably more impressive than Rajković, who already had a very astute defence in front of him.

Larsonneur's start to the 2020/21 season has not been at the same level and he has been at fault for some of the goals that his side have conceded. Luckily the proficiency of his team's attacking capabilities has seen them somewhat compensate for this. The 23-year-old is part of an emerging group of young French goalkeepers who will all be competing for national call-ups in the upcoming years. Larsonneur is very attached to his hometown and gives his all for the club both on and off the pitch. There is no doubt that another strong season could well cement him in the shortlists of many clubs.



Moise KEAN

Club: Paris Saint-Germain

Born: 2000/02/28

Position: Forward

At Club Since: 2020

League Apps 2020: 25

67
(NEW)

Moise Kean's loan signing at Paris Saint-Germain in early October was as late and unexpected as Eric Maxim Choupo-Moting's Champions' League quarter-final winner against Atalanta in August. There was no prior indication of a deal, but it was wrapped up in super-quick fashion by Sporting Director Leonardo, ending a frustrating period on Merseyside for the former Juventus striker. The signing was initially greeted with uncertainty as after showing so much promise with the bianconeri, the Italian struggled to get going at Goodison Park, with only two goals to his name in 31 appearances.

It was a low risk move: Edinson Cavani had left the club whilst Mauro Icardi was struggling for form and fitness. As the transfer deadline loomed and with PSG's COVID-19 affected transfer budget in the red, a loan agreement made sense – but only if Kean could re-kindle some of the form he displayed in Turin. Kean settled well and quickly; unbeknownst to manager Thomas Tuchel, Kean spoke French fluently due to his Ivorian heritage and this enabled the 20-year-old to effectively communicate with his new teammates.

On the field, Kean found the net twice on only his third appearance in red and blue in a 4-0 thrashing of Dijon in late October. He followed this up with another brace four days later in the Champions' League against Istanbul Basaksehir. Kean has continued to show his threat in front of goal during the first half of the 2020/21 season and so far looks to be a successful addition to a PSG squad that has been depleted by injuries and illness.

His willingness to scrap and fight, run the channels and do his work both inside and outside of the box likens the Italian to the style of Cavani rather than Icardi. Kean's addition means that PSG now have a nice contrast in attacking styles to choose from once Icardi is fully fit and ready for selection. Kean possesses qualities that complement this PSG side more than the Argentine. Kean is more dynamic, rapid and provides excellent movement. His temperament is good and provides a big strong target, should PSG wish to switch their approach.

However, at times, he lacks composure in front of goal and that is where Icardi is usually very clinical. It will be fascinating to see which striker gets the nod from the club's next manager in the second half of the season. Unlike the deal to sign Icardi, PSG were unable to secure Kean's loan with an option-to-buy and if he continues his impressive form, the capital club could end up ruing that reality. Even if the Italian's stint in the capital ends up being a short-lived one, he has done himself and Paris Saint-Germain justice and will return to Everton a far more complete and confident player than when he departed.



Hamari TRAORÉ

Club: Stade Rennais

Born: 1992/01/27

Position: Defender

At Club Since: 2017

League Apps 2020: 24

66
(NEW)

The old saying about death and taxes ought to be, at this point, expanded to Hamari Traoré bombing down the right-flank. The Rennes and Mali full-back's tireless energy is a joy to watch, and while he may be capable of making a mistake every now and then, his dynamism and crossing ability have often been his team's saving grace in what has been a year of highs and lows.

The Breton side were one of the biggest beneficiaries of the LFP having called the Ligue 1 season to an early end in April, as hard-charging Lille looked to be on the verge of catching up with Julien Stéphan's team for third place and the final Champions' League spot. However, Rennes managed to cling on to achieve the club's best-ever top flight finish. The current campaign has been more of a mixed bag, with a humbling exit from Europe's top competition coinciding with a raft of injuries and some truly woeful form domestically.

Things seem to have gone better following that continental exit, though, and Traoré has been at the heart of that, his burgeoning relationship with club-record signing Jérémy Doku improving by the day, as the club finished 2020 with four straight wins to end the year among the European places. A superb dribbler and crosser of the ball, Traoré's ability to stretch the pitch laterally allows Doku space to cut inside, while also taking advantage of the aerial prowess of the likes of Serhou Guirassy and Martin Terrier.

Of course, the caveat to his essentially being an auxiliary attacker is that he is sometimes caught out of position. With Damien Da Silva and Steven N'Zonzi, the players nominally responsible for covering his runs, Rennes can sometimes be exposed on the break, leaving the team to concede, or for Traoré to give away a cheap foul. His positioning has improved — only Fabien Centonze has more interceptions in the league this year — but discipline has been an issue for him throughout his career in Ligue 1, dating to his time with Reims. While he has reined in that side of his game to some extent this season, given the multivalence of Doku's threat, it does remain an issue.

Still though, on his day, Traoré remains a thrilling presence for club and country, and his pinpoint crosses make him a threat that must be respected, his hyper-attacking occasionally comes at some cost. He may not be perfect, but as we so often do in football, we take the good with the bad for the reward of success. With a first Champions' League, a Coupe de France and an epic run in the Europa League in the books since his arrival in 2017, it has been quite the successful adventure for Monsieur Traoré.



Dylan BRONN

Club: FC Metz

Born: 1995/06/19

Position: Defender

At Club Since: 2020

League Apps 2020: 26

65
(NEW)

After winning the Ligue 2 title in 2019, Metz continued to uphold their reputation as a French yo-yo club. They usually perform too poorly to survive in the top flight but can often dominate in the second tier, they would fit perfectly into a Ligue 1.5. For the 2019/20 campaign, similar predictions were made and with a backline consisting of two veteran central defenders in John Boye and Stoppila Sunzu, it was easy enough to predict what their weakness would be. Sure enough, Les Grenats struggled.

At the halfway stage of the season, it looked as though it was going to be another swing on the yo-yo for Metz. They were sitting one place above the automatic relegation spots and joint on points for the relegation play-off place. Possessing a strong defence as a promoted side can really boost your chances at successfully avoiding relegation, but for Metz this wasn't the case. A defender like Sunzu was consistently becoming exposed by Ligue 1's quicker play and more dangerous movement from attackers, so Metz needed to look at strengthening the defence.

Dylan Bronn was signed from KAA Gent in Belgium in the 3rd day of the winter transfer window and since that transfer he has featured for every single Ligue 1 minute Metz have played in 2020. The instant impact that he has made can be seen in the simplest of statistics. Before the Tunisian joined, Metz were averaging 0.89 points per game and conceding 1.47 goals per game.

In the nine games he played before the end of the curtailed 2019/20 season, Metz averaged 1.89 points per game and were conceding 0.78 goals per game. While of course not all this should be attributed to Bronn's arrival, with the loan signing of Vincent Pajot strengthening the midfield core, the central defender's strength, poise and frame have made him one of Ligue 1's best defenders despite being in the division for just 12 months.

The difference in defensive solidity was clear and now the pair of Bronn and Boye is becoming one of the most impregnable in the division, with both players successfully complimenting each other. They are both apt at stepping out of the backline, comfortable sweeping up and recovering any loose balls, although Boye usually has more time on the ball in early parts of build-up and Bronn's role is usually to recycle possession.

With Boye now 33, Metz bolstered their defensive ranks through the addition of the very promising and sought-after Kiki Kouyaté from Troyes in Ligue 2, who has joined the two as Metz have moved to play with a back three, making it clear that with him and Bronn, Metz coach Frédéric Antonetti, has his partnership for the future set.



OTAVIO

Henrique Santos

Club: Girondins de Bordeaux

Born: 1994/05/04

Position: Midfielder

At Club Since: 2017

League Apps 2020: 23

64
(+22)

The largest foreign representation of players in 2020 for Ligue 1 was Brazil, with 30 players in Ligue 1 squads in 2019/20 and 23 in 2020/21. These include many big stars like Neymar and Marquinhos, but further down the league there are Brazilian players who are just as important to their teams. Otávio is certainly one of those to Bordeaux.

Even during a COVID-19-hit transfer season, it was certainly a surprise to see little to no transfer rumours surrounding the Bordeaux midfielder who has proven for more than one season that he is one of the underrated midfielders in the division. Even with Bordeaux switching managers from Paulo Sousa to Jean-Louis Gasset, Otávio has transitioned well and produced a string of consistent performances under both coaches.

Perhaps it is part the type of work that Otávio is executing and his age profile that allows him to go under the radar of many bigger clubs, but any recruiting department using any form of metrics and data would see as Otávio is always standing out. In 2019/20, no Ligue 1 player completed more successful pressures than the Brazilian and he was third in the league for tackles in the middle third of the pitch per 90.

Bordeaux under Gasset have now become a side that are very tough to break down, possessing a strong and experienced centre back pairing of Laurent Koscielny and Paul Baysse. However, Otávio is another key asset to this defensive success. He is used to cut off passing options and break down attacking moves with clever positioning, where he will often make successful decisions to step out to tackle if there is a good chance of winning the ball. Bordeaux have become difficult to beat, but on the other hand have found it difficult to score, with much of their play becoming too stagnant and slow; unfortunately for Otávio, this is one of the weak points in his profile.

While he excels at maintaining possession and evading pressure, he often chooses the simple and easy sideways passes which can slow the flow of the game when unnecessary. Otávio's inability in these areas may now explain why he has been less sought after, but his pairing with Toma Bašić has somewhat negated this issue. His Croatian teammate is the more progressive of the two players who can construct and join attacks with Otávio's solid defensive work next to him, supporting his marauding runs. The Brazilian's form during the 2020/21 campaign has been poorer than the previous season, but with a very strong showing against PSG in a late November draw, his previous season's form might be returning.



Ander HERRERA

Club: Paris Saint-Germain

Born: 1989/08/14

Position: Midfielder

At Club Since: 2019

League Apps 2020: 18

63
(-14)

Often mocked for being PSG's best PR manager, always rolled out for the pre-match press conferences ahead of a vital match, former Manchester United midfielder Ander Herrera has been showcasing a variety of qualities on and off the pitch since joining PSG in July 2019. Just like his now current teammate Rafinha, Herrera's story has been, in some way, tied to PSG's. When Thomas Tuchel's men defeated the Red Devils in the first leg of the Champions' League round of 16 in 2019, Herrera was on the pitch and played the entire game for the English club. For the second leg, the Bilbao-born player was not even on the team sheet, due to a hamstring injury and Manchester United knocked Les Parisiens out. Was it some sort of premonition of what would be his career at the Parc des Princes? Well...

Ander Herrera has been a relatively consistent player at PSG. Unfortunately, when he arrived, he spent a lot of time on the sidelines due to multiple injuries. Once fit, he proved to be a decent addition to the Parisian squad. Quite an unknown commodity in France, observers quickly discovered a hard-working, box-to-box and committed midfielder. However, it was his natural charisma and quick mastery of the French language that most marked French media. His omnipresence on TV and in the newspaper has led to the nickname: "PSG's spokesperson".

On the pitch, Herrera started 2020 with a short appearance against Lille in Ligue 1 in January, before playing an entire game at... right-back, in a 4-4 thriller in Amiens. A good demonstration of his two best qualities: versatility and professionalism. Then, he got injured, missed PSG's tie against Dortmund, only to see COVID-19 shut down the world for a couple of months. A blessing in disguise that enabled the Spaniard to come back in great shape for the Final 8 in Portugal. He was a surprise starter against Atalanta in the quarter-finals, but struggled to cope with Gian Piero Gasperini's men's athleticism and aggressiveness. He was subbed off in the 72nd minute and witnessed Eric-Maxim Choupo-Moting's winner from the bench. His best PSG performance came afterwards, in the semi-final against Leipzig, where he was omnipresent and really displayed his large array of qualities: intelligent pressing, strong accuracy of passing with Thilo Kehrer and down the forward right channel, constant marshalling and encouragement.

The beginning of the 2020/21 season has seen Herrera make many appearances in Ligue 1 and in the Champions' League: 20 so far, only two less than his entire tally of last season. In a nutshell, he has established himself as a key member of Tuchel's squad, missing just two matches all campaign thus far and, on a free transfer, is proving brilliant business for the capital club. He has taken on more importance in the dressing room and majorly contributed to the excellent atmosphere fostered by Thomas Tuchel, a major factor in the club's deep Champions' League run in 2020 that surely helped the players reach the European heights of a Champions' League final for the first time in the club's history.



Damien DA SILVA

Club: Stade Rennais

Born: 1988/05/17

Position: Defender

At Club Since: 2018

League Apps 2020: 25

62
(+9)

It's fair to say that Damien Da Silva is enjoying the best years of his career post-30 - not an uncommon phenomenon in the modern game, but a remarkable feat nonetheless. In 2013, at 25, he was playing in France's semi-professional third tier. Seven years later, he is captaining a side in the Champions' League. Indeed, 2020 has been Da Silva's first full year wearing the Rennes armband, and while his side might not have rescaled the dizzying heights of their Coupe de France win in 2019, there have been highlights aplenty.

The performances of the Frenchman, alongside defensive partners Joris Gnagnon and Jérémy Morel, were a vital component of the Les Rouge et Noir's strong end to 2019, and helped the side navigate a challenging start to 2020. When the team's form began to dip in the New Year, clean sheets against Nîmes and Brest helped them secure what would prove to be vital points, as the season would be prematurely halted in March. Rennes were the biggest beneficiaries of this decision, sitting in third at the time, with Lille, in superior form, finishing just a point behind. Rennes, for the first time in their history, had thus qualified for the Champions' League.

Only Reims conceded fewer goals last campaign, though it was by no means plain sailing for Da Silva and co. In fact, the 32 year-old scored an own goal against rivals Nantes at the end of January, which, were it not for two stoppage time goals, could have had serious ramifications for their season. He was also part of a side that conceded four to Angers in the Coupe de France, albeit in a match they won 5-4, eventually reaching the semi-finals, where they were eliminated by Saint-Étienne.

Rennes began this season in impressive fashion, with the performances of Da Silva and new signing Nayef Aguerd in central defence particularly catching the eye, coming up with important contributions in both defence and attack. In fact, Da Silva has already scored three times this season, securing a point away at Lille and at home to Reims, and equalising in a 2-1 Breton derby win over Brest, a match in which he particularly impressed. The high point of the year was set to be Da Silva and Rennes' maiden appearance in the Champions' League. However, Julien Stéphan's side struggled in a challenging group, and a combination of lack of experience, quality of opposition and misfortune has seen them gain just one point. Other than during a poor performance in a dead rubber match against Sevilla, their captain did not look out of his depth.

Rennes are enduring a tricky campaign, as they struggle to balance domestic and continental action, but their captain remains consistent. Although they have brought in the highly-rated Daniele Rugani on loan from Juventus, there has been no suggestion that Da Silva's place is at risk. Indeed, the man who idolises Sergio Ramos and Pepe for their off-pitch qualities remains the heartbeat of his team, and his contributions on the pitch are as valuable as ever.



Florian THAUVIN

Club: Olympique de Marseille

Born: 1993/01/26

Position: Forward

At Club Since: 2016

League Apps 2020: 16

61
(-11)

Florian Thauvin, the darling of the Mediterranean and heir to the throne of Marseille, is no longer the “next Franck Ribéry”, but has developed into his own major footballing personality, as one of the Ligue 1’s elite playmakers. Even at 27 years of age, Thauvin has not yet seemed to reach his full potential, which would seem to be an odd statement to make considering that he is one of Marseille’s top 21st century goalscorers.

Thauvin has been on a mission this year to regain his place in the French national team and re-establish himself amongst the Ligue 1 elite after last season’s injury-plagued campaign saw him appear for just 20 minutes in two French top flight fixtures. In 2020/21, Thauvin has begun making his case with an immense offensive impact, contributing to 60% of Marseille’s goals this season at the time of writing.

Thauvin is an all-action winger with the pace, speed and the technical ability to unlock the vast majority of Ligue 1 defences. His ability to produce a swiss-army knife of passes, use his pace to beat defenders or cut into space onto his preferred left foot to score from almost anywhere on the pitch with remarkable accuracy are the defining characteristics of his game. All of which were on full display against Bordeaux this season, when Thauvin scored one of the best goals of the campaign. Watching Thauvin curl a football in with his left foot can only be described as magic that only a select few in Europe are able to pull off.

This season, outside of the Champions’ League, has gone to plan for the Frenchmen. At the time of this piece, Thauvin sits atop of the assist table with five assists. He has also managed to net four goals. Marseille have even managed to beat PSG this season and sit right outside of the top three. Thauvin’s success tends to run parallel with Marseille’s good form as he is their go-to playmaker. However, as we have seen in Europe, the “Thauvin or bust” mentality can also hurt the French winger and Marseille when defences find ways to slow him down.

Nowadays, Thauvin seems to be more focused and may look to leave Marseille given that there is not much more he can accomplish without the club seriously strengthening his squad and the player’s contract expiring in 6 months. The Thauvin we see today is not the Thauvin who left for the Premier league in his early twenties who was affected by the pressure of the media and lights of the Premier League. This Thauvin is an elite playmaker who possesses all the bells and whistles to be a top player in any league.



Aurélien TCHOUAMENI

Club: AS Monaco

Born: 2000/01/27

Position: Midfielder

At Club Since: 2020

League Apps 2020: 21

60
(NEW)

It had never been a secret that Aurélien Tchouaméni had the potential to be one of Ligue 1's top midfield talents. Having broken through in 2018, the midfielder only began to impose himself as a key member of the Bordeaux line-up by the end of 2019 under Portuguese manager Paulo Sousa.

The Rouen native had been linked with a host of major clubs in the last few years - realistically, it was only a matter of time before he left the banks of the Garonne for a club reputed for developing young talent. That move came in the January transfer window at the start of the year, as Monaco's offer just short of the €20m mark was accepted, after he impressed in the first half of the season with his establishment as a first-team regular.

His first six months with the Monegasques would bring little indication of what was to come, with manager Robert Moreno limiting him to a mere three 20-minute substitute appearances which would see him pick up a yellow card in each one. With the rest of the league campaign cancelled from early March onwards as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, he had to wait until the start of the new season before making his mark at his new club.

Nevertheless, the French youth international has been a key cog in Niko Kovač's Monaco side since the Croatian manager's arrival this summer, having started most of the club's league fixtures this season. Having been used sparingly for most of his time at his former club and rarely stringing together consistent spells of form, Tchouaméni is clearly taking his move to the Principality a chance to reach the next level.

The 20-year-old is essentially a midfield all-rounder, with his sound defensive contributions as well as an impressive technical palette making him an ideal component of any midfield three or central pairing - as he has shown at Monaco alongside Youssouf Fofana many a time this season. The highlight of his year will have come on the big stage, as he announced himself to wider audiences with a tireless performance against Paris Saint-Germain in November in a match which saw his side come back in spirited fashion from 2-0 down at half time. At the heart of it was Tchouaméni, consistently winning his duels and involving himself in Monaco's forward play as much as possible.

While other young midfielders might be in the Ligue 1 spotlight as of now, it's only a matter of time before Monaco face the same dilemma as Bordeaux did for several years: when a bigger club on the European stage comes knocking, it would be difficult to deprive the midfielder of the next step in his inexorable rise to the top.



Romain FAIVRE

Club: Stade Brestois 29

Born: 1998/07/14

Position: Midfielder

At Club Since: 2020

League Apps 2020: 17

59
(NEW)

Silver linings from Thierry Henry's disastrous spell in charge at Monaco are scarce. But Romain Faivre's development this season may be one significant example. The French attacking midfielder was awarded his senior debut with Monaco towards the end of Henry's reign, the first of four consecutive starts in December 2018 and into January. In truth he did little to suggest he would become the player he is in 2020 and, following Henry's dismissal, Faivre vanished from view. Not even appearing on the bench again until his move to Brest last summer. Valuable experience and exposure were gained however.

The move to the Stade Francis-Le Blé transfer changed everything for Faivre. Immediately thrown into Olivier Dall'Oglio's eleven, he has remained ensconced ever since as Brest's attacking style carried the Breton club towards the top half of the table. Up until mid-December (10th), games involving Brest had seen the most goals of any Ligue 1 club. Although they had the worst defensive record at that point with 24 conceded, only five clubs (all in the top six) had scored more than their 21.

Capable of playing as a second striker or number ten as well as drifting in off the left, Faivre's accuracy from dead balls, creativity and skillful style has been a driving force for a thrilling campaign so far. A whipped, pinpoint free-kick reduced the deficit at Nantes, a hooked first-time effort opened the scoring in a superb 3-2 win over Monaco and a neat finish aided a minor fightback against Marseille on the opening day.

Faivre's deliveries have routinely caused issues too, providing a brace of assists directly from corners to aid impressive victories over Saint-Étienne and Metz. There's something of 'champagne football' about Faivre's style and in the way he skips past defenders and provides such beautifully shaped balls. There's effectiveness there too, Faivre was the league's most successful dribbler over the first six Ligue 1 games in 2020/21 and rewarded with a France U21 call up - scoring on his debut in October's 5-0 win over Liechtenstein.

Faivre occasionally shows his inexperience and can be a little frustrating in running down blind alleys, overhitting a pass or conceding possession needlessly, but these issues represent little more than growing pains for a gifted forward talent.

Henry used an incredible 40 different players during his short 20 match spell as Monaco coach. Although results were far from perfect, his willingness to give youth a chance should be commended, even if his hand was forced a little by injuries. Alongside Faivre, Benoît Badiashile, Sofiane Diop, Khéphren Thuram, Giulian Biancone and many more youngsters were either given significant game time or their debuts by Henry. The faith Henry placed in Faivre however may be the best thing to come from a terrible three months.



Marco VERRATTI

Club: Paris Saint-Germain

Born: 1992/11/05

Position: Midfielder

At Club Since: 2012

League Apps 2020: 18

58
(-50)

Marco Verratti may be the best product of Italian football of the last decade. While he shares a similar skill-set of long and short passes to his most common Italian comparison, Andrea Pirlo, such an evaluation does not speak to his motor and effectiveness on the defensive side of things. While Pirlo provides the pass, Verratti does more. Verratti creates the pressure, wins the ball, starts the transition and has the eye to invent passes that break the line of any defence. The 1.65m midfielder is a barracuda on the ball and a dancer with it at his feet. As midfielders go, he is almost the complete package, the only major weakness of his game is his complete inability to shoot.

On the field, Verratti is the piece that makes it all work at PSG, which is only an issue owing to his horrific fitness record. Verratti continues to miss matches with off-and-on injuries since last season. The most notable absences due to injury were during the Champions' League matches against Atalanta and the final against Bayern Munich. It is hard to say that the outcome of the final would have been different with a healthy Verratti but it is obvious that the Parisians do not seem to have the same rhythm without maestro Verratti creating the ebb and flow in the midfield.

No matter what selection Thomas Tuchel has made in Verratti's absence, PSG were reduced to a side in move construction that exclusively relied on Neymar dropping very deep in midfield to receive the ball. Only a few players in the world have such an impeccable influence on and off the ball the way Verratti does, which is why seeing him fall behind this season is so frustrating.

His reputation for loving his life in Paris, with Verratti having paid less attention to fitness and more attention to smoking, drinking and partying in his early years with the club, appear to have hindered his development for the longer term.

The Marco Verratti that arrived from Italy has grown into the player we thought he might be. However, the juvenile setbacks that plague the 28-year-old continue to be an issue and hinder Verratti and his teammates. Still, Verratti is a competitor. His exceptional penchant for yellow cards with risky challenges and temper tantrums are an expression of his desire to win. You need players like Verratti in every sense of the game — the good, bad and the ugly.

If Verratti can refine himself, it is more likely than not we will see him back towards the top of the list in the years to come.



Tino KADEWERE

Club: Olympique Lyonnais

Born: 1996/01/05

Position: Forward

At Club Since: 2020

League Apps 2020: 21

57
(+35)

2020 has been the kind of year that Tinotenda Kadewere must have dreamt about as a kid. He began the year preparing for a game against relegation-battling Chamois Niortais, in Ligue 2, France's second tier. When the game came, it was he who scored the only goal of the game to boost Le Havre's hopes of promotion to Ligue 1. Now, he ends the year on the back of a winner against reigning French champions and Champions' League finalists, PSG, in Paris - also the only goal of the game. Beat that.

Kadewere was announced as a new signing for Lyon in mid-January, then loaned back to Le Havre for the rest of the 2019/20 season. Their promotion hopes heavily depended on Kadewere, the leading scorer in Ligue 2. By the time COVID-19 forced the league to come to a premature end, he had produced 24 goals and assists. The next best at Le Havre was nine by Jamal Thiarié. That tally of 24 goals and assists was also the best in the league, three ahead of Adrian Grbić and seven ahead of Yoane Wissa.

Kadewere was, expectedly, not a guaranteed starter as the new season began and Lyon wobbled. Things soon changed after he impressed in a 3-2 Lyon victory at Strasbourg, the highlight being an incredible first half showing from him, Memphis Depay and Karl Toko Ekambi. That setup saw Depay look unplayable in a free role, with Toko Ekambi and Kadewere making devastating runs in behind while also providing width. Before then, Kadewere had been operating centrally, in a front two or as the lone man upfront. They created six big chances; Depay bagged three assists, Toko Ekambi two goals and Kadewere one. Manager Rudi Garcia must have felt that he had finally worked out his perfect attack so he did it again against Monaco. Once again, they created six big chances as they opened up Monaco at will. This time, Kadewere provided an assist, Depay a goal and Toko Ekambi two goals. Like the Strasbourg game, all their goals came in a devastating first half in which Monaco had no answer.

The derby Rhône-Alpes against Saint-Étienne soon came and this was to be Kadewere's finest moment yet for Lyon. He did not even start the game, Garcia opted for Moussa Dembélé. For an hour, Lyon laboured but found themselves a goal down until Kadewere came on to bag the brace that won Le Derby. A big personal moment, indeed. Three days later, he was scoring for his country Zimbabwe against African champions Algeria, albeit a consolation goal. He returned to France to once again be decisive for Lyon as he scored an unlikely winner against Angers, in a 1-0 win. And then, along came PSG. So far, Kadewere has adapted to a higher level really well and shown that he can consistently be a decisive player for OL. His work off the ball has been important as has been his ability to adapt to multiple roles and positions. While there is still a lot of room for him to grow, the signs so far are good. If he continues to be decisive, even as more of a supporting cast member than a protagonist in the side, then 2021 could be the year that catapults him into more global reckoning.



Faitout MAOUASSA

Club: Stade Rennais

Born: 1998/07/06

Position: Defender

At Club Since: 2017

League Apps 2020: 19

56
(NEW)

Maouassa has not appeared in the Get French Football News 100 since 2017, but the French U21 international has come back in a big way. He has spent recent years slowly breaking through at Rennes, and he spent time on loan at Nimes Olympique in 2018/19. After making 27 Ligue 1 appearances that season, Maouassa got the chance to establish himself as one of Europe's most promising full-backs.

At the beginning of 2020, Maouassa was in the middle of great 2019/20 Ligue 1 campaign. The then-21-year-old had played in 63% of available league minutes. This is very impressive for a young defender in a very physical league. He would then go on to feature in every one of Rennes' remaining Ligue 1 games up until the season was stopped in March. It is arguable that the season ended too early for the full-back, as Maouassa scored in his final two Ligue 1 matches. He was man of the match in both games. The last fixture, a 5-0 thumping of Montpellier in March, was fantastic. He started the rout, cutting inside and firing a powerful long shot on his weaker right-foot into the top corner.

It capped off a pivotal season for Maouassa. Despite his slight 1.70m frame, in 2019/20 he proved himself as a formidable force both in attack and defence. Hassane Kamara & Lionel Carole were the only left-backs to be dribbled past less times than Maouassa. No full-back scored more than his three goals in the shortened season either. Had Rennes made it through to the Europa League knockout stages, Maouassa could have impressed in Europe too. That did not stop reported interest coming from Manchester United in May. Maouassa was even forced to respond to the rumours, assuring he was "Very happy at Rennes".

The new season has been a lot trickier for the Frenchman though. The 20/21 Ligue 1 season started brightly for Maouassa, as Rennes drew at Lille on the opening day. Maouassa was one of the key performers, making more defensive actions than anyone else in the match. An assist followed at Montpellier. However, 41 minutes into a clash against Monaco in late September, Maouassa went off with an ankle injury. This kept him out of the side for nearly two months, barring him from completing a full 90 minutes until the 1-0 victory over Nice in December.

Even without playing games, Maouassa's influence on Rennes has shown to be huge. In the 12 games across all competitions that he missed while having surgery, Rennes lost six times. In the eight he has played in this season, Rennes have lost just once. His importance to Julien Stéphan cannot be understated.



Alfred GOMIS

Club: Stade Rennais

Born: 1993/05/09

Position: Goalkeeper

At Club Since: 2020

League Apps 2020: 15

55
(NEW)

I'm not personally a professional goalkeeper paid thousands of Euros each week to try and win football matches but I assume the first thing that they tell you in training is to not concede four goals in a game. Unfortunately, on the August 28th this year, Alfred Gomis of Dijon FCO did exactly that. Memphis Depay got a hat-trick, Lyon went home happy, case closed nothing to see here, see you later.

However, this game, in which Dijon's Gomis was peppered with shots from start to finish, is probably one of the best microcosms you could use to display the goalkeeper's quality. He made nine saves, one of the highest tallies of the season so far, eight of which came from shots inside the box. These are magnificent numbers for any goalkeeper and just shows the calibre of the player.

Not long after this game, Gomis got his big money move to Rennes to replace his countryman Edouard Mendy who left for Chelsea. And while it has not been the dream start for him so far, with the entire Rennes squad buckling under the pressure of their first ever Champions' League group stage appearance, there is plenty of reason to have faith in Gomis, someone who will soon enough come good and fill the massive shoes left behind by Mendy.

Last season, when playing for a Dijon side that eventually finished 16th in Ligue 1, Gomis was a vital contributor to their ultimate survival. The Mustards conceded 129 shots over the 28-game season, just eleven off Amiens who endured the most. During the campaign, Gomis regularly played behind a back four of Hamza Mendyl, Fouad Chafik, Wesley Lautoa and Bruno Ecuele Manga, the latter three all being over thirty and over the crest of the hill, shall we say. None of them performed overly well throughout the season and as a result Dijon conceded the sixth most xG, if you're into that sort of thing.

But despite these obstacles Alfred Gomis was incredibly up the task. Agile in his leaps, strong with his handling, commanding of his area, in fact he was the best goalkeeper in the 2019/20 season for claiming the ball from corners and crosses, putting all of his 1.96m frame to good use. In 2020, across his spells at Dijon and Rennes, Gomis has had to cope with an average of 4.2 shots on target against per game, a rather high total. So, for him to be battered in pretty much every game but still more often than not get out with plaudits being heaped upon him is some achievement. We are still to see the best of him at Rennes but given some time to settle in, he has every ability to excel in the position that has been famously held by some high-profile names in the past. Petr Cech, Pierrick Hiard, Benoît Costil... Could Alfred Gomis be the next to join that list? Watch this space.



Gaël KAKUTA

Club: RC Lens

Born: 1991/06/21

Position: Midfielder

At Club Since: 2020

League Apps 2020: 24

54
(NEW)

Once described by Chelsea's French scout as "the most gifted player of his generation", Gaël Kakuta has spent more than a decade searching for a home. Since leaving Lens in 2007, the Lille-born DR Congo international has joined 12 clubs on loan or otherwise, ranging from Bolton Wanderers to Hebei China Fortune to Rayo Vallecano. Rarely, if ever, has he enjoyed more than fleeting success or much faith from his employers. In 2020 however that finally started to change.

After several loan spells away from Chelsea, it was the 2011/12 season before Kakuta reached double figures for league appearances in one campaign, with four goals in 14 games on loan at Dijon in Ligue 1. It wasn't until the 2014/15 campaign with then respectably mid-table Rayo Vallecano that he managed to find any sort of consistency, impressing with a combined 12 goals and assists over 35 La Liga games.

Hebei China Fortune were impressed enough to end the forward's nomadic existence with Chelsea and sign him on a permanent deal but it was not until his latest return to Ligue 1 that the teenage prodigy, now 29, really emerge. The marquee addition for promoted minnows Amiens in 2017, Kakuta became a leader and talismanic number ten for Christophe Pélissier's upstarts and aided a miraculous thirteenth place finish with a combined tally of 12 goals and assists. After another, far less successful, season with Rayo, Kakuta returned to the Stade de la Licorne last term only for his efforts to be negated by Ligue 1's COVID-19 enforced cancellation. Only Serhou Guirassy proved more effective as Amiens were unluckily relegated.

Rescued by his boyhood club Lens in the summer, Kakuta has continued to impress in 2020/21. Lining up as a creative number ten behind two strikers in Franck Haise's positive 3-4-1-2 set-up, Kakuta's guile and intelligence in midfield as well as his exacting finishing from the penalty spot has led Lens into the top half of Ligue 1 upon promotion. Kakuta has been pivotal in making Lens one of European football's most captivating sides with five goals and three assists in his first 12 games.

Each assist in particular underlines Kakuta's vision and ability to create something from next to nothing for a teammate. A smart, well weighted first time pass for Arnaud Kalimuendo assisted a key opener in December's win over Rennes, a visionary, looped through ball for Kalimuendo again aided an equaliser against Angers and a pinpoint, off-balance cross found Ignatius Ganago to put his team ahead at Nîmes.

Thirteen years after the furore surrounding Chelsea's 'tapping-up' scandal and the teenage forward's eventual four-month ban for having left Lens for London, Gaël Kakuta has returned home to Northern France and found the best form of his career. Imagine if he'd never left.



Youssouf FOFANA

Club: AS Monaco

Born: 1999/01/10

Position: Midfielder

At Club Since: 2020

League Apps 2020: 23

53
(NEW)

Set to turn 22 shortly after the publication of this guide, the rapid rise of Youssouf Fofana has been impressive indeed. Nearly a year on from leaving Strasbourg, the club where he made his professional debut, for AS Monaco, he has been arguably the Principality side's most consistent player this season, bar Ruben Aguilar. Fofana has been responsible for knitting together Niko Kovac's two-man midfield with his dynamism and passing nous, even if it's perhaps not an ideal role.

Born in Paris of Malian descent, he had an ill-fated stint at Clairefontaine owing to his small size at 14 before moving on to play for both Red Star and then amateur side AS Drancy, where he found some stability. He then moved east to join the Alsace side, where he quickly impressed, playing everywhere in midfield from the base of a diamond to just behind a front two. An ankle injury suffered early last season derailed his progress to some degree, but once fit again, he was quickly an integral (and versatile) part of the side, helping the club recover after a bumpy start to the season complicated by their European obligations.

When Monaco came calling last January, he moved south for the somewhat surprising sum of €15m, where he slotted straight in to Robert Moreno's side, and has likewise been a regular under Niko Kovac, playing of late alongside Aurélien Tchouameni in a 4-4-2 and also in a box-to-box role when the Croatian has opted to deploy a 4-3-3. Fofana himself has admitted that he is probably best suited in the latter of these, even if he is one of the league's better tacklers - his pace makes him a good complement for Tchouameni, but the former Bordeaux man's slowfootedness can leave him exposed at times in this system — it is no coincidence all of his bookings have come playing in a double pivot.

When Aleksandr Golovin comes back to full fitness, Monaco might indeed be well served to go back to playing a midfield three. With Fofana both able to pull the strings and snap into tackles, the Russian will be given a freer role to support the attack, even if Fofana himself has a fine eye for a pass and a wicked shot from range, although he is yet to find the net in red and white. For his country, Fofana has struggled to some degree to be a regular for France's U21s, but that is only down to the sheer volume of talented players in the same position (Houssem Aouar, Jeff Reine-Adélaïde, Mattéo Guendouzi, Ibrahima Diallo) — one has to feel that without that group of players ahead of him, he would be a key element of Sylvain Ripoll's side.



Maxwel CORNET

Club: Olympique Lyonnais

Born: 1996/09/27

Position: Defender

At Club Since: 2015

League Apps 2020: 23

52
(NEW)

It has been a year of adaptation for Maxwel Cornet. Injuries to Youssouf Koné and Fernando Marçal meant that Cornet was required to cover at left-back for a Coupe de la Ligue match in late 2019 against Toulouse and, one year later, he continues to start in the defence for Lyon. 2020 could not have kicked off any better for him, starting every game in a run of seven consecutive wins in all competitions. The return of Marçal led to Cornet returning to a more familiar attacking role for most of this winning run, but manager Rudi Garcia continued to test the Ivorian at left-back in the cup games.

Garcia's decision to switch to a 3-5-2 formation against FC Metz in February proved to be beneficial for the 24-year-old and led to what was perhaps his best period of the calendar year. With Cornet at LWB and Marçal at LCB, his defensive duties were relaxed somewhat, and he was given the freedom to push forward and create chances for his side. Cornet's performances at wing-back during the Champions' League knockout stages earned recognition across Europe, including yet another goal against Manchester City. In three Champions' League games against Pep Guardiola's side, Cornet has now scored four goals and his most recent strike helped Lyon into the semi-finals of the competition for only the second time in the club's history.

The manager's inability to settle on a formation this year has been a frustration for Lyon fans, but Cornet has continued to maintain a place in the line-up, regardless of his role. More recently, the return to a back four and the traditional left-back role for Cornet has highlighted some of his flaws. The 24-year-old is not a natural defender, and this has become more apparent at full-back where his lack of positional awareness and ability to retain possession can let him down. At wing-back, Cornet could afford to lose the ball higher up the pitch with Marçal covering the area behind him. But in his current role, he has been producing concerning numbers for both turnovers and pass completion. 3.31 turnovers per 90 is one of the highest values for a full-back in the Top-5 leagues this season, coupled with a pass completion of 76%, which similarly demonstrates his tendency to lose possession for his side.

Cornet's regular appearances in the starting 11 throughout the year suggest that the manager trusts his ability in several positions. Despite recent calls from fans to replace him with the emerging academy graduate Melvin Bard, Garcia continues to persist with the converted forward in a defensive role. With the rising emergence of Bard expected in the new year, Cornet faces a new challenge in order to retain his place in the team.



Serhou GUIRASSY

Club: Stade Rennais

Born: 1996/03/12

Position: Forward

At Club Since: 2020

League Apps 2020: 21

51
(+48)

Serhou Guirassy's name has risen in the ranks of public consciousness in 2020. He made his Champions' League debut, and moved to Stade Rennais. However, the French striker started the year in the middle of a relegation dogfight for Amiens SC in 2019/20.

Amiens lost to Montpellier on New Year's Day, marking their seventh Ligue 1 game without a win in a row. Sadly, Luka Elsner's side did not manage to pick up their form before the Ligue 1 season was controversially cancelled. Amiens failed to win in 2020, as they were relegated to Ligue 2. However, Guirassy did the best he could to save the club he joined in January 2019. He contributed to 40% of Amiens' league goals in 2020. He gave them the lead against Monaco in February, firing a shot into the roof of the net with no backlift from the edge of the box.

Later that month, Guirassy was instrumental in a fantastic 4-4 draw against champions PSG. He displayed intelligent movement to slip behind Thiago Silva and slot in the first goal of the match. His dummy directly led to Amiens' second. Even after PSG came back to lead 3-4 after being 3-1 down, Guirassy kept his cool in the last minute of the game to equalise. He had added highly intelligent play to his game, on top his brooding physicality.

After Ligue 1 was officially cancelled at the end of April 2020, Amiens knew they could not hang on to their star talent. There were links to the Premier League before Rennes made their move in late August. Serhou Guirassy moved to Brittany for €14m, after reportedly pushing for the deal to occur over several months. In the absence of M'Baye Niang, Guirassy was thrust into the frontline of the Rennes attack. In September, Guirassy scored an unforgettable first goal for the club against Nimes, an outstanding controlled long shot on his weaker foot. It was not long before another career highlight, as two matches later he scored a well-timed overhead kick against Saint-Étienne. He had showcased major technical development.

Guirassy has only added three more goals and two assists since late September, across all competitions. There have been more moments to remember though. The 1.87m striker's powerful late equalising header against Chelsea was a memorable goal, before Rennes crashed out of the Champions' League. Guirassy is a striker who brings more to the game than goals and direct assists. His powerful strength and improved link up play has nursed Rennes through a difficult patch in form throughout November and December. When Rennes regain confidence, Guirassy will be the star in one of Europe's most exciting attacks.

75-51 RECAP

75.	Bruno Guimarães	Olympique Lyon
74.	Fabien Centonze	FC Metz
73.	Loïc Badé	RC Lens
72.	Kevin Volland	AS Monaco
71.	Yvan Neyou	AS Saint-Étienne
70.	Morgan Schneiderlin	OGC Nice
69.	Ignatius Ganago	RC Lens
68.	Gautier Larssonneur	Stade Brest 29
67.	Moise Kean	PSG
66.	Hamari Traoré	Stade Rennais
65.	Dylan Bronn	FC Metz
64.	Otavio	Bordeaux
63.	Ander Herrera	PSG
62.	Damien Da Silva	Stade Rennais
61.	Florian Thauvin	Marseille
60.	Aurélien Tchouameni	AS Monaco
59.	Romain Faivre	Stade Brest 29
58.	Marco Verratti	PSG
57.	Tino Kadewere	Olympique Lyon
56.	Faitout Maouassa	Stade Rennais
55.	Alfred Gomis	Stade Rennais
54.	Gaël Kakuta	RC Lens
53.	Youssef Fofana	AS Monaco
52.	Maxwel Cornet	Olympique Lyon
51.	Serhou Guirassy	Stade Rennais



50

(NEW)

Steven NZONZI

Club: Stade Rennais / Born: 1988/12/15

Position: Midfielder / At Club Since: 2020 / League Apps 2020: 20

Rennes surprised Ligue 1 in 2019/20 as Julien Stéphan's side finished 3rd in the curtailed Ligue 1 season, qualifying for the Champions' League for the first time in their history. It was a huge achievement for the club who were inspired by the quality performances from Edouard Mendy in between the posts and Raphinha whose direct incisiveness was a constant threat to many French sides.

Of course, the main star of the show was mercurial academy talent, Eduardo Camavinga, who broke onto the scene and demonstrated phenomenal ability and composure for such a young player at 17. The concern for Rennes was the reliance and pressure put on such young shoulders, in many of his first starts for the club he was running the midfield and performing every duty be that breaking up possession, recycling it or progressing forwards where he would join attacks.

Julien Stéphan knew such a profile of talent needed protecting so that he would not burn out and overextend himself. So in January he stepped in for Steven N'Zonzi who had returned from a loan move to Turkish side Galatasaray, and appeared out of favour at his current side Roma.

N'Zonzi had not played in France since his time at Amiens over a decade ago, but adjusted and quickly became a mainstay in the first eleven alongside centre backs Damien Da Silva and new signing Nayef Aguerd. He began to provide the defensive solidity needed that allowed the likes of Camavinga and Benjamin Bourigeaud to maraud forward in confidence. In build-up, the 31-year-old has become a crucial cog in the Rennes setup, often dropping deep and sometimes in-between the central defenders to provide another passing option.

In this way he has taken some of the responsibility from Camavinga, as N'Zonzi generally has more of the ball than any other Rennes player. This allows him to dictate the tempo of the match with smart and simple passes or driving passes into attacking space. Despite being targeted and often the focus of much opposing midfield pressure, the Frenchman rarely gives up possession and in turn frees up space and gaps for his teammates to attack.

In August, both N'Zonzi and Camavinga were called up to the French national team; having two midfielders who are also regulars for France is quite an achievement for a club like Rennes, and is another sign of their progression as a stronger Ligue 1 club in recent years.

However, recently, N'Zonzi has come under criticism from some of the Rennes fanbase. He is often targeted as the scapegoat for the Champions' League campaign in which the Breton side only won one point. Much was expected of him because of his European pedigree, having appeared consecutively in the last five editions of the tournament. It appears that he was not the leader of the team that his reputation may have suggested, because he did not seem to overtly contribute to the group in this way.

It is almost inevitable that the former Stoke man is criticised more than the younger and less experienced teammates, as more was expected of him. Rennes started the 2020/21 Ligue 1 season strongly but hit a poor run of form that coincided with their Champions' League performances. Due to N'Zonzi's profile, he was severely criticised for slowing down the game too much for Rennes to inflict consistent damage on opposing teams.

Even his role to facilitate Camavinga has come under scrutiny with the Rennes talent experiencing his first real continual run of poor form. Last season, the teenager caught the eye with his driving runs forward and breaking opposing pressure with quick feet and agile movement. He would often receive the ball in his own half and barrel forwards, magnetising players towards him conversely now that N'Zonzi is the deepest lying midfielder, manager Julien Stéphan has placed Camavinga further up field where he can no longer affect the game in this way.

Despite Rennes crashing out of the group stage, they cannot be too disappointed especially in comparison to other French sides in Europe. They competed well against the big hitters Sevilla and Chelsea, but learnt a valuable lesson of being ruthless with their chances at that level of competition particularly against Krasnodar. Now eliminated from the Champions' League, Rennes will look to stabilise themselves and try to recover their league form where N'Zonzi and his partnership with the backline and the importance of his role in the team must regain the influence, and fast.



49

(NEW)

Yoane WISSA

Club: FC Lorient / Born: 1996/09/03

Position: Forward / At Club Since: 2018 / League Apps 2020: 26

Three years after making his debut for Angers, Yoane Wissa found his way back to France's top division – this time with newly promoted Lorient. At the Stade Moustoir, the now 24-year-old, made a name for himself as one of Ligue 2's most electric wide players and thus far has carried that reputation over to Ligue 1.

In 2016, Wissa was uncovered by Angers's now famous lower-league scouting network - at the time playing for Châteauroux's B-side. Unfortunately, Wissa was unable to crack the line-up on a consistent basis and was sent on a series of loans, starting with a Stade Lavallois and then AC Ajaccio in 2017.

The Congolese international hit his stride at Ajaccio, notching 14 goals and 2 assists over the season. The total was good enough to earn him a permanent move to Lorient for a fee of €2m. His first season at Lorient was solid, but a little unremarkable – collecting six goals and four assists – but it was his second campaign that would cement him as one of the club's key players.

Wissa would go on to lead the team in goals and help them to a first-place finish and automatic promotion to Ligue 1 in a truncated season. In the abbreviated back half of the 2019/20 campaign, Wissa registered five goals and one assist, which when added to the four goals and one assist he has bagged so far this season, gives him eight goals and two assists this calendar year.

The tally once again places him at the top of his team and highlights Wissa's ability to create genuine goal-scoring opportunities from the wing position. Lorient manager Christophe Pélissier's preferred 4-4-2/4-4-1-1 formation relies on Wissa taking a prominent role in the final third. The newly promoted side puts an emphasis on quick offensive transitions and Wissa's ability to create space for himself and his teammates is paramount in generating opportunities on goal.

The midfielder ranks first on the team in successful dribbles per-90 and while contributing the fewest touches of any regular starter, is first in progressive distance on a match-to-match basis. This emphasises the forward momentum with which Wissa plays and the expectation of advancement that comes with each touch he takes.

The Châteauroux graduate also has the most shot-creating actions on the team, once again something achieved with limited touches. Of particular importance is that fact that Wissa creates these shots largely from open play – with 50% of the actions coming from 'live pass' situations. Hand-in-hand with his illlusiveness in the open field is the large number of fouls Wissa is able to draw – averaging 2.2 per-90, which is good enough for number one on the team.

Though born in France, Wissa went uncapped at youth level and in September officially declared for Congo – joining the club for two international friendlies against Burkina Faso and Morocco. Deployed at left-wing for the national team, the new recruit quickly made his mark – scoring in his second appearance to earn a draw with Morocco.

Wissa is part of an exciting crop of Congolese players, which includes Ligue 1 colleague, Gaël Kakuta. Having qualified for the FIFA World Cup only once in its history, it will be an uphill battle for Congo to earn a place in 2022, but adding players of Wissa's calibre provides some hope.

Domestically, for the time being, Wissa's future is tied to Lorient – cementing his relationship with the club by signing a contract over the summer, which would keep him at Stade Moustoir until 2024.

However, Lorient presently sit 18th in the league and based on the first 17 weeks of the season are likely to be fighting against relegation for the duration of the campaign. If Lorient were to ultimately go down at the end of the year, a player of Wissa's quality would be highly sought-after by mid-table and newly-promoted sides, alike.

Therefore, while the winger's immediate future looks set in stone, his future at Lorient may well be tied to the club's ability to remain in France's top division.



48

(+20)

Pablo SARABIA

Club: Paris Saint-Germain / Born: 1992/05/11

Position: Forward / At Club Since: 2019 / League Apps 2020: 18

Pablo Sarabia's second season in Ligue 1 follows the same path as his career—slow and steady. Whether it be due to teammate injuries, suspensions, or on his own merit, Sarabia has earned himself regular playing time in the capital city. Some may still see Sarabia as an odd man out or spare part at PSG and for good reason. However, on the pitch, Sarabia is quickly earning a reputation as a clutch man in Paris with several late in-game contributions.

Those who saw Sarabia's move to Paris as a money move were proved wrong quickly. Sarabia earned his time on the pitch not only with his versatility but also his work-rate off the ball. Sarabia went on to feature in 21 matches for PSG and finished the season with 14 goals and seven assists in all competitions and four goals and three assists in league play – a tremendous maiden haul for the 28-year-old. The four goals and three assists in the league may seem minimal compared to his prior production in Spain, but that does not appear to be a setback for the workhorse that is Pablo Sarabia.

Thomas Tuchel in 2020 continued to utilise Sarabia on the wings of PSG's attack. The Spaniard has been able to maintain an elite level of play on either the right or the left side as one of Ligue 1's true two-footed players. As a winger, Sarabia is able to provide pinpoint crosses with his right or left foot or attacking by cutting in on the opposite foot.

This dual-threat allows him to be utilised in a wide range of systems and formations, which is why Sarabia is not only a coach's dream player, but has the ability to compete for time on the pitch amongst talents such as Angel di Maria, Neymar and Kylian Mbappé, even though his time at Sevilla highlighted his talents as a more traditional #10, attacking midfielder.

Whilst the label "versatile" can come across as "cliché" for players who are simply fill-ins, Sarabia excels as someone who can do what the game calls for without giving up the quality of the starting player.

Sarabia does have his pitfalls. While Sarabia's work-rate makes up for his lack of speed, it is still a hole in his game. Especially when considering his dribbling ability is only above-average. This does not take away from the immense quality of his counter-pressing.

However, in matches where he is faced with bigger, faster and stronger opponents, Sarabia will at times disappear. Though, even in games where he is physically outmatched, he can be effective with off the ball contributions and he has shown good decision-making when finding the open options in transition. This type of determination is symbolic of Sarabia as a player.

In a world full of players who are here today and gone tomorrow, Sarabia is a breath of fresh air. His hard-work is not only an example for the prima-donnas around him, but an excellent addition to his talent as one of the most well-rounded players in the league. This PSG team has not quite found its identity in respect to its available talent.

Although Sarabia is not the most talented player, he may be the right player to add balance to PSG on the field if used correctly – we expect that Mauricio Pochettino will see things the same way.

Even if PSG can find a way to better utilise him, Sarabia may never be able to return to the numbers he produced at Sevilla. Nonetheless, with Sarabia's well-rounded playing style, we could see unparalleled efficiency in his offensive production playing alongside the talents of Mbappé and Neymar as a third option.

PSG may have been looking for players to provide depth and an option when faced with injury, but it is very clear that Sarabia is an elite competitor who expects to play and above all, looks to win. The Spaniard must avoid the injuries that have plagued him in the final six months of 2020 if he is able to make his mark in the French capital.



47

(+7)

Habib DIALLO

Club: RC Strasbourg / Born: 1995/06/15

Position: Forward / At Club Since: 2020 / League Apps 2020: 22

All things considered, 2020 has been a positive year for Habib Diallo and he is certainly not the type to think of himself as a victim, particularly in the context of the tragedies that so many have experienced. However, he could be forgiven for thinking that he too has suffered in a small way.

Diallo began the year with Metz, midway through his breakthrough top-flight season. Having moved to north-eastern France from Senegal in 2013 as the latest recruit from the ever-fruitful partnership between Les Grenats and famed academy Génération Foot, it took Diallo some time to adjust. Many were unconvinced of his ability or aptitude for French professional football. But he was universally liked, buying him a little indulgence, and eventually began to change opinions. He signed his first professional contract in 2015 and began to rise to wider attention in the spring of 2016, as his nine goals in their final 12 games helped Metz gain promotion to Ligue 1.

Diallo remained in Ligue 2, loaned to Brest, where he had the benefit of developing under excellent coach Jean-Marc Furlan. When he returned to Metz for the 2018/19 season, it was in order to lead the line in the yo-yo club's latest Ligue 2 campaign. An impressive return of 26 goals and six assists helped Metz to the title and indicated that Diallo was ready to take the step up to Ligue 1.

A goalless pre-season did not bode well. However, three goals in his first two matches, including a superb performance and a brace in a 3-0 win over Monaco, allayed the fans' doubts and gave Diallo the jolt of confidence that he needed. Although notoriously shy, Diallo had grown sufficiently in structure that he was handed the captain's armband when Renaud Cohade slipped out of the squad, and he more than set an example, his 10 goals and one assist in the first half of the season almost single-handedly keeping Metz afloat as they ended 2019 in 18th place. Performances that also earned Diallo his first Senegal cap.

The truncated second half of the season was far more comfortable for Metz as they eventually finished in 15th place, although Diallo's personal stats slipped a little, with two goals and two assists in the six matches that he played.

Nevertheless, Diallo was a Ligue 1 captain, an international and had finished the season among the league's top goalscorers, his 12 goals placing him just one behind Neymar and Victor Osimhen. Metz were now ready to pass the goalscoring responsibility onto another Génération Foot graduate – Ibrahima Niane – and to cash in on Diallo. With Osimhen joining Napoli for a reported £60m, Metz's valuation of around £10m seemed more than reasonable for a versatile striker at the peak of his career, who can play across the front line, hold the ball up well, dominate in the air and finish reliably. The club went into the transfer market and spent the money that they expected to receive, with Chelsea, Tottenham and Sheffield United among those having been linked.

However, as the final days of the window approached, no concrete bid had been submitted other than a vague loan offer from West Bromwich Albion. Panicking somewhat, Metz sold Diallo to Strasbourg for £9 million. The sale of a popular player – to a local rival – a potential relegation rival too – at a cut price – against the player's will – was an extremely unpopular move among Metz fans (exacerbated by Niane rupturing knee ligaments that same week).

It was surely a big blow to Diallo's morale too, which makes his form since moving further east all the more impressive. In his first match, he came off the bench and scored within six minutes to spark an ultimately unsuccessful comeback against Lyon. Since then, he has made eight straight starts, scoring four goals and laying on three assists (including one to secure a draw against Metz). In those eight starts, he has helped the Alsaciens to three wins and two draws; until then they had managed one win and six defeats in seven. In that time the club has climbed from the relegation zone to 15th place, suggesting that – like last year – Diallo could be the difference in his club's chances of survival.

The financial consequences of the COVID-19 crisis were likely the main reason for the Premier League clubs failing to come through for Diallo last summer. But if there had been any lingering doubts that he was a one-season top-flight wonder, he is proving those doubters wrong and playing his way towards the big move that he deserves.



Duje CALETA-CAR

Club: Olympique de Marseille / Born: 1996/09/17

Position: Defender / At Club Since: 2018 / League Apps 2020: 22

After a difficult start to life in France, Duje Ćaleta-Car is now one of the first names on the team sheet for André Villas-Boas. The Croatian centre-back was an important part of the Marseille side that qualified for Champions' League football last season, featuring in 23 of the 28 league games, playing 90 minutes in 20 of those 23 games. Last season also witnessed the development of an impressive partnership with the experienced Álvaro González, with both players continuing to start almost every game in the current season. Despite his relatively young age, the 24-year-old has already become a leader at Marseille, with a strong personality to back up his tough and physical style on the pitch.

At the time of writing, Ćaleta-Car has started 11 of Marseille's 12 league games this season, partnering with Álvaro for all but one of the 11. In this run of games, his side have kept three clean sheets, not incredibly impressive on paper. However, only 10 goals were conceded during this period, including conceding more than once only twice in each game, which highlights the defensive solidity that Marseille have achieved with the Croatian in the side.

A recent run of six wins in a row, in which Čaleta-Car has started in five, has propelled the club into the Champions' League places with currently the 2nd best defensive record in the league. The arrival of highly-rated Leonardo Balerdi, on loan from Dortmund, has added some strong competition in the centre-back positions for Marseille this season, but it looks unlikely that he will be able to break into the current partnership anytime soon.

Čaleta-Car has a number of standout attributes that make him a valuable player to this Marseille side. At 1.92m, he is an imposing figure at the back and has the physical strength to match. He regularly comes out on top in defensive duels, both in the air and on the ground.

The 24-year-old also possesses surprising pace for such a big frame, and this combination of strength and speed makes him very difficult to be beaten one-vs-one. Possibly the most interesting aspect of the defender's game is his ability to distribute the ball effectively with both feet. It is very rare to find a centre-back who is so two-footed, and along with his excellent vision, he is able to utilise his talent by producing accurate long balls to either flank.

Čaleta-Car's distribution is superb, and the Croatian can regularly initiate attacks with precise long passes to a wide player. The fact that he can achieve these passes with both feet makes it even more impressive, and also enables him to make the right pass under pressure. One observation that is interesting in terms of his distribution is that he tends to favour the left foot when distributing to the left flank and the right foot for the right flank.

This is due to the angle that he is able to achieve on the pass when kicking towards the same side as his chosen foot. A right-footed pass to the left side of the pitch tends to swing towards the sideline whereas the left-footed pass will swing away from the sideline for the wide player to run onto towards the box.

Despite not receiving a red card since his first, and at times difficult, season in France, the defender has been guilty of making rash tackles and picking up unnecessary yellow cards, even before his arrival in France. He does have a tendency to rush into tackles, and his size and speed sometimes work against him as he charges into challenges, because he can't correct his course easily once he commits. This season however, there are signs that the 24-year-old is working on this aspect of his game, committing only one foul per 90 in the league thus far.

Last summer, similarly to many Marseille players, Čaleta-Car was the subject of transfer interest from abroad, with the strongest rumours linking him with a move to West Ham. The player himself confirmed the interest in October and revealed that a bid from a Premier League club was received in the last transfer window.

Ultimately, he rejected the move, even though OM wanted to sell in order to raise cash, stating his desire to play with Marseille in the Champions' League this season. Whilst OM's eventual Champions' League campaign was catastrophic, crashing out bottom of their group, there is no doubt that this additional season of regular football will serve the Croatian well should he eventually move to the Premier League.



45

(NEW)

Amine GOUIRI

Club: OGC Nice / Born: 2000/02/16

Position: Forward / At Club Since: 2020 / League Apps 2020: 16

As Lyon continue to scour Europe and South America for top-tier talent, more and more players have found themselves forced to depart Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes in pursuit of a clearer pathway to first-team football. Anthony Martial, Alassane Pléa, and Elisha Owusu are just a handful of academy players who have left Lyon in search of greener pastures, but if there is any player who has best epitomised the phrase 'The One That Got Away,' it is Amine Gouiri.

Born and raised in the suburbs of Lyon to Algerian parents, Gouiri began his development at local clubs FC Bourgoin-Jallieu and FC Isle d'Abeau before joining Lyon's academy in 2013. Gouiri quickly rose up the youth ranks for club and country, earning interest from Real Madrid, Manchester United and Bayern Munich and becoming recognised as one of the best talents in his age group.

In the summer of 2017, Gouiri headed for Croatia, where he would take part in the 2017 UEFA European Under-17 Championship. Despite France's elimination in the quarter-finals, Gouiri finished as the tournament's top scorer with eight goals.

Six months later, he was given his first team debut in a 0-0 draw against Montpellier, and he would go on to play 183 minutes under Bruno Genesio in the 2017/18 campaign.

Just when it seemed Gouiri was headed for a breakout season at the Stade des Lumières, his wings were cut by a cruel twist of fate. On 18th August 2018, he ruptured the anterior cruciate ligament in his left knee, causing him to be sidelined until April. He would make just five appearances for the club's reserve side before heading for Poland, where he would score three goals in the FIFA U20 World Cup.

With Nabil Fekir joining Real Betis in the summer, many had tipped him to establish himself in the first team under new manager Sylvinho. Instead, Gouiri spent the majority of 2019/20 in the reserves, playing just 109 minutes for the first team under Rudi Garcia, who replaced Sylvinho in October. Six months after rejecting a loan to Nîmes, Gouiri realised that the time had come to depart Lyon.

On July 1st, Gouiri joined OGC Nice on a four-year contract for a fee of €7m. At 20 years of age, he made his first Ligue 1 start on August 23rd, playing on the left side of Nice's 4-3-3 against newly promoted Lens. Gaël Kakuta opened the scoring for Lens, but Gouiri quickly equalised, receiving the ball at the edge of the box and floating the ball past Jean-Louis Leca and into the top right corner. In the 75th minute, he cut in from the left flank and glided the ball into the bottom right corner.

It's been more of the same for Gouiri at the Allianz Riviera. Les Aiglons have been a trainwreck this season, leading to manager Patrick Vieira's dismissal on December 4th, but Gouiri has been one of the lone bright spots for Nice, having registered eight goals and three assists in 16 appearances this season. Whilst he has been mainly used as a centre forward over the past month, Vieira used him both on the left-wing as well as a second striker, but no matter where he has played, Gouiri has been an oasis in a desert of underperforming players and conservative tactics.

Apart from his record in front of goal, the 20-year-old forward has an ability to connect his team's attacks, capable of holding up possession against bulky defenders, twisting and turning past onrushing opposition players, and finding teammates in space. Whilst he is a central forward by nature, perhaps he would be best suited to playing as a left winger in a 4-3-3, with the mission of cutting inside, linking up with his attacking teammates and arriving in goal-scoring positions.

Gouiri himself opined in a November interview with L'Équipe: "I have often been compared with [Benzema]. He started on the left wing, like Lacazette, because a youngster cannot immediately play as the team's reference point in attack. On the wing, you receive the ball more, you are facing the game, it's easier to gain confidence."

Only time will tell if Gouiri reaches the loftiest of heights, but one thing's for certain: as Lyon prepare to search for an attacking talisman to replace the outgoing Memphis Depay, Nice already have a player who can lead their line for the next decade in Amine Gouiri.



44

(NEW)

Kasper DOLBERG

Club: OGC Nice / Born: 1997/10/06

Position: Forward / At Club Since: 2019 / League Apps 2020: 18

Surprise has defined Kasper Dolberg's career so far. As an 18-year-old the Dane, seemingly a fully-fledged continental level striker, burst from Ajax's prolific and much vaunted youth system. In helping Peter Bosz's side to the 2017 Europa League final, Dolberg managed an impressive 23 goals in 47 outings that season. Borussia Dortmund and major English clubs were linked.

Dolberg continued to surprise, although not the way he would have hoped, tallying a less eye-catching 17 Eredivisie goals across 54 games over the following two-and-a-bit seasons before leaving for France. The Dane's displays were solid but the explosion once anticipated did not materialise. A move to Nice was also a little left-field, hardly the destination a teenage Dolberg seemed on course for, but could he yet surprise again?

Overall, Dolberg's move to Ligue 1 just about qualifies as a positive one - as is underlined by his place in this list. His record of 14 goals in 37 games across all competitions is notable in the circumstances and there have been considerable highlights such as his derby-winning brace in March against Monaco.

“He’s a killer, he’s cold,” said then Nice defender Malang Sarr afterward. “He’s full of composure and, at his age, being able to have that quality ... There aren’t many forwards in the world who do. We are happy to have him with us.” For over €20m, he is comfortably their record signing, a huge outlay for a Les Aiglons, and in that vein, more may have been expected.

There was a shift in Dolberg’s on-field body language and level of performance at the start of this Ligue 1 season. Having confidently rifled home a penalty before nonchalantly clipping a decisive second in the late August win over Strasbourg, Dolberg seemed set for a hot streak of form. However, over the ensuing international break his house was looted and his Porsche stolen. The incident drew parallels with a bizarre theft of his €70,000 watch from the team dressing room by a teammate a year earlier.

Clearly affected psychologically, evidenced by his slumped shoulders during the following insipid team display at Montpellier, at the time of writing Dolberg has just scored just once in 12 games for club and country since. Although Nice’s ineffective and unimaginative attacking style under Patrick Vieira contributed, the Danish international has become an increasingly passive and peripheral figure, a reality accentuated by the striker contracting COVID-19.

While it may certainly be tricky to brush off such incidents, it does point to a key issue for Dolberg - managing the mental side of the game, his attitude and consistency. A little fickle confidence wise, Dolberg has tended to score in bursts for Nice. Two in his first four Ligue 1 games preceded none in his next four before three in three, then none in four. A brace to beat Lyon in February contributed to three strikes in two games. He then slumped to one in five.

Overall, 14 goals in 31 Ligue 1 outings - as the top scoring Dane in Europe’s top five leagues in 2020 with nine at the time of writing - is a satisfactory record for a team that struggles to fashion chances in a league where goals are often scarce. Nevertheless, with Nice expected to chase a European place each season, Dolberg’s intermittent effectiveness - he often disappears from games in line with his goal threat - means he has yet to prove he can truly be relied upon.

In a young side, and especially without captain Dante for the rest of the season thanks to an ACL injury, as one of Nice’s more senior and important players, in theory Dolberg should be accepting more responsibility as a leader and a lightning rod for his team’s successes and failures. Instead, he has cut a forlorn figure. At his best, Dolberg is a clinical, confident poacher but that form only appears for short spells and not often enough.

The Danish striker has a golden opportunity nevertheless as Nice remain an upwardly mobile club and Dolberg carries the status and ability to be a crucial influence and perhaps realise his initial potential. He has however barely displayed the gumption needed to take that chance. To his detriment, this season Dolberg has been comfortably outshone and outscored by the overtly more ruthless, hungry and dynamic Amine Gouiri. Dolberg will be hoping that Patrick Vieira’s sacking results in a set up more suited to his skill-set.

Having stunned and underwhelmed European football in equal measure, now 23, Dolberg has the opportunity to surprise once more. He could yet become the striker he once threatened to be, as well as the forward that Nice have long craved. Like all good strikers, he simply needs to seize upon the chance that has fallen to him.



43

(-24)

Yunis ABDELHAMID

Club: Stade de Reims / Born: 1987/09/26

Position: Defender / At Club Since: 2017 / League Apps 2020: 26

September 13th, 2020 was a most unusual day. For the first time in over two years, Yunis Abdelhamid missed a Ligue 1 match. Since the promotion of Stade de Reims to Ligue 1 in 2018, Abdelhamid had played every single minute of Ligue 1 action until matchday three of his third season, a total of more than 102 hours of consecutive game time.

Added to this outrageous consistency was an equally impressive achievement: Abdelhamid was part of Ligue 1's best defence during the second of those seasons, which ended prematurely during the spring. The Moroccan international was the leader of a side that conceded 21 goals in 28 matches – three less than the next best, PSG. Reims finished sixth in the league and managed an interesting run in the Coupe de la Ligue, losing to Les Parisiens in the semi-final.

In addition to these results, 2020 began well for Reims fans who were worried about Abdelhamid's contract expiring in the summer. The rumour was that Abdelhamid might be looking at other Ligue 1 sides, such as Montpellier, his native city.

But in February, the defender extended his contract until 2022, and the announcement video was Oscar-worthy. Facing off in a Western saloon ambience, Abdelhamid and Stade de Reims president Jean-Pierre Caillot showed off their acting skills in a tense round of the popular card game Uno. Playing his penultimate card, a smirking Abdelhamid calls “Uno”, but is outplayed by Caillot who cheekily lays a +2 card.

With the early interruption of the 2019/20 season, the traditional UNFP awards rewarding the year’s best players were also cancelled, but no doubt Abdelhamid would have made the team of the season. He featured in the season’s best XI according to L’Équipe and France Football, the two most prominent football outlets in France.

At 33, Abdelhamid has become a household name in a league he had failed to even gain access to for most of his career. Before 2018, he had only played one season in Ligue 1, for Dijon. This narrative however fits with the notion that the centre-back is a late bloomer. His first professional contract came when he was 24, at Arles-Avignon.

With the departure of Alaïxys Romao, Abdelhamid also became the new club captain, unsurprisingly. He is the leader for Reims and its defence and plays with the same intelligence as a player with years of top-level experience. What appears to be making the difference between his level today and his earlier years in amateur football is his “hygiene”, or lifestyle.

In a humorous interview with France Football this year, he explained, “As an amateur, you can eat your mum’s tagine then go to the match. And in the evening have a kebab ... it took me a long time to find this rigour.”

His leadership carries beyond the green rectangle. After a 3-1 home loss to Lorient in October, in which Reims received two red cards, angry fans confronted the team on the side of the pitch. TV cameras showed Abdelhamid animatedly discussing with the fans, and singlehandedly turning their emotion from aggression to respect, and both sides parted with handshakes and encouragements.

A well-merited reward for Abdelhamid, his coach David Guion, and the rest of Reims was a qualification for the Europa League preliminary rounds. Unfortunately, the outcome will not have been what Abdelhamid wished. He missed the first match away to Servette Genève. In the next round, he played all 120 minutes of a tense 0-0 with Fehérvár, but in the shoot-out his penalty was saved, and the Hungarians were the ones to reach the group stage.

For reasons still unclear, the formula which Reims relied on in the last two seasons is not working out as well in the current campaign. With only three wins, the club from Champagne sit 17th after the first 15 games. More worryingly, they have conceded 26 goals, more than they did in all of last season. Abdelhamid’s partner in central defence, Axel Disasi, left for Monaco over the summer, and Romao’s departure has possibly exposed the defence a little further.

It is the third consecutive season in which Abdelhamid has to adapt to a new central defensive partner, after the successive exits of Julian Jeanvier, Björn Engels, and Disasi in the last three summers. Although Guion has a fantastic history of preparing a well-drilled back line, the usual mechanisms are not yet clicking smoothly with new man Wout Faes. Reims have spent the first half of the season near the relegation zone, but neither Guion nor Abdelhamid have had their last word as they look for solutions.



42

(+23)

Zinedine FERHAT

Club: Nîmes Olympique / Born: 1993/03/03

Position: Forward / At Club Since: 2019 / League Apps 2020: 21

While it's often hard to gauge a player's importance to a team, particularly if they are, as is Zinedine Ferhat, a creative player or forward who does little in the way of goals or assists, there is something to be said in the case of the Algerian for resorting to the poetic to address the way that he plays. While Nîmes have rarely had an easy time of it since returning to the top flight in 2018, save their initial campaign, with Ferhat still at that point playing in Le Havre, what little joy Les Crocos have had has been largely down to his sublime talent.

Born in Bordj Menaiel, Ferhat broke through at with USM Alger, one of the country's biggest clubs. Over the course of six seasons in the first team, despite a revolving door of coaches, he established himself as one of the league's top talents, and even earned a handful of caps for his country, an impressive feat for a domestically-based player given the number of Algerians who ply their trade abroad. Still, though, when he did make the well-trodden journey to France, as is so often the case for talented players from northern and western Africa, it was to Le Havre, a team who had come close to earning promotion recently, but were hardly a giant of French football - the country's bright lights seemed far away indeed.

Still, though, in his first season in France, playing under the guidance of the attack-minded Oswald Tanchot, he was impressive enough to be a regular starter. He played on both the left and right of a 4-2-3-1 as the team finished a respectable eighth, even though Ferhat admitted that he struggled to a degree with adjusting to a new country and a more physically challenging brand of football.

The following campaign, though, was where he really stood out. Recording a league-record 20 assists, he powered “Le Ciel et Marine” to a fourth-place finish, only to miss a penalty in the playoffs against Ajaccio. On the heels of having conceded a stoppage time equaliser, it was a cruel end to what had been a promising campaign. However, there was already interest from the top flight, as Nantes, Metz, and Montpellier were all linked to the player at various points, and he was also a regular for Les Fennecs again, no mean feat for someone in France’s second division.

A move, however, failed to materialise, and with Le Havre losing Lyon loanee Jean-Philippe Mateta, there was less fluency in the team in 2018/19. The writing was on the wall given a combination of the club’s lack of ambition and his own failure to be called up ahead of Algeria’s winning Africa Cup of Nations campaign.

Nîmes had thrived in their first year back in Ligue 1 under Bernard Blaquart, playing an unflinching brand of attacking football, but the departures of Denis Bouanga, Téji Savanier, and Sada Thioub in 2019 meant that the club were in need of creativity and plumped for Ferhat, who was out of contract.

Last season was far from an easy ride, though. While Ferhat’s qualities with the ball at his feet remained manifest, the lack of an effective or proven central striker was problematic indeed, as the team’s gung-ho style was found out vis-a-vis a lack of a quality finisher. The current season has been more of the same, though - Ferhat is the club’s leading scorer at the time of writing with just three goals, and even as his play has improved, the team’s combination of injuries in central defence and lack of a proven forward have been their undoing.

Even if it seems that Nîmes may not be long for Ligue 1, it is unlikely that Ferhat will make the drop with Les Crocos. Despite being about to turn 28 in March, he is a player who has continued to improve, with his physicality, crossing, and ability from set pieces all impressing despite a lack of consistency in terms of the framework around him and his side’s tactics. He has a powerful shot, but the nature of Nîmes’ football calls for him to cross the ball more often than cut inside himself.

Combined with the lack of consistency from the club’s centre forwards, Ferhat’s raw statistics have not necessarily risen this year. That’s not to suggest that in the ideal conditions he would again record twenty assists, this time in Ligue 1, but he would likely do much better than the three he has at present.

Thus, even if there’s not much joy to be had at the Stade des Costières of late, Ferhat remains a compelling watch, as important to his team and their attacking philosophy as is any other player in the league.



41

(+1)

Laurent KOSCIELNY

Club: Girondins de Bordeaux / Born: 1985/09/10

Position: Defender / At Club Since: 2019 / League Apps 2020: 18

In a team blighted by mediocrity for the best part of ten years, Laurent Koscielny's presence has been a breath of fresh air for Bordeaux. The former French international has hardly put a foot wrong since his return to Ligue 1, spearheading a defence which loses all bearings in his absence.

As well as being a calming presence at the back, Koscielny technical prowess has meant that the former Arsenal captain is often the catalyst for Bordeaux's attacking moves, usually stemming from his well-timed interceptions. His time in red and white has rendered the defender into a technically astute player, which inevitably sees him stand out among his team-mates in spite of his faltering physical condition.

Despite his high profile as a seasoned international and a decade as one of the Premier League's top centre halves, there were question marks over whether the former Lorient man could be a success on his return to Ligue 1. Many scoffed at the five-year contract handed to Koscielny back in 2019, pointing out that the centre-back would be verging on his forties by the end of his spell.

Beyond this, all the signs were pointing to a decline that was already underway. His game time in North London had been reduced by an Achilles tendon issue that had plagued him since 2014, causing him to play through the pain, by his own admission.

It also culminated in his absence from France's eventual World Cup-winning squad in 2018. In a rare show of honesty from a player at this level, the defender went on to admit to Canal Plus that part of him had wished for the team to falter that summer, such was his distress at missing out on a winners' medal: "I could have been a part of that adventure and won the World Cup. I know that, until the end of my days, I'll have that in my mind."

Although a sour ending at Arsenal facilitated a quick transfer back to his home country, the fact remained that the injuries were piling up and a lack of game time in his final season added an element of uncertainty as to whether Koscielny could return to his best.

As it turned out, Koscielny has more than proved his detractors wrong. Within a year of his arrival, Koscielny has taken the captain's armband from Benoît Costil and effectively become the glue that keeps Jean-Louis Gasset's side from collapsing like a house of cards. A change of scenery has rejuvenated him, staying largely injury free and turning out for the majority of Bordeaux's matches since arriving.

The effect the former international has on his peers is clear - any backline combination involving Koscielny is simply better organised, more alert, and more astute, whether that's when he's paired with Paul Bayssse, Pablo, or another centre-back partner. Whether that's under Paulo Sousa last season or Gasset since August, Koscielny is inevitably the vector by which any semblance of defensive solidity is achieved. In his absence, those same players are disorientated and lacking in any cohesiveness. As fate would have it, he is precisely the kind of presence that his former North London outfit has been sorely lacking for the last couple of years.

Bordeaux's modestly respectable defensive record this season is a testament to that - highlight performances this year will have included clean sheets against Lyon and away to Rennes, as well as captaining the Les Girondins to a 2-2 result at the Parc des Princes in Paris. In a club where backroom chaos and on-field indifference reign supreme, Koscielny stands tall and marshals his teammates into admirable mid-table finishes. Sparing a freak spell of play against Monaco in October where the team shipped three goals in as many minutes, the Frenchman's appearances have been mostly free of defensive capitulations.

In an interview looking back on his first few months in the south-west of France, Koscielny was clear that he had not arrived in Bordeaux to simply wind down before retirement. With the club itself currently seesawing between spells of good form and collapses on and off the pitch, steadying the ship may well end up being the biggest challenge the defender has faced yet.

Were he ten years younger, the defender would be looking to leave Bordeaux as soon as possible for a club more fitting of his brand and stature. As things are, it is unlikely another European side will come knocking for Koscielny, not least given his sizeable wages - in the end, though, his time with Les Girondins will have done no harm to the centre-back's reputation.

A portrait of Ruben Aguilar, a male football player, wearing a red AS Monaco jersey. The jersey features the Kappa logo, the AS Monaco crest, and the word 'interte' on the shoulder. The background is a blurred green and yellow field.

40

(+8)

Ruben AGUILAR

Club: AS Monaco / Born: 1993/04/26

Position: Defender / At Club Since: 2019 / League Apps 2020: 22

To say Monaco have been a bit of a mess over the past two years is to put it mildly. They have had so many problems, fired manager after manager, rehired a former manager (Leonardo Jardim) and then fired him again. The off-field problems have had a big impact on their form on the pitch, and lack of continuity has also affected their players; of whom they have too many of in a bloated squad.

It is hard to expect any player at the club to really show great consistency due to the circumstances, and when they do show it, it is more an exception than the rule. Players have also faced a lot of uncertainty regarding their roles and importance in the team, as every new manager means a big change in formation and/or personnel used. These players are constantly in and out of the team.

It is something that was always bound to happen to Ruben Aguilar once he joined Monaco back in 2019, a highly-rated right-back, who had shone very brightly in der Zakarian's system at Montpellier. A lot was expected of him but he struggled to get sufficient minutes and he was in and out of the team under Jardim.

2020 began with the arrival of Robert Moreno as manager but not much changed in Aguilar's situation. He had sporadic appearances in the first month; sometimes benched, sometimes given a few minutes of action and sometimes given a start in the cup. Then he began to get starts in the league but it was sandwiched between full 90 minutes spent on the bench.

In spite of the inconsistent playing time, Aguilar slowly started to show why the €8m spent on him had been widely viewed as a good bargain for Monaco when the transfer happened. Whenever he did play, he showed his impressive range of abilities and delivered some solid performances. The 1-0 win over former club Montpellier, specifically, was Aguilar's best performance in a Monaco shirt. That day, he won four tackles, had two interceptions as well as three clearances and a block.

He won 11 out of 11 ground duels and three out of three aerial duels. It did not stop there. Offensively, he was also untouchable, completing all three dribbles he attempted, delivering two key passes. No Monaco player even came close to having as many touches as him that day - he had 102, completing 66 passes at 94.3% completion while being the most fouled player on the pitch (four). In all of that time, he did not commit a single foul. It was as perfect as any full-back performance could be.

The competition for a spot with Benjamin Henrichs was heating up but it was Aguilar who was impressing more just before the COVID-19 pandemic hit and forced the season to end prematurely. Henrichs was subsequently sent on loan to Leipzig in the summer, days before Niko Kovac was announced as the new Monaco boss.

From this point on, Aguilar became a guaranteed starter in the team. So far, in the 2020/21 season, Aguilar has been one of the best full-backs in the league, putting in a string of impressive performances. He has been irresistible offensively - no full-back has created more clear-cut chances in the league than him - while also being defensively solid, averaging 4.5 tackles + interceptions per game. His ground duel success rate of 57% is also quite impressive, especially considering Monaco's defensive struggles.

Aguilar becoming a guaranteed starter in the Monaco team has coincided with an upturn in their fortunes in 2020. Admittedly, they are still a work in progress but a lot is changing about the side and there is a widespread feeling that they might just be back to the greatly admired club of a few years ago.

One of the key positions in modern football is that of the full-back, and it can be argued that having a solid full-back like Aguilar has brought them some stability and balance. After all, he embodies that balance between attacking excellence and defensive solidity.

While 2019 was a test of Aguilar's resolve, mentality and even ability, 2020 has been evidence that he is the real deal. It was not always rosy, and he was not always at his absolute best, but for the most part, he was excellent and gave his team much needed solutions. 2021 could be the year he earns more widespread respect for his excellence and contributions to Monaco.



39

(-30)

Moussa DEMBÉLÉ

Club: Olympique Lyonnais / Born: 1996/07/12

Position: Forward / At Club Since: 2018 / League Apps 2020: 25

Moussa Dembélé has already shown during his career that he is not afraid of making an unexpected move in order to push his career forward. Now 24 and approaching his peak years, it is increasingly looking as if the striker needs to think outside the box again to ensure that his great potential does not go unmet.

Dembélé began at Paris Saint-Germain, learning his trade alongside the likes of Adrien Rabiot and Kingsley Coman. At only 16, however, working out sooner than most that his first team chances would become limited, he left PSG's youth set-up and took the courageous decision to cross the Channel and join Fulham.

After coming through the Londoners' youth ranks and breaking into the first team squad, he made his first senior start against Everton in April 2014, weeks before Fulham were relegated to the Championship. His breakthrough came two seasons later in the 2015/16 season, as his 15 goals and seven assists helped Slavisa Jokanovic's team to survive an ignominious relegation to League One.

With his contract at an end and several English clubs showing interest in the 20-year-old, Dembélé made the decision to move north of the border to Celtic, to experience top-flight and European football away from the glare of the Premier League spotlight. Two successful seasons followed, with Dembélé scoring 51 goals in 94 games in all competitions, as he helped the Bhoys to three league titles, three League Cups and two Scottish Cups.

Despite further Premier League interest, Dembélé decided in the summer of 2018 to return to France, joining Lyon for a little under £20m and looking to continue his steady career progression.

On paper, his first two seasons for Les Gones were very successful. The 2018/19 campaign saw Dembélé play 33 Ligue 1 matches, including 21 starts, scoring 15 and assisting five – including a goal and assist in a win over PSG and a late header to win the derby against Saint-Étienne – as Lyon finished third. His impressive form earned calls from several quarters for Dembélé to receive a senior France call-up – which would have been another natural progression after featuring in all national age groups from U16 up, including scoring 13 goals in 25 matches for the U21s.

Dembélé began last season ignoring more rumours of interest from Premier League clubs – with Manchester United the club linked most frequently – and looking to continue his upward curve. And at first glance, it was a success: although Lyon faltered in the league, struggling to recover from a poor start under Sylvinho, they reached the Coupe de la Ligue final, the Coupe de France semi-finals and the Champions League semi-finals. Dembélé himself contributed 16 league goals (including another match-winning brace against Saint-Étienne) – six of which came in 2020, as well as six domestic cup goals and, most memorably, a double off the bench to lead Lyon to a famous 3-1 win over Manchester City in the Champions' League quarter-final (reprising his brace against City for Celtic four years earlier).

However, the fact that coach Rudi Garcia preferred a clearly unfit Memphis Depay and a less prolific Karl Toko Ekambi over Dembélé for Lyon's most important matches of the season – in the second leg away to Juventus and against City and Bayern Munich in the Champions League – perhaps hinted that all was not going entirely as planned for Dembélé.

This season has followed in a similar vein. Although he has featured in every one of Lyon's matches, Dembélé has only started six of them and has managed only one goal – the third in a 3-0 win over struggling Reims with the match already won. Before that match, he had amassed 23 shots without a goal.

Dembélé is generally an archetypal no.9, who is not necessarily the most mobile but, given the opportunity, can put away chances, either on the ground or in the air. His problem is that he has far less of an all-round game than Depay, Toko Ekambi or Tino Kadewere and so does not offer the flexibility, versatility or fluidity that Garcia seems to want from his attackers: essentially, other than score, Dembélé does not offer a lot to the team. Which makes the loss of his clinical edge all the more worrying.

For his career goalscoring record (113 goals in 238 club appearances) and those two crucial goals against Manchester City, Dembélé deserves his place in this list. However, he needs to rediscover his mojo, whether at Lyon or elsewhere, to keep his Premier League and France hopes alive.



Zeki ÇELİK

Club: Lille OSC / Born: 1997/02/17

Position: Defender / At Club Since: 2018 / League Apps 2020: 21

From the Turkish 2nd tier to the best competition in Europe in only 15 months. Quite unusual is it not? Well, that is (part of) the story of Zeki Celik. Lille signed the right-back, who was already an international, from Istanbulspor, after just one season as a professional football player. Luis Campos once again played a huge part in the deal.

Some of his first words as a Dogue were: “Eventually, I would like to play the Europa League and then the Champions’ League to prove that I can be a great player.” It is fair to say that he fitted right in when nobody really knew what to expect from him. In his first season in the North of France, he played 34 of his team’s 38 games in Ligue 1, with Nicolas Pépé in front of him on the right side, helping Lille to reach a Champions’ League spot.

As the adage says, getting to the top is not so easy, staying there is more difficult. It is particularly true in football, even more so when you are a young player. One of the revelations of the 2018/19 season had some difficulties in confirming his potential during the following campaign, especially with the Champions’ League to contend with.

He still managed to play 32 games in all competitions, not missing one in the UCL, but was nowhere near as sharp and efficient as in his first term. He had not found the net all season long and delivered only two assists. Quite disappointing. But let's have a look at the bigger picture.

In an interview with So Foot in December, he explained his drop of form: "Last season, I was not as good as in my first season with the LOSC. I'm saying it for the first time, but I had a big injury on my ankle, over the course of four months. It had a big impact on my performances. I was scared to feel pain, was making defensive mistakes that I was not doing in my first season. I decided to tell the coach and say that I could not keep hiding this pain. He found the right words to motivate me again."

On top of his new status, environment and injury, he also had to deal with rumours about his future. His debuts with Lille did not go unnoticed. Tottenham, West Ham, Atalanta and even AS Roma were interested but the youngest of a brotherhood of nine decided to remain in Ligue 1, a decision helped by the arrival of fellow countrymen. First Yusuf Yazici, then Burak Yilmaz (to whom he offered his number 17 shirt to), with both making a major impact for Les Dogues.

Quiet off the pitch, tireless on it, Zeki has been rediscovering his form this season, before an ankle injury stopped him. He already found the net twice in all competitions, including a superb long range shot against Strasbourg and another one against Celtic.

That being said, he still has room for improvement on the defensive side of his game. Often bypassed by a skilled opponent (he has lost a take-on on 15 occasions), he made a mistake leading to a goal against Celtic and scored an own goal against Lyon..

Let's not forget he is only 23 years old and is not helped by the lack of competition for his spot in the Lille squad, with veteran Jérémy Pied being nowhere near his level. With the team from the north qualified for the knockout phase of the Europa League, the Turkish right-back has a great opportunity to show his potential on the European stage.

He always said that Lille was the perfect team to grow up in, meaning that he is eventually planning to leave for a bigger club sooner or later, with him having a soft spot for the Premier League. On top of that, he will be hoping to play in his first major international tournament in 2021, with Turkey being qualified for the Euros (in the group A with Italy, Wales and Switzerland).

A great reward/ambition for Zeki Celik, who has been working hard for most of his life from life at the market stalls with his uncles at the age of eight to later on with his brother in the textile industry to fighting for a Ligue 1 title.



37

(NEW)

Álvaro GONZÁLEZ

Club: Olympique de Marseille / Born: 1990/01/08

Position: Defender / At Club Since: 2019 / League Apps 2020: 24

2020 will go down as the most memorable year in Álvaro Gonzalez's career to date, for the right, but also for the wrong reasons. The 30-year-old Spaniard has been a key component in the André Villas-Boas revolution at Marseille, helping bring Champions' League football back to France's second city for the first time since 2013, with his defensive contributions and leadership powering a pragmatic OM side to finishing the truncated Ligue 1 season as runners-up. He has established himself as one of the division's highest performing centre-backs, but has also seen an impressive year marred by controversy.

Having spent his entire career in Spain, Álvaro joined from Villarreal in summer 2019. Initially brought in on a season-long loan with a mandatory €5m option to buy, he was billed by the club as a "defensive leader", and viewed as a replacement for Adil Rami following the Frenchman's ignominious exit. Despite a somewhat rocky start, missing a handful of matches due to injury and suspension, the latter the result of a cynical foul on Lyon's Moussa Dembélé, the 30-year-old quickly endeared himself to the Vélodrome crowd for his determination, tenacity and grit, winning 33 of his first 46 duels in the league, an area of the game in which he excels.

This year, however, Álvaro has truly become part of the Marseille spine, helping the side pick up five consecutive clean sheets in the league to start 2020, as Les Olympiens went on to lose just once before the premature termination of the season, a 3-1 defeat to Nantes (in which the Spaniard coincidentally scored a mildly comical yet largely unavoidable own goal).

Despite that particular blooper, his consistency has been commendable. He has missed just two matches all year (both this season, due to suspension and suffering from COVID-19), and in that time OM have lost just twice in 20 league matches. In fact, they have only lost twice in 31 games when Álvaro has started since his arrival at the club. To put this into perspective, they lost three of the eight Ligue 1 matches that he didn't start in last season.

This is by no means a coincidence. Indeed, the man brought in to become a "defensive leader" has done exactly that. Villas-Boas' Marseille did not finish second through ruthless attacking play, but football built on defensive stability, to which Álvaro has contributed significantly, not only in his own performances but in bringing the best out of those around him, particularly defensive partner Dujé Čaleta-Car. Speaking to the media in February, Villas-Boas heaped praise on the defender, "He has an ensemble of exceptional qualities, tactics, like the leader of an organisation. He has an understanding of the game [...] commands his defensive line, knows when to retreat, to put the opponent in an offside position, anticipate things, close down spaces. He plays for the totality of these details."

OM have disappointed this season, falling desperately short in Europe, while also being somewhat flattered by their domestic results. That being said, this has largely been down to out-of-form attacking players and poor recruitment. Since making his loan move permanent, Álvaro himself has continued much of his good work, putting in solid performances in the Champions' League despite the team's disastrous form, while achieving his long-term goal of featuring in the competition. Though discipline remains a problem (he tops the Ligue 1's table for yellow cards), OM have the joint-best defensive record in the league (9 conceded in 11 matches). There has even been talk of a Spain call-up.

However, what should have been the pinnacle of the Spaniard's time at OM, being part of a resolute defensive performance to beat rivals PSG 1-0 in September, was steeped in controversy. In a tempestuous encounter, Álvaro was spat at by Angel Di María, while the game ended in a mass brawl, which included Neymar hitting the defender, and resulted in five players being sent off. In the aftermath, Neymar revealed the brawl was sparked by alleged racist remarks being made towards him by the Marseille defender.

The saga that followed was gritty and protracted, with Álvaro receiving death threats. The league's disciplinary committee eventually ruled that they lacked sufficient evidence on either side, but it certainly has left a bitter taste at the end of an otherwise stellar year, with questions remaining unanswered.

What became evident through this period was just how beloved Álvaro is at the Vélodrome. Players and staff rallied around him, offering their unwavering support, the metaphorical embodiment of what followed his first goal for the club. After scoring in the Coupe de France in January, every Marseille player sprinted to be a part of the celebrations. Any allegations of racism deserve serious probing and consideration, but purely in footballing terms, few can deny that the deal to bring the Spaniard to Marseille looks like increasingly shrewd business at a time when Marseille have been financially hamstrung.



36

(NEW)

Morgan SANSON

Club: Olympique de Marseille / Born: 1994/08/18

Position: Midfielder / At Club Since: 2017 / League Apps 2020: 19

Versatile midfielder Morgan Sanson is continuing to play an important part in André Villas-Boas' Marseille side, carrying on from his tremendous form last season. The 26-year-old excelled on the left of a midfield 3, developing an understanding with Valentin Rongier which enabled Sanson to play with more freedom while maintaining a balance in the midfield. By the end of last season, Sanson had cemented his place at LCM in the 4-3-3 system that was favoured by his manager and attracted the attention of a host of Premier League clubs. The player made no secret of his desire to leave Marseille for England last summer, but ultimately was unable to secure a move abroad, despite signing a mandate with "super-agent" Pinhas Zahavi.

This season, Sanson has remained a regular in the Marseille side and has started the majority of games in all competitions. The arrivals of Michaël Cuisance and Pape Gueye have increased competition in the midfield positions, but so far, the new additions have been unable to claim a regular place in the line-up. Villas-Boas has adjusted the formation several times already this season, including a 5-3-2 system against Manchester City in the Champions' League and a 4-3-1-2 shape that has been utilised both domestically and in Europe.

The congested schedule and the requirements of different systems has led to rotation in the midfield positions, with Gueye and Cuisance given opportunities over Sanson at times, most notably during the use of the 4-3-1-2. Despite Sanson's technical ability and previous experience in an advanced midfield role, Cuisance has been preferred in the midfield position behind the two forwards, with Gueye also receiving some minutes in the LCM position that Sanson had previously made his own. More recently though and coinciding with OM's perfect domestic form, the ex-Montpellier player has returned to the starting line-up, regardless of the formation used.

One of the reasons that Sanson continues to be a valuable player for his manager is his contribution to the team without the ball. This season, he ranks third in the squad for successful pressures per 90 and seventh for pressures per 90 in the attacking third of the pitch. This rank of seventh improves to second when removing players with less than 3 90-minute stints played, with Sanson only behind Valère Germain. These pressing metrics highlight Sanson's high work-rate and an ability to win the ball back for his side in dangerous positions, attributes that Villas-Boas desires from his players. Rankings in other defensive metrics such as third for tackles won per 90 and sixth for interceptions per 90 underline his ability without the ball.

The 26-year-old is also one Marseille's most important players with the ball, currently ranking third for both expected assists per 90 and key passes per 90, behind only Dimitri Payet and Florian Thauvin, arguably the two most important players in the squad.

Last season's return of five goals and four assists in all competitions should be improved upon this campaign, with two goals and three assists achieved already this season in half the number of games. Sanson's technical ability has always been a strength, but questions have been raised in recent seasons over the player's physicality, with suggestions that the midfielder is too easily dispossessed. This weakness has perhaps contributed to some of his rotation with Pape Gueye in midfield, a player who has only been dispossessed 0.60 times per 90, compared with a value of 2.04 for Sanson.

Over the summer, a number of rumours linked Sanson with a move to the Premier League. The fact that a move never actually materialised is as a result of the fact that the rumoured interest was mostly generated by his agent, with OM requiring liquidity through selling players – something they failed to do. Marseille's reported asking price of around £30m has also been highlighted as a potential obstacle to a transfer last summer. Clubs across Europe have been reluctant to spend to the same extent as recent seasons due to the effects of the pandemic on club finances, and such a fee would be significant for most Premier League clubs.

Sanson would also likely struggle with the physicality of English football, with many players finding it hard to replicate their performances overseas after a move to the Premier League. Reservations on his ability to adapt to a new league, coupled with the high transfer fee quoted by Marseille, have perhaps contributed to a failure to secure a dream move.

If Marseille continue to hold out for a fee that would come close to matching their current club record sale of £35m, Sanson will have to perform to an even higher standard to prove that he is genuinely worth it.



35

(-14)

Juan BERNAT

Club: Paris Saint-Germain / Born: 1993/03/01

Position: Defender / At Club Since: 2018 / League Apps 2020: 7

“He played like s**t,” raged Bayern Munich director Uli Hoeneß. “When we played Sevilla, he alone was responsible for the fact that we almost got knocked out. On that day we decided to get rid of him because he almost cost us the whole Champions’ League.” Cast out as a scapegoat by the perennial German champions before arriving unheralded in Paris, seemingly as Layvin Kurzawa’s understudy, 2018 could have gone better for Juan Bernat. Since, however, the Spanish international has instigated quite the turnaround.

Juan Bernat’s spell at the Parc des Princes began much as his stay in Germany ended, in acrimony. With Kurzawa a long-term injury absentee, Bernat was criticised in the French press after his debut despite aiding a 4-0 win over Saint-Étienne, clumsy in giving away a penalty four days later in defeat at Anfield and torn apart by Ismaila Sarr of Rennes in the following Ligue 1 fixture. Although he later apologised, Uli Hoeneß’ misgivings seemed to have been proved accurate. Without immediate competition in the left-back position, some consistent game time helped the now 27-year-old settle and despite some outliers, notably in being dragged off at half-time at the Parc des Princes against Napoli, displays generally quickly improved.

In truth, since that rocky start, few, if any, PSG players can claim to have raised their level of performance when it matters as consistently or as effectively as Bernat. In 18 Champions' League games with Paris so far, the Spaniard has directly contributed to seven goals (either a goal or assist) while developing a knack of scoring at pivotal moments. Not bad for a left-back.

It was Bernat's header that put last season's semi-final beyond RB Leipzig in Lisbon and he who provided the crucial second to oust Borussia Dortmund in the last 16 second leg at an empty Parc de Princes just before lockdown. Bernat also provided two assists to help PSG, minus Neymar and Kylian Mbappé, beat Real Madrid 3-0 in September 2019 as well as opening the scoring in a key 2-1 win over Liverpool and also in the draw at Napoli during the previous season's tough group stage. By the time Kurzawa returned to full fitness in the new year that season, the €25m signing from Monaco had been emphatically replaced.

Unlike Kurzawa, Bernat has become consistently astute defensively as well as a threat going the other way, while providing presence plus aggression having clearly earned the trust of his teammates and coach as an immovable cornerstone of the PSG first eleven. When Mbappé referred to Bernat as "Scrappy-Doo" on Instagram in 2019, he provided a jovial but accurate description of his playing style and what he adds to the team.

Thomas Tuchel also praised his full-back's attitude with trust between the two appearing mutual. "I get along very well with him," Bernat explained. "He's the one who demanded that I come here, he trusted me a lot from the start, and I try to give it back to him on the pitch." It is a partnership that has been ended by the German's shock sacking, but the Spaniard intends to remain in the capital. "I've been playing a lot for two years, and that's what I wanted." Bernat explained in September. "I have one year of contract left, and I'm very happy. I would like to stay at PSG for several more years. The club has a very big project, and it continues to develop."

Sportingly however, 2020 has been a tough year for the Spainard. Although he played a key role in the re-organised Champions' League last eight back in August, Bernat made it just three games into the 2020/21 season before an ACL knee ligament injury during the win over Metz in September likely ended his campaign. Injury also robbed PSG of their left-back for both cup finals in July and an eight-game spell across January and February. As a result, Bernat only made ten competitive starts in 2020. Mbappé displaying a shirt reading "Amino Juanito" at Nice following Bernat's injury underlined his impact on the Parisian group and how sorely his absence was felt.

Thomas Tuchel's desperate search for apt cover within his squad, rotating between the solid but uninspiring Dutch youngster Mitchel Bakker, Kurzawa and even Abdou Diallo - playing slightly out of position at left-back in the fortunate win at Old Trafford, underlines Bernat's importance and stature as the most improved player in the Paris squad in recent times and perhaps across the elite level of European football.

Far from "playing like s**t" for some time, Juan Bernat has instead become one of Europe's most reliable and underrated full-backs.



Axel DISASI

Club: AS Monaco / Born: 1998/03/11

Position: Defender / At Club Since: 2020 / League Apps 2020: 23

From being revelation of the Ligue 1 season to captaining AS Monaco, 2020 was not a bad year for Axel Disasi. The 22-year-old has shown tremendous progress over the past 12 months and is a promising name to watch over the next few years in Ligue 1, or, possibly, in another league, having garnered major interest from England in recent months. However, it was not always evident that Disasi would break into first-team professional football, which makes his rapid rise all the more impressive.

As a youngster from the Parisian region, Disasi played for Paris FC's academy and made four first team appearances. He joined Stade de Reims on a professional deal in 2016. After only 13 matches in Ligue 2, and four matches in Reims' first season back in the elite level, 2019/20 was truly a breakout season for the young man of Congolese origin. Disasi played all but one of the matches in that campaign. And he did not stop at becoming a regular starter: he became an essential piece in Ligue 1's meanest defence of the season.

The defence built around Disasi and his partner Yunis Abdelhamid conceded only 21 goals in 28 matches, improving on the club's first season back in Ligue 1 in which they had already finished at an impressive fifth best defence. Reims finished sixth in the league, and reached the Coupe de la Ligue semi-final.

Next to his leader Abdelhamid, who intelligently directed the defence, Disasi demonstrated his qualities both defensively and on the ball. Standing at 1.90m, he is exceptionally strong and is a major presence in duels, aerially or in on the ground combat. He is also a forward-looking player, be it through his gutsy and intelligent passing or his tendency to carry the ball into space.

Seen as one of the most "bankable" assets at Reims, Disasi approached the summer with a gentlemen's agreement for his departure, at the right price. As the summer advanced, and it was apparent that transfer fees would take a hit with Ligue 1's deteriorating financial situation, Reims eventually had to settle for lower than they wanted. The move to Monaco, after lengthy negotiations, was completed for a total of €13m, and Disasi signed a five-year contract.

His first match for Monaco was the reception of Reims, a game in which he cruelly scored a header from corner against the club that gave him so much. In line with recent seasons, Monaco can be described as inconsistent. Disasi himself has had ups and downs since the start of the season. He was sent off and conceded a penalty on matchday five against Strasbourg, in a match where he and his partner Benoît Badiashile made major goal-inducing errors. Monaco failed to win the two matches during which Disasi was suspended.

His return coincided with a disastrous 4-1 loss in Lyon, after which Monaco turned things around and won four on the trot. Disasi scored again against Nice, and when Wissam Ben Yedder was unavailable due to COVID-19, he was rewarded with the captain's armband. He first wore it against PSG, in only his ninth match for the club, in a game which Monaco won 3-2.

Then ASM's form dipped again, with three consecutive losses. In the third one, Disasi was sent off on a similar incident as his red card against Strasbourg. Taken for speed as the last man by Gaël Kakuta, he put his arms around the Lens midfielder, preventing him from running into a one-on-one situation with the goalkeeper. The incidents which provoked these two red cards highlight an area in which Disasi can still progress: the alignment and positioning of a defence and his place within that. There is no leader like Abdelhamid for Disasi to follow at Monaco, and the club will be expecting the youngster to instead assume this role himself, given his potential.

Throughout 2020, Disasi rejected approaches from the Democratic Republic of the Congo to wear their colours on the international stage, a nation of which he is also a citizen. He has turned down their calls so far, hoping to one day make it to Les Bleus. As a youngster, Disasi made only a few appearances for France's U20 side in 2017/18. But he will certainly take inspiration from his teammate Ruben Aguilar, who received his first ever call up this season at the age of 27, albeit in very favourable circumstances given the number of absentees.

At a club like AS Monaco, Disasi will have a chance to prove himself in a potentially higher-level team (when they are in form) than Reims, and he is well-placed to develop into a leader. AS Monaco Vice President Oleg Petrov told Get French Football News in November: "At his age, a real leader, strong character."



33

(NEW)

Nayef AGUERD

Club: Stade Rennais / Born: 1996/03/30

Position: Defender / At Club Since: 2020 / League Apps 2020: 19

Nayef Aguerd's arrival into, and rapid ascent within, French football has been one of the more remarkable stories in Ligue 1 in recent times. The Moroccan international, 24, arrived without much fanfare in Dijon in 2018, but it wasn't long before his quality, even in a team which leaked goals, was regularly noticed. He made the move west to Rennes, and has been a regular under Julien Stéphan, even as he has struggled with injury and a case of COVID-19. It has been an impressive journey from the port city of Kenitra to Champions' League action at Stamford Bridge for Aguerd, but his placement on this list is well-deserved, and should be even higher in the years to come, should a club outside of France not come calling for his services.

Aguerd moved definitively to Dijon from FUS Rabat, the major club in the part of the country from which he hails, but his talent was first noticed and developed at the country's major footballing academy, the Académie Mohammed VI. Morocco's answer to Clairefontaine, in terms of its independence from a singular club, the academy has, since its establishment, also seen the likes of Hamza Mendyl and Youssef En-Nesyri pass through its doors.

Following a successful spell there, he joined Rabat, where he received a first call-up to the national team in 2016, and also won a league title and was named the country's best young player in the same season.

After further progress, he joined Dijon in the summer of 2018, signing for a sum of €1.6m, but it was hardly smooth sailing in his first season at the Stade Gaston-Gérard. Not only did Olivier Dall'Oglio's open style of play mean that undue pressure was placed on the back line, Aguerd also faced serious competition for his place, with Wesley Lautoa, Cédric Yambéré, Senou Coulibaly, and Laurent Ciman all also options in central defence. This competition, along with a series of injuries, prevented him from establishing himself, starting just a dozen matches in the league as the team just managed to avoid the drop via the relegation playoffs.

He did succeed, however, in scoring three goals among those appearances, something which proved vital, as Dijon lacked a consistent goalscoring threat from among their forwards, and would augur well for the future. The next season offered more of the same in terms of injury issues for the Moroccan, though, with an ankle problem ensuring that he made the same number of starts as the previous campaign.

Unlike in 2018/19 though, last year saw Aguerd as the undisputed first choice, at least when fit, having benefitted from the departures of Yambéré and Ciman to feature regularly alongside Bruno Ecuele-Manga, using that aforementioned aerial ability to be a commanding presence at the back.

What brought him to an ambitious Rennes side this summer for €5m, though, is more than just a knack for getting his head on the ball, although his three goals to date this season in the league (all of them in wins for his team, no less) serve as a reminder that he remains a vital threat at set pieces. Too, only Loïc Badé and Sven Botman have won more headers in the league, an attribute that is key both offensively and defensively.

Tall and thin, but possessed of a wiry strength and with good pace, Aguerd's mobility and ability to recover make him a complete, modern centre back, to say nothing of his being an ideal foil for Damien Da Silva. Both players are adept passers of the ball, but Aguerd's pace and skill in terms of his ball recovery allow both to play more expansively, his penchant for keeping things simple fostering the team's ability to play possession football by building from the back.

A lengthy spell on the sidelines owing to COVID-19 will have had an outsize effect on Aguerd's play this season (although it is telling that Rennes won none of the four matches that he missed), but he nevertheless remains one of the league's most impressive young centre backs.

Upon his return from illness and the end of the Breton side's ill-fated Champions' League campaign, they have won each of their last two matches, and may well be positioning themselves, with Aguerd back in the side, to contend for Europe once more, affirming his importance to the team in no uncertain terms.



32

(+63)

Boulaye DIA

Club: Stade de Reims / Born: 1996/11/16

Position: Forward / At Club Since: 2018 / League Apps 2020: 23

A 12-year-old Boulaye Dia stood forlorn by the side of the road. The chance of a two-day trial with Ligue 1 record champions Saint-Étienne had vanished thanks to his dad's broken-down car. Their deadline missed, a taxi had been called to take father and son back home. "No trial and Saint-Étienne never called back," Dia remembers. Although young Boulaye dealt with the misfortune better than most would, it was not the last time that he was left disappointed.

A year later and it was Les Verts' eternal rivals Lyon who would let the teenage Dia slip through their nets. "I went there almost every Wednesday over a few years," Dia explained to Get French Football News. "They did a wrist test to assess future growth and told me that I wouldn't grow much – because I was quite small at the time – so I didn't fit the profile that they were looking for." Now a burly, rapid, handful of a striker with Stade de Reims, OL's assessments were proved to be almost comically incorrect.

Dia however remained commendably stoic. “They were blows,” the forward concedes “[but I] thought about them a bit and then moved on. I told myself I still had loads of time ahead of me and at 13 it isn’t so serious; you just think we’ll see when I’m older what opportunities I’ll have.” After considering a career as an electrician, the Welsh Premier League were the next to miss out on Dia’s services after a trial arranged by a former teammate with Airbus UK FC. “It went well but I wasn’t prepared to go there,” Dia recalls. “The agent said a few clubs were interested but it was all a bit ambiguous so I decided to go back to France.”

Thanks to his talent as a finisher however, Dia’s luck quickly changed. “I went back to Jura-Sud, who were in the CFA, I got on well with the coach,” Dia explains. “I had a good season, scoring 15 goals in 20 matches, and then Reims came in.” Signing for the new Ligue 2 champions meant a mammoth jump to the top tier of French football for the 2018/19 campaign.

Nevertheless, the young forward’s seriousness, commitment and respect for his profession carried him though. “I came from so far back that I didn’t have the time to be starstruck,” Dia explained. “I knew that I had to work hard to make up for everything I had missed, having not gone through a youth development centre... There’s no comparison between the amateur and the professional worlds. But I was always in the mindset – even when in CFA – of preparing for a transfer to a professional club in the summer... I went in with a professional attitude and that’s why I quickly broke through.”

That mindset has been evident ever since. By November 2018, he was a regular in David Guion’s eighteen and before the end of the winter he’d edged out Pablo Chavarria as first choice striker in Guion’s resolute and organised, overachieving promoted team. An eye-catching opener in January’s Coupe de la Ligue clash with Toulouse was followed by a starring role in the 2-0 Ligue 1 triumph over Rennes a month later.

Eight goals in 28 outings the following (2019/20) season was far from prolific but Dia’s strength, eagerness to run the channels and hold up play paired with that driven, committed attitude caught the eye of many with Marseille, Rennes and Premier League clubs interested over the summer. A bicycle kick during Reims’ shock 2-0 win at the Parc des Princes was a particular highlight as Dia’s goals and work-ethic contributed to a top six finish and Europa League qualification. Kicking on once again this season, Dia matched his eight-goal haul after only eight league outings, including a hat-trick to beat Montpellier 4-0 in October. At time of writing, only Kylian Mbappé had outscored him in Ligue 1 this term.

Despite being something of a late bloomer, the new Senegalese international counts his meandering route to the top as a blessing. “It brought me character, an experience of real life, mental strength,” Dia says. “[It] helped me to keep my feet on the ground and to always remember where I come from.” Having gone from a disgruntled 12-year-old standing by a toll booth to scoring winners against the champions, Dia knows more than most that “you always need to work, always believe in your dreams, never give up. There is always hope if you do things well and have a little confidence in yourself.”

Given his upward trajectory over recent seasons, that philosophy and his considerable ability should mean major disappointments suffered by the teenage Dia will remain a thing of the past.



Denis BOUANGA

Club: AS Saint-Étienne / Born: 1994/10/11

Position: Forward / At Club Since: 2019 / League Apps 2020: 25

In a year that has largely been unkind to Saint-Étienne, Denis Bouanga has stood out as a shining beacon of hope. The 26-year-old forward made his mark quickly at the historic club becoming one of their few offensive weapons and a fan favourite in the process.

Bouanga arrived at ASSE in 2019 after a breakout campaign at newly promoted Nîmes a year earlier. Saint-Étienne were coming off a promising season, in which the club finished fourth and managed a Europa League spot. Unfortunately, with the departure of manager Jean-Louis Gasset that pre-season, ASSE began to trend downward under the stewardship of former assistant, Ghislain Printant.

Printant was eventually let go and Claude Puel was hired to oversee a complete transformation of the side. Saint-Étienne rang in 2020 with a chorus of in-fighting, as the new gaffer attempted to freeze out discontented veterans and promote youth from within the club ranks.

Through the turmoil, Bouanga's impressive performances were the only touchstone. The counter-attacking football harnessed by Puel was a perfect match for the winger's electric pace and unbridled desire to get toward goal. Despite playing on the flank and being in a largely defensive side, Bouanga led the team with 1.5 shots on target per ninety.

The forward would register four goals in seven league matches to start 2020 – crucial in Saint-Étienne earning enough points to squeak out a 17th place finish – a mere three points off the automatic relegation places at the end of the coronavirus shortened season. Despite an underwhelming league performance, ASSE were able to give supporters something to cheer about in the Coupe de France – forcing their way to the finals against Paris Saint-Germain.

Bouanga's performances in the Coupe de France were defining; in the Round of 16 he scored his side's only goal in a hard-fought one-nil victory over Monaco. He followed up that performance by smashing home the opening goal in a 2-1 win over plucky, Épinal in the quarter-final. If that was not enough, the Gabon international collected the assist for Ryan Boudebouz's 94th minute winner against Rennes in the semi-final.

In the long-awaited final against PSG, Bouanga registered more shots than any player on the pitch, as ASSE fought valiantly after going down to ten men in the 31st minute. Unfortunately, it was not enough as the Parisians held on for a one-nil win.

Bouanga's goal-scoring has tailed off to start the 2020/21 season with just two thus far. However, his underlying numbers remain consistent: he is second in the side in shot-creating actions, and continues to produce more shots on target than any player in the side.

Saint-Étienne rely heavily on Bouanga to act as the main outlet for their counter-attacks and as such he leads the team in progressive carries, attempted dribbles, while registering third in drawn fouls. The lack of complexity in Puel's attack means that the chance creation load often falls to a handful of players – the most prominent being Bouanga.

Internationally, Bouanga has been a relative mainstay for Gabon, but has grown into a more important player over the past year, as Gabon battle through African Cup of Nations qualification. Their pursuit has been successful thus far, as the nation sits second in their group and poised to qualify; thanks in no large part to the goal and two assists Bouanga has registered in the two matches they have contested in 2020.

Thus far, the 2020/21 season has not been kind to Saint-Étienne, as the club languishes in 15th in the table. Claude Puel's side have only mustered three wins in 14 attempts and have one of the worst non-penalty expected goal differentials in the league. What is more, the lack of consistent offensive production remains the key factor in the club's struggles.

If ASSE hope to turn it around and become a more competitive squad in the New Year, it will almost certainly require a raft of impressive performances from their offensive talisman. Looking further ahead, Bouanga's contract does not expire until 2023 and it is difficult to imagine Les Verts selling him without a ready-made replacement, despite their cash problems. Meaning that in all likelihood, with his slight dip in form at the end of 2020 being taken into account and likely to give possible suitors pause for thought, the forward's future lays at the Stade Geofroy-Guichard, at least in the short-term.



Gaëtan LABORDE

Club: Montpellier HSC / Born: 1994/05/03

Position: Forward / At Club Since: 2018 / League Apps 2020: 26

Gaëtan Laborde works in the shadows -- he does not have the Peaky Blinders hair, tattoos, and international cachet of his teammate Andy Delort at Montpellier, just as he did not reflect the flash and affectations of the likes of Malcom and Diego Rolan at previous club Bordeaux. His social media is filled mostly with pictures of him at work, whether it be on the practice pitch or in matches, eschewing opulent dinners and scenery to emphasise that he is, first and foremost, a footballer and not a celebrity.

Not the tallest, the quickest, or the most clinical, he has made his reputation by dint of his hard work, graft being his bread and butter in extremis at a time when pressing and off the ball work has become all the rage in football, it is easy to see why he may not be long for La Paillade Born in southwestern France, Laborde's career started at humble local side Stade Montois, before he joined Bordeaux's academy at the age of 14, just as the team, under Laurent Blanc, was experiencing its best form of the last thirty years, being European regulars and even winning a league title.

This was no small matter for Laborde, as even in France's rugby-crazed southwest, the youngster's father would regularly take him to matches, fostering a love on the part of the player for not only football but Les Girondins in particular.

As he told the Ligue 1 official website: "When I joined, Bordeaux had a brilliant generation that won the league title. They had a terrific Champions' League run the next year too, when they were knocked out by Lyon in the quarter-finals. We were all big fans of those players and they made us even hungrier to succeed."

That hunger (which continues to evince itself today) saw him quickly become a regular for his country at various age groups up through the U20 level, and his star really began to shine in 2013, when he was part of a side which won the Coupe Gambardella, France's prestigious youth tournament. His achievements for the reserves saw him take his first steps in the professional game, as he went out on successive loan spells, first to Red Star in the National before temporary moves with Brest and Clermont in Ligue 2.

His spell in Brittany was somewhat awkward, as he was often played out of position on the left-flank and used sparingly after the arrival of Youssef Adnane in the January window. However, he distinguished himself to a sufficient level that in the 2016/17 season he became a regular.

Bordeaux did well that campaign, making deep runs in both domestic cups, and qualifying for the Europa League. Laborde was the club's leading scorer, with thirteen goals across all competitions, and at 23, things seemed bright indeed for the local boy. However, after a bright start to the season for the club, a fractured foot sidelined him for nearly three months, abruptly putting a stop to any momentum.

The arrival of Jimmy Briand the following summer allowed Laborde to leave a club in turmoil, and his arrival at Montpellier, while without fanfare, became a real turning point for La Paillade, scoring 11 goals in his first season at the club as they finished sixth, being unlucky to miss out on European football after Rennes and Strasbourg won the domestic cups.

What Laborde offers to his team, though, is so much more than scoring. Michel der Zakarian has never been seen as a particularly ambitious or expansive manager with regards to his tactical philosophy, but in Laborde and Delort, he has a pair of players whose combination of determination and skill give him the ability to play an intense pressing style without sacrificing much in the way of positivity. Laborde has already scored six goals this season, and his six assists put him joint-top of the league in that regard. To go with nine assists for the calendar year, despite being sometimes played not in a partnership with Delort, but on the right flank in a 4-3-3.

Delort, whose aerial ability is superior to Laborde's, will likely continue to outscore his teammate, but it is easy to see why there are persistent links to a move abroad for the latter, perhaps as soon as January, with Newcastle and West Ham supposedly among the interested parties. For the moment, though, Laborde turns out weekly in orange and blue, playing a team-first style of football, in which, as he admitted to Téléfoot recently, "I need to play with more selfishly." For fans of Montpellier, they might rather he continue to evince the hallmarks of generosity and motivation that have distinguished his career to date.



Hassane KAMARA

Club: OGC Nice / Born: 1994/03/05

Position: Defender / At Club Since: 2020 / League Apps 2020: 24

Admittedly there weren't a raft of excessively strong candidates for the role of best left-back in Ligue 1 last year. Jordan Amavi and Juan Bernat each would stake credible claims to this honour, but in a season in which the end of season Trophées UNFP were not awarded, it was Hassane Kamara who stood out.

He moved from Reims to Nice in the summer and while his form for Les Aiglons has not been as scintillating as it was for the Champagne side, much of that can be put down to getting used to new tactics and a lack of nous as regards to setting up his team on the part of former manager Patrick Vieira. At his best, and used properly, he is a force of nature, blending pace and work-rate with a preternatural ability on the ball and a good positional sense.

Born in Saint-Denis, Kamara got his start in football at Toulouse, before joining Châteauroux at 18, where he played his first matches as a professional. Then a midfielder, rather than a full-back, he showed a good eye for goal and was a rare bright spot for a Berrichonne side which would struggle throughout his time at the club.

They were eventually relegated at the end of the 2014/15 season. Even if his team went down, though, Kamara would move in the opposite direction joining Reims on a free as the Champagne club had earned promotion to the top flight.

To say Kamara played sparingly in his first two seasons would be an understatement — Franck Signorino was firmly installed as the first choice left-back, and in midfield the more experienced Atila Turan, as well as Diego Rigonato and Nicolas De Préville provided stiff competition indeed. After toiling in the reserves, Kamara was finally afforded an opportunity to play regular football again in 2017, going on loan to Créteil in National.

A regular there, he returned to Reims and played more regularly thereafter, but wasn't really a guaranteed starter until the 2019/20 season, making the left-back position his own under David Guion, despite the club having paid a record fee for Ghislain Konan in 2018.

Guion's teams aren't exactly known for their fluent style of play, but in Kamara, the manager had not only a tireless worker but a player who could allow Moussa Doumbia greater attacking freedom. His drive and defensive work-rate were key in allowing the team to remain solid at the back without sacrificing width and flair going forward. No other left-back in the league came close to getting through as much work defensively as Kamara, as he led the league by wide margins in both interceptions and tackles, as well as dribbles completed. He did so by largely staying out of the referee's notebook, continuing to polish the aspects of his play that were not always manifest in playing further forward earlier in his career.

In the summer, Nice, who were back in Europe after scraping to a fifth-place finish under Patrick Vieira came calling, and with Les Aiglons' seemingly ambitious in the summer. The move offered Kamara a chance to play as more of a wing-back, and he opted for it, even as there were also links with Marseille. With Nice under Vieira playing most often with three at the back, Kamara was able to play a more attacking role, something which naturally appealed to a player who had come through as a winger, rather than as an orthodox full-back.

While Kamara individually has performed at a decent level this season, remaining a constant in the eleven when fit, the team's propensity to rotate excessively around him has been some matter of frustration. At Reims, Guion's relative consistency in terms of tactics and personnel were one of the driving factors behind the Champagne side's success, but in Vieira, there was more than a touch of the team being rudderless, a manager not having much of an idea of the ethos which he wanted to install.

Asked to do less defensively, his statistics in the current campaign are hardly on the level of last year. As an attacking conduit, he has been perhaps found out somewhat, even if he is more than slightly a victim of having been unable to foster a consistent relationship with whoever is playing in an attacking role on the left.

With Vieira recently dismissed, new manager Adrian Ursea looks set to persist with the same system, but with more consistency as regards his personnel. Jeff Reine-Adélaïde in particular looks to be given an expanded role on the left, and the hope here is that with more consistency Kamara can be back to his best, allowing the attacking players the run of the pitch while also contributing to his side's forward play on occasion.



Predrag **RAJKOVIC**

Club: Stade de Reims / Born: 1995/10/31

Position: Goalkeeper / At Club Since: 2019 / League Apps 2020: 25

A cornerstone in Reims' magical 2019/20 season, Predrag Rajkovic went from an obscure signing to the name on the lips of every club supporter in France. The Serbian international arrived from Maccabi Tel Aviv for €5m and was worth every penny – putting together a season that would land him in Ligue 1's best XI for 2019/20.

Reims have a storied past, but a small budget, and club manager David Guion has been able to turn a little into a lot in what is now his fourth season at the helm. The manager's system is based on a rock solid medium block and formidable, proactive defending in their own 18-yard box. This type of tactic requires a goalkeeper capable of commanding his area and organising his defence, and in 2020 Rajkovic fit the bill perfectly.

The Serbian international was the last line of defence in Reims' familiar 4-4-2 formation. The basis for the system was for Reims to allow the opposition to have plenty of the ball, while keeping them far away from their own defensive third by packing the middle of the park and pressing efficiently along the sidelines.

Fundamental to this process was the holding of a relatively high line and having two central defenders capable of winning the bulk of their aerial duels. What is more, it meant that Rajkovic was required to be active in the space behind the defence and on the edge of his area.

For this reason, the Serbian goalkeeper averaged more defensive actions outside of his own box than one would expect from a side conditioned to spend the majority of the game playing against the ball. And yet, Rajkovic produced roughly the same number of actions as keepers playing for more aggressive ball-playing sides such as, Anthony Lopes, Edouard Mendy during his time at Rennes and Steve Mandanda.

Of course, what earned Rajkovic his notoriety was not his ball-playing ability, but rather his acumen as a shot-stopper. In the back half of the 2019/20 season Rajkovic's shot-stopping ability was nearly unparalleled – boasting a +1.3 post-shot expected goals per ninety rating. To put that in context, Nice's Walter Benítez led the league in the category in over the course of 2019/20 with a rating of +0.41.

Rajkovic's individual ability to keep the ball out of the back of the net was foundational to Reims' success in 2019/20. Guion's system, while refined, was still predicated on the other team having more opportunities at goal and in all likelihood producing a higher expected goal output. If Rajkovic was unable to produce stellar performances on a regular basis it would have been hard to imagine Reims finishing in sixth place and earning a Europa League qualifying place.

Rajkovic had long been a regular in the Serbian national team – making his debut against Colombia in 2013. Since that time, he has featured largely as a back-up – he was included in the 2018 World Cup squad but went the entire tournament without being capped. However, that changed in 2019 when he began to deliver fantastic performances domestically and by 2020, he had overtaken Marko Dmitrović as the nation's starter. In his three Nations League caps in 2020, Rajkovic only allowed one goal and helped Serbia retain its place in League B.

As generous as the first half of 2020 was to Rajkovic, the second half has been less kind. Reims are allowing more quality chances in front of goal and the second-year keeper has not been able to fully rediscover last season's form. Rajkovic now ranks near the bottom of Ligue 1 in post-shot expected goals and his side is paying for it – having only mustered two wins on the season.

A far cry from the side that shocked France with a Europa League berth in 2019/20, Reims now look as though they will be competing to avoid relegation for much of the 2020/21 campaign. Without question any upturn in form from Rajkovic would go a long way in changing Reims fortunes, but the Serbian international will need a more concerted defensive effort in front of him if Guion's side is to rise up the table.

Despite his struggles, it does not appear that Rajkovic will be moved on from Reims before the end of the season and if the club's form does not improve any notions of selling him for a profit are likely to evaporate.



27

(NEW)

Sven BOTMAN

Club: Lille OSC / Born: 2000/01/12

Position: Defender / At Club Since: 2020 / League Apps 2020: 25

Recent events at Lille show that all is not well off the pitch: presidential adviser and recruitment expert Luis Campos went AWOL in August, before this month leaving along with president Gérard Lopez as the indebted club was sold to a faceless investment fund. On the pitch, however, Les Dogues have been purring. After finishing as runners-up two years ago and being unfortunate to finish last season in only fourth place, this year Lille are looking like genuine title contenders, thanks in great part to Campos' notoriously wily turnover of talent. Sven Botman's contribution epitomises this successful policy.

Coming into this season much of Lille's success of the preceding 18 months had been built on the foundations of their centre-back pairing of José Fonte and Gabriel – himself plucked from the obscurity of the Brazilian second division as a 19-year-old. Following Gabriel's big money move to Arsenal, Lille's priority was to find a replacement who could slot in quickly and maintain the team's positive dynamic. Enter Sven Botman.

£7.2m for a 20-year-old with just one season's experience seemed a large fee at the time but after less than six months it is already clear that this will be looked back upon as a bargain.

The giant Dutchman came through the youth ranks at Ajax, winning the Dutch U17 and U19 titles and participating in two UEFA Youth League campaigns. However, when it came to breaking into the first team, there were still reservations.

As his former reserves team-mate, Kaj Sierhuis, recalls: “he was never considered a special talent, even though he climbed moved through the age-groups quite easily. He doesn’t fit the prototype of an Ajax defender: not very big, very comfortable with both feet, unafraid to dribble and able to play in midfield. He is big, a very good defender, but he needed to learn to not be afraid to play, to dribble”.

Ajax made the decision to loan Botman to fellow Eredivisie club SC Heerenveen for the 2019/20 season. And despite the frustration of the campaign being cut short due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the move proved a great success. Botman was immediately added to the first team and went on to play every minute of Heerenveen’s season, helping them to finish in 10th place – one place higher than the previous season – as they reduced their goals per game conceded from 2.15 in 2018/19 to a far more miserly 1.58. Botman also contributed two goals and four assists – an excellent return in his first season for someone whose footballing credentials had been questioned – and perhaps most impressively received no yellow cards.

His rookie campaign attracted the interest of Campos, and Botman moved east to Lille, with the modest aim “to develop”. It is unlikely that either the player or Christophe Galtier expected Botman to become the regularly starting left-sided centre-back – particularly with former club captain Adama Soumaoro still at the club and looking to regain the place that he had lost to Gabriel. However, Botman was given his chance in the season opener at home to Rennes and impressed sufficiently that he retained his place and, as last season, is yet to miss a single minute – not only in Ligue 1 but also in Lille’s successful Europa League group stage.

At time of writing, Lille have the joint-best defence in Ligue 1, are top of the table and are through to the Europa League knock-out stages (drawn, inevitably, against Botman’s former club Ajax), having notably beaten a Zlatan-led AC Milan 3-0.

Botman – who is of course dominant in the air – ranks in Lille’s top two for blocks and clearances per match, and third for interceptions, reaching those placings with far fewer fouls per game than those around him – partly because his precociously good reading of the game means that he does not need to throw himself into tackles – although when he does, he wins the majority of them.

Too, despite Ajax’s reservations, he also has an 85% pass completion percentage, looking to bring the ball forward either with a pass or a dribble whenever he can. While he has amassed four bookings and is yet to contribute anything offensively, his introduction to French football has been close to faultless so far. The Dutch U21 international has also earned his first senior squad call-up.

Come the summer, if Lille maintain their excellence on the pitch and instability off it, there could be a big exodus of players and Les Dogues may struggle to keep Botman at Luchin beyond one season.

A photograph of Houssem Aouar, a professional footballer, in action on a green pitch. He is wearing a white Olympique Lyonnais kit with blue and red accents, featuring the 'mirates' sponsor logo. He is dribbling a yellow and black football with his right foot. The background shows a blue stadium wall and a red advertising board. In the bottom left corner of the image, the number '26' is displayed in a large blue font. In the bottom right corner, the text '(+3)' is displayed in a large green font.

26

(+3)

Houssem AOUAR

Club: Olympique Lyonnais / Born: 1998/06/30

Position: Midfielder / At Club Since: 2009 / League Apps 2020: 22

Much as we've described Kylian Mbappé's 2020 as being not necessarily a year of regression, but of failing to live up to his own high standards as a 22-year-old playing a key role for one of France's top teams, so, too, must we be mindful of the lens through which we view Houssem Aouar.

That he is even still playing for the club where he broke into the first team in fine form in 2017 is a surprise — Juventus and Arsenal were both heavily linked with the player over the summer, and a move to one or the other seemed all but imminent, but in the end he stayed put. As a result, he has, after a few bumps along the way, looked to be back to his best, playing a key role in Lyon's being a seemingly legitimate challenger for the Ligue 1 title.

Born in Lyon, Aouar is a pure product of the club's vaunted academy, having joined in 2009 at the age of 11. After a few fleeting appearances at the end of the 2016/17 season, he came into his own the following campaign, as that year, marked as it was by an impressive run to the Europa League semi-finals, also proved a farewell tour for a series of iconic players, including Alexandre Lacazette, Corentin Tolisso, and Maxime Gonalons.

The departure of the latter two from midfield meant that it was something of needs must in the centre of the park, and for much of the season, Aouar, whose gifts with the ball at his feet had already been well-noted, was played in a central partnership with new signing Tanguy N'Dom-bélé.

While neither was an orthodox defensive midfielder, the pair's relationship was a crucial nexus for the team's success, as they finished third ahead of a hard-charging Marseille, winning nine of their final ten matches. While not a visionary passer in the mould of the former Amiens man, Aouar's wiry strength and determined approach to the game worked well.

With the team also participating in the Europa League, his versatility was also key for the team, as he also operated as a number ten, or even wide on the left, earning match time as a result of his committed attitude. It was a hard lesson at times, to be sure, but his combativeness no doubt took form as a result of this, something which would serve him well in the years to come.

The following season saw him improve further, recording seven goals and eight assists as he featured in every league match bar one. Last year saw him bedevilled at times with a thigh injury - an issue which continues to be a concern, but taking a more secondary role in terms of the team's attack with the likes of Jeff Reine-Adélaïde and Karl Toko Ekambi taking more central roles in driving the team forward. It seemed that there would be, perhaps, more of an opportunity for him to play in a more advanced role once Memphis Depay and Reine-Adélaïde suffered season-ending injuries, but the season being prematurely curtailed due to the current health crisis put an end to that.

As to the current campaign, while his league form was uneven, or even quite disinterested until recently, his physical issues and a bout with COVID-19 meant that he was used sparingly, unable as he seemed to be to complete 90 minutes. With improvements made to their own personal games, Maxence Caqueret and Lucas Paquetá, both players who occupy a similar role in Rudi Garcia's 4-3-3, it looked as if Aouar had made a mistake in staying at the Groupama Stadium in light of the interest of bigger clubs, with his poor attitude culminating in his being suspended by Sporting Director Juninho against Reims.

He was back in the next match, though, and the suspension seems to have done the trick in motivating the player, as he has been in the form of his life in the month since. His creativity and ability on the ball have allowed him to play his role in support of Lyon's attack perfectly. He has been equally able to act as an auxiliary attacker, tracking back with vigour, something that has played no small part in Maxwel Cornet's surprisingly successful conversion to left-back.

It also underscores again Aouar's willingness to get stuck in, even if he can be petulant at times. While the suspension and his form to start the season were not a good look, all in all it's been a good year for Aouar, having earned a first senior cap for France. He is now seemingly back on track as a key player in a Lyon side which looks to be their best in some while.



25

(NEW)

Boubacar KAMARA

Club: Olympique de Marseille / Born: 1999/11/23

Position: Midfielder / At Club Since: 2017 / League Apps 2020: 23

Marseille have gone in a new direction since André Villas Boas took over. One of the most striking things about them, compared to how things were with previous manager Rudi Garcia, is their ability to grind out results somehow, somehow. They have mastered the art of winning ugly, and taking a results-first approach. To be a team like this requires a core consisting of versatile, adaptable and no-nonsense players who are fighters, players with the mentality, leadership and grit to grind out these wins. Fortunately for Villas-Boas, he struck gold in this regard. One of the players he is blessed with at Marseille is Boubacar Kamara.

21-year-old Kamara is one of Marseille's most important players, and he represents a vital cog in the OM machine. They might rely on more glamorous, established or popular names like Thauvin and Payet to forge ahead of opponents, but without the work of players like Kamara in the team, they would be nowhere. When Payet and Thauvin are having off days, Kamara cannot afford to. It is this trio's consistency that keeps Marseille steady on their path.

Under Villas Boas, Kamara has been moved from a central defensive role to defensive mid-field. He has developed into one of the best defensive midfielders in France. Whilst he sees himself as a centre back, but his entire skill-set being so suited to the defensive midfield role suggests his future might be there.

Kamara has exceptional reading of the game with good mobility, technical ability, long passing technique and tackling. In all of this, he plays football like an artist, complete with the aesthetics even when he is defending. In build-up, he is vital for Marseille and possesses the intelligence to bait opponents into an ill-advised press then beat it somewhat effortlessly. It helps that he is so composed on the ball, and has the ability to break lines. While solid in the air, Marseille also rely on his great recovery pace to deal with counter-attacking threats.

Perhaps, the most understated thing about Kamara is how many duels he gets involved in per game, both in the air and on the ground. Last season, he averaged 6.8 total duels per game at a 59% success rate. This season, he is averaging 7.8 duels per game at a 55% success rate. That ability to get into so many duels, and with above average success, is one of the chief characteristics of some of the best defensive midfielders in the world.

When Manchester City, Barcelona and Bayern Munich are heavily linked with a player, there is a big possibility that the player is worth the attention. Kamara certainly is. This year, he has proven his versatility and excellence with some great displays for his club, and not even a disastrous Champions' League campaign by Marseille has hurt his stock as it keeps rising. It is not clear if these clubs interested in him want him in a centre back role or a defensive midfield role, but they certainly know what they would be getting. His ability to seamlessly slot into both roles must be seen as a big bonus.

As OM marched to 2nd place in the league at the beginning of the year, with a defence that barely conceded, Kamara played a key role. They conceded just one goal in their first six games of the year - four games in the league and two in the Coupe de France. And even when they started to concede a few more goals in February before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, his performances remained solid. He screened the area in front of the defence with great skill, dealing with threat after threat when Marseille had their backs against the wall. As the 2020/21 season kicked off, he picked up where he left off.

As in the previous campaign, Marseille have had their struggles - winning against PSG aside. But as the months have gone by, things have gone steady for them in the league. At the time of writing, OM have now won five straight games and will be top of the league if they win their two outstanding games. Although Kamara, like his teammates, has seen his level drop a little owing to combining European football with domestic football, the year is ending on a high and big things are expected for the rest of the season. There are whispers of a possible title challenge, even though no one really wants to jinx it. If OM are to do that, they will need Kamara at his consistent best, helping them grind out important wins as they are known to do.

There is so much more to come from Boubacar Kamara judging by what we have already seen. There will certainly be a fight for his signature in 2021 and it seems inevitable that OM will have to sell. One can see them holding out for a big fee, especially considering how important he is for them, how highly his stock has risen in 2020 and the likely competition for his signature.



24

(-4)

Léo DUBOIS

Club: Olympique Lyonnais / Born: 1994/09/14

Position: Defender / At Club Since: 2018 / League Apps 2020: 20

Most of the players in Lyon's incandescent run to the semi-finals of the Champions' League, and indeed their current brilliant iteration which sees them finish 2020 atop the league, have had their time in the limelight. This is certainly true for the team's cadre of brilliant forwards, and the midfield as well as had their day in the sun. However, the defence has been rather less feted, even if three of Les Gones back four are also regulars for their countries. Jason Denayer's unpretentious solidity since arriving from Manchester City has continued apace, Marcelo's ebullience and fiery temperament continue to fulminate, and Maxwel Cornet looks increasingly assured by the day as a left-back.

While Cornet and Denayer have kept busy on international duty, though, Marcelo has never been called up for his country — Lyon's third international is Léo Dubois, a regular for Didier Deschamps as he jockey's to be Benjamin Pavard's deputy. Critics may take his regular appearances for his country with a grain of salt, averring that there is a lack of competition at the position — Djibril Sidibé and Ruben Aguilar are hardly decorated internationals even if the former of the two Monaco men has a league title and a World Cup to his name.

But, even if his play has not quite been up to the impressive standard he set at Nantes, his first professional club, his consistency and doggedness make him the consummate professional, and a role model for his (mostly) young teammates — despite being only 26, he has nearly 200 first team appearances, a figure which dwarfs that of most of his fellow Gones.

Dubois came through with Les Canaris after having joined the Brittany side aged 14, and was slowly eased into the first team, but his reputation and drive, even playing for a relatively negative side under Michel der Zakarian was impressive indeed, despite the club spending most of his tenure there battling relegation. He was named club captain in his final season at the Beaujoire, 2017/18, but turned down a contract extension to join Lyon on a free that summer. With this decision, he was electing to join a club that was better run, and had bigger ambitions, in comparison with the near-permanent state of crisis that has been fostered under Waldemar Kita at Nantes.

His first two seasons at Lyon were somewhat a period of adjustment - a thigh injury and competition for his place from Kenny Tete and Rafael meant that he only played two dozen matches in the league in his first campaign, while last season saw him sidelined for more than two months with a knee injury. Nevertheless, even in this most recent aborted campaign, he was given the captain's armband on occasion, his leadership qualities in evidence even if injuries kept from being at his best.

Speaking to the club's website recently, he addressed his proclivity for taking the reins, saying, "It's something natural that's in me. I like to communicate, to speak, to express myself - I don't force myself to do it. I feel comfortable doing it. It is a matter of constantly pushing oneself." That determination in concert with his leading by example is surely as much as what appealed to bringing him into the France setup as his play on the pitch — these sorts of intangibles are notably prized by Deschamps as they have been by all of his managers.

That work-rate in particular has been of massive, if under-recognised importance in the current season. Without having to struggle with injury, Dubois is able to be a capable conduit for the team's attack - with both he and Cornet able to stretch play laterally, more space becomes available centrally.

Too, there is also his increasingly impressive relationship with Tino Kadewere — the Zimbabwe international's joie de vivre and energy have stood out this season, but much of his freedom in attack comes from his knowing that the reliable Dubois is behind him, and the same is true for Karl Toko Ekambi when the two switch flanks — this freedom has been the beating heart of Lyon's counter-attacking brilliance.

This, of course, suits Dubois more — while he did record decent numbers of assists with Nantes, that was largely playing route one football. Without an orthodox target man at which to aim, or Rudi Garcia preferring to build play on the ground, Dubois is asked to take on a more naturally fitting defensive role, and between this, the team's form, and his own fitness, he is clearly more at ease on the pitch, continuing to be a central part of Lyon's rapidly developing fluency and style.



Maxence CAQUERET

Club: Olympique Lyonnais / Born: 2000/02/15

Position: Midfielder / At Club Since: 2018 / League Apps 2020: 17

Unpretentious in his work ethic, but elevated on the ball, Maxence Caqueret is the future of the Olympique Lyonnais midfield. The 20-year-old is an elite pressing force, who continues to hone his ball retention abilities, while showing the progressive passing range and enough potential to reach the very top of the game.

Caqueret is another in a long line of Lyon academy success stories. He joined the club in 2011 and worked his way up to Lyon's B side in 2016 where he caught the eye of the French international youth setup and eventually the Lyon first team. He made his debut on 5th January 2019 in a Coupe de France match against Bourges. The midfielder would only feature once more that season – having to wait nearly 10 months for his first Ligue 1 cap.

However, once Caqueret got into the line-up it became increasingly difficult to take him out. Almost instantly his quality shone through in a Lyon midfield that throughout the 2019/20 season often lacked a forward thrust.

What also became apparent was what a relentless presser he was – flying forward from mid-field to start the counterpress and frequently registering over 40 pressures per match. In fact, in the 2019/20 season Caqueret would be Lyon's most prolific presser of the football: averaging a full 12 more pressers per 90 than his next closest teammate and the most in Ligue 1.

Along with a tremendous engine, Caqueret is also a deft and direct ball player, who is hell-bent on driving his club forward. In 2020 he is first on the team in progressive passes – averaging over seven per match. Playing largely as a number eight, the 20-year-old has looked comfortable playing on both sides of the pitch and has been an effective link to the front line.

At such a young age, Caqueret's ability to read the game and push himself physically is profound. Both are qualities that have led him often to feature in a more nuanced box-to-box role when playing with fellow youngster, Bruno Guimarães and Houssem Aouar. The diminutive midfielder's willingness to cover the extra ground, recognise overloads and do the hard work out of possession is tailor-made for the modern game.

Caqueret also boasts promising ball retention skills, committing few mis-controls and averaging a respectable number of successful dribbles in midfield. He's not yet fully formed in terms of his retention skills, but shows enough promise to play in a double pivot and potentially as a number six later in his career.

Caqueret capped off the end of the 2019/20 season by featuring in three of Lyon's four Champions' League knockout matches on the club's unexpected trip to the semi-final. The journey elevated Caqueret's name throughout Europe, as Lyon's young midfield was lauded for its hard-fought performances.

Internationally, Caqueret has progressed steadily through the French youth ranks. He began with the U16's in 2015 and in 2020 graduated to the highly competitive U21 side where he was the youngest midfielder in the squad. Up until now, Caqueret has yet to feature for the U21s, but is likely to join them for the U21 European Championship next year.

A similar surplus of talent at Lyon has limited Caqueret's minutes to start the 2020/21 season. The unexpected non-departure of Aouar, as well as the acquisition of Lucas Paquetá from Milan has complicated matters for the 20-year-old, who is back to sporadic appearance-making in 2020/21.

Nonetheless, for Lyon and Caqueret there is plenty of time left. The academy-developed midfielder is tapped as one of the club's stars of the future and for good reason. Of course, it is part of the Lyon business model to cash in on the talent they produce and therefore Caqueret is unlikely to see out his career at the club. Perhaps the truncated stays of so many of Lyon's most talented prospects makes Caqueret's slow transition into a full-time starter and means supporters will get to enjoy him for longer.

Coming off a disappointing 2019/20 domestic campaign, which saw Lyon miss out on Europe for the first time in over 20 years, it is integral the side find its way back to the top of the Ligue 1 table in 2020/21 and beyond. And if there is to be a renaissance at Lyon, Caqueret is certain to be a key character.



22

(-8)

Walter BENÍTEZ

Club: OGC Nice / Born: 1993/01/19

Position: Goalkeeper / At Club Since: 2016 / League Apps 2020: 25

The new Nice “project” of the past two to three years has been beset by problems and failures to launch. Sporting directors have gone and come back again. Ownership has changed. And Patrick Vieira arrived as coach to great optimism but has recently departed after failing to meet expectations, his fans and superiors tiring of Les Aiglons’ on-pitch struggles and lack of attractive football.

Through all this upheaval and disappointment, one of the few consistent positives has been goalkeeper Walter Benitez, who at times has appeared the only man at the Allianz Riviera keeping his head while all those around him are losing theirs.

Now aged 27, Nice remains only Benitez’s second club, which speaks to his loyalty and consistency and also to the confidence that he inspires in others. Benitez came through the youth system at Quilmes, his early promise earning him the number one shirt for Argentina for the 2013 U20 South American Championships.

Not long after his 21st birthday, Benitez was given his first senior start for the Brewers. Benitez conceded one but impressed sufficiently to retain his starting berth for the remaining five matches of the season, keeping three clean sheets in the process. Having made the number one spot his own, he retained it for the majority of the next 18 months, keeping 16 clean sheets for a struggling side.

His contract having expired, in the summer of 2016 the 23-year-old Benitez made the move across the Atlantic to join OGC Nice on a free transfer. Due to the good form of young French goalkeeper Yoan Cardinale, allied to the Argentinian missing the first three months due to a stress fracture, Benitez's first season on the south coast was mainly spent on the bench. His two and a half Ligue 1 appearances, featuring two clean sheets, helped Nice to a third-place finish, while his one Europa League appearance was the final match of the group stage with Nice already eliminated, although he did help the team to a consolation win over Krasnodar.

2017/18 also began with a watching brief from the sidelines, despite Lucien Favre's team's struggles to replicate the previous year's form. However, Cardinale sustained an injury in late October with Nice languishing in 15th place, giving Benitez his chance. Although he presided over heavy defeats against Paris Saint-Germain and Lyon during his first four matches, he played a crucial role in Les Aiglons' upturn in fortunes, his penalty saves against Caen and Toulouse either side of the Lyon defeat helping the team to four vital points and acting as a catalyst. Benitez remained in goal for the rest of the season as Nice eventually finished in eighth place.

The following season, with new coach Vieira at the helm, promised much but began with a shock for Benitez as Cardinale was re-installed as number one. However, after three poor performances, including in a 4-0 home loss against Dijon, Cardinale was benched and Benitez went on to excel. He ended the season with 16 clean sheets and only 29 goals conceded in 38 matches, often hiding poor Nice performances, helping Vieira's team to a seventh-place finish and earning himself the Nice Player of the Year award.

Benitez remained between the sticks for 2019/20 and, although there was a slight drop-off in his form – unsurprising considering Vieira's propensity to play around with defensive formation and personnel – the Argentinian remained one of Nice's most consistent performers, helping the team to scrape to sixth place and a Europa League spot. Despite only keeping one clean sheet in the first half of this year, Benitez more than earned his contract extension. And this season – despite Nice's challenges leading to Vieira's sacking – he has produced five clean sheets and only 20 goals conceded in 15 games.

New Nice goalkeeping coach Nicolas Dehon is certainly impressed with all that he has seen: "He is a calm force. It was tough for him when he arrived but he uses that to push himself on. He is strong on closing down angles to pressurise strikers and he comes up with brilliant reflex saves on his line. We're working on his kicking game but he never panics. He's improving because he is intelligent. He takes in information and saves it for use later."

Benitez has rightly expressed his annoyance that he keeps being overlooked for Argentina's senior squad and has not ruled out taking up French nationality. Despite Les Bleus' strength in depth in that position, Benitez would become a serious squad contender should he maintain his form of recent years.



21

(+14)

Steve MANDANDA

Club: Olympique de Marseille / Born: 1985/03/28

Position: Goalkeeper / At Club Since: 2017 / League Apps 2020: 24

After a difficult 2018-19 campaign, any qualms over whether Steve Mandanda was capable of performing at the requisite standard for OM, and matching his own high standards, were dashed in closing stages of last year. In 2020, they have been eradicated.

Mandanda has been a force since the arrival of André Villas-Boas, with the combination of a prolonged pre-season training regime and his reinstatement as club captain giving a new lease of life to the 35-year-old. His performances this year have helped drag Marseille over the line to secure their return to the Champions' League for the first time since 2013, when at times they might have faltered.

"This season, he is there for us. He's saved us in several matches", Villas-Boas stated after the club's 0-0 draw against Bordeaux in February, a match in which Mandanda won his side the point. Referring to a point-blank, shot-snuffling save against Rémi Oudin and a diving stop late on to deny a header from defender Pablo, the Portuguese coach described his keeper's saves as "impossible".

The match against Bordeaux was midway through a run of league matches which saw Mandanda keep five consecutive clean sheets to start 2020, which also included shutting out fellow Champions' League-chasers Rennes away from home, a match which Marseille went on to win.

Exhibiting the kind of form that affectionately earned him the nickname "Il Fenomeno" from the Vélodrome faithful, the Frenchman was instrumental to Les Olympiens finding themselves six points clear of third place in March when the campaign was halted due to the pandemic, and subsequently ended. Marseille finished as runners-up, with L'Équipe readers voting Mandanda the best goalkeeper in the league, a view echoed by many. Were it not for the truncated season and cancellation of the UNFP's end of season awards, the record five-time Ligue 1 goalkeeper of the year may well have added a sixth title to his collection.

The year has not only been a triumph for Mandanda at club level, but also with the French national team. After a period out of the side, his improved performances and consistency led Didier Deschamps to recall him in late 2019, where he started a string of European qualifiers in the absence of Hugo Lloris. In 2020, he looks to have edged Lille stopper Mike Maignan as Les Bleus' second choice keeper, starting their 7-1 drubbing of Ukraine in October, before captaining the side for the first time in their match against Finland the following month. "He has enormous experience [...] I know his role as leader", Deschamps said of him in November, "He had a difficult path and he prolongs his career. He is a positive boy who pulls the group to the top."

The leadership and off-the-pitch qualities alluded to have been a staple of Mandanda's long and successful career, and have been exhibited time and again this year. In late November, Marseille were confronted by a handful of ultras prior to a match against Nantes, who demanded to speak to the team regarding their abysmal European form. Mandanda was the first player to comply with the request, communicating on behalf of the squad that he knew the club was not performing at the required level, promising that they would bounce back.

The confrontation was the result of what has been a turbulent campaign for Marseille. Breaking the record for consecutive defeats in the Champions' League, their performances have been heavily criticised, and with good reason, while in Ligue 1, OM have failed to convince at times, despite being in title contention at the turn of the year.

Mandanda however has continued to cover himself in glory. OM's best player, he remains in the conversation for best goalkeeper in the league again this year. He proved infallible in September, when Marseille won their first Le Classique since 2011, making a fingertip reaction save to deny Marco Verratti in the opening minutes, as well as saving a low, driven effort from Neymar with his feet later in the match. In a 1-1 draw with top-three rivals Lille later that month, Mandanda was key in securing the point. Villas-Boas, who has worked with the likes of Petr Cech and Hugo Lloris, claimed after the match, "On the line, I have never seen anyone like Steve."

Mandanda's performances earned him a contract extension in August, keeping him at the club until 2024, a decision that already seems justified. Marseille's record appearance holder, the veteran has expressed his desire to finish his career at the club, an end which does not yet appear to be in sight. And good thing too – it is hard to imagine anyone else occupying the Marseille goal. As Villas-Boas put it in July, Mandanda is "inscribed in the memory and history



20

(+18)

Jonathan **BAMBA**

Club: Lille OSC / Born: 1996/03/26

Position: Midfielder / At Club Since: 2018 / League Apps 2020: 26

Of Lille's trio of attacking Jonathans, Bamba has arguably received the least attention in recent years. Ikoné won his first France caps last autumn, while David became Lille's record signing this summer after finishing joint-top scorer in the Jupiler League.

However, if Jonathan Bamba maintains the form that he has shown so far this season, he may well keep stealing all the headlines for the remainder of the campaign and perhaps even further.

Bamba, now 24, came through the Saint-Étienne youth system after joining from hometown club Alfortville, making his debut in a late substitute appearance against Paris Saint-Germain in January 2015. Les Verts' coach Christophe Galtier gave Bamba 15 appearances over the next 12 months, including league and cup starts and Europa League experience, and enabling the young left winger to score his first professional goal, against Nantes.

Bamba was loaned out to Ligue 2 side Paris FC for the remainder of the 2015/16 season. Two assists in 13 starts as the Parisians finished bottom of the table were followed by another six-month loan move for the remainder of 2016, this time joining Jupiler Pro League team Sint-Truiden. After a bright start, Bamba sat out the final two months of the year, the club unimpressed with his tactical and defensive failings.

Bamba was immediately fielded out again though, to join future Lille team-mate Nicolas Pépé at Angers. This time the move to a higher level appeared to focus his mind and he returned to the Forez in the summer having scored three and providing two assists in 16 appearances, mainly off the right wing.

This time Bamba took his chance at Saint-Étienne, with 27 starts and seven substitute appearances across the front line, seven goals (albeit mostly penalties) and nine assists. However, failure to agree a new contract saw him reunite with Pépé and Galtier at Lille for the 2018/19 season. Forming the left side of the exciting “BIP-BIP” forward line, Bamba played a crucial role, featuring in every match, scoring 13 goals and notching three assists to help Les Dogues to the runners-up spot.

However, just five goals and one assist in the second half of the season raised familiar question marks over Bamba’s consistency – a concern that increased last campaign when, having lost team-mate Pépé and despite a quick recovery from a disgraceful foul by England’s Hamza Choudhury on summer U21 European Championship duty for France – Bamba managed only one goal and five assists (of which three came in 2020).

The season seemed to bear out the concerns of his Paris FC coach Jean-Luc Vasseur: “he did amazing things, the way he’d eliminate opponents with his first touch ... he is able to profit from the speed around him, can take advantage of his movement ... But he didn’t score as much as he’d have liked.”

When Bamba started this season strongly, it boded well but was not necessarily a sign of things to come: he has a quirkily good record of eight goals in his past four Augusts. However, having now grown in maturity, game-management and decision-making, Bamba has been excellent, amassing five goals and six assists as well as helping Lille through to the knock-out stages of the Europa League and winning the UNFP Player of the Month award for October.

His ASSE youth coach Abdel Bouhazama sees it as Bamba “developing egotism, even though it’s not in his nature to be narcissistic. I see him taking corners, free kicks. Beforehand he was the kid who relented, but now he’s one of the more experienced players and has understood that he needs to think of himself ... He has developed psychological endurance and, with his physical maturity, he is a machine”. Vasseur agrees: “I remember telling him that the day he became more decisive with his stats, he would reach another dimension. Today he’s there.” France U21 coach Sylvain Ripoll is also impressed: “he is sharper in small spaces, in his passing. Jo might be young but with several seasons behind him he has gained in maturity”.

With his consistent, decisive form, thoughts of a full France call-up ahead of the Euros come to mind. Bamba – who could qualify to play alongside Pépé for the Ivory Coast – has said that “like all French players it’s a dream to be able to defend your country’s colours. It’s up to me to keep working to appear in the list.” Maintain his current form all campaign and Bamba may well be extending his season deep into the summer.



Romain PERRAUD

Club: Stade Brestois 29 / Born: 1997/09/22

Position: Defender / At Club Since: 2019 / League Apps 2020: 24

The term 'modern full-back' has become almost clichéd in the last decade of footballing discourse. More attacking, dynamic, aggressive, pressing sides have, by necessity, moulded a new type of player that represents more of an auxiliary winger than a defender. Brest left-back Romain Perraud meanwhile may have taken a step further still along the evolutionary path amongst the current cohort of elite level full-backs. Far from just an overlapping crosser of the ball, Perraud's success could help hasten the progress of a new wave of full-backs.

Having joined Brest from Nice ahead of the 2019/20 campaign, Perraud's first season in Ligue 1 took a while to gather momentum. Nevertheless, the Frenchman had proved much as Paris FC chased promotion from Ligue 2 in 2018/19. At one stage the marauding Perraud was the pragmatic Paris' top goalscorer as PFC also forged the league's best defensive record. A miserly 22 goals conceded underlined the then 21-year-old's equally impressive defensive acumen. Perraud was elected Ligue 2 Player of the Year that season by France Football.

Although Perraud provided only a single assist in 20 games last season, noticeably settling after Christmas, this season has seen another sizable leap forward for the 23-year-old. In partnership with right-back Ronaël Pierre-Gabriel, Perraud provides Olivier Dall'Oglio's attacking team with balance and dynamism in all three thirds. Perraud in particular is adept positionally and often the victor in a battle with his direct opposing number, while charging forward to provide some intelligent crossing, resulting in four assists across his first 12 games this term. His shooting has been productive too, adding three goals in the same spell.

Incredibly by mid-December, Perraud led the gung-ho Brest in goal contributions with seven combined goals and assists. Only Irvin Cardona had more goals while highlights were plentiful. Perraud's delicate half-volley to put Brest two up on Lille in November. Arriving late to the attack against Lorient, Perraud opened the scoring with another clever volley, this time with the side foot. A fizzing, in swinging daisy-cutter from the edge of the area brilliantly put his team ahead at Brest.

Again, appearing unannounced in the inside left position to support an attack, a beautiful half-volley, fading cross dropped perfectly on the head of Steve Mounié to complete a devastating first half against Saint-Étienne. Perraud too instigated the moment of the season for Brest so far as his bulldozing run and looping cross invited Cardona to apply his leaping, karate kick at Dijon in September. The left-back had contributed a goal or assist every 154 minutes in Ligue 1 by mid-December which, at the time, was better than Dimitri Payet (176 mins), Kasper Dolberg (204 mins) and Mauro Icardi (177 mins). Boasting the ability to ghost past defenders off the ball and arrive late in the box as well as create chances seemingly out of nothing - all seven of his goal contributions were far from simple or obvious - Perraud could instead be compared to an attacking midfielder rather than a modern full-back. Without him, Brest would be far less able to impose themselves on sides as they have been doing under Dall'Oglio as one of Ligue 1's most exciting and captivating watches.

In simple terms, Perraud does what is expected from a 'modern' full-back with his support of attacks and keenness to beat a man and provide crosses, as well as forcing his way into the area. But Perraud goes further. Few of his peers possess his guile and vision to create chances and instigate moves. Instead of a necessary link in the chain as a forward-thinking side like Brest progresses the ball, Perraud combines attributes more commonly associated with creative midfielders to mould and direct the play. Almost only a bonus at this stage, Perraud, unlike many used in his position, is astute, forceful and committed defensively too while offering a notable physical challenge.

Although there are examples of wing-backs - specifically those deployed alongside a trio of central defenders - who are capable of such influence, to produce such performances as part of a theoretically more restricting four-man defence is rare. Liverpool's Trent Alexander-Arnold's unique profile makes another more high-profile divergence from the usual full-back role while Angeliño of RB Leipzig is comparable in terms of output and influence across the 'Big 5' leagues, although often used as a more progressive wing-back.

While the level at which he plays remains a caveat to his level in 2020, Perraud's upward trajectory from Nice's reserves to Ligue 2 and Ligue 1 remains impressive and an extended stay at the Stade Francis-Le Blé is becoming increasingly unlikely. Such vision, subtlety and guile won't be easy to replace in a full-back. Instead Perraud's next move could see him set the standard as the 'complete' full-back.



18

(+57)

Presnel KIMPEMBE

Club: Paris Saint-Germain / Born: 1995/08/13

Position: Defender / At Club Since: 2015 / League Apps 2020: 18

Marquinhos ducked, Thiago Silva ran, but Thomas Tuchel was trapped. A small towel did little to protect the Germany coach from the joyous, champagne bottle-wielding Presnel Kimpembe. Kimpembe could not wait to celebrate PSG's Coupe de la Ligue final victory over Lyon back in July and bound into the post-match press conference to douse his coach. Ever the joker off the pitch and often inconsistent amid concentration issues on it, for much of his career to date the French defender was seen as a weak link at the Parc des Princes. 2020, however, has been very different.

Kimpembe is unique in Paris - a young, promising, but not overtly talented player given a chance. With the defender's level questioned throughout his youth career alongside his future at the club, the fact that the now 25-year-old has made it so far towards the summit of the European game is commendable in itself. The player himself admits; "I must have shocked more than one person in recent months. At one time no one saw me coming here."

At youth level, Kimpembe “did not play a lot,” as he told L’Équipe in September. “My generation (95) was outclassed by the 94s, and I played with younger ones. When the others went to tournaments, I would train with the 97 or 98s. While everyone was signing pro, I had to wait until the final year. I really struggled to take off.” Largely thanks to the club’s top heavy transfer policy, Laurent Blanc was left without a fourth-choice central defender for the 2015/16 campaign and Kimpembe was promoted to the senior side permanently. Having impressed across a handful of starts that year, when David Luiz was sold back to Chelsea, without replacement, Kimpembe moved further toward the first team under Unai Emery. His assured, intense and commanding display in the 4-0 first leg Champions’ League last 16 win over Barcelona underlined his development. Tellingly perhaps, Kimpembe remained on the bench for the infamous second leg.

Despite the relative stature of his more illustrious defensive peers in Marquinhos and Silva, something approaching parity between the three was established under Emery and, with Silva underperforming, Kimpembe was preferred to O Monstro for the Champions’ League last 16 first leg at Real Madrid in February 2018. Despite his growing importance however, performances were often erratic and a sense of haughty entitlement shown by other PSG youth products, most notably Adrien Rabiot - and often the squad in general, persisted.

Meanwhile, although the “honest defender, nothing more” as L’Équipe once referred to him had developed significantly, instances of rashness, poor positioning and decision-making were still worryingly common. Now well into his twenties, such issues appeared endemic as recently as 2019. In last year’s GFFN 100 Kimpembe sat as low as 75th, below fellow centre-backs Damien Da Silva, Christophe Hérelle, Ismaël Traoré and Pedro Mendes.

This year however, Kimpembe has noticeably grown in stature and begun to assume responsibility both as a leader and defensively, emboldened by Tuchel enlisting him vice-captain to Marquinhos after Thiago Silva’s departure. Now undoubtedly first choice, much more consistency has emerged with the pro-active, intense and aggressive Kimpembe seen in the win over Barcelona now far more regularly evident.

“I have matured.” Kimpembe explained. “I managed to settle down as an important element in a dressing room where I wouldn’t necessarily have thought I would be.” It’s a maturity that also extends beyond the pitch. “I suffered a lot last season with my pubalgia [injury],” the player explained. “I hired someone who takes care of my nutrition at home and personal coaches during lockdown. What happens to me is no accident.”

Authoritative throughout the Champions’ League last eight in Lisbon last August, making several decisive challenges across all three games, not to mention his 100% first half pass completion against RB Leipzig in the semi-final, underlined Kimpembe’s newfound professionalism and drive. Kimpembe too began to impress for Les Bleus too in 2020, notably aiding clean sheets against Sweden and Portugal last autumn.

Now instead Kimpembe is able “put aside this rashness and instead be calmer,” he says. “I feel more mature, more serene in many situations; know how to release a ball when it is necessary to release it; know how to tackle when there is an emergency.” Although, as his lax performance and unneeded dismissal against Leipzig in the group stage season shows, frustrating errors still persist, should he continue on this trajectory, Kimpembe will be regularly spraying the champagne in victory as well as jest for the rest of his career as one of Europe’s best cen-



Téji SAVANIER

Club: Montpellier HSC / Born: 1992/12/22

Position: Midfielder / At Club Since: 2019 / League Apps 2020: 22

Think about the fancy cars, the big tattoos, the luxury holidays destinations... Now forget about all that, and you will be much closer to Téji Savanier's personality. Earning around €100k a month, he still lives in the same estate (Gély, in Montpellier) he grew up in – a place considered by many to be quite dangerous – spends his holidays camping with his teammate Andy Delort and even forgets he bought a brand-new villa a few months ago. Very unusual off the pitch, he is also a one-of-a-kind player on the field. Nearly anachronic.

After a fantastic season with then promoted team Nîmes in 2018/19, Savanier joined Montpellier, where he started his career, and the outcome was pretty much the same. Surrounded by better players, including a duo of very complementary strikers, Andy Delort and Gaëtan Laborde, he fitted in right away. One of the smoothest and most accurate right feet in Ligue 1 helped his team finish just one point shy of the European places in a season stopped prematurely because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Whether it is switching flanks, shooting from a distance or creating chances, especially from set-pieces, MHSC's number 11 never disappoints.

Since 2018/19, he has delivered 14 assists from set-pieces, more than any other player in the top five European leagues – that means in front of Trent Alexander-Arnold, João Moutinho or Angel di Maria. Savanier is also only behind Dimitri Payet in terms of creating chances from these situations in Ligue 1 over the same period.

Let's not forget his six goals from outside the box, which is the highest tally in the French top-flight. Not bad right? This season alone, he has three assists and three goals to his name (in 11 games at the time of writing), including a brace – and a panenka - in September against semi-finalists of the Champions' League, Lyon.

Very light on his feet, he has the ability to turn and go forward, thanks to his technical and dribbling skills. On the other hand, his lack of speed is responsible for his defensive flaws, and he is often dribbled past. More impressively, since his first game in Ligue 1 in August 2018, he has never gone three consecutive games without being involved in a goal (over 62 appearances overall)! His confidence is evidenced by the fact that he has attempted the most shots from outside the box this calendar year in Ligue 1 (34).

Where does this accuracy and long-range finishing quality come from? He explained it in a fantastic piece in Le Magazine L'Équipe: "I imagined this line (a crack on a wall) was one in a big stadium, and that these holes (air vents), where a ball barely could go in, was the top corner. In the summertime, after coming back from the beach, I spent hours playing here by myself, bare-footed on the tar". He was also the only kid who could play with the big guys in the projects, where his talent has long been known to everyone. With a glimpse of exaggeration, you could hear some say that "he is a better player than Paul Pogba".

Obviously, these performances could not go unnoticed for a long time. Media from other countries have started to talk about the midfielder and his name was even associated with a call-up with the French national team. When asked about Savanier in October, Didier Deschamps said that he was "an interesting and surprising player, with great performances over the last few games with Montpellier". He added that "he was among fifty or so players that the French staff was following". In other words, he is far behind a few players in the mind of the manager but who knows, dreaming has never been forbidden.

What is the next step for Téji Savanier? Take Montpellier to a European competition and shine in it or move to a bigger club? Last year, Lyon, Sevilla and AC Milan were among those interested in the midfielder. Up to this point, he has never wanted to live too far away from Gély and his family, but the 28-year-old recently admitted for the first time that he is open to an experience abroad.

Of course, he will not do so without taking his relatives with him. Let's hope for the French top-flight that he stays longer in the Hexagone. His kind of profile is so rare and enjoyable to watch. Be sure of one thing, Téji Savanier, who's peculiar first name is derived from T.J., a boxer in the movie The Champ, will never back down, wherever he is.



Andy DELORT

Club: Montpellier HSC / Born: 1990/10/09

Position: Forward / At Club Since: 2018 / League Apps 2020: 23

Andy Delort might be the most underrated forward in Ligue 1. Now 29 years old, the Algerian international has formed himself into a complete striker – capable of holding up play, linking with teammates, scoring goals and collecting assists. Few players in France do so much for their side so inconspicuously.

Delort's goal scoring prowess is obvious; the striker has led Montpellier in goals every season since arriving in 2018. What often gets overlooked is what a proficient creator he is: finishing first or second on the club in assists in all three of his seasons with Montpellier. Delort has meshed flawlessly with his two attacking partners, Florent Mollet and Gaëtan Laborde to form one of France's most underrated, yet punishing, attacking triumvirates.

In many ways, 2020 has been more of the same from Delort, who has cobbled together nine goals and four assists in just 19 matches. In 2019/20, he helped Montpellier to an eighth-place finish, which saw the club fall one point shy of a Europa League place. In 2020/21 Montpellier continue to roll, presently sitting eighth – one point the Europa League places.

Delort's raw numbers are good, but his underlying numbers are staggering. The striker racks up statistics all over the final third – his proficiency in and around the 18-yard box leaping off the page. Delort leads Montpellier in non-penalty expected goals plus expected assists in 2020 – a stat that is considered a barometer for goal contribution.

Even for a striker, Delort produces a significant number of shots on target per ninety – sitting ninth in the league in 2020/21, while averaging the highest non-penalty expected goals per shot on his team. This evidences the fact that Delort is capable of finding useful pockets of space in the attacking third and ensuring that he gets his attempt on target regularly – an obvious, but integral skill for any proficient striker. It does not hurt that Delort is formidable in the air where he wins, a team leading, five duels per ninety.

The malleable nature of Montpellier's front three means Delort has to be able to act as the creator for his counterparts and he does so with gusto. In the back half of 2019/20, Delort managed 14 key passes, while in 2020/21 he has already mustered 24 in just eleven matches, which puts him second on the team and tenth in the league. What is more, Delort ranked first on the team in passes into the penalty area last season and leads the category again in 2020/21.

The statistics coalesce in the all-important shot creating actions category; here he ranks second per ninety, but generated more 'live pass' shot creating actions than anyone on the team in 2020. In fact, in 2020/21 Delort is fourth in Ligue 1 in live pass shot creating action per ninety – an incredible statistic for a player in a side that plays largely in transition.

Born in France, Delort spent his youth playing as a French international, but in 2019 he embraced his mother's North African roots and declared for Algeria. His timing was perfect; as Algeria would go on to win the African Cup of Nations that same year. Since which time, Delort's role in the side has grown – now first choice to lead the line, the striker bagged a goal in his only cap with the national team in 2020.

Fundamental to Delort's overall success is his ability to be effective throughout the final third – he plays sideline to sideline and is as comfortable progressing the ball from midfield as he is in the opposition box. The fluidity of Montpellier's play in the final third would not be possible with a more static and one-dimensional striker. All of Mollet, Delort and Laborde have progressed immensely while playing together because of their willingness to work off the ball and remain unselfish around goal.

Delort's consistency and success makes Montpellier a legitimate threat for European places this season, as Michel der Zakarian's side continue to produce some of Ligue 1's most consistent performances in 2020. A European berth would represent the club's first foray outside of domestic football since 2012/13.

Delort's current contract runs until the end of the 2023 season and it would be surprising if the club parted ways with him before then. Now 29-years-old, Delort has found a system and squad that suits his style and he has been thriving because of it.



15

(NEW)

Burak YILMAZ

Club: Lille OSC / Born: 1985/07/15

Position: Forward / At Club Since: 2020 / League Apps 2020: 30

It is rare that things go well when a player endeavours to leave his native country at a certain age — the lack of mental flexibility can make that element of adjustment a challenge, to say nothing of elements such as the rhythms of play, language, and customs that are obstacles for all players. Witness, of late, the uneven form of Dario Benedetto for Marseille, or Kevin Trapp's mediocre displays with Paris Saint-Germain.

So, when a player who is in his mid-thirties, even with a decorated record for his various clubs and his country wants to make a similar leap, expectations must necessarily be somewhat low, especially if the league he is coming from is a step below as regards to its quality.

Thus, when Burak Yilmaz went his first four matches with Lille without scoring, few were surprised — it seemed that the move to France for a player of 35 was a bridge too far, and that Jonathan David would continue to lead the line on his own.

With Yilmaz lumbering about in the opposition penalty area, he and David struggled to forge a relationship and Les Dogues evinced little in the way of offensive fluidity, a far cry from the brilliance that had been on display with Nicolas Pépé and Victor Osimhen in the fold in previous seasons.

He had impressed for Besiktas last season, yes, recording nine goals and five assists in just 16 matches after returning from injury. However, those injuries, combined with the Turkish Super League's deserved reputation for being something of a footballing graveyard, were likely giving fans of the northern side some pause, especially with the excitement generated over the team's other, more flashy attacking options.

However, with patience, his ability to be the locus of the team's attack was soon on full display, finding the net in each of the club's next four matches in the league, a figure which now stands at a half dozen. He has also added four assists and another two goals in the Europa League (both coming in a dramatic 13-minute cameo from the bench against Sparta Prague), and any lingering doubts about his ability to lead the line should well and truly have vanished - the only question in terms of his suitability is who remains his best partner in attack.

Does the pace of a Jonathan David or a Jonathan Ikoné offer the ideal complement, with either of the jet-heeled pair able to run beyond the Turkish international as he acts a hold-up player? Or is his countryman Yusuf Yazici a better foil, acting as a skilful second striker, his playmaking ability and shared language giving the pair a creative advantage?

The jury is somewhat out on this count, but it's clear that in Yilmaz, Lille have their man, and his age and lack of experience in a top five league have scarcely counted against him as he has become one of the first names on Christophe Galtier's teamsheet, even if the manager is still trying to work out the team's strongest eleven.

It should be said, though, that for all of his bullishness and physicality, Yilmaz's lack of speed is a weakness in pressing the ball, especially alongside the somewhat languid Yazici. Defensive frailty is hardly something one would associate with a Galtier side, of course, but one has to feel that the team's success in having the best defence in France is down far more to the team's two majestic centre backs and the drive of Benjamin André in midfield making life tough for opponents, as opposed to Les Dogues offering much in terms of their press.

Still, though, this is a minor quibble, especially as one has somewhat of a sense of déjà vu over Yilmaz's role in the team. Even as he adjusts to a new league and language, his ability to be a bulky presence in the opposition's area is not unlike the role that Loïc Rémy had filled prior to his departure this summer — the Frenchman's ability to not only draw the opposition to him with his hold-up play, but to operate unselfishly even while chipping in with the odd goal.

With Rémy firmly ensconced in that role, the likes of Pépé and Osimhen rose to prominence, and given the starts made by Yazici and Bamba this season, the feeling here is that Yilmaz's role as a leader of this team on and off the pitch is massive indeed, and should continue to be as the team continue what has already been a very impressive 2020.



Jason DENAYER

Club: Olympique Lyonnais / Born: 1995/06/28

Position: Defender / At Club Since: 2018 / League Apps 2020: 23

Since joining Les Gones in 2018 after several loans in Turkey and Scotland, Jason Denayer progressively established himself as one of Ligue 1's best central defenders. He has lacked consistency at times, in the image of the entire Lyon squad in the last 18 months, but is now their most prominent defender.

After a fairly impressive maiden Ligue 1 campaign in the Rhône in 2018/19, it is fair to say that Jason Denayer has been through a lot since the beginning of the 2019/20 season. When Sylvinho took over OL, the Belgian was promoted to the position of club captain, which was a great responsibility for the Belgian international defender and a mark of trust from OL's new coach, especially when he had only been at the club for 12 months at that juncture. But Sylvinho's first experience as a coach turned sour and the former Arsenal and Barcelona full-back was quickly fired after a poor run of six Ligue 1 games without a win and a last-minute defeat in the derby against arch-rivals Saint-Étienne.

A change of plans that did not seem to disturb the Belgian's progress, despite new OL coach Rudi Garcia giving the armband to Dutch superstar Memphis Depay. Indeed, Denayer is first and foremost a great professional. Something that has been recognised consistently by all his clubs (probably due to his time in Antwerp in the Jean-Marc Guillou's academy) throughout his career.

2020 saw the Belgian start in almost every Lyon game (apart from Bordeaux on January 11th and Strasbourg on February 2nd). Capable of playing in a back four, mostly alongside Marcelo, he also featured in a back three as the central defender between the two Brazilians, Marcelo and Marçal.

This 3-5-2 system seemed to suit Denayer perfectly, benefiting from Marcelo and Marçal's experience and rigour. This system, tried by Garcia for the first time against Metz in February, proved to be effective as Les Gones won two league games in a row, including exacting revenge on Saint-Étienne in the Rhône derby. They would eventually lose their last league game in Lille in March before football's shutdown.

In this back three, Denayer showed impressive consistency in the league, but in Europe too. Indeed, after a very complicated group stage campaign, Lyon managed to dispatch of Cristiano Ronaldo's Juventus in the Round of 16 of the Champions' League. In the first leg, Denayer featured in the heart of the 3-5-2's back line. He made a number of vital interceptions to prevent Paulo Dybala's team from scoring a crucial away goal. Lyon eventually secured an unexpected win.

After the COVID-19 break, Denayer started the second leg in Turin. He had a difficult first half in which he often was brought out of his primary defensive positional zone to help his struggling teammate Léo Dubois. Despite a better beginning to the second half, Denayer had to leave his teammates in the 61st minute due to an injury.

These two somewhat average performances were eclipsed by a very impressive display in Lyon's incredible win against Guardiola's City. In this game, he was imperious and managed relatively successfully to contain Raheem Sterling and Kevin De Bruyne. His physical presence was very important for Garcia's side, as well as his ability in the air to clear many dangerous balls. Those two characteristics are his main attributes, and, despite his height (1.84m), he is also surprisingly capable of jumping high.

Lyon would eventually be trashed by Bayern in the semi-finals, but this Final 8 journey proved that Denayer was capable of competing with the brightest and best in Europe, after many years of instability at club level. Indeed, since the beginning of the 2020/21 season in August he has featured in 11 out of a possible 13 OL league games. During that period, his team only lost once, in Montpellier.

This season could be the one for Lyon to reach the Ligue 1 heights again, with the Belgian's leadership and defensive qualities essential to their title challenge. In 2020, Denayer proved to be more and more consistent from the Final 8 until the end of the calendar year, and, if he keeps on playing like this, he might have a chance to feature in Roberto Martinez's 23 for the upcoming Euros.



Benjamin **ANDRÉ**

Club: Lille OSC / Born: 1990/08/03

Position: Midfielder / At Club Since: 2019 / League Apps 2020: 24

1st in 2015/16, 3rd in 2016/17, 1st in 2017/18, 2nd in 2018/19, 5th in 2019/20, 1st in 2020/21. These numbers represent where Benjamin André stands in terms of duels won in Ligue 1. This is one of the reasons he was nicknamed as the “Opta player” in the well-known data company. He very recently became the first player to win 2500 duels in the French top-flight since Opta began collecting complete data sets on the competition.

Not the most spectacular player, not the most technical, but probably one of, if not the, first name in the starting 11 by his managers, whether that was with Rennes or is with Lille. Essential for Les Dogues, Benjamin André has won 101 duels (1st in Ligue 1), including 37 aerial battles (2nd at Lille), made 27 interceptions (2nd at Lille), 91 recoveries (3rd in Ligue 1) and 23 successful tackles (3rd in Ligue 1) in the French top-flight season to date. A crucial element of Les Dogues’ spine, alongside the likes of Mike Maignan, José Fonté and Sven Botman.

Furthermore, since his arrival in the North of France last season, Lille have lost ... 67% of their games without the midfielder in all competitions (4/6), compared to 23% with him (12/52). It is everything but a surprise that LOSC have lost their only game in all competitions this season without the defensive midfielder. Against Brest, Les Dogues lost the midfield battle and were particularly weak with their wing play.

Christophe Galtier, Lille's manager, admitted that he asked André to make some alterations to his game when arriving at the Domaine de Luchin, but has heaped praise on the work that he has done and the consistent performances of the midfielder, as his coach explained in a press conference in March: "Thanks to his experience, Benjamin André reassures the players in front of him, behind him, on his left, on his right. He is the guy, with his words, who triggers the pressing, who regulates the highs and lows in a game. He is also a reference to the other players, with his commitment, determination and behaviour."

It is pretty much impossible to think of a game in which Benjamin André in 2020 has not performed, be it in the French top-flight or in Europe. He never shirks away from responsibility, whether that is on or off the pitch. When asked at half-time against St Etienne if Lille were having trouble because of the accumulation of matches, the club fighting it out in the Europa League group stage, he answered that such excuses were not valid. He may not wear the armband week in and week out, but he is certainly acting like a real captain.

His relationship with Renato Sanches is also key to the success of the team from the North of France. The Portuguese is fantastic going forward, with his immense technical ability, ability to change direction and accelerate exceptionally in just a couple of metres. Nice-born André balances these abilities with his outstanding placement skills, reading of the game, ball trajectories and level of impact in the duel, the duo create a nightmare for opponents. He makes the players around him better, a quality like no other. Of course, one can say that he should be involved in more goals, scoring once in 2020 and not delivering any assists, but that has little to nothing to do with his role.

Where does his fighting spirit come from? Like most of us, our personality is defined by our youth and what happened during that time. Aged 11, his father passed away, making him the "chief" of the family. Gaëtan Laclef, one of his coaches when he was a youngster mentioned these difficult times to France Football: "I know it made him stronger. He developed mental strength, iron will. He was only 11 but he was very strong. I believe that because his father was not around anymore, he sort of became the man of the family. That's when he started to reveal himself. He became more mature, that's for sure."

At 15, he left his hometown, Nice, to move further south, the destination being Corsica. With Ajaccio he discovered the professional world and the French top-flight. After six seasons, he went to Rennes, where he eventually became the captain and lifted the Coupe de France. Whether it is at Ajaccio, Rennes or Lille, he is beloved by the fans, and that means more than a thousand words. Is Benjamin André underrated? Absolutely, possibly more so than anyone in European football.



Memphis **DEPAY**

Club: Olympique Lyonnais Born: 1994/02/13

Position: Forward / At Club Since: 2017 / League Apps 2020: 17

While we might grumble about Neymar's perceived penchant for diving, Dimitri Payet's seeming disinterest, or Hatem Ben Arfa having seven lives, it is safe to say that no player in Ligue 1 comes close to being as maddening as Memphis Depay. This is not to imply that the Dutchman's time in Lyon has not been a success by any means — his appetite for the big moment has been manifest on plenty of occasions, but as his time with Les Gones seemingly nears its end, we are left more with a sense of what might have been than a sense of accomplishment.

Injury, of course, has played its role in colouring how we view the captain's 2020 — after suffering a torn ACL late in 2019, that he has been able to feature as much as he has in the current campaign is nothing short of miraculous. Too, at the time of writing, only three players have recorded as many combined goals and assists as Depay, and the club are competing for the title in a meaningful way for only the second time in a decade. He is the club captain, and the centrepiece of a frightening attack alongside Karl Toko Ekambi and Tino Kadewere, but, at times, Lyon succeed despite Memphis, rather than because of him, even if his particular brand of genius does seem nigh on irreplaceable.

Take, for example, his goal record — eight is an impressive enough total, but three of those came in the form of a hat-trick against a Dijon side that have been arguably the league's poorest on the opening day of the campaign, and he has scored just twice from open play since.

In terms of his assists, the same holds true as well — three of them were against Strasbourg in a wild encounter, while the other was against a Reims side that was as overmatched as Dijon had been. This sort of analysis would seem, then, to paint Depay as a sort of flat track bully, but the truth is actually far more nuanced than that, something that is borne out in the way that he plays for his country as well.

Netherlands have long played Depay as a withdrawn striker, similar to his role with Lyon, and he has been at his best there, scoring eight goals and adding eleven assists, despite missing three matches, since the beginning of 2019, and taking his country to the final of the UEFA Nations League. Lyon seem to have realised the wisdom of this, and it does beg the question why none of his previous managers at club level attempted the same.

It is true, admittedly, that Depay's seemingly self-obsessed nature and desire for individual glory have their part to play in his wanting to operate as a centre forward. The fact of the matter is that even if his finishing can sometimes be woeful (see Lyon's recent win over Nantes, where missed at least three very presentable chances), his creativity and enjoyment of bringing other players into play is palpable.

This is something that has been true throughout his time at Lyon, especially after the departure of Nabil Fekir. By playing a central role, he can not only invite the wide forwards into play but also the midfielders - Houssem Aouar and Lucas Paqueta in particular.

Thus, while he may not readily record an assist, an incisive or ambitious pass in the lead-up to a goal is often down to him, and such is his potency with the ball at his feet that he often draws defenders to him, opening up opportunities for his teammates. As his relationship with Toko Ekambi and Kadewere continues to improve, we can likely expect more of this, even if the agate type does not reflect a sustained level of excellence.

Tracking back has never been his strong suit, nor pressing, but playing him as a slightly withdrawn centre forward, Rudi Garcia is also being canny in minimising any potential deleterious effects. Depay's lassitude is covered neatly by the combined graft of the midfield and his fellow forwards.

Had this been on show in the Champions' League Final 8 in Lisbon, it is possible that Depay would be a bit higher on this list. In the end, though, despite his sometimes-erratic form and lack of interest, his importance to Lyon's success and ability to create a result out of nothing is admirable, and if this is indeed the last time that he is a part of this document, he has been an unexpected jewel in French football over the last four years.



Anthony LOPES

Club: Olympique Lyonnais / Born: 1990/10/01

Position: Goalkeeper / At Club Since: 2000 / League Apps 2020: 24

Romain Thomas' back was not a pretty sight. Red splotches and impact bruises covered the middle of his spine after a collision with Anthony Lopes' knee during the November meeting at the Stade Raymond Kopa. "He came to knock me out," the defender insisted afterwards. Eventually, Thomas was able to continue. Just as surprisingly, given the presence of VAR, so was Lopes. Not for the first time, the recklessness of Lyon's Portuguese keeper somehow went unpunished. Despite some stunning displays in 2020, the past year has also shown that that aggression is holding one of Ligue 1's best back.

Lopes' quality has long gone more than a little under the radar, both in France and in continental terms. Despite some patchy form at times in recent seasons, in 2020 the Portuguese has a strong claim to be Ligue 1's best goalkeeper. His athletic shot-stopping and lightning reflexes make him the most spectacular player in his position across the division. Few in world football could level his match-winning ability to make stunning saves at crucial times or give the impression that, whatever happens, he simply will not be beaten when he is truly at his very best.

So strong is Lopes at his peak, it is actually rather surprising that he has been a Lyon player for so long. Although the current high standard of elite level goalkeepers combined with relatively few openings between the posts at the very zenith of European football creates something of a bottleneck for candidates to join one of the top 10 clubs like Lopes, the lack of interest from elite clubs who have recently had goalkeeping conundrums and dipped into the market to solve them, such as Chelsea and PSG, is a little curious.

Lopes' main issue is the unpredictability that can characterise the rest of his game. Although his ability to command his area, claim crosses and marshal his defence is usually very solid, his eyes-bulging, all-action, combative style can mean he appears a touch ill-disciplined and even clumsy. Compared to the serene presence of the un-flashy but unerringly consistent Mike Maignan at Lille or the quiet authority and experience of PSG's Keylor Navas or Steve Mandanda of Marseille, Lopes is found wanting.

A 'take everything' approach when dealing with onrushing forwards or challenging attacking players at corners can land him in hot water. Were the OL keeper not protected by the bizarre double standard that goalkeepers enjoy - that they're able to dangerously plough into strikers without punishment but are consistently awarded free kicks after the slightest touch - his record may be much worse.

For example, the Lopes' knee in the back of Romain Thomas went unpunished. "It's scandalous, you have to have a little common sense," said Thomas afterward. However, a collision with Steve Mounié, which led to a late penalty and eventual draw with Brest in mid-December, was the most recent example of Lopes not getting away with such unneeded physicality. Even if, by his own admission, that was a rare occasion where Lopes pulled out at the last second before clattering into Mounié.

Drawing many parallels with former Arsenal and Germany keeper Jens Lehmann, there is no doubt that the Portuguese is one of the craftier exponents of the game's dark arts. A piece of timewasting, multiple roleplay-acting in the win over PSG in December drew a smirk from Lopes afterwards, as he told Canal Plus upon seeing a replay: "Gosh, it's fantastic isn't it. How many is that? 1... 2... 3... 4..." Saint-Étienne's Mathieu Debuchy experienced similar underhand tactics after virtually no contact between the two in March as OL led the Rhône-Alpes derby with 15 minutes to play.

Despite that s***housery, genuine errors which lead to goals are still rare, especially so in 2020, while highlights have been plentiful for Lopes. A stand-out display in the Coupe de la Ligue final helped OL into a penalty shoot-out after a 0-0 draw with PSG back in July, a pair of stunning flying saves kept Lyon in the game at Lille after Marcelo was sent off. While a string of superb stops were key to OL wins away to stubborn Metz, an organised Angers and Strasbourg.

Having turned 30 in October after graduating from Lyon's prolific academy, Lopes has been an OL player for two decades and over 350 senior games. Should he continue this form and consistency however, the Portuguese could yet catch the eye of one of the truly elite level clubs from across the continent in 2021. A Lyon man through-and-through, a move will not be actively sought out by Lopes but, despite his qualities, indiscretions such as against Thomas are keeping him from becoming one of Europe's best, regardless of his employers.



10

(+2)

Mike **MAIGNAN**

Club: Lille OSC

Born: 1995/07/03

Position: Goalkeeper

At Club Since: 2015

League Apps 2020: 26

2020 has been a stunning year of growth for Lille goalkeeper, Mike Maignan. The 25-year-old has honed his craft between the sticks and has shown himself to be not only one of Lille's best players, but also one of their most important leaders. For the better part of three years, Maignan has been one of France's most consistent goalkeepers, but over the last year he has emerged as one of his position's brightest stars.

Maignan came to Lille from the Paris Saint-Germain academy for €1m in 2015. At the time, he was only 19 years old and it would take another two years before he cemented a regular place in the first team squad in what was a chaotic 2017/18 season. Manager Marcelo Bielsa was sacked after a tumultuous run and Les Dogues only narrowly avoided relegation thanks to the pragmatism of new manager, Christophe Galtier. The 2017/18 season, while a collective failure, individually saw Maignan begin to display some of the attributes that would make him Ligue 1's best goalkeeper just a year later. He finished the season with a positive post-shot expected goals rating and betrayed a comfort in operating outside his 18-yard box. At only 21 years old, they were promising first steps for a largely inexperienced first team keeper.

If 2017/18 was laying the groundwork then the 2018/19 campaign was Maignan's coming out party. Lille proved to be one of the stories of the year, as Galtier's side produced an electric brand of counter-attacking football and in the process managed a convincing second place finish behind Paris Saint-Germain. As lightning-quick as Lille were on the break, what made them so formidable was their defensive solidity. Galtier's side let in the fewest goals in the league that season with Maignan earning a career high 15 clean sheets – not allowing a goal in nearly 40% of his matches. Maignan's stellar play did not go unnoticed, as the National Union of Professional Football Players (UNFP) selected him as their goalkeeper of the season.

The start of the 2019/20 campaign was a struggle for Lille, as they wrestled with the departure of several key players. As a consequence, the manager was forced to shift to a new formation, a 4-2-2-2, and system and the growing pains were evident up until the New Year. The start of 2020 saw everything begin to click for Lille and Maignan. The club would win six of its last seven matches and Maignan's post-shot expected goal numbers began to rise. Lille was steadily moving up the table, but were only able to make it to fourth – one point behind Rennes and the final Champions' League place – before the season was abandoned because of the pandemic.

Statistically, much of 2019/20 was a down year for Maignan; his shot stopping numbers dropped and he was given less licence to command the space outside of his area. As a consequence, his defensive actions fell off a cliff to near unrecognisable levels. The promise of a fresh start in 2020/21 may have been enough to reinvigorate the young keeper. Now in his sixth season with Les Dogues, the 25-year-old is practically considered an old hand in an extremely young side and the evolution of his stature has seen him grow into one of the club's leaders on the pitch. Visually more commanding and comfortable marshalling his defenders, the French Guiana-born goalkeeper had a more take-no-prisoners approach when setting up his walls and identifying danger areas.

Lille has made no secret of the fact that in 2020/21 they believe they can challenge PSG for the title. Well stocked in nearly every position, confident in their playing style and hardened by the past two campaigns, the northern French outfit seems to have carried that confidence onto the pitch.

The club is once again fortified defensively – boasting the fewest goals against and the lowest expected goals against in Ligue 1. In the process, Maignan has collected six clean sheets at the time of writing – not allowing a goal in almost 50% of his appearances. Maignan has also returned to being a more active goalkeeper outside of his area; his total defensive actions per ninety have vaulted back up to where they are nearly level with the numbers that he was putting up under Bielsa. Consequently, he is coming out further from goal to complete the actions – embracing the all-important sweeper aspect of his game. More fundamentally, Maignan is currently exhibiting the best pure shot-stopping of his career; he currently has the league's best post-shot expected goals rating at +4.2. The 25-year-old also has the league's third best save percentage and the second lowest goals against average per ninety.

Maignan and Lille have also made their newfound confidence count in Europe. In a season that has seen the bulk of France's side crash out of European competition, Lille has been one of the few exceptions. Les Dogues have thus far been standouts in the Europa League – finishing with 11 points in a complicated group, which featured AC Milan, Sparta Prague and Celtic. A convincing 3-0 win, followed by a 1-1 draw with Serie A leading Milan, announced Lille as a team to watch in the tournament and highlighted Maignan's ability between the posts – as he racked up four saves in Lille's 3-0 win.

A regular for France at international youth level, Maignan started with Les Bleus in the U16s in 2011 and quietly progressed through the ranks until 2016 when he struggled to get capped by the U21 side. There was an extended layoff before Maignan earned his first senior call-up to the national team in 2019 and it took him another year to finally be trusted with game time. Finally, in October 2020, Maignan replaced Steve Mandanda in the second half of a 7-1 rout of Ukraine.

Competition in goal for Les Bleus remains fierce and it may still be a couple years before Maignan fully establishes himself at the international level. However, manager Didier Deschamps's decision to include him as the team's third goalkeeper is a nod toward the future, as backup keeper Mandanda, 35 years old and starter Hugo Lloris, 33 years old, slowly progress out of the side. It is likely Maignan will retain his spot heading into Euro 2020: an invaluable experience in a squad that is one of the favourites to win the tournament. Maignan's contract runs until the end of the 2022 season, but the business model at Lille means that promising young players are constantly on the transfer block. In summer, reports swirled that Maignan was being considered by Chelsea as a replacement for the struggling Kepa Arrizabalaga. In the end, the Blues decided on Rennes's Edouard Mendy – a move that spared Galtier a considerable headache.

Nonetheless, Maignan's consistent and excellent form will make him a constant target for larger clubs looking to upgrade in goal. Rumours that Tottenham and Manchester United have both looked at the 25-year-old highlights the fragility of his long-term position at Lille and emphasises the need for LOSC supporters to enjoy him while they can.

Lille have laid down a marker early in the 2020/21 season. Galtier's side have only lost one match, are once again formidable defensively and are scoring goals from a variety of sources. Only two points behind Paris Saint-Germain in second place, the top of the Ligue 1 table is shaping up to be a dog fight for the duration of the campaign. Lille cannot afford to drop unnecessary points if they want to keep pace with the reigning champions, while holding off the advances of Lyon and Marseille, who are hot on their tails. The challenge will be a test of Lille's resolve and Maignan will be at the centre of that battle. While he may be young for a keeper, the veteran is counted on to motivate his side and act as a stabilising presence in goal. The transfer rumours portend that this may be Maignan's last season at Lille and a Ligue 1 title would be a fitting end.



9

(NEW)

Renato **SANCHES**

Club: Lille OSC

Born: 1997/08/18

Position: Midfielder

At Club Since: 2019

League Apps 2020: 17

Exasperated, Swansea coach Paul Clement bowed his head and slowly rubbed his temples. Receiving the ball just inside the Chelsea half during Swansea's trip to Stamford Bridge back in 2017, Renato Sanches, under no pressure whatsoever, had inexplicably passed the ball out of play. Although he may have been distracted by the advertising hoardings, that pass was one of many woefully misplaced as the Portuguese midfielder's performance - Europe's most exciting teenage prospect only 18 months earlier - drew smirks from viewers and derision on social media. A YouTube video of his display entitled "Renato Sanches - Contender for Worst Performance in Premier League History" has 626,000 views. Three years later however, much has changed.

Sanches started the 2016/17 season in Benfica's B team as an 18-year-old, but by the end of the campaign he had signed a five-year deal with Bayern Munich as part of a £30m transfer. Such was the Portuguese midfielder's meteoric rise that he did not even make the Benfica squad until late October, but a devastating opening trio of performances in November and December quickly cemented him in the Benfica first eleven, becoming an ever-present until the end of the campaign.

Regardless of his explosion with Benfica and some impressive displays for Portugal at EURO 2016, which included his deflected yet dramatic strike against Poland in the quarter-finals, Sanches' career disintegrated yet as quickly as it had coalesced having joined Munich. In and out of the Bayern team at the start of the season, as he recovered from injury, Sanches' wastefulness in possession and inability to affect games saw him disappear from the team in the second half of the year, resulting in a left-field loan move to Swansea City for the 2017/18 campaign after just 17 Bundesliga games, mostly off the bench. Uninspiring at best either side of the catastrophic display against Chelsea, Sanches' stay in Wales was virtually ended in January due to injuries.

Disastrous spell in Wales aside, Sanches made a bullish start up on his return to Munich the following year. "I'm ready to play here this season. I have no weaknesses. I'm strong." Sanches told FCB.tv. "My smile was always there, I've never lost that," the then 20-year-old later explained to Sport1. "But now I feel that I'm more mature, so maybe that gives me a different perspective on a lot of things." Bayern CEO Karl-Heinz Rummenigge meanwhile insisted that "we were absolutely convinced of his qualities two years ago and we're not going to give up on him now."

Despite that confidence, Sanches explained that "I want to establish myself with Bayern. I feel that I've arrived now," the 2018/19 campaign was again underwhelming for the Portuguese. Another 17 Bundesliga outings resulted in just 567 minutes, with starts again a rarity despite the long-term injury to fellow midfielder Corentin Tolisso. Far from establishing himself, Sanches stagnated once more in Bavaria. The stalling of Sanches' fledgling career is a common tale. It's clear Sanches was (and still is) a gifted individual with significant potential but that talent was not allowed to develop and progress naturally or in a conducive environment as it should have been. A victim of his own early success with Benfica, which amounted to less than one full senior season at just 18, Sanches was catapulted to the summit of European football without the experience or skill-set to fulfill such gargantuan expectations.

Although powerful and exciting, Sanches remained raw and inconsistent at such a young age. Should he have remained with Benfica for two more seasons perhaps - by which time he would still barely be 20 years old - the boisterous midfielder would have been afforded the consistent game time and the breathing space needed to refine his craft, make mistakes and learn from patches of diminished form or inconsistency. Such growing pains would have remained outside the attention received by 'FC Hollywood' and the zenith of continental football. The teenage Sanches simply wasn't ready for such a jump. As a result, a move to Ligue 1 has made sense all along. Sanches' route may have been meandering but he is finally where he needs to be to progress. Outside Paris, Ligue 1 provides the perfect environment for young players to develop.

The now aptly branded 'League of Talents' is geared towards the development of young players, with 19 clubs set up to provide opportunities for burgeoning prospects to grow and eventually be sold on - often in their early twenties - as more well-rounded professionals. Ligue 1 provides a high level of quality, some of the best coaching on the continent, consistent game time for young players without intense pressure and a tactical, physical style that forces younger players to focus on their decision-making, workrate and attitude rather than simply enjoying the entropy and space, even naivety, of more open divisions such as Holland's Eredivisie or the Bundesliga. By its very nature, Ligue 1 instills young talents with a rigour other divisions don't. Underlining how crucial game time has been, Sanches told *La Voix Du Nord* last year "Honestly, I feel better than a few years ago when I signed for Bayern," the Portuguese explained. "Simply because I play more, and when I play more, I have more confidence in myself." Far from the haughtier "no weakness" comment two years previously, Sanches conceded, "I still have a lot to learn. I just try to give the best, for myself, for the team."

Still only 23, the chance to focus his talents under the radar in Northern France has been key with manager Christophe Galtier mentioning he works hard but sometimes needs to better channel his efforts. "I am an emotional person," Sanches acknowledged. "I sometimes have trouble controlling my emotions. But I don't want to lose that side of my personality, because if I lose it, I'm going to lose myself too. With the coach, there are also times when things heat up a bit, but he is aware of it, I am aware of it, and that is why I must also improve on that side." Since joining Lille in summer 2019, Sanches has clearly benefited from Ligue 1's unique position. Confidence, consistency and match craft have all noticeably improved while Sanches has taken on considerable responsibility for Lille in all areas of play as part of a two-man midfield in Galtier's attacking 4-4-2. Sanches' dynamism, progression of play, mobility and even his technical ability and vision in possession, which were criticised in Germany, have become crucial to LOSC's style and effectiveness, especially in 2020.

Although Galtier enjoys significant squad depth in Sanches' position, without the Portuguese midfielder Lille are a different proposition despite the presence of the evergreen Benjamin André alongside. However, although the deep-lying Sanches is not tasked with providing goal contributions, five goals and one assist in 40 Lille games at time of writing is one facet of his game that could be improved upon. Although Sanches laughed off potential interest from bigger clubs during that October interview with *La Voix Du Nord*, developments above Galtier at LOSC could feasibly mean that the Portuguese, injured until the start 2021, has already played his last game at Stade Pierre-Mauroy after Luxembourg businessman and Lille owner Gérard Lopez agreed to sell the club in December amid rising debts. Having acquired the club initially via a succession of loans from JP Morgan and the Elliott Management, Lopez was struggling to pay back the full €225m by summer 2021, largely thanks to the financial crisis in French football following the collapse of Mediapro's TV rights deal, the COVID-19 induced restriction of revenue streams and the club's inability to sell on more bankable playing assets in the previous transfer window.

Lopez was moved aside by new owners in December and as a result a January fire sale of playing staff is possible. With an €70m bid from an unnamed Premier League club reportedly rejected last summer, Sanches is perhaps Lille's most sellable player and Liverpool were the first to be linked in the aftermath of the news with Gini Wijnaldum's future uncertain as his contract runs down. Given LOSC supposedly need to swiftly raise over €120m, a cut-price deal could be likely for a player Lille acquired for only around €20m. Across a short career so far, Sanches has experienced much. But after misfortunate and several mis-steps he has finally found the right project, the right environment and the right league in which to develop his considerable abilities. Since joining Lille, the Portuguese midfielder has also clearly grown as an individual as well as a professional, the explosive, inconsistent and fiery teenager has been moulded into a refined but no less devastating modern midfielder by Galtier in less than two years. At a much matured 23, Sanches may now be ready to fulfill the potential that the Benfica teenager of 2016 promised. Any move back to England might be scoffed at but, unlike that night at Stamford Bridge, any doubts about the new Renato Sanches won't last long.

8



(+55)

Eduardo **CAMAVINGA**

Club: Stade Rennais

Born: 2002/11/10

Position: Midfielder

At Club Since: 2019

League Apps 2020: 23

Just as French football was finally getting used to the incandescent brilliance of Kylian Mbappé, perhaps even taking the striker for granted as he racked up titles for club and country, his successor in the role of teenage phenom has seen that level of excitement return. While Mbappé's gifts as a rapid striker are easy to appreciate, even more so as most players who come through at such a young age do so in attacking role, it takes something equally as special to break through as Eduardo Camavinga has over the last nearly two years. Playing a nuanced and skilful role as a box-to-box midfielder for Julien Stéphan's Stade Rennais, he was a (the?) key element in leading the Breton side to their best-ever place in the league, third and Champions' League football. While Rennes' European campaign was nothing to write home about, he has capped an already-successful 2020 off by becoming, having only just turned 18, not only a regular for his club but for his country as well, even scoring on his first start in October. Long seen as the next big thing in European football, his emergence, in the grand tradition of Rennes as a breeding ground for precocious midfielders (including Yann M'Vila, Tiemoué Bakayoko, and Yoann Gourcuff) Camavinga is unlike any of that trio but has taken the French game by storm by playing a fearlessly individual style.

Born in a refugee camp in Angola to Congolese parents, Camavinga moved first to Norway, where the family stayed for a year, before settling in France, in Fougères, where he played for the local side. After joining Rennes' academy at a tender age, he was viewed as a solid prospect, but as he had not been called up for any of France's underage teams until 2019, owing to his lacking French citizenship. Therefore, prior to making his professional club debut he managed to fly somewhat under the radar, appearing in a handful of matches down the back end of the 2018/19 season. What would follow, though, was a rise that was positively meteoric. As one of his youth team managers at Fougères, Nicolas Martinais, told Goal last year: "I knew his qualities, but I did not think things would go that fast and that he would have this exceptional trajectory. All the training exercises we did, we'd have just finished explaining them and he'd have already understood everything."

At that point in time, Stéphan largely favoured a 4-2-3-1, but even if Camavinga was largely deployed in a deep-lying role, it was often alongside a more prosaic, veteran player, such as Jakob Johansson. That is not, of course, to suggest that Camavinga could not do a job in screening the defence when called upon, allowing the likes of Benjamin Bourigeaud or Clément Grenier licence to get forward as necessary. This versatility and maturity offered more than a hint of what was to come, but as most of the focus on Rennes that season was on their winning the Coupe de France (a competition in which he never featured) or giving Arsenal a torrid time in the Europa League, it was not really until the following campaign that Camavinga would really make his presence felt.

Last season started well enough for Rennes: the club recorded a more than creditable draw in Montpellier on the season's opening weekend, a decent performance but one which would perhaps be looked as nigh on expected given their Coupe de France win and renewed investment in the summer window. The real test was yet to come, however, as Matchday Two saw Roazhon Park host Paris Saint-Germain, who were consensus title favourites despite an underwhelming summer in the transfer market. Playing deepest in a 3-5-2 set out to frustrate their opponents, Camavinga, to put it simply, ran the show against the trio of Marquinhos, Julian Draxler, and Marco Verratti. His combination of wiry strength and long stride made his eagerness and disruptive qualities the idea screen for the defence, especially against players as skilled on the ball as Verratti and Draxler. But, as he showed on the evening, in a foreshadowing that would be central to how his play would evolve in the weeks and months to come, he also demonstrated an inveterate desire to get forward with the ball at his feet.

That spiky character and attacking drive were manifest throughout, and he also displayed a fine eye for a pass as well, completing 98% of his passes and adding an assist for Romain Del Castillo's second-half winner as a coup de grace. Tongues were indeed wagging following the match, but it would take more than that one performance, even against a high-calibre opponent, to convince the world at large of his gifts. Went top of the table, he was rewarded with the UNFP's Ligue 1 Player of the Month award, his 17th birthday yet to have occurred.

It wasn't all smooth sailing, though. Rennes followed that early burst of brilliance with a ten-match winless run across all competitions, slipping into mid-table domestically and out of contention in Europe. Camavinga himself was far from blameless in this spell, with an ugly red card at home to Cluj chief among his trespasses, but he was also far from the only party deserving of some level of castigation. His motivation to succeed may have actually been a hindrance, as without an experienced head alongside him in midfield, to play a more defensive role following a season-ending injury to Johansson, he was often simply being given too much responsibility.

Things soon brightened for the teenager, who in the span of a week last November, became a French citizen, made his debut for Sylvain Ripoll's U21s side, and turned seventeen. Rennes' form had improved as well, but the best was yet to come, as the club, recognising the importance of veteran mentorship, brought in Steven Nzonzi on loan from AS Roma in January 2020. What the hulking former Stoke and Blackburn player lacked in pace, he more than made up for in experience, to say nothing of having the bonafides of a proven winner, with both a World Cup and a Europa League to his name, instantly giving Rennes, and Camavinga a level of veteran nous that was badly needed.

More than his experience, though, Nzonzi also brought the ability for the team to switch to a 4-3-3, with Camavinga playing in a box-to-box role alongside one of Bourigeaud or Grenier in a shift that saw Rennes win three of four matches with both players included from the off. Freed from doing the dirty work at the base of midfield, Camavinga's star continued to rise, featuring in 25 of 28 matches in the league, and being a key element in the team's run to the Coupe de France semi-finals. Even though the current global health crisis put a premature end to the season, a place in the Champions' League was due reward for the improved play on the part of Camavinga and the team as a whole.

This season, though, has been one of adjustment - the team's play in the Champions' League, while valiant, was simply too lacking in moments of quality, and even if Camavinga didn't feature in two of those matches owing to injury, it was hard not to be disappointed in his failing to make good on his promise in a group that was far from daunting. Whether the weight of expectations, the mental strain of the pandemic, or a simple adjustment to a higher level of football, there has been, on the part of the teenager, if not a sense of regression, at the very least a sense that his progress has stalled somewhat. Rennes have admittedly evinced an upturn in form following their being eliminated from the Champions' League, and while another tilt at it seems unlikely given the strong play of the likes of Lyon and Lille, there does seem to be another chapter yet to be written this season.

Key evidence of this, of course, is his impressive play with France - the competition for places is tough, with Houssem Aouar and Adrien Rabiot also trying to punch their tickets for EURO 2021. However, that he remains a part of the conversation at all is testament to his mental fortitude, perhaps the most important piece of his future and one which casts his potential and ability to truly blossom in the future in the best possible light, even as he navigates endless speculation over his next move.

A preternatural calm, a high level of intelligence and most importantly, respect for all those around him, have been the hallmarks of Camavinga's approach to the game since his early adolescence, as Landry Chauvin, another figure at Rennes academy, recalls, having told Bleacher Report: "[I] was the director of the academy for five years, and I never had any problems of behaviour or attitude with him. Never, never, never, nor did anyone else. He respects the coach as much as the cleaning lady or the supervisor of the academy."

And it's precisely that respect and overall approach which has catapulted Camavinga to this lofty place in our rankings and deservedly so — if he is still in France come the end of 2021, there is every expectation that he will be placed even more highly.



José FONTE

Club: Lille OSC
Born: 1983/12/23
Position: Defender
At Club Since: 2018
League Apps 2020: 24

Winning both the Johnstone's Paint Trophy and the European Championship is a unique achievement, but it is one that neatly distills the career and attitude of Lille defender José Fonte, the only player to achieve such a bizarre double. The driven and intensely hardworking Fonte needed just six years to transition from then League One Southampton's 2010 JP Trophy triumph over Carlisle United to starting Portugal's Euro 2016 final victory over hosts France in Paris. Now 37 years of age, 2020 has seen the best form of Fonte's career and his incredible rise shows no signs of slowing down.

"I've come here with a purpose," Fonte explained after joining Southampton from Crystal Palace in January 2010. "To help this club move to the top divisions. I want to play in the Premier League and I think I can do that quickest by moving here." Miraculously Fonte's ambitious goal was realised in little more than two years as Southampton managed successive promotions in the Portuguese's first two full seasons at St. Mary's.

Across seven years with the Saints, Fonte proved himself a consistent and adept Premier League defender, enjoying four consecutive years inside the top eight, including finishes of 7th in 2014/15 and 6th in 2015/16 under Ronald Koeman. Fonte impressed sufficiently to force his way into the Portuguese national side, winning the first of 43 caps to date in 2014, which the man in question described as "every player's dream." Fonte attributes much of his success to his upbringing and work ethic. "My background made me what I am," Fonte told reporters. "It was one of hard work and suffering, but one I'm very proud of." As the player confirms, Fonte was even receiving interest from José Mourinho's Manchester United at one stage such was his impact. As talks over an improved contract disintegrated, Fonte was allowed to join West Ham in January 2014. West Ham fans however may scoff at the assertion that Fonte has been one of Ligue 1's best centre-backs over the last 30 months after a fruitless spell with the Hammers in 2017. Hampered by injury and allowed to leave for China in February 2018, co-owner David Sullivan said at the time that: "I'm not involved in the [transfer] strategy. The manager said he wants Fonte from Southampton and [Robert] Snodgrass from Hull. My kids begged me not to sign them."

After just nine games in the Chinese Super League, Fonte returned to Europe with Lille in July 2018. In partnership with the lowkey excellence of Ligue 1 stalwart midfielder Benjamin André and the bullish but clinical forward Burak Yilmaz, Fonte helped to form a robust, effective and experienced spine of the Lille eleven. Following a difficult few months in China with Dalian Yifang after leaving West Ham, Fonte said he had to "get out" quickly and Lille's famed and now departed Sporting Director Luís Campos was the first to approach the Portuguese defender. Campos told Fonte: "I need someone with your profile, I need someone with experience, leadership skills because I have a very young squad with no experience."

Fonte's role draws parallels with those played by Kamil Glik, João Moutinho and Radamel Falcao in Monaco's 2017 Ligue 1 title win, a team also built initially by Campos. The Lille of 2020 have emulated much of what Monaco achieved in acquiring burgeoning talents from Ligue 1 and less fashionable but cost-effective markets abroad before developing those players and selling them on a sizable profit. The wizened spine of both the Monaco of 2017 and nowadays Lille were and are key to that development. It's a responsibility Fonte takes seriously.

"As soon as José arrived at the club, he spoke to me," recalled former Lille defender Gabriel Magalhães, before his summer switch to Arsenal. "He encouraged me to work hard, to seize the opportunity that would come my way one day. He's taught me a lot, on and off the pitch. If I leave Lille one day, if I can, I'll take him with me! He's helped me improve a lot." 20-year-old Dutch centre-back Sven Botman, Gabriel's summer replacement from Ajax, told Téléfoot Chaine that "José is very important to me, he has a lot of experience and coaches me a lot. I need it, even more now, in a new more physical and more tactical league. I like having this support, and I thank him for it." Both players notably improved at the Stade Pierre-Mauroy, "I've done a good job!" Fonte joked when asked about Gabriel last season.

The explosion into form of Renato Sanches is also partly down to Fonte's nurturing. "Renato had a difficult time at Bayern," Fonte told La Voix Du Nord. "I told him he needed to play and regain the joy of playing. LOSC and its coach give young people the opportunity to express themselves. Afterwards, I explained to him that his integration would be easy because other players spoke the same language, that the working conditions were good. I also told him: "You are going to play Renato and we are going to win!" And at the moment, he is the most important player of the team, isn't he?"

Although Fonte is careful to point out that he is the captain and not the coach, that leadership has been invaluable for manager Christophe Galtier's Lille, often rallying the side during half time team talks as well as on the pitch. "I'm trying to show the way," explained Fonte. "I want to have a positive influence on this team. Every day, I talk to all my teammates... I speak to transmit my energy." Acknowledging this current Lille squad is the best he's played with during his three seasons in France, Fonte boldly predicted that "everyone knows that PSG are the champions, they have world class players, but Lille are capable of beating them. Aside from that, over 38 matches, you have to be consistent. So, I want to motivate my teammates to become consistent. We will see what they are capable of." Such a fiercely competitive drive and professionalism extends to the Portuguese international's diet, conditioning and preparation. Despite turning 37 in December, L'Equipe reported in the autumn that Fonte has the second lowest body fat percentage in the LOSC squad after Jonathan Bamba.

With his young family still living in London, Fonte persists with strictly regimented sleep patterns - from 11pm to 7am in a room of 21 degrees Celsius with no light or electronic devices; an intensely regimented diet - even for a professional athlete; and continues to be the first to arrive at the training ground and the last to leave. "He has a perfect knowledge of his body," explained Galtier. "Before training José has 45 minutes of individualised work in all areas: muscle strengthening, stretching, flexibility, explosiveness, all supervised by our coaches. And half an hour after the sessions." Fonte's leadership, by example this time, energises his colleagues, says the coach. "When you have a player like that, young people watch him," Galtier enthused. "They say to themselves: "ah, is that the job?" Yes that's it!"

Fonte remains more forthright on his influence. "I'm the oldest in the team, I play international football, I won the Euros and with all due respect, they have to listen," he said. "I don't feel like my physique is declining," Fonte insists. "Some say I am slower now but I never have been quick. I use my intelligence, anticipation, technique and good positioning. I try to think a second or two before the opponent. It doesn't mean that I don't work on my strength and speed. I always have. And when I look at the data, it hasn't dropped since Southampton."

A motivating force on and off the field, Fonte has risen to become one of Ligue 1's best and most commanding defenders over the last three seasons. Described by Gabriel as "like a second coach on the pitch," Fonte has marshalled Ligue 1's meanest defence in 2020. Across 24 Ligue 1 games up to mid-December, LOSC had conceded just 16 times, eight fewer than PSG and four fewer than the next best, Marseille. The fact that only PSG (67) and Lyon (40) had scored more goals than Lille's tally of 39 in that time underlines Galtier's miraculous tactical balancing act between attack and defence. Unerring consistency defined Fonte's year but, like any great leader, some of his best performances have been saved for key moments. Aiding a clean sheet in the 3-0 Europa League win at San Siro, a powerful display in the first Northern derby for five seasons saw off Lens, a steadfast performance earned a point against rivals Marseille at the Vélodrome and a thunderbolt header to beat Bordeaux in December put Lille top of Ligue 1 – these were all highlights.

Upon signing an extension in 2019, Fonte quoted Michael Jordan, saying "Talent wins games but it's teamwork and intelligence wins championships." Despite the boardroom uncertainty, going into 2021 Lille unexpectedly find themselves in a Ligue 1 title race. Having jumped from the Johnstone's Paint Trophy to Euro 2016 success to the Champions' League with Lille last season, the determination, drive and leadership of captain José Fonte might just be enough to propel Les Dogues to glory.



6

(+46)

Keylor NAVAS

Club: Paris Saint-Germain

Born: 1986/12/15

Position: Goalkeeper

At Club Since: 2019

League Apps 2020: 20

One of a handful of positions with which Paris Saint-Germain's bosses have struggled since the beginning of the QSI "project" is goalkeeper. Nicolas Douchez, Salvatore Sirigu, Kevin Trapp, Gianluigi Buffon and Alphonse Areola have all been given at least one chance to make the position their own, and each has come up short for a variety of reasons. Arguably those who came closest were Sirigu and Areola and, despite some stand-out performances at times, in both cases the criticism often levelled at them was that they only made the regulation saves and did not make the special stops that win not only matches but competitions.

That being the criterion, there are very few goalkeepers in world football who can fit the bill. However, Keylor Navas has already shown in his short time in the Parisian capital that he could be the man to help the club make that final elusive leap. Contrary to PSG themselves, Navas came from a modest background in rural Costa Rica and was raised by his grandparents after his parents moved to the United States in search of a better life. Desperately missing them, Navas consumed himself in football but originally suffered rejection from the big club of the region as he was considered too small. He eventually joined top-flight Saprissa, his coach Roger Mora impressed by his force of character: "technically he had some gaps but he had enormous mental strength in order to improve. He always wanted to be the best and he eventually overtook all the other keepers because he knew what he wanted". Mora was in no doubt about why Navas – who sometimes didn't have enough money for gloves or to pay for his bus ticket to training – was so dedicated: "he quickly became the man of the family. Every time he went to training, he saw it as a responsibility. He wanted to succeed in order to help his family". Navas broke into Saprissa's first team in 2005 and, over the next five years, helped the club to win six championships as well as one CONCACAF Champions' League. Unsurprisingly, he also broke his way into the Costa Rican national team, winning the first of his 91 caps to date in a World Cup qualification match against Suriname in 2008.

Now ready for a move to Europe, Navas enlisted an agent to tout him to the larger Spanish clubs but without success, and the keeper found himself at La Liga 2 club Albacete. He immediately took over the No.1 role and kept his place all season, but was unable to prevent the club being relegated to the third tier. He impressed sufficiently, however, to secure a loan move to Levante, to be their back-up keeper. Although the move was made permanent 12 months later, Navas amassed only 10 La Liga appearances in his first two seasons – although the second of those campaigns saw him keep eight clean sheets in 12 Europa League matches.

Navas used the time to better understand the demands of a top European goalkeeper, going as far as changing his diet and losing five kilos. He became the regular first choice in 2013/14, playing all but one La Liga match and keeping 17 clean sheets in the process, earning him the goalkeeper of the year award, ahead of future rival Thibaut Courtois, then of Atletico. His real break-out season ended with a starring role in Brazil as Costa Rica reached the quarter-finals of the World Cup, where he kept another clean sheet against the Netherlands, only for the team to lose on penalties. A small personal consolation was being voted second-best goalkeeper of the tournament. He was rewarded for his stellar season with a move to Real Madrid, first as back-up to Iker Casillas; then becoming No.1 for the 2015/16 season. While Los Merengues were pipped to the title by one point, Navas kept nine clean sheets in 11 matches as Real won the Champions' League. The following season, although his personal statistics were less impressive as he recovered from Achilles tendon surgery, Navas went one better, Real winning La Liga as well as retaining the Champions' League trophy.

A third straight Big-Eared Cup came in 2017/18, Navas recognised with the UEFA Goalkeeper of the Year award. However, the following season saw Navas frustrated to drop to back-up behind newly-arrived Courtois. At almost 32, it was time to move on and, on the last day of the 2019 summer transfer window, Navas joined PSG for €15m, with Areola going the other way on loan. Thomas Tuchel explained the reasoning: "As it was Navas, we decided it was a good move. I think that, this window, we've gained in personalities and character. It wasn't an easy decision regarding Alphonse, but we decided to recruit [Navas] for his personality, his team spirit. I have enormous confidence in him."

In a changing room becoming renowned for internal tensions, big egos, yet also consistent under-performance and mental wilting in important matches, Navas was signed to make a difference. Not only was he a multiple Champions' League winner, automatically imbuing him with respect and authority; he also had the temperament to counter the hotter, more excitable heads in the group. As former Spain goalkeeper Santiago Canizares observes: "he is aware of how privileged he is and so has been able to adapt to teams with very different objectives and atmospheres. His coaches and team-mates have always loved him. Despite winning three Champions' Leagues he always retains the attitude that he has just arrived, is starting from scratch and needs to prove himself. He is a very religious man, very humane, respectful. No one could get angry with him. He is a real family man and homebody. You wouldn't see him in a nightclub."

Although the Courtois clan may not entirely agree (Thibaut's dad, Thierry: "Petr Čech welcomed him [Thibaut to Chelsea], always gave him advice, helped him to integrate – he was a real team-mate he could always count on. We can't say the same about Keylor"), Navas has quickly become an integral part of the PSG team, on and off the pitch. Indisputably the number one, Navas has barely put a foot wrong since his arrival, immediately setting the tone with a clean sheet against former club Real Madrid in the Champions' League group stage and then making a record 10 saves in the return match to help PSG to a draw.

2020 has brought much success. Domestically, he won the treble, keeping 11 clean sheets and conceding only 18 in 21 Ligue 1 appearances, and remaining unbeaten in both cup finals – saving the decisive spot-kick to beat Lyon in the final ever Coupe de la Ligue final. Although the second half of his season was less impressive in the league (just three of the 11 clean sheets, and conceding four against Amiens), he can be forgiven due to his focus on the Champions' League, where he showed his influence on and off the pitch.

After PSG's first leg defeat to Dortmund in the "seizièmes" the players were filmed partying at Cavani, di Maria and Icardi's birthday celebrations – with Navas chanting "this is how we win the Champions League!" Although contradicting Canizares' claim, it turned out to be an important moment. It was he who stood up to Leonardo on behalf of the team after the incident, advising that such moments of release were essential to knit a team closer together. He was proven right as PSG won the second leg to secure their place in the Final 8, then did the business on the pitch too, his performance a big part in sparing PSG's blushes in their late win over Atalanta in the quarter-final. Although he missed the semi-final win, he was a part of PSG's valiant fall at the final hurdle against Bayern, the team very close to fulfilling his post-Dortmund prophecy.

So far this season, whether due to anti-climax, tiredness, injuries or off-pitch tensions, PSG have been far from their best, struggling before coming through the Champions' League stage and already suffering a surprising four league defeats. However, Navas missed two of them through coronavirus/injury and, in the 11 Ligue 1 matches he has played, has kept seven clean sheets and conceded only six. At times, as final rampart, his understated yet reliably excellent performances have prevented PSG from suffering further embarrassment.

At 34 years of age, Navas is not the long-term solution for PSG. But he has already shown in his fewer than 18 months in the French capital what a shrewd acquisition he is. He has proven that he has the ability and attitude to ensure that he doesn't hide away in the big matches. He also has the authority to federate a dressing room, leading by example and experience. The club is still searching for the Holy Grail of the Champions' League trophy and there are still holes in their squad that mean that it remains a tough challenge. But in Navas, they have someone who could yet prove the difference between agonising failure and final success.



Wissam **BEN YEDDER**

Club: AS Monaco
Born: 1990/08/12
Position: Forward
At Club Since: 2019
League Apps 2020: 26

Wissam Ben Yedder's diminutive stature made him second choice for many managers throughout the early portion of his career. The deference given to bigger, stronger centre forwards often saw less technically capable strikers start ahead of the Spanish born striker. It seemed with each consecutive season Ben Yedder was once again forced to prove himself and slowly recaptured the starting spot.

The cycle was finally broken when Ben Yedder arrived at Monaco to start the 2019/20 season. The club from the Principality handed Sevilla €40m for the striker's services and made it abundantly clear that he would be their talisman going forward. Ben Yedder did not disappoint, finishing in a tie with Kylian Mbappé for the most Ligue 1 goals in 2019/20, while forming a formidable partnership up front with Islam Slimani. The offensive output re-established Monaco as a challenger at the top of the Ligue 1 table, following a disastrous 2018/19 campaign in which the club finished a narrow two points away from the relegation playoff place.

Ben Yedder began his career at Toulouse, starting in the first team squad at the tender age of 19 - eventually establishing himself as a regular starter two years later during the 2012/13 season at age 21. The youngster's proficiency at Toulouse was staggering, in four of his five years as a regular starter for Les Violets he finished in the top five in the Ligue 1 scoring charts – in his one down season, he still remained in the top 10. His counterparts, Alexandre Lacazette, Michy Batshuayi, Valère Germain and Edinson Cavani drew most of the plaudits – some earning high profile and expensive moves to new clubs. For Ben Yedder his size seems to have played a factor, as despite being one of the league's most consistent offensive performers he was handed a modest €9.5m transfer to Sevilla.

The Andalusian club and its Sporting Director, Monchi, had long been major identifiers of undervalued talent and Ben Yedder fit the bill perfectly. Nonetheless, he was not immediately handed the starting role – forced into the background behind a handful of more high-profile forwards. Yet Ben Yedder's play saw him collect more minutes as the 2016/17 season progressed and he finished the campaign as the club's leading scorer – with 18 goals across all competitions. It was not until 2018/19 that Sevilla fully embraced Ben Yedder as the regular starter. Manager Pablo Machín saw the value in the technically gifted forward and handed him the offensive reigns. That season, Ben Yedder notched 18 goals and nine assists across all competitions – forming an underrated attacking unit with future Paris Saint-Germain player, Pablo Sarabia.

The campaign led Sevilla to cash in on their investment and in 2019 Ben Yedder returned to his roots in Ligue 1. He joined a Monaco side looking to add some veteran leadership to an extremely young squad, which had underperformed a year earlier. The French international unpacked his full suitcase of skills during his first season at Stade Louis II. His 18 goals put him in a tie for the most goals in the league with Kylian Mbappé and his four assists were good enough for second on the team. Ben Yedder averaged the fourth most box touches in the league, while finishing top five for Monaco in passes into the penalty area.

The striker's ability to find pockets of space in the opposition box, as well as work in extremely tight areas is a nod to his days as a futsal player during which time, he represented France at the U21 level. He is extremely adept at combination play in the final third, which was a major factor in the prodigious relationship with Slimani. Evidencing this ability to negotiate in the final third is the sheer number of shot-creating actions Ben Yedder produces from 'live pass' situations; the striker produced the second most in Ligue 1 during the 2019/20 campaign. In the back half of the season, he averaged a stunning 3.3 live pass shot creating actions per ninety; managing eight in a single match against Montpellier in February.

To start the 2020/21 season, Ben Yedder's underlying statistics have dropped slightly. He is no longer recording the staggering non-penalty expected goals plus expected assist numbers he was a year earlier and his shot creating actions are down. However, his raw goal scoring numbers remain consistent – a testament to his finishing ability. Over the course of his career the forward has managed 0.5 goals per ninety minutes and the 2020/21 season has been no different with six goals in 12 matches.

Similar to his experiences domestically, Ben Yedder has never been handed anything at international level. Coming out of Toulouse he was hardly considered by France at the youth level internationally. He did not feature for France until the U21 level and even then, only made nine appearances. The fact that he is of Tunisian descent made him a prime target for the North African side's national setup. They are reported to have approached the striker on several occasions, but were never successful in convincing him to join.

It took Ben Yedder 189 professional matches and 74 goals before he was called up to the French national team. Didier Deschamps capped him in a friendly match against Columbia in 2018 and subsequently named him in the reserve side for the 2018 FIFA World Cup. It was not until 2019 that Ben Yedder became a regular in Deschamps' squad a trend he has carried over into 2020 where the striker has featured three times for Les Bleus – collecting two assists.

Now 30 years old and an important part of a remerging Monaco side, Ben Yedder continues to be linked with a move away from the Principality. Over the summer rumours persisted about Manchester United and Barcelona being interested, but club boss Oleg Petrov insisted the French international would remain at the club. More recently, Manchester City are said to be circling the striker and if Monaco's history in the transfer market is to mean anything, Ben Yedder will be made available for the right price.

For now, however, he remains in Ligue 1 and part of a Monaco side that once again looks capable to battling for a European place. The signing of new manager, Niko Kovac over the summer signalled a new era and the players have responded accordingly, as the club hovers near the top of the table. Monaco has improved defensively, ranking in the top five in expected goals against, but the club's goalkeeping has been subpar with the league's fifth worst post-shot expected goals rating. The dynamic means that while Monaco is limiting quality chances on their goal, they are decidedly midtable in terms of goals against.

Fortunately, the attack has not lost its bite: ranking third in Ligue 1 in expected goals and producing the fifth most shots on target per ninety. The side has also become far more adept at pressing – sitting second in passes allowed per defensive action. A by-product has been a significant jump in territorial advantage, which sees Monaco third in passes completed within 20 yards of their opponent's goal and box touches.

Ben Yedder has had to fight hard for every opportunity he has been given in football, as his size has often been used to underrate his abilities. Throughout his career he has shown that he is one of France's most consistent goal scorers, yet it took over half his career to get called up to the national team. Finally, at Monaco, he has been trusted to lead the line on a weekly basis and the side from the Principality is benefitting.



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Ángel DI MARÍA

Club: Paris Saint-Germain

Born: 1988/02/14

Position: Forward

At Club Since: 2015

League Apps 2020: 21

After impressively being ranked second in the Get French Football News 100 2019, Angel Di Maria's style of play has shifted as he has turned from 31 to 32 years old. In 2019, Di Maria performed well across a multitude of systems, as a dynamic game-changing force. In 2019, he demonstrated immeasurable consistency, physicality, and work-rate. He has now begun to adapt his game. In Thomas Tuchel's first season with PSG, he had set himself the goal of fitting Di Maria, Neymar, Kylian Mbappé and a striker, all in the same system. This led to nine different recognised formations being used in 2018/19, when Di Maria scored 12 goals and assisted 11 times. The results for PSG were less rewarding though. They were knocked out of the UEFA Champions' League by a weakened Manchester United. They won Ligue 1 by 15 points, but there was a clear sense that the team had not clicked under Tuchel.

This was evident in beginning of the 2019/20 season. By December 2019, PSG had suffered embarrassing losses to Rennes, Reims, and Dijon. They produced unconvincing wins over Brest and Club Brugge. Di Maria had featured everywhere from right-wing, to left-wing to central midfield. This period though, laid the groundwork for 2020. This year, Angel di Maria found a more settled role, and PSG enjoyed their best year since the Qatari 2011 takeover. At the beginning of the year, there were whispers of a new PSG. One that set up in a gung-ho 4-2-4 formation. Although players like Pablo Sarabia and Mauro Icardi would swap in and out of the system, it had clearly been personally designed for Mbappé, Neymar, Edinson Cavani and Angel di Maria. It was more like a 4-2-2-2, with Mbappé stretching the opposition defence upfront, creating space for Neymar and Di Maria to drift centrally from wide positions. While Neymar would get on the end of chances, Di Maria was more impactful in build-up play. The 4-2-2-2 system was first used in Ligue 1 against Montpellier in early December 2019. PSG won 3-1 away from home, blowing the opposition away. This game was one of the last 11 league matches PSG played in 2019/20. Di Maria played in 10 of those games, all in this more intriguing role. PSG won nine times and drew twice.

In the early months of 2020, PSG played some of the most dazzling and ruthless football that had ever graced the Parc de Princes. Di Maria was vital to this. In previous years we had seen the Argentine produce endless work-rate, and beautiful skill on the ball. 2020 though, was the year for Di Maria to boast the vision of an aging superstar. Di Maria's goal output dropped to just a couple of goals, but he assisted his teammates an outstanding eight times in the final 10 Ligue 1 games of the previous campaign. January 2020 began in fine fashion, when Di Maria set up Mbappé with a wonderfully disguised pass against Monaco. In February, Di Maria assisted both goals in an important 2-1 away victory over Nantes. He terrorised the western side, using his free-roaming role to pop up on both wings. When his dangerous delivery from a corner led to Thilo Kehrer's winning goal, it showed the only effect age had on Di Maria, was improved his already formidable technique.

He followed this match up with another Ligue 1 masterclass against Lyon. His first goal started the scoring in a 4-2 win. Receiving the ball on the right-wing, he dazzled Marçal with a lightning quick shimmy, finding a split second's worth of space inside the box, and ruthlessly firing into the bottom corner. Marçal incidentally would go on to have his worst game in a Lyon shirt. He produced an infamously amusing own goal, that continues to circulate social media to this day. Di Maria made sure the game was wrapped up in quality though, assisting Edinson Cavani's 199th PSG goal. PSG practically wrapped up the title even before Ligue 1 was cancelled. By late March, they were 12 points ahead of second placed Marseille. They would have had a game in hand too. Di Maria finished as Ligue 1's top assister. Only Dimitri Payet completed more than Di Maria's 78 key passes. Of course, this formality was far away from PSG's central focus; the Champions' League. In the group stage, Di Maria was one of the leading performers in the entire competition. He scored two goals in a 3-0 beating of Real Madrid. He completed an outstanding four assists in a single match against Club Brugge. The knockout stages though, is where Di Maria did his best to drag Les Parisiens to the glory they had longed for.

Tuchel set PSG up more defensively in the Champions' League, and this was on display in the round of 16. The trident of Di Maria, Mbappé and Neymar was isolated all game in a 4-3-3. For the return leg in March though, Tuchel switched to this 4-2-2-2, and Di Maria was able to shine between the lines. In a senior career spanning 15 years, Di Maria had found his position as a hybrid winger/attacking-midfielder. Just 25 minutes into the game, he had already dropped in-between Raphaël Guerreiro and Manuel Akanji, before spinning, and playing a great through ball through to Cavani. While the striker would miss this chance, another fantastic corner delivery from Di Maria would help open the scoring for PSG. Later in the first half, he set up the move for the second goal. Tuchel's system was perfect for entrusting Neymar and Di Maria to use their positional intelligence to cause endless havoc. It is a shame that this 4-2-2-2 would not appear again in the Champions' League.

PSG would not play the quarter-final vs Atalanta for another 22 weeks. In that time, they were only treated with two competitive fixtures. This clearly led Tuchel to being more cautious, opting to drop a forward against Atalanta in August 2020. Di Maria would miss the game too due to suspension. This Atalanta game is one that has nearly been forgotten, but it speaks a lot about the passion that PSG were exuberating in 2019/20. The moments following Choupo-Moting's last minute winner were incredible. Thomas Tuchel screamed till the energy in his then-crippled body (he was wearing a foot brace following an injury sustained playing 5-a-side football) left him empty. Marco Verratti, Di Maria and Layvin Kurzawa leaped up and down in the stands, nearly falling over the seats in front of them. Even without the departed Cavani and Meunier, August 2020 looked set in stone to be a month to remember for Les Parisiens.

This feeling of invincibility was flowing through the veins of the PSG players in the semi-final. They demolished RB Leipzig. Angel Di Maria was, again, instrumental. His continuously fantastic set-piece delivery led to the first PSG goal, when Marquinhos' header opened the deadlock 12 minutes in. Just before the end of the first half, a well organised PSG press led to Di Maria picking up the ball in the box, and coolly finishing past Peter Gulacsi. In the second half, Leipzig looked to launch a comeback. However, Di Maria put in a great cross for, surprisingly, Juan Bernat, to head into the net from close range. It was a man of the match performance for Angel Di Maria. His tendency to perform in the big matches is nothing new of course. His stock arguably was at its highest following his mesmerising display in the 2014 Champions' League final for Real Madrid. Yet there was something more confident and cultured about his play in 2020.

The Champions League final however, was less fulfilling and more heart-breaking for Di Maria and PSG. For the player who achieved the most assists in the 2019/20 Champions' League, the final was disappointing for the Argentine. Inside the first 25 minutes, he fired a shot over the bar from inside the box on his weaker right foot. With 70 minutes remaining, he did superbly to set up Marquinhos in a one vs one situation, but Manuel Neuer smothered the Brazilian. Aside from these two highlights, PSG and Di Maria's powerful drive to glory was halted by Bayern Munich. Back in July, Di Maria described the chance to win the trophy in Lisbon as a dream. He had previously lived there for three years. The disappointing failure to fulfil that dream no doubt mentally exhausted him.

Things grew worse after August. Di Maria has had his career disrupted even more than in the days of his injury-plagued spell with Manchester United. He was one of the PSG players to contract COVID-19, sitting out the start of the 2020/21 Ligue 1 campaign. He returned without pre-season training, and has taken time to regain fitness. Di Maria has played in just 53% of available league minutes, although has contributed to six goals. For PSG, it has been a trickier campaign. They have faced more injuries and suspensions than any other French side. Tuchel has felt pressure too, and even called out Angel Di Maria in late December. He told the press, "I feel Di Maria has lost some things", challenging him to regain his form. The German has now been sacked.

While surface statistics and media comments may suggest it, Di Maria's career is not winding down. Just the world class performance against Rennes in November 2020 showed us Di Maria is still one of the most technically gifted players in the world. His growing set-piece ability will give Argentina an edge going into Copa America 2021.

Angel di Maria started 2020 as a man with fire in his veins, finally in a settled position which personally catered to his long list of skills and abilities. The 19 assists he made in 2020 came from wide-ranging situations, some showcasing his intelligent decision-making, others his ever-improving skill with a dead ball. The romantic conclusion of a Champions' League victory in Portugal, sadly did not come to fruition. However, his performances in France and across Europe expanded upon a secret only hinted at in 2019. Neymar & Mbappé will still grab the headlines for PSG. Lionel Messi will continue to reign leader of modern Argentinian football.

Angel di Maria though, will continue into his thirties as one of the game's greatest unsung heroes. In a modern world where entertaining football is prioritised over winning 'ugly', Di Maria is one of the game's leading protagonists. After 2020, he has shown us he is still one of the keys to PSG's decade-long plot to conquer Europe. If the reports from December 2020 are true, that Di Maria is negotiating a new contract with PSG, 2021 may still be a brighter year for 'Fideo'.



Kylian **MBAPPÉ**

Club: Paris Saint-Germain

Born: 1998/12/20

Position: Forward

At Club Since: 2017

League Apps 2020: 21

While Kylian Mbappé may have slipped a few places in this year's Get French Football News 100 rankings, it is only because we've endeavoured to hold the striker, who has (unbelievably) only just turned 22, to an increasingly higher standard, and to acknowledge the consistent excellence of those above him, notably his club teammates Marquinhos and Neymar. After leading Ligue 1 in scoring in a truncated 2019/20 season, he has done the same through the first fifteen matches of the new campaign, having found the net ten times, in as many appearances, averaging a goal for roughly every hour he has been on the pitch.

It is old news, though, that he has been able to run roughshod over opposing defences domestically. Even if he has added more creativity to his play of late, benefiting from the arrival of the equally prodigal Moise Kean as a near-ideal foil in attack, he will also be judged on his play for his country, and in the Champions' League. In the latter, of course, an ill-timed challenge from Loïc Perrin in the Coupe de France final saw his time in Lisbon be largely ineffective. His struggles to get back to full fitness in an attempt to recover from an ankle injury played an outsized role in hindering his potency in the Final 8. It should also be noted that his ineffectiveness in summer did not hinder his team's success in Portugal in an outsized way. However, in the case of Marquinhos, the degree to which the team suffers in his absence is patent, underscoring the notion that cruciality is not always measured in terms of goals scored.

On the whole, though, Mbappé remains inarguably football's most exciting young talent, evincing a rare breed of achievement and potential that continue to augur well for him being the heir apparent to Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo vis-à-vis becoming a transcendent superstar. That balance is also reflected in a level of maturity in terms of already having "been there," something which he means he, having won a World Cup at 19, is rarely fazed by the odd big occasion, telling *Téléfoot* ahead of the Champions' League final, "The pressure is being handled well. I have always dreamed of this kind of match. I have already played high-stakes games like this."

While he may have struggled at times for his club, something that is perhaps a product of Thomas Tuchel's proclivity for changing tactical systems (more on this and its impact on Mbappé later), he has cautiously embraced a different role for his country this year. While a combination of a thigh injury and a case of COVID-19 contracted in September meant that he only featured in four of the seven matches that France played this year, his shift to a more central role appears well on its way to paying dividends for both player and country.

With Didier Deschamps aiming to keep faith in the evergreen Olivier Giroud as his primary striker, he needed a way to deploy both Mbappé and Antoine Griezmann, laying down a template that France can theoretically follow through the World Cup in 2022, the Chelsea man's form and fitness permitting. Whereas the 2018 World Cup saw Mbappé played on the right flank in a mutable 4-2-3-1/4-3-3, with Blaise Matuidi's work-rate and flexibility able to stitch things together to give the attack more freedom, the former Paris Saint-Germain man's having decamped to Miami means that he no longer figures in the manager's plans, necessitating a rethink.

The emergence of Marcus Thuram as a viable option on the left flank may yet change the final formation, but in an effort to afford Mbappé more space closer to goal, Deschamps has taken to playing a 4-3-1-2/3-4-1-2, with Griezmann playing behind a partnership of (when both are fit) Giroud and Mbappé. Whether this role is best suited to Griezmann's knack for running off the shoulder of Giroud or drifting wide is a matter of some debate, but Mbappé has taken to a freer role (and less defensive responsibility) like a duck to water, and his brand of controlled chaos is that much more effective in this system. It is early, yet, but if France were not already favourites for the European Championships, the ability of Mbappé to thrive in that freer role will only boost their credentials in this regard — potentially foreshadowing a historic run for the player of having played a key role in winning both the World Cup and the European Championship before having turned 23.

However, as much as Mbappé has impressed (albeit in a limited sample size) for his country this season, his sometimes-contentious relationship with Thomas Tuchel, combined with his own desire to play as much as possible and the German's tactical tweaks have led to a somewhat bumpier ride. Before castigating Tuchel too firmly, it is essential to note that the club's hierarchy had a middling transfer window. The manager and his superiors were clearly not on the same page as regards to what sort of targets were needed to replace the departed quartet of Thiago Silva, Thomas Meunier, Eric-Maxim Choupo Moting and Edinson Cavani, with neither an orthodox centre back or a right-back having been brought in. Tuchel instead resorted to shoehorning Danilo Pereira and Alessandro Florenzi into positions to which they are far from suited.

Moreover, this says nothing about how his hand has similarly been forced by long-term injuries to Mauro Icardi, Pablo Sarabia, and Juan Bernat, as well as a six-match ban domestically for Ángel Di María, as well as positive diagnoses for COVID-19 for Neymar, Di María, and Leandro Paredes in addition to Mbappé. But nonetheless, there has been a palpable degree of frustration for Mbappé, cycling as he has among different roles, playing on either flank, centrally on his own, or even, of late, as part of a strike partnership with Moise Kean ahead of a 3-5-2. This is not to suggest that Mbappé's inventiveness has been hindered by any of this, but only to note that some aspects of his relationship with the now fired manager may have suffered, particularly in light of the club's uneven form domestically.

Too, there have been issues from the player's perspective over how Tuchel has managed his playing time, particularly through the torrent of fixtures that has been the current campaign's Champions' League group stage. One would do well to be reminded, of course, of not only the deleterious effects that that amount of matches can have on even a young and fit player, to say nothing of the lingering effects of Mbappé's bout with COVID-19. It is clear from incidents such as Mbappé refusing to shake the German's hand after being substituted off against Montpellier at the beginning of 2020, that despite the success that Mbappé had under the German, that there were frictions between the duo.

Mbappé has said the right things in the press, of course, averring in August ahead of the Champions' League final that, "(Tuchel) is succeeding in putting us in good spirits. We have had a lot happen this season, highs and lows. That happens to all managers in the world. At PSG you notice it more. We believe in him and we will also be playing for him tomorrow."

While things did seem to have improved after the team's coming back from a difficult situation in the Champions' League, Tuchel having readily admitted that for him, balancing the desires of a dressing room full of stars, "felt like I was more of a sports politician or sports minister than a coach." It was not enough to save the German's job. Mbappé's series of Champions' League performances are also worth analysing — Barcelona, in disarray as they are, are hardly likely to be a terribly stern test in the Round of 16, but Mbappé, even factoring in his battling injury in the summer, was regularly stymied in that competition in 2020, scoring just once from open play in ten starts in Europe. Even that one goal was of no importance against an Istanbul Basaksehir side who were well-beaten in a 5-1 drubbing.

Whether it's a matter of opponents setting up to stop him tactically or his lacking a sense of rhythm vis-à-vis the changes that Tuchel had made is a matter of some contention, but it is a strange lacuna in his game. Some might have it that Neymar is often more eager in Europe to take the reins against opponents of the highest calibre, but it is something that will need resolving - even as Mbappé did much to change the game against Atalanta, for example, when he came off the bench to completely open up what had been a fairly tense contest.

Domestically, though, it would be remiss of us not to highlight his achievements - after finishing joint-top scorer last season, he seems well on his way to do the same in the current campaign, despite having been frustrated by a series of niggling injuries that have seen him start fewer matches than he perhaps would like. He has even brought assists back into his game, something which has not always been a constant in Paris, particularly as he achieved an impressive tally of eight with Monaco in his final season in the Principality. Having Neymar fit and firing has helped in this regard, and so, too, has his burgeoning relationship with young Kean, whose combination of workrate and physicality has been instrumental in creating more space.

Thus, while having slipped a few places might seem a matter of negativity on our part, it is again only a nod to his own standards and consistency having slipped the smallest bit, and the play of his teammates being at such a high level. The future remains bright for Mbappé in Paris — if he isn't sold in an effort to bring in Lionel Messi, as some rumours have had it of late. His importance to both his club and his country remains paramount, and if he can evince just that extra bit of flexibility as regards his role on the pitch (and within the team) there is no doubt he will be back atop these rankings sooner rather than later.



2

(+9)

NEYMAR

da Silva Santos

Club: Paris Saint-Germain

Born: 1992/02/05

Position: Forward

At Club Since: 2017

League Apps 2020: 12

The lights went out. Neymar, his father and Santos' president Luis Álvaro were plunged into darkness. A single chair in the corner remained illuminated. Pointing, Álvaro said: "This is the chair of the great national sports hero. Since Ayrton Senna's death, this chair has been vacant. If Neymar Jr. stays at Santos and refuses Chelsea's proposal, he will take his first step toward sitting in this chair." As he explained in *Neymar: My Story, Conversations With My Father*, Neymar refused Chelsea's 'huge transfer bid' back in 2010 but, a decade on, is the Brazilian any closer to taking Senna's seat? The iconic Formula One racing driver Ayrton Senna's significance in Brazil cannot be understated. An intensely passionate, spiritual and eloquent sportsman, a genius in his field as the greatest driver of them all. Through his trio of world championships in 1988, 1990 and 1991, Senna helped over one hundred million ordinary, disadvantaged Brazilians dream. There was a sense that all Senna did was for Brazil, that his achievements were for all Brazilians and that he proudly embodied all that was good about his country.

Senna's death in May 1994 after his Williams FW16 skidded from Imola's high speed Tamburello corner and into concrete barriers, left a huge void in the world's sporting psyche and threw Brazil into national mourning. "I think the spirit that we had in '94, we got it from Ayrton." Brazilian goalkeeper Cláudio Taffarel told FIFA.com. "His accident was devastating for the whole of Brazil. When he died, we all said, 'Let's go out and win this World Cup for Ayrton Senna.' Fortunately, we managed to do that and honour him with a banner after the final: 'Senna, aceleramos juntos' (Senna, we accelerated together). I'm very proud that we won the World Cup for Senna." "[Senna was a] one-of-a-kind guy. He was so charismatic yet so humble. He walked into our hotel – not posing like celebrities do, no security around him, no fuss – and you would have thought he was just a regular guy," Taffarel remembers. "Funnily enough, he was convinced that one of us – he wasn't sure if it would be him or us – would become four-time world champion."

Neymar and Senna are different personalities but parity exists between their talents and potential for influence, both in a sporting and broader social sense. But Neymar's path towards taking Senna's place has been a meandering one since Álvaro's piece of boardroom drama back in 2010. 2020 nevertheless was Neymar's best year yet in Paris. Avoiding the major injuries of the previous two seasons helped, but before lockdown, Neymar had finally started to gather momentum at a key time of the season. Lyon, Montpellier and Monaco were blown away by some devastating performances before the forward scored in each leg to beat Borussia Dortmund in the Champions' League last 16 in March. However, when football returned, Neymar appeared understandably sluggish. A trio of woeful finishes nearly saw PSG exit the Champions' League to Atalanta at the quarter-final stage and the Brazilian became a peripheral figure against Bayern Munich in the final. Nevertheless, by mid-December, he had still managed 19 goals and 12 assists in 27 games across 2020 in all competitions for PSG, having reached 50 PSG goals one game faster than Zlatan Ibrahimović, a record.

Even so, the PSG forward's output per game in 2020 had dropped below Harry Kane, Ciro Immobile, teammate Kylian Mbappé, Erling Haaland, Lionel Messi, Cristiano Ronaldo and was a long way adrift of Robert Lewandowski's frankly astonishing record of 41 goals and 15 assists across 37 games. Pivotal, a lack of consistent influence in the bigger games continues to frustrate. By his own admission however, Neymar has finally settled in Paris, reducing any likelihood of a summer transfer back to Spain with Real Madrid and especially Barcelona likely to be unable to afford him. At his infamous birthday party last year, Neymar reportedly delivered a speech, saying: "For the first time, I am entirely happy in Paris," and that he wanted to "do everything I can alongside my teammates to win everything this year".

Nevertheless, a more petulant side remains. Instances have become less frequent but Neymar's reaction to Thiago Mendes' late tackle during the loss to Lyon in mid-December underlined their persistence. Although there is no doubt a twisted ankle might hurt, the floods of tears and repeated beating of the turf bordered on the comical. Especially when Tuchel told reporters that the PSG number ten could return for the trip to Lille less than a week after an injury that upon the Brazilian's reaction seemed a broken ankle, but was actually just a sprain. It could be argued that Neymar's reaction served its purpose as Mendes was - via a much-delayed VAR review - sent off for a tackle that, had Neymar got up, would have amounted to a run of the mill yellow card. While he is far from the only elite level footballer with an immature, selfish streak, as the most gifted (besides Lionel Messi) of his generation all possess, Neymar's inconsistency of application and need for silly one-upmanship during games makes his attitude increasingly frustrating. While replicating the drive of Cristiano Ronaldo would be tough for any footballer, if Neymar had a fraction of Ronaldo's fierce professionalism his ceiling would become truly frightening. Although admittedly the Portuguese is a player with a sizeable ego of his own and one famous for exaggerating injuries and shedding the odd tear.

In 2013, Neymar quoted Senna via Instagram. “Whoever you are, no matter what social position you have, rich or poor, always show great strength and determination, and always do everything with much love and deep faith in God. One day you will reach your goal”. While a commendable message to his millions of followers, and there’s no doubting Neymar’s faith, whether the Brazilian forward has himself followed Senna’s advice to the letter since is open for debate. Maybe Neymar simply sees his goals as already being achieved. He’s been consistently one of the top ten players in world football for nearly a decade, carried a relatively (in a historical sense) weak Brazilian national side under immense pressure and won La Liga, the Champions’ League, Ligue 1, the Copa Libertadores as well as nine domestic cups across three countries. But given his supreme talent, has Neymar achieved what he is truly capable of?

Aside from those titles, Neymar’s individual level clearly has room for further growth. He has been presented with the chance to leave a true legacy across the footballing world but as it stands, he’ll be remembered as a supremely gifted and mightily successful player but little more. Neymar will be 29 on February 5th. The window in which that potential can be reached is closing. When Neymar joined PSG in 2017, there was a feeling that he was searching for a means to challenge the Messi and Ronaldo dominance, for a team that would coalesce round him and carry him towards the Ballon d’Or - a sign that he was looking to progress individually. His demeanour since has largely suggested otherwise. While the Brazilian may be the team’s focal point, rarely has he played with the intensity or seriousness of Ronaldo or Messi and never has he done so consistently in Paris. Performances like that against Lyon far outnumber games where Neymar has threatened to be the leader, matchwinner and decisive influence he was signed to be. Most frustratingly of all it could be argued that all he had to do to achieve those goals was to play. Play hard, play humbly and play honestly for Brazil, Paris and Barcelona and his ability would have done the rest.

However, it’s difficult to ignore the colossal pressure he is already under from all quarters and the effect those expectations would have on a seemingly fragile individual; Neymar may simply not be interested in attempting to emulate Senna. Perhaps, as a young man and a talented footballer, Neymar would rightly point out he has never sought such pressures or influence, nor ‘Senna’s chair.’ Maybe his back injury in the 2014 World Cup quarter-final irreparably altered his journey and his mentality. But his apparent lack of willingness to wholeheartedly try and realise such dreams, considering his gifts, is frustrating.

That is not to say the PSG forward is not charitable or unconcerned by his stature in Brazil. The way in which he sank to his knees in tears, genuine on this occasion, following what was perhaps the most pressurised penalty kick in World Cup history after the Round of 16 meeting with Chile at the 2014 World Cup showed he cares. He has done some admirable charitable work via, amongst others, the Instituto Neymar Jr. which ‘aims to expand opportunities for children, adolescents and their families, who live in a situation of social vulnerability, through education, culture, sport and health’ and reportedly donated \$1m to help fight COVID-19 in Brazil.

Senna, the man and the sportsman, inspired the next generation of F1 drivers. “He was such a fighter, that was the thing – I don’t think he was ever one to drive half-heartedly.” F1 driver Lewis Hamilton said in 2008. “He was always looking for perfection, and, yeah, he was a warrior – and that was what I loved about him.” Sometimes aloof and often reserved off track, Hamilton too is a markedly different character to his hero but Senna’s influence (as one of many) is obvious on the Hamilton of today. A focused, fiercely competitive winner, Hamilton’s indomitable and unerringly consistent performances has seen him realise his potential and challenge Senna as one of motor racing’s greatest. He used his first tearful words when he became a record seven-time world champion in 2020 to inspire. “All the kids out there who dream the impossible, you can do it too man. I believe in you guys.” Hamilton has embraced the potential for influence that his skill and success affords him, leading Formula One’s support for the Black Lives Matter movement while furthering various environmental causes.

Neymar should not be expected to try and fill the void left by Senna, to show the drive to become the greatest player of his generation or to mirror Hamilton’s efforts to overtly inspire and influence. But would it not be great if he did? Because he is that good. Neymar remains a hugely popular figure in Brazil and his ability is such that all three of those goals may still be achievable. For now, however, Neymar remains a supremely skillful, often joyous footballer but he is yet to truly show he will take the chance that few are ever afforded - to become a true great. That chair in the corner remains a long way off.



MARQUINHOS

Correa

Club: Paris Saint-Germain

Born: 1994/05/14

Position: Defender/Midfielder

At Club Since: 2013

League Apps 2020: 12

While the idea of how a player catches the eye has always meant that rankings such as these have skewed towards attacking players, there are occasions when players whose primary function is not goalscoring or play-making are so integral to their team that their level of play and influence is totally unavoidable. Thiago Silva was honoured by this publication with first position in 2016's edition, of course, but even if this place atop our rankings has lately been the province of Kylian Mbappé, the play of Marquinhos for Paris Saint-Germain over the course of 2020 has seen the Brazilian, still only 26, move decisively ahead of his young teammate. There have been the odd moments of brilliance, of course — witness his vital goals against Atalanta and Manchester United in the Champions' League — but it is largely by consistency, determination, and application that Marquinhos takes this well-deserved place.

This latest laurel for the former Roma man comes at the end of a 2020 which has been far from linear, at least in terms of how he has been deployed by manager Thomas Tuchel. On his arrival to the Parc des Princes, for a sum of €30m, then the third-highest amount that had been spent on a central defender in the history of the game, he often found himself left on the bench by Laurent Blanc, with the combination of Silva and David Luiz preferred. However, his intelligence, reading of the game, and work-rate nevertheless allowed him to force the issue. When Serge Aurier struggled with injury, Marquinhos became an unlikely deputy for the former Lens man at right-back, playing a run of matches there ahead of Gregory van der Wiel despite being hardly blessed with the Dutchman's ability to get forward.

While that brief spell playing in a new position did not augur his being converted into a full-back, it did evince something that remained a constant under Blanc's successor, Unai Emery, and, more recently, Thomas Tuchel — that his versatility, tangible passion, focus, and unassailable attitude towards being a leader (no small matter as he has assumed the captaincy in the wake of Silva's departure for Chelsea) make him, week in and week out, not only the best player on his team, but in all of Ligue 1. It should be said as well, before anyone reading this spits out their drink or becomes irate, that yes, the flair and brilliance of Neymar and Mbappé will never cease to catch the eye, but both have come up short on a regular enough basis that their lack of consistency (see, for example, Mbappé's lengthy and only recently ended scoring drought in Europe), especially when compared to that of Marquinhos, makes for a necessarily stark contrast. This is perhaps less so with a player like Ángel Di María, but in the Argentine's case, his lengthy ban in the league has an outsize effect on how his play is viewed in a year in which fewer than thirty matches have been played in Ligue 1.

Thus, through consistency and excellence, Marquinhos takes top spot. Yet the mechanics of this consistency, which has been achieved, again, through excelling not only in multiple positions, but also by being the acknowledged fulcrum of the team's style, no matter who lines up alongside him, or the tactical system, are what deserve closer examination and consideration. A product of Corinthians' academy, he enjoyed only a brief spell in the first team at the Pacaembu, before departing for Italy, joining AS Roma, initially on loan, some eight years ago. 2012/13 was a tumultuous season for the Giallorossi, as Zdeněk Zeman, who had surprisingly benched Nicolas Burdisso for the teenage Brazilian, was sacked in February, in the midst of the club stumbling to a sixth-place finish. This robbed Marquinhos of a chance to acclimatise smoothly to Italian football.

Under Zeman's trademark breakneck style, Roma had one of the league's poorest defences that year, but Marquinhos' partnership with Leandro Castán, was impressive indeed. The more bruising style of the older player offered an ideal complement for the teenager, who, brimming with enthusiasm, allowed AS Roma to play out from the back quickly. That summer also brought about more change, as Paris Saint-Germain came calling, earmarking the player as the future of the club's ambitious sporting project under Qatari ownership. While the price tag may have raised some eyebrows at the time, given his lack of not only experience in European football but professional football, having gone to Italy after a relatively scant number of appearances in Brazil.

Indeed, there were also some suggestions that Silva's outsize influence in the dressing room, which had seen Christophe Jallet and Mamadou Sakho cast aside despite their manifest abilities, was bringing the club to pay a premium for Marquinhos given the captain's well-documented preference for speaking Portuguese on the pitch. Those doubts did play a part in how Marquinhos was viewed early on, especially as while Alex, who was his primary competition for places in that first season and had regularly kept him on the bench in the biggest matches, was moved on the following summer. David Luiz's arrival gave the youngster another experienced rival on the path to becoming an automatic first choice alongside Silva. The former Chelsea man was signed for £50m in 2014, a then world-record fee for a defender, and it seemed that Marquinhos, despite performing admirably, would have to continue to play an apprentice's role under Laurent Blanc.

He was, however, granted an extended run in the team as Silva suffered a serious thigh injury in pre-season, and missed two months through injury. Playing alongside Luiz, Marquinhos was far from poor, but PSG were languishing, by their standards, in fifth, and he was even benched for Zoumana Camara at one point. An ill-timed hamstring injury and Silva's return to fitness saw fewer opportunities for him, but even with Luiz and Silva well-established as the team's first choice defensive pairing, Marquinhos was still afforded opportunities to feature, notably at right-back, as previously mentioned, starting ten matches there over the course of 2014/15.

The following campaign was more of the same, with he, Silva, and Luiz rotating a first team position among them, and he and Luiz getting the odd match in different positions, with Marquinhos' play at right-back against Chelsea influential in PSG's comprehensive two-legged Champions' League victory over the English side. In the summer of 2016, though, Luiz was off, his brief spell in the French capital having come to an end, and the door for Marquinhos to be a regular in his preferred position was opened at last.

The emergence of Presnel Kimpembe and the signing of Abdou Diallo in recent seasons, as well as Tuchel's experimentations with playing Danilo Pereira in a back three has meant that there has continued to be competition for places, but rather than Silva, Marquinhos has become the lynchpin of the team, whether playing in a back four or a back three.

Far from the most imposing of centre backs at an even six feet and of a rather slender build, Marquinhos still, in many ways, has something of the effect of the gawky teenager that he arrived at the Parc des Princes as, at least physically. But in this, he has consistently drawn comparisons to Silva, his erstwhile teammate, and a player whose initial forays into professional football were as a defensive midfielder, rather than as a centre back, owing to a lack of height and perceived physicality. What he may lack in manifest physical gifts, though, Marquinhos more than makes up for in a level of elegance in his play that goes hand in glove with his often more aggressive defensive partners.

That's not to say, of course, that he doesn't approach play with the idea of a "warrior's mentality," approaching the game with the necessary level of ebullience no matter which position he is deployed, or in what position. This is something that should not be confused with an eagerness to be reckless, especially given his impeccable disciplinary record - only 14 bookings in more than 200 matches as a defender, and six in 45 in midfield. And it has been this shift into midfield that has been so integral to his placement atop these rankings.

Normally, when a centre back is asked to play in defensive midfield (or vice versa) there exists a tactical "bridge" - playing with three at the back, or having the defender play as a lone holding midfielder just ahead of the back four. However, at Paris Saint-Germain, and over the last year, Marquinhos has been played not only at the base of a 4-3-3 but also in the team's high-octane 4-2-4, partnering players like Marco Verratti, Ander Herrera, or Leandro Paredes, each of whom are far more likely to get forward with the ball at their feet than to offer the Brazilian support.

Given the concomitant lack of tracking back on the part of the wide forwards, Neymar and Ángel Di María, in that scheme, Marquinhos' role thus became even more important. This was especially true as the diminishing pace of Silva and the sometimes-coltish exuberance of Kimpembe meant that the centre backs could need more assistance than usual. Thus, his positional intelligence, combined with his singlemindedness and determination to improve his own play and that of the team, have turned him into a world class defensive midfielder, having already been one of the world's greatest central defenders. "Marqui" summed up his views on both positions as follows: "When you're in defence, you see the game in front of you, but in midfield, it almost seems like things are going too fast. I can improve on the offensive side of things, but also in my coverage, positioning, movement, covering the runs of the full-backs, and the midfielders when they're counter-pressing, especially when we lose the ball. I can still improve a lot, especially in my attacking placement."

It is not folly to admit that this is true, of course, but it does bear witness to his tremendous focus and desire to improve – the mentality that has taken him to the top of football and The Get French Football News 100 2020.

THE GFFN 100 2020 | TEN TO WATCH

Mohamed-Ali Cho | 16 | Angers SCO

Just 16, Cho is the youngest player on this list and perhaps also the one with the brightest future. Born in France, he grew up in England, playing in Everton's youth system before joining the Brittany side in the summer. Yet to start a league match, he is being brought along slowly by Stéphane Moulin, but his ability with the ball at his feet is undeniable. This skill, combined with an improving work ethic and a spellbinding turn of pace, augur well for his future — with Moulin no stranger to improving players of his ilk (Nicolas Pépé, Sofiane Boufal) things look rosy indeed for him.

Arnaud Kalimuendo | 18 | RC Lens (on loan from Paris Saint-Germain)

A prolific scorer for both club and country at youth level, Kalimuendo made his professional debut in challenging circumstances against Lens in September, impressing enough for the northern side to take him on loan for the season. With four goals in the league for Le Sang et Or already, he has impressed to no small degree. Deceptively strong and also fairly quick, Kalimuendo's best asset is his finishing — to say it is instinctive hardly does it justice as he is equally adept using both feet as well as his head. It may be too early for him to play a regular role in the first team with his parent club, but his ability is manifest.

Timothée Pembélé | 18 | Paris Saint Germain

Due to a raft of injuries and suspensions in the capital side's ranks, as well as the departures of Tanguy Kouassi and Loïc Mbe Soh, Pembélé has been thrown in at the deep end this season, no easy task for a central defender. After a rocky start against Bordeaux in which he scored an own goal not ten minutes after making his professional debut, he has come into his own in recent matches, aided by his versatility, strength and pace. While at his best as a right-sided centre back, he is also comfortable playing as a wing-back as well, aided by a fine sense of anticipation in that role. The club's tricky financial situation may give Pembélé the opportunity for rapid first team action as was offered to Presnel Kimpembe half a decade ago.

Adrien Truffert | 19 | Stade Rennais

Another player on this list who underwent a baptism by fire is Truffert, who made his debut for Rennes in September after Faitout Maouassa was forced off through injury. Coming on against Monaco, he scored a goal and set up another to guide his side to a 2-1 win. Of late, even with Maouassa fit again, Truffert continues to feature for Julien Stéphan, playing further forward on occasion as well. Opportunities may not be as plentiful for Truffert with Rennes' exit from Europe, but his combination of vision and ability to whip in crosses make him an ideal option anywhere on the left flank.

El Bilal Touré | 19 | Stade de Reims

While including Touré on this list may be a bit cheeky, given he had played seven times last year, scoring three goals, he is still not a forward who has received much recognition outside of France, even if he became a newly-minted Mali international in October. Capable of playing across the front line, that versatility has allowed him to feature extensively for Reims, as his energy and eagerness to press make him an ideal foil for Boulaye Dia centrally, but he is also able to settle comfortably in a wide role. A consistent run in the first eleven could do much to see his star rise further, but for now his effectiveness and energy make him one to watch.

THE GFFN 100 2020 | TEN TO WATCH

Joris Chotard | 19 | Montpellier HSC

Chotard had a bright pre-season, but has found it hard to win a place consistently — he certainly was not helped by Michel der Zakarian's opting for a more attack-minded eleven, with Florent Mollet and Téji Savanier both regulars, but if anything, this is hardly the youngster's fault, as his game has continued to develop. Initially classed as a no-nonsense defensive midfielder, he has lately developed a cultured passing game, which is a thing of beauty. Were he a bit more imposing, or he to have more defensively-minded partners in midfield, he would probably feature more regularly, but has been admittedly hurt by Montpellier's shift away from playing three at the back.

Sofiane Diop | 20 | AS Monaco

Diop has been a professional footballer far longer than anyone else on this list, having made his debut in the 2018 Trophée des Champions, having joined Monaco from Rennes. Yet despite featuring on occasion in the past, he has come into his own (and then some) under Niko Kovac this season. Able to play both as a central midfielder or wide on the right, his work-rate and relationship with Rubén Aguilar has been remarkable, and his determination in pressing is also a thing of beauty. Having added goals to his game (four in the league) as well, he looks at present to be a complete modern winger.

Sinaly Diomandé | 19 | Olympique Lyonnais

Already an Ivory Coast international, the powerful Diomandé has featured regularly for Lyon this season after being a regular with the reserves having arrived from Malian side Guidars. Able to play at right-back but probably best suited to playing in a centre back pairing, Diomandé's combination of pace, positional acumen, aerial ability and passing nous are impressive indeed. With Marcelo getting no younger, Diomandé should have more opportunities in the months to come, and looks set to be a complete defender, talented at all aspects of the modern game.

Mattéo Ahlinvi | 21 | Nîmes Olympique

A product of Guingamp's youth academy before joining Nîmes on a development contract, midfielder Ahlinvi was a complete non-entity heading into this season, having played a grand total of 32 minutes of first team football. Superb with the ball at his feet, but at times overly ambitious and perhaps even a bit naïve, Ahlinvi undoubtedly needs a bit more polish to his game, something that may not always be possible in a relegation scrap, but the raw materials are there and they are intriguing indeed.

Anthony Racioppi | 22 | Dijon FCO

Racioppi has had the odd blunder such as his failing to deal with a backpass against Lens, but after arriving in Dijon from Lyon, he quickly took over the role of number one from Saturnin Allagbé, despite the club having paid €2m for the Benin international. A Swiss youth international, there is something of his former teammate, Anthony Lopes about Racioppi, having a fine gift for making reflex saves and stopping penalties, but also being capable of the odd gaffe. Like Lopes, he is also perhaps not the best with his feet, but given time (and a better defence) he projects to continue to improve.

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