

GFFFN



2017

WHAT IS THE GFFN 100?

The Get French Football News 100 comprises of our selection of the top one hundred talents that French football has to offer, judged solely on their performances in 2017.

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 2017.

For example, Bernardo Silva is ineligible despite playing half of the calendar year at Monaco because on the 31st December 2017 he was plying his trade at Manchester City.

However, Luiz Gustavo is eligible for the GFFN 100 despite having joined Marseille in the summer of 2017 because on the aforementioned date he was a registered squad member of theirs.

Players that are eligible are judged on all their professional appearances in 2017, regardless of whether or not they were playing abroad for a part of the calendar year. This applies to the international appearances they might have accumulated, during World Cup Qualification or January's Africa Cup of Nations, for example.

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

The selection process involved a nomination stage whereby the GFFN 100 contributors chose their favoured list of one hundred, alongside the use of statistical data to rank players according to a range of over 50 distinct parameters across different playing positions.

ALEXANDER DJIKU

POSITION: DEFENDER
 CLUB: SM CAEN
 AGE: 23



Last season - 2016/17 - SM Caen's problem was obvious. They conceded far too many goals, which is why they flirted so perilously with relegation, escaping literally by the skin of their proverbial teeth. It is no exaggeration to say that if they suffered the same defensive frailty this campaign, relegation may well have loomed well before the end of the season.

The first half of the 2017/18 season has been testament to their hard-work on the training ground, particularly in the defensive department, with only Marseille and champions elect PSG managing to breach Caen's backline more than twice in a match so far. Central to that stark improvement has been the recruitment of 23-year-old Alexander Djiku from SC Bastia.

Djiku is a uncompromising defender in the true definition of the term. There are no frills to his game, he is a prime example of an individual embodying the philosophy that a defender's job is to stop the ball from entering, or in fact going anywhere near, the goal that he and his team are defending.

Born in Montpellier, Djiku was schooled in the SC Bastia B side and made the breakthrough into the Corsican club's first team in 2015. Having impressed in his performance in Ligue 1, he was earmarked by Patrice Garande as a replacement for newly retired Nicolas Suebe as someone who would add some steel to last season's porous defence.

Caen were successful with a bid of around €2m in the summer and on 11th July 2017, Djiku signed a four-year contract with the club, fighting off some stiff competition to secure his signature. He could have earned significantly more with a move to Turkey from where there was firm interest from a number of sides, most notably Fenerbahce, or to England where there was interest from both Premiership and Championship clubs.

Clearly an intelligent young man, and perhaps well advised which is rare in the modern game, he rejected these advances to move to Normandy, to continue his development. Given last year's struggles, he was clearly sold on the club's renewed ambition and deter-

mination to avoid a similar fate this season.

Of Senegalese descent, Djiku is a defender who likes a tackle and is outstanding in the air. The former asset does mean that he is not averse to a mistimed challenge and therefore is no stranger to the referee's notebook, in fact it took him just 38 minutes of his debut, ironically at his hometown club Montpellier, to see yellow, however, his style of play and commitment is something that was perhaps missing from the Caen backline last season.

At the other end of the field his 1.82m frame and aerial ability make him a dangerous threat in the opposition box and, added to the likes of Santini, Rodelin and Da Silva, provides Caen with a far greater goal threat, not to mention defensive solidity, at set pieces.

If Caen can keep Djiku clear of injury and suspension, they should have no problem in carrying their newfound defensive steel into the second half of the season and avoiding any recurrence of last season's nail-biting finish.

PREJUCE NAKOULMA

POSITION: ATTACKER
 CLUB: FC NANTES
 AGE: 30



CF Ouagadougou, Gornik Zabrze, Mersin Idman Yurdu and Kayserispor hardly reads like an illustrious footballing career nor the usual path for a young African player aiming to make a name for himself. Yet this was the meandering journey taken by Burkina Faso forward Préjuce Nakoulma, one which eventually landed him at the Stade de la Beaujoire and FC Nantes. Exploding onto the Ligue 1 scene with five goals in his first six starts, Nantes fans quickly adopted the tune "Oh Nakoulma, Nakoulma, il marque tous les soirs," a variation of: "He scores every week."

Despite the footballing backwaters populated by Nakoulma earlier in his career, the prolific nature of his opening salvo of Ligue 1 outings was a little against the grain. Despite his explosive pace and power, the Burkinabe attacker's previous performances were largely defined by inconsistency; capable of the specular and occasionally unplayable but more often quiet or erratic. Although he was often used in a wider role, 15 goals over 78 games for Mersin and Kayserispor in Turkey is largely representative of his overall record.

A standout display without scoring in his first appearance in

France, arriving January, as Sergio Conceição's Nantes side lost 4-0 at the marauding eventual champions Monaco. This was followed by a brace at Montpellier in a 3-2 victory the following week before a bulldozing performance in the visit of Nice and another couple of goals to win the western derby with Angers. Nakoulma's bristling form coincided with the arrival of the intense and combative management of Conceição who had his team playing aggressive, attacking football which played to his new striker's strengths. A combined tally of 21 goals underlined a commanding partnership that was quickly fostered with the equally powerful, if less dynamic, Emiliano Sala.

Nakoulma's unorthodox route to one of Europe's top five leagues has taken time, the Burkina Faso international turned 30 in April and after the success of his opening six months in France another move was in the offing this summer. Nakoulma looked to force through his next career jump: "I am not enjoying the start of this season, because we've lost two matches. I'm equally not enjoying it from a personal point of view," explained Nakoulma. Claudio Ranieri however, replacing Conceição after his move to Porto, remained firm amid rumours

of a rift between the two. As a result, Nakoulma was left out through much of August before being convinced to stay on at the Beaujoire.

His explosive, ebullient start aside, Nakoulma has since settled, unusually for him, into a more consistent, predictable string of performances in Ligue 1, leaving the majority of the goal-scoring to Sala, having netted just twice this season so far.

Nevertheless, his pace and power continue to prove a handful for the division's defences as Ranieri is more inclined to move Nakoulma into a wider role or one subservient to Sala. An international hat-trick in November shows his scoring touch remains ensconced however. "Nakoulma, il marque tous les soirs," may no longer fit but Claudio Ranieri's pacey, rugged forward remains key to Les Canaris' charge for the top six.

DENIS BOUANGA

POSITION: ATTACKER
 CLUB: FC LORIENT
 AGE: 23



That a player from Ligue 2 makes this list may raise some eyebrows, but Denis Bouanga's 2017 makes him an easy choice for the GFFN 100. Playing no part of Lorient's relegation, he spent last season on loan at Tours and took the league by storm, scoring sixteen goals and assisting a further six despite missing a large chunk of time owing to his playing for Gabon at the Africa Cup of Nations. Seeing the current predicament of Tours, badly cut adrift and almost certainly heading for the National (French 3rd division), may seem a reductive argument for Bouanga's talent, but he should also be lauded for succeeding at that rate in Ligue 2, period.

Ligue 2 has a decent reputation among Europe's second division as an incubator of talent, with any number of top players having featured there at various points in their careers, but it also can be intensely negative, as the drop to France's semi-professional third division is a steep one which sides are generally desperate to avoid. While some sides may play with an eye towards possession-based football, there is rarely an attacking

intent displayed in the league, which makes success on a poor side all the more impressive. Tours did play with more verve than most last season, scoring 55 times (only six sides, including all three of the promoted sides, scored more), but also conceded at a rapid rate, with a defence that was comfortably the league's worst.

Fans of Lorient may recognise that description, but *Les Merlus* this season have put themselves in the thick of the race for promotion not by adopting a devil-may-care attitude, but adopting a more balanced approach necessitated by the departure of Benjamin Moukandjo. That has hardly hindered Bouanga, who appears to be once again succeeding despite the odds. Following on from being let go by Le Mans, his boyhood club, he turned heads by redoubling his efforts at amateur side Mulsanne, where he impressed enough to be picked up by Lorient. A loan spell at Strasbourg saw him evince himself as a goal-scorer of considerable talent, but he failed to establish himself at his parent club.

Despite the disappointment of

being sent on loan again last year, Bouanga played well enough to catch the eye of Gabon boss José Antonio Camacho, who made the youngster an important part of the hosts' plan. Three draws were not enough to see *Les Pantheres* through, but Bouanga's form, buoyed by his play with his country, where he was named man of the match by Gabonese media in two of those matches, went through a marked uptick upon his return.

This has continued into the current season, where he has eight goals in all competitions, helping Lorient into third place as of this writing. A rapid player who thrives on speed, Bouanga can sometimes be better with his decision-making, but one must remember he is still young, only just 23, with not much professional football under his belt. A fine and inventive finisher, he readily displays creativity and links well with others, playing with good movement and vision. Despite his goal-scoring prowess, he probably best works off of an orthodox striker, and were he afforded that chance, he is likely to improve even further.

RONY LOPES

POSITION: ATTACKER
 CLUB: AS MONACO
 AGE: 22



"It is true that Rony was considered the most talented of the two". This is what Renato Paiva had to say when making the comparison between Bernardo Silva and Rony Lopes early in their respective careers. As their former coach in their youth club, Benfica, he is probably as well informed as anybody about their potential. Knowing Bernardo's quality, this is no small compliment and says loads about how exciting a prospect Rony Lopes is. His capacity to play both on the wing and in behind the striker as well as his pace and technical capacities make him a dangerous player for any team.

However, it is also hard to deny that as of now, it is the new City signing that has had the better career. A myriad of elements explain this: the 21-year old's decision to leave Benfica for a big club (Manchester City) at an early age, his propensity for injuries and lack of stability in a single side are likely to have all played a big part in his thus far contrasted career.

Nevertheless, 2017 has been overall a good year for Rony

Lopes. He spent the first six months of 2017 at Lille, where he was one of the few individuals to shine in a poor season for the northern outfit, scoring four goals and delivering four assists playing on the wing for most of the time. He was considered as one of the most important players at the club by his coach Franck Passi who even went as far as to pinpoint the poor results that *Les Dogues* produced entirely on his and fellow Portuguese striker Eder's injuries.

This was enough to convince Monaco to retain him for the following season, hoping that Lopes might be able to stop the squad bleeding that the club suffered during the summer transfer window. Despite performing poorly as most of the team did in the Champions' League, he has so far kept up the standards that he produced for Lille domestically. Establishing himself on the right wing, he has been one of the more effective elements of the southern side, scoring two goals and delivering four assists to his partners in Ligue 1. Although some fans still believe that he might

benefit from being a little less individualistic, he is slowly but surely making a space for himself in the hearts of the Monaco fans, as was demonstrated by his election as Monaco Player of the Month in October.

What might be the most positive aspect of 2017 however is that he has only sustained a single injury throughout the whole year, a thigh problem that kept him away from the pitches for around a month in January. If his injury problems are behind him as this seems to portend, he might at last be allowed to fulfil his potential at Monaco.

Moreover, his respectable performances have been rewarded by his first cap with the Portuguese national team, coming in as a substitute at the 81st minute of the game against the United States. Although competition for a spot in the Portugal squad for the World Cup is expected to be tough, if Lopes keeps up his recent performances with the Principality club, he could well be giving headaches to Portugal's manager Fernando Santos. Leonardo Jardim and Monaco sure hope he does.

LOIS DIONY

POSITION: ATTACKER
 CLUB: SAINT-ÉTIENNE
 AGE: 25



The hero of Dijon's first season since the club returned to Ligue 1 last season, Lois Diony has made a name for himself as a striker who could just as capably finish off intricate team moves in the six-yard area as well as create his own chances with moments of magic. He scored 11 goals in 35 league games playing alongside strike partner Julio Tavares, guaranteeing Dijon's safety after scoring that same amount during the previous year in the club's promotion season.

As one of the in-form strikers of last season, interest from bigger clubs was inevitable and eventually perpetual low-scorers St Étienne, in their quest for a marquee striker to spearhead the start of the post-Christophe Galtier era, stumped €10m for the forward, an offer happily accepted by the Burgundy club. Nevertheless, halfway into the new season and the man they had hoped would be able to replicate Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang's form in his time at the club has failed to score a single goal.

Taking this statistic at face value is perhaps unfair on Diony, though. Many pundits have come to his defence, citing the limited chances he receives in a team that has proved itself woefully poor going forward this season. His failure to impose himself is likely part of a larger problem for *Les Verts*, who have seen strikers Alexander Sørerlund, Robert Beric and Ricky van Wolfswinkel all arrive to fanfare before ultimately having little effect. The striker's impact has been so far restricted to winning three penalties - none of which he has taken - and one assist in the league campaign at the time of writing.

His situation has not been helped by the fact that Garcia had not been convinced by the Mont-de-Marsan native, with the Spaniard originally insisting on a player like Mariano Diaz - now at Lyon - as his preferred choice before begrudgingly accepting Diony.

It seems that Diony's predicament has mirrored the overall situation of his team, with St

Étienne in freefall and a battle to stay up looking increasingly likely with each drubbing. Nevertheless, if it is a relegation dogfight that the club is poised for in the second half of the season, then Diony's experience in leading Dijon to safety last season could prove crucial and Jean-Louis Gasset will hope that it will see him pick up his form in the latter half of the campaign.

Overall, it has been a contrasting year for Diony, who has failed to translate his goal-scoring form from the context of a relegation candidate into a mid-table team. Nevertheless, his stellar year at Dijon is proof that he is a more than capable striker when the conditions are right. Last season, he shone as one of the underdog heroes of the tightly contested relegation battle; this time round, limited opportunities and poor performances from his team have prevented him from showing exactly what convinced St Étienne to make him the club's record signing.

IVAN BALLIU

POSITION: DEFENDER

CLUB: FC METZ

AGE: 25



For a member of the worst Ligue 1 defence of both 2016/17 and 2017/18 (so far) to make this list, that player must be a bit special. Despite being in the Metz team that had been handed one 7-goal and three 5-goal maulings, Ivan Balliu remains one of Ligue 1's more impressive attacking defenders.

Balliu graduated from *La Masia* - and captained Barça's youth team to the league and cup double in 2010/11. He featured regularly for Luis Enrique's B Team and was called up by Pep Guardiola for a first team pre-season tour, but never broke into the first team. Instead he moved on to Arouca in Portugal, where he attracted the attention of Metz, who recruited him in the summer of 2015 to help them secure an immediate return to the top flight.

Although in and out of the team that season under José Riga, he found more favour under Philippe Hinschberger and didn't miss a single minute for the final ten games as Metz scraped into Ligue 1 thanks to goals scored (including his sole goal for Metz, a 30-yard rocket against Clermont).

Last season too Balliu was not an ever-present, but began more often than not as Metz secured their maintien in Ligue 1. And Balliu played an important part. A classic modern day right-back (who has featured at left-back and even at right wing), Balliu is strong, quick and comfortable on the ball with good distribution. Although not the strongest in the air, he is strong and brave in the tackle.

His positioning is not always ideal but that is often to be expected from one who places a lot of emphasis of his attacking responsibilities. And he has proven that he is more than adept in this area, last season contributing an impressive five assists, all of which helped secure important points for Metz. Arguably his stand-out game was against Caen in a 2-2 draw in April, where his crosses provided goals for Ismaila Sarr and Cheick Diabaté.

His performances for Metz earned him international recognition early this season: although qualified to play for Spain, he was called up by another talented right-back - Christian Panucci - to represent

Albania - ironically against Spain. His impressive 2016/17 also led to interest from other clubs, with St Étienne a major suitor. Instead, Balliu extended his Metz contract.

This season has, however, been more of a struggle for Balliu, as it has for everyone at Metz. He has been doing his best to stem the tide of attacks against the team and doing his forward shift too - most of what Metz has done well offensively this season has come from his right side, although he has no assists to his name this time. He may have a tough few months ahead of him, however - since Frédéric Hantz has come in as coach he has played less frequently, and has not even featured in the squad for *les Grenats'* last two matches at the time of writing, in which they've gained four points, with the more rugged, defensively-minded Jonathan Rivierez preferred.

Nevertheless, Balliu has the talent to break back into the team and, if not, there will be no shortage of teams ready to make use of his talents.

BRYAN DABO

POSITION: MIDFIELDER
 CLUB: SAINT-ÉTIENNE
 AGE: 25



Bryan Dabo may be one of the only people associated with St Etienne who can consider themselves in a better position compared to this time last year. Having been alienated from the squad by then-coach Christophe Galtier, along with other mainstays of the team, following injury problems and what Dabo himself would admit were issues with the time it took to adapt to the team and his limited impact when he did play, all signs pointed towards an exit in the summer.

Nevertheless, the situation changed when Galtier announced the end of his eight-year tenure at the Rodez club, with the arrival of Spanish coach Oscar Garcia providing the opportunity for Dabo to rectify the false start that he had made to his ASSE career. The reversal in fortunes - from a purely personal perspective - has been clear for the 25-year-old in his 12 league appearances this season at the time of writing, in which he has netted twice, and his impact on games has become drastically more pronounced.

Fans have finally started to see the player that Galtier had been convinced by at Montpellier. One of the key features of Dabo's game remains his versatility, even if his central midfield berth has become consolidated over time. The opening half of the season has seen him take up both attacking and defensive roles in midfield as well as being deployed on both wings.

This revival has, nevertheless, contrasted with St Etienne's disastrous and borderline chaotic campaign. After encouraging performances in the opening weeks of the season - in which Dabo had excelled and been a key player - the club has nosedived and hurtled down the table, especially since Garcia's departure.

Dabo's good form at the start of the campaign has given way to play that has reflected the bigger picture of the team now managed by Jean-Louis Gasset; disjointed and without clear direction. Matters were made worse when one of the club's higher ups reportedly took a pot shot at the mid-

fielder, accusing him of not being one to shy away from the cameras, with his behaviour within the club being put into question.

Overall, credit must be given to Bryan Dabo for his strong start to the season, turning out as one of Oscar Garcia's main men in a team that had looked to be able to challenge in the upper reaches of the table. With a refreshing style of play and pragmatism, St Etienne looked well on the way to recovering from Galtier's departure, and Dabo was at the centre of this encouraging opening to the season.

Nevertheless, with the team in disarray and Dabo once again in the midst of an internal spat with the club, it must be questioned whether, after last season, it is wise to stay on at St Etienne. Unless the club sees an upturn in fortunes in 2018, surely the best option would be to leave, and he would not be short of potential suitors.

ANDREA RAGGI

POSITION: DEFENDER
 CLUB: AS MONACO
 AGE: 33



When teams win a title, the star players will always get the headlines. The individuals who score the most goals, who perform the best in the big games or produce the most assists will naturally get the media attention but in those winning teams, the players who go under the radar are oftentimes some of the most underrated, crucial cogs in a squad. Someone who comes in when a key player is injured and does their best to fit into a system to keep a tactical set-up churning.

Last season for Monaco, Andrea Raggi was that player. He may be heading towards the back end of his career but his value to the team in 2017 has been huge. He deputised at times for the Brazilian Jemerson or the former Torino centre back Kamil Glik, but whenever he pulled on the shirt of *Les Rouges et Blanc*, he slotted in almost perfectly.

In Ligue 1, his appearances were fairly sparse, if we are being totally honest, but that isn't entirely Raggi's fault. Glik and Jemerson had formed a great partnership over the course of the season and as it happened, they rarely (if ever) got injured. But what makes Raggi

stand out is that he could have kicked up a fuss and demanded more game time but he was happy to fill in when needed, especially in the Champions' League when his experience at the back helped Monaco reach the semi-finals and featured in outstanding wins against Tottenham Hotspur at Wembley, Manchester City and Borussia Dortmund.

In fact, the only Champions' League game he did not feature in that season was the 2-0 home defeat against Juventus so maybe if he had played, who knows what would have happened?

His rare yet important role in the Monaco team helped them romp to the Ligue 1 title ahead of PSG, but the second half of 2017 has not been too kind for the 33-year-old Italian, despite him featuring in a fair amount of wins for Monaco.

Raggi was a fixture in just two Champions' League matches, the draw away against Besiktas and the home defeat to RB Leipzig, but as a whole the European campaign for Leonardo Jardim's side was nothing short of embarrassing, with the Italian's Ligue 1 form having ac-

tually been decent despite very few appearances made.

The experienced defender did not feature in a domestic league game until October when he played at right-back in a 2-0 home win against Caen which was then followed by a run of good form for Monaco to keep themselves in the hunt for a Champions' League place. Wins against Bordeaux, Guingamp, a draw against Amiens and a loss at home to PSG, with Raggi coming off injured in that home clash with *Les Parisiens*, meant that his season has been derailed somewhat by a hamstringing injury but the fact still remains that he is an important part of this Monaco team and can still put in a good performance when called upon, even in the role as captain.

His loud-mouthed presence in a generally young and quiet squad played a huge psychological role in Monaco's title win. His ability to put 110% commitment to the Monaco cause whenever called upon has proved invaluable in 2017. Now, Raggi's wisdom must help Jardim fend off competition from Marseille and Lyon to re-qualify for the Champions' League for next season.

NAIM SLITI

POSITION: ATTACKER
 CLUB: DIJON FCO
 AGE: 25



Dijon were hardly expected to have an easy time of it in their second campaign back in Ligue 1 this season. After barely avoiding relegation despite endeavouring to play an attractive brand of attacking football under Olivier Dall'Oglio, the losses of Lois Diony and Pierre Lees-Melou, as well as an aging midfield, Dijon were widely tipped to go down, but have instead consistently surprised this season. A revamped centre back partnership of Papy Djilobodji and Cédric Yambéré has certainly helped matters, as has retaining the solid 'keeper Baptiste Reynet, but neither has Dijon's attack lost much of its verve.

The continued development of Kwan Chang-Hoon has been impressive, as has a renaissance from Frédéric Sammaritano, but Naim Sliti, despite missing a large chunk of the season through injury, has been the driving force behind the eastern side sustaining their attractive style. Signed by Lille two summers ago, on the back of being short-listed for the Ligue 2 Player of the Year with Red Star, he was deemed surplus to Les Dogues' requirements after a

busy window. This, despite having impressed on loan from the capital club and on the back of an impressive campaign for Tunisia at the Africa Cup of Nations, scoring twice in the group stages for his country.

Born in Marseille, the left-sided attacker had a somewhat itinerant career before landing in Paris and catching the eye there during the club's spell in Ligue 2. He soon displaced the likes of Éric Bautheac after making the move north, and despite Lille's season being somewhat of a damp squib, impressed with his ability with the ball at his feet and his ability from set pieces. Despite his seemingly not being up to Marcelo Bielsa's standards, he easily showed that the step up to the top flight was no obstacle. When he became available on loan, Dijon, who had reportedly offered €1.5m for the player on a permanent deal in the summer, leapt at the chance to sign him.

Club president Olivier Delcourt was eager to see the player arrive, neatly describing his qualities in an interview with the club's website, *"He's going to bring attacking creativity. He's comfortable keeping the ball,*

and using it, especially in the quality of his final ball. He has an intelligence in his movement and a real technical quality."

Ranking alongside the likes of Neymar, Nabil Fekir and Allan Saint-Maximin, Sliti excels at drawing fouls and beating opponents on the dribble. Despite only recording two goals and the same number of assists for Dijon in the early stages of the current season, his raw numbers are surely coloured by the club lacking a proven striker to back up the veteran Julio Tavares, who rarely featured before Sliti's injury.

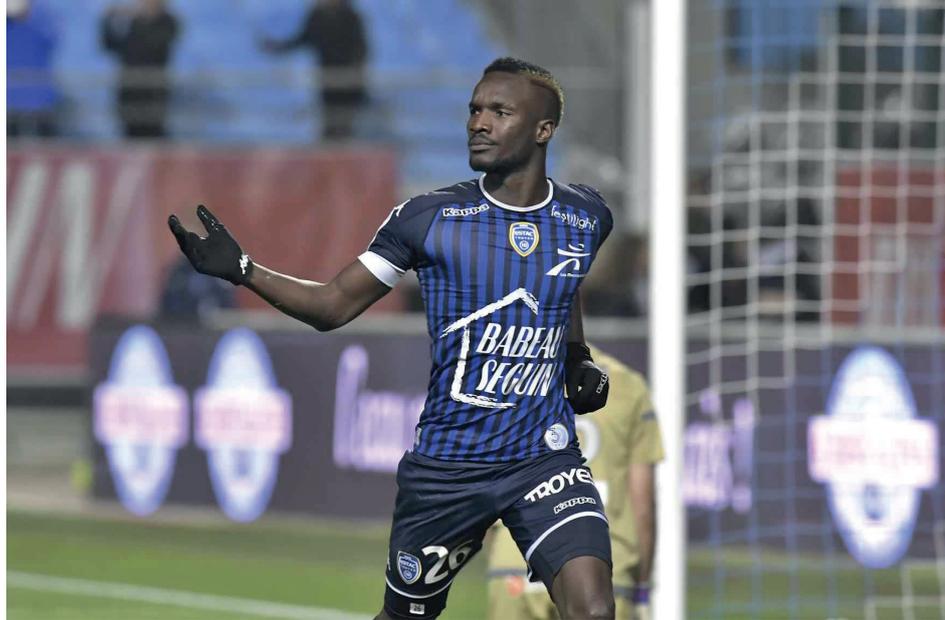
Dall'Oglio's experiments with the raw Benjamin Jeannot and Wesley Saïd have failed to come off with any consistency, but the potential combination of Sliti's dead-ball and crossing abilities with the powerful Cape Verde international must surely have the manager licking his lips in anticipation. With a World Cup on the horizon for Tunisia, Sliti's uptick in play has come at an opportune time to further showcase his attacking qualities as he should be easily able to displace the veteran Sammaritano, who is currently working his way back to full fitness.

ADAMA NIANE

POSITION: FORWARD

CLUB: TROYES

AGE: 24



It was in the second week of the new season that Adama Niane announced himself to Ligue 1. Gliding on to a visionary pass from veteran team-mate Benjamin Nivet, the Malian striker held off Nice's central defender Dante and delivered a precise lofted finish over Yoan Cardinale. ESTAC Troyes went on to win the game at the Allianz Arena 2-1 and that result armed the newly promoted side with the confidence to compete at the top level.

Troyes had turned to Niane in the summer of 2015/16 following their relegation to Ligue 2, acquiring a striker who had made 91 appearances and scored 40 goals over four years in Nantes' B side. Having failed to break into *Les Canaris'* first team, the forward had a point to prove and promptly repaid the Champagne side with 23 goals in a season that saw promotion secured via a two-legged play-off with Lorient.

Approaching Christmas, Troyes lie in a healthy fourteenth position and Niane has demonstrated he can perform at the highest level, developing an intuitive

understanding with both the highly rated Samuel Grandsir and South Korean revelation Hyun Jun Suk. This young attacking trio offer a wealth of pace and variation that should see the club reach safety this term.

Tall and slightly built, Niane is quick and well suited to Troyes' counter-attacking style although manager Jean Louis-Garcia will hope to cure his tendency to stray offside rather too often and to improve his conversion rate. At 24, there is still an occasional rawness. On a more positive note, the Malian has a habit of scoring late goals including key strikes against Lille and Strasbourg in recent weeks, and has two assists to his name.

It was Troyes, of course, who endured that miserable Ligue 1 campaign in 2015/16, winning just three times and finishing as *'lanterne rouge'* with just 18 points. But this time around feels very different, with the energy of Niane and his attacking accomplices contributing to a lively atmosphere at the dated Stade de l'Aube. This has seen the team deliver some notable

scalps, including those of St Etienne and Angers.

International recognition in a talented Mali side finally arrived this summer with a debut appearance in a 2019 African Cup of Nations qualifier against Gabon for the Troyes man. With the other teams in the group being South Sudan and Burundi, Bamako-born Niane will be hopeful of featuring in the finals in Cameroon. As a club with modest finances, Troyes will know this presents a selling opportunity for a player they acquired for free and indeed rumours have already circulated over interest from Liverpool, Arsenal, Aston Villa and Spanish side Levante.

The latter of whom very nearly brokered a deal with the French top flight outfit in the summer, but Troyes resisted. For now, Niane looks entirely settled at Troyes. The 2016/17 Ligue 2 top scorer thoroughly deserves his place in this year's GFFN 100. However, in order to secure Ligue 1 safety for his club, he will hope to build on his slightly mediocre tally of three goals in the first half of the campaign.

IBRAHIM AMADOU

POSITION: MIDFIELDER
 CLUB: LILLE OSC
 AGE: 24



Lille are a club in crisis. The 2011 Ligue 1 champions seem to have spent much of the seven years since their Eden Hazard, Yohan Cabaye and Gervinho-inspired title run lurching from one failed attempt to revamp themselves to another, but in the last year the farce in northern France has escalated beyond anyone's control.

Frédéric Antonetti, himself brought in to firefight the previous catastrophe under Hervé Renard, was sacked and replaced by Franck Passi who barely managed to keep the club afloat as Spanish/Luxembourgian businessman Gérard Lopez brought to the team and installed the enigmatic Marcelo Bielsa as manager while cringingly rebranding Lille as "LOSC Unlimited". A base, he hoped, for youth development under the purview of "El Loco."

Now however, Lille find themselves in a familiar mess of in-fighting, insipid displays, relegation battles and a sacked (suspended) manager. Throughout the chaos of the past 24 months, however, there has been once constant; midfielder-come-centre back, Ibrahim Amadou.

With Bielsa and, perhaps to a greater extent, Sporting Director Luis Campos, given free rein to mould Lille as they saw fit almost overnight, player turnover has been monumental at Lille this year. Seven players arrived on January deadline day and close to 20 more both left and arrived in the off-season. As a result, the physically imposing, pacey midfielder Amadou was the only man to start both opening games of this and last season.

Having signed from Nancy in 2015, where he developed as a youth product and then in Ligue 2, Amadou took a while to fight his way into the Lille side. But as aging stalwarts Rio Mavuba and Florent Balmont faltered, Amadou was phased in during early 2016 by then boss Antonetti where, along with the wing wizardry of Sofiane Boufal, he aided Lille's transformation from relegation flounders to a miraculous top five finish.

Amadou's powerful running on and off the ball, his rumbustious presence in midfield areas and ability to drive his team forward from deep positions made him invaluable to Lille's rise up the Ligue 1 standings. As a result, he

quickly surpassed the defensive midfield presence which was offered by Balmont, Mavuba and Mounir Obaddi. Amadou's youthful exuberance and direct style became central to Lille's ability to turn the ball over and forge forward.

His bulky stature and ability in the air has unsurprisingly lead to a retreat into the centre back role under Bielsa, often playing as the middle of a three man defence, which, in theory, allowed Amadou to strike a balance between his rampaging runs and defensive abilities. This, however, as Bielsa's LOSC project unraveled around him, has not always been the case as his form has been on the downturn in the latter part of 2017.

Nevertheless, eight figure bids from Premier League sides may not be a thing of the past, with Middlesbrough supposedly keen last season. Now, Ibrahim Amadou is 24 and with his club hoping to finally settle down, his talent may be allowed to rise once more and could yet be the difference between a winning or losing a battle against the drop come May.

ISMAEL TRAORE

POSITION: DEFENDER
 CLUB: ANGERS SCO
 AGE: 31



Following Angers' promotion to Ligue 1, few of the squad that hauled the club up into the French top flight for the first time since 1995 were retained by manager Stéphane Moulin. Despite the undoubted hotspots of talent that quietly burn away in Ligue 2, the overall gap in quality between the premier division and its little brother is wider than may be expected. As recent Ligue 2 champions Troyes and Nancy discovered, keeping the same side that won the second tier title will equal somewhere between a struggling and disastrous promoted side in Ligue 1. Both quickly returned to Ligue 2.

Angers underlined the need to revamp a team moulded for Ligue 2 promotion. Winger Abdoul Razzagui Camara, defenders Romain Thomas and Vincent Manceau plus Ludovic Butelle in goal were the only men to be considered starters for Angers at the start of both Ligue 2 and Ligue 1 campaigns. The wily Stéphane Moulin however was able to assemble a side that challenged for Champions' League places up until Christmas upon promotion, finishing a superb 9th, largely from an eclectic group of Ligue 2 standouts.

Midfield sentinel Romain Saïss, now of Wolves, joined from Le Havre, the imposing Cheikh

N'Doye was immediately installed as captain and talisman upon arrival from Créteil while Billy Ketkeophomphone, formerly of Tours, led the line. Partnering the monolithic Romain Thomas at the heart of what became a stoic defence, entirely comprised of Ligue 2 regulars, was Brest's powerful centre back, Ismaël Traoré.

The Thomas-Traoré partnership, ably aided by full-backs Manceau and Yoann Andreu, kept Angers' goal against tally to just 11 in the first half of the season, just two more than then league leaders by 19 points, PSG, as *Le SCO* went into the winter break third in Ligue 1. Traoré's bullish physique, anticipation and ability with his head proved crucial to Moulin's dogged, counter-attacking outfit who maximised their talents to spring a number of surprises. Traoré and Thomas scored, both from set pieces - their most potent weapon, in landmark wins over Lille and Marseille.

Consistently stoic and commanding displays from Traoré saw him force his way into a talented Ivory Coast squad while his partnership with Thomas, although they have struggled in forward areas since, remains the bedrock of Angers' repeatedly competitive displays.

This season however, has been a markedly different tale. Thomas and Traoré in particular, despite a promising start, have looked tired and increasingly off the pace in Ligue 1. Traoré's previously powerful and aggressive displays have turned to lumbering and ineffective. Traoré was, understandably, taken out of the side in order to allow him to rest and recuperate in recent games but this gamble seems to have failed as Moulin's side lost disastrously at Troyes and were lucky to take a point from Guingamp in that time. Traoré's return has also proved equally troublesome for the now 31-year-old captain, promoted after N'Doye's move to Birmingham. He has looked increasingly out of sync and error prone since, a particularly embarrassing mistake in conceding the opening goal to Montpellier in December being a low point.

Angers remain in relegation trouble and their defence, which has come to their rescue in the past, is worryingly underperforming, Traoré in particular. It may be down to this talented but aging defender to rediscover his best form if Angers, one of the league's smallest clubs, are to continue their Ligue 1 adventure.

JEREMY MOREL

POSITION: DEFENDER

CLUB: LYON

AGE: 33



Not many players get a career renaissance at 33 but Jérémy Morel has had a new lease of his footballing life in 2017.

Widely derided for not quite being good enough to be a consistent starter at left-back with either former club Marseille or current side Lyon, many thought he would be on his way out this year. However, his experience has helped him move inside as a centre-back and while he is not always starting, he has become a reliable player in a problem position for OL.

His 2016/17 season ended in a strong fashion, with four assists from his more usual spot of full-back. Unable to recover from a poor start and wobbling near the end meant that Lyon never truly challenged for a Champions' League spot, finishing nine points behind third-placed Nice.

With a number of big name moves in the summer, the under-the-radar departure of Emanuel Mammana meant there was a gap at the back. At the same time, the arrivals of both former Guingamp

man Marçal and Le Havre youngster Ferland Mendy, it looked like Morel's time was up.

Instead, coach Bruno Génésio saw the chance to keep the former Lorient man's experience within the set-up and operated him as a centre-back. Alongside another new signing in Marcelo, he performed admirably, keeping Mouctar Diakhaby out of the side at the start of the season.

Despite his diminutive size, his nous to be in the right position at the right time and support his team-mates defensively helped contribute to a slowly improving unit. Three consecutive clean sheets to end October was a real achievement for a side that had consistently leaked goals at important times earlier in the season, allowing them to become a more balanced outfit.

In November, he did lose his place back to the youngster Diakhaby and since then, he has struggled to get a look in. With the defence still looking strong in his absence, it has been hard to justify reinstating him without someone drop-

ping their level or becoming injured.

Perhaps the performances against the likes of Paris Saint-Germain and Bordeaux have led to Génésio being a little more cautious in starting him. His obvious lack of height, physical presence and speed can really hurt them when playing top opposition and while he may feel a little aggrieved at losing his spot so easily, it is also just in terms of what the man replacing him brings to the table.

Although short-lived, this burst of life from Morel was more than welcomed. Not content to simply sit on the sidelines as a cheerleader, he has rolled his sleeves up and tried to fit in wherever the team has needed him to be and that is truly commendable.

Whether he sticks it out in 2018, when Lyon will surely look for more defensive cover, remains to be seen. If he does become available, there should be plenty of Ligue 1 clubs that could use both his experience and his leadership as he enters the very final years of his career.

BENOIT COSTIL

POSITION: GOALKEEPER

CLUB: BORDEAUX

AGE: 30



Before he had even set foot on the banks of the Garonne, Benoît Costil knew he would be facing an upstream struggle to win over the Bordeaux faithful, particularly those in the *Virage Sud* behind his back. While he was by no means an unwelcome acquisition – his long sustained good form at Rennes spoke for itself – Cédric Carrasso's forced departure from the club on the board's part had left a bitter taste in fans' mouths who had felt the veteran had been discarded too easily by those in charge of the club. To the point that, in the opening games of the season, fans behind Costil's goal were still singing the praises of their former captain, now at Galatasaray.

While off the pitch he had been making his frustration at this clear to everyone, on the field he was a part of Bordeaux team that went six games unbeaten at the start of the season, in which the stopper showed all the signs of carrying over his form from his spell in Brittany. Even after shipping six goals in the Parc des Princes, there was a general consensus that, while he had not entirely replaced

Carrasso, Costil was an adequate replacement, just as capable of producing commanding performances in a team whose stock was rising going into October.

Nevertheless, now the honeymoon period of his Bordeaux career has come to a close, and the tides have turned. Gourvennec's men are slipping down the table and Costil's performances have been put into question, having now lost his spot as France's third choice goalkeeper to PSG's Alphonse Areola.

In his defence, Gourvennec's defensive setup has done his goalkeeper no favours, with Jérémy Toulalan's partnership with Vukašin Jovanović being less than convincing, even in the team's good run at the start of the season. It is nevertheless clear that Bordeaux's inability to keep attacks out has been their undoing this season, and Costil has been a part of that with his unconvincing shot stopping and poor positioning. With 27 goals conceded in 18 league games at the time of writing, the Caen native has done little to turn the tide of opinion and make fans forget about

Cédric Carrasso, and with every error the shadow of the 35-year-old looms larger over Costil.

There is no doubt that Benoît Costil will be fondly remembered in Brittany, the club where he spent the six years that saw him establish himself as one of the league's top keepers and swing in and out of the national team. Up until the end he was consistently one of the team's top performers, one who could be relied on to keep clean sheets and considered a vital part of Rennes' frequent pushes for the European spots. By virtue of his time at Rennes, he can be considered one of the country's top shot stoppers, but his decline has been unquestionable since the new season.

Where the Costil we saw at Rennes has gone is anyone's guess, but if Gourvennec is to steady the ship and stop Bordeaux from sinking further down the table in 2018, his goalkeeper's performances will have to improve. If not, then it will not be long until backup option Jérôme Prior creeps back into the team.

ALEXIS BLIN

POSITION: MIDFIELDER
 CLUB: TOULOUSE FC
 AGE: 21



Another name in the glut of Toulouse youngsters making a name for themselves, Alexis Blin is finally getting consistent time on the football field.

That is not for a lack of trying, either. His 2016/17 campaign got off to a great start, being part of a side thriving after avoiding relegation and beating both Paris Saint-Germain and Monaco at home.

Unfortunately for the 21-year-old, the second half of this season did not go to plan. Niggling heel injuries restricted him to just 12 appearances and just five in the club's last 12 games as they nosedived from European competition to mid-table obscurity.

It is no coincidence that this drop-off happened during his absence, with the youngster adding both a defensive mind and a metronome to their mid-field. Lacking that and their strikers slowly dipping out of form, *Le TFC* finished the season on a down note.

The major positive of the 2017/18 campaign so far is that Blin has managed to at least be part of the squad for every single Ligue 1 match. While dotting in and out of the starting

eleven for the first seven games, he has been ever present since, starting every single match for Pascal Dupraz's team.

His role within the team has expanded too. With Oscar Trejo gone and Jimmy Durmaz missing long spells, the team have really lacked creativity which has forced Blin to play more in a midfield two and become more of an attacking threat when needed alongside Giannelli Imbula.

Highlighted by his three assists, he has shown that he is able to perform in the final third and create. Little flicks, a willingness to go out wide and linking with all the forward players has helped encourage his team, attempting to inject an attacking impetus into a side that has looked abjectly uninspiring for vast swathes of the current campaign.

That is not to say he has lost any of his more defensive instincts though, his dog-with-a-bone intercepting tendencies are still prevalent and called upon. He times tackles well, keeps opponents in front of him but he has added aggressiveness to his pressing and winning the ball back higher up the pitch.

Take for example his assist against Nice. It began with a passing move that was due to come his way but was instead deflected towards Arnaud Souquet, who he quickly harassed and stole the ball from before swinging in a quick low cross for Andy Delort to gobble up.

This facet of his game not only helps endear him to the fans, who already appreciate his talents, but also displays another level of growth in his progression. He is slowly moulding into a more well-rounded midfielder and that adaptability will only help him in the long run.

Saying that, 2018 will be a crucial year. For his club, they will need to get back into form if they want to avoid a relegation fight and gather more talent in the January window to support the likes of Blin and their exciting defence to become a more cohesive, savvy unit.

As for him personally, he will just be happy to finish a full season for once, injury-free. Getting that under his belt will be the first hurdle and if he continues this way, there will be more eyes across Europe having a sneaky glance at his progress.

BERTRAND TRAORE

POSITION: ATTACKER
 CLUB: LYON
 AGE: 22



2017 has been a frankly huge year for Bertrand Traoré. The brother of former Auxerre, Lorient and Monaco forward Alain Traoré, Bertrand began his career in Bourgogne at Auxerre before joining Chelsea as an 18-year-old.

Alain and Bertrand's father Isaïe was a popular footballer in Burkina Faso where he was renowned for his fiercely powerful shooting, something that both sons have incorporated into their own game.

The younger Traoré has long been a rising star. He made his international debut for Burkina Faso at 15 and has already won 43 international caps. His move to Chelsea was a sideways one at best but, having joined Ajax on loan last summer before moving to Ligue 1 this year, his professional career has finally begun. This is mirrored in his appetite for first team action since he has joined Lyon, his energy has finally been unleashed on the European stage.

He scored eight goals in the second half of the season for Ajax, including two in a Europa League semi-final against future club Lyon, un-

derscoring the fact that it was time to leave the Chelsea loan army.

The excellent brace against Lyon aside, he also grabbed an assist in an impressive all-round display during a high-profile encounter, that evidently left an impact as Les Gones moved swiftly to secure his signature for about €10m, with Chelsea retaining a 15% sell-on clause.

Since arriving in France, Traoré has been swiftly integrated into one of Ligue 1's most exciting attacks and shown stunning versatility as both a goal-scorer and creator. Playing wide on the right of Lyon's attacking three, Traoré often finds and exploits physical mismatches to deadly effect.

He made an impressive derby goal against St Étienne look laughably easy as he cut onto his left to curl in his shot and, in Arjen Robben-esque style, that has swiftly become a trademark move. Far from being a one-trick pony though, Traoré has scored powerful headers, predatory close-range goals and one wonderful free-kick against Bordeaux.

Traoré serves as both a second striker in support of Mariano Diaz and a more orthodox wide forward with a flexibility that has confounded Lyon's opposition again and again.

In addition to his goal-scoring, he is also an impressive creative force and has made 16 key passes already this season. His final ball was criticised at Ajax and remains something to be further refined but his output, alongside the prolific Diaz and Nabil Fekir, is nothing at which to be to be scoffed.

He remains a work in progress, of course, but the qualities already evident in his game mean that when he has fully developed he could be something very special.

In a summer in which Lyon made a truly remarkable number of excellent signings, Traoré ranks as one of the best.

If Traoré realises his true potential, 2017 will be remembered as the year that made his career.

NORDI MUKIELE

POSITION: DEFENDER
 CLUB: MONTPELLIER
 AGE: 20



A powerful and pacey presence whether played at wing-back or on the right side of a back three, Nordi Mukiele has become one of Ligue 1's more highly regarded prospects since making his move from Stade Lavallois to Montpellier in January. Already capped at various youth sides for France, he made the step up from the U-20s to *Les Espoirs* this summer, and despite not having been recalled for the side's more recent matches, has continued to impress for *La Paillade*.

Born in the Paris suburb of Montreuil, Mukiele's early years were spent at Paris FC before moving to Brittany in 2013. There, he made his professional debut at 17 and was quickly added to the first team. Despite a bit of difficulty during his time in Laval, his talent was evident, as Stéphane Moreau, director of *Les Tangos'* training centre, recalled, "We had a bit of a rough time, as one does with all young people. But, Nordi has values, and capacity for reflection. I have many hopes for his future, I'll not hide that."

He'll do well to show his talent."

Signed by the southern club in the winter window, Mukiele most often played centrally for Stade Lavallois, but has also impressed at left-back and right-back (in a four). While offering more protection to the superb but aging Hilton may have been key in Michel der Zakarian's decision to have his side play a 3-4-1-2, the play of Mukiele surely influenced the veteran manager as well. Rangy and quick without sacrificing any of the aerial presence needed as a centre back, he also offers a truly remarkable presence as an attacking conduit.

While the archetypal full-back often succeeds through his pace and dribbling ability, looking to beat his opposite number and deliver a cross, that is hardly the extent of Mukiele's play. Mukiele is certainly skilled at these components of the game, but he is also impressive at linking play at close quarters. With defensive midfielder Ellyes Skhiri and the other centre backs able to cover his runs,

he is also able to get forward with aplomb in more central areas. This allows him to aid the attack and add a creative presence where one can, at times, be lacking, with Stéphane Sessegnon the team's only real attacking midfielder.

His polyvalence is impressive, as is his level of experience given his young age, but Mukiele can at times, be a victim of being a jack-of-all-trades, master-of-none presence. Unable to get a game at right-back for France's youth sides, (there is no shame in being behind Benjamin Pavard), he similarly finds a clutch of more orthodox centre backs ahead of him as well in the form of Issa Diop, Abdou Diallo and Mouctar Diakhaby. Also eligible for DR Congo through his parents, he may find his path to being an international easier in that way, but no matter his decision, his energetic performances have made him one of Ligue 1's best defenders, and Montpellier soon may find themselves fending off suitors for his signature.

FAITOUT MAOUASSA

POSITION: ATTACKER
 CLUB: STADE RENNAIS
 AGE: 19



In Faitout Maouassa, Rennes have a player with undoubted potential but also incredible rawness. Having signed from Nancy in the summer of 2017, Rennes fans have witnessed a mixed bag from Maouassa. Having been played in numerous positions in a side which struggled greatly under Christian Gourcuff, it was always going to be a struggle for the player to continue his rapid development.

In the first half of 2017, Maouassa was proving just why he was being quietly mentioned as such a promising talent. As one of very few bright lights in a Nancy side which eventually saw relegation, the exciting youngster was a bundle of pace and energy down the left wing. Capable of playing either at left-back or in a more advanced left midfield role, Maouassa impressed going forward with three goals and three assists a more than adequate return for an 18-year-old in their breakthrough season.

After displaying such promise for a struggling side, it was Rennes who snapped up the

youngster in a €7m move. After also attracting the interest of Lille and Marseille, Maouassa elected to join Rennes so that he could play under Gourcuff, stating *"I know Marcelo Bielsa is a great coach, but Christian Gourcuff convinced me of his ability help me progress. When I see what he did with Raphaël Guerreiro, to evolve like that is beautiful"*. Sadly, for the player, that level of progression has yet to materialise and even more ominously, his very reason for joining Rennes, Gourcuff, has now departed the club.

Versatility has been both a blessing and a curse for Maouassa in his young career so far as having played the majority of his time down the left flank, he has also been deployed in a more central role and out on the right wing. Whilst this versatility has resulted in plenty of playing time, it can also be argued that it has stunted his progression due to being unable to focus on one particular position.

In terms of style of play, Mao-

uassa is an incredibly direct player. Small in stature but deceptively strong, he has blistering pace and loves nothing more than running with the ball, taking players on. Despite this though, Maouassa has plenty of work still to do, especially with his decision-making and final product. Too many moments, especially during his time with Rennes, he has seemed too eager to take things on himself when a simpler option was available to him. His pace and enthusiasm are great to see but if it leads to him continuously losing the ball or failing to produce a good enough delivery, then Maouassa will always struggle.

He played a key role in the victorious French under-19 European Championship side back in 2016, however until such time as he and his coaches can work out where exactly his best position is, so that he can work on what characteristics are needed to focus on and improve, Maouassa runs the risk of failing to live up to his potential.

LEO DUBOIS

POSITION: DEFENDER
 CLUB: FC NANTES
 AGE: 23



Two years ago, full-back Léo Dubois was on the fringes of the Nantes squad, now, at just 23, he is *Les Canaris'* captain and pivotal to the rise of Claudio Ranieri's latest club. "Léo Dubois is a very important and very intelligent player. He crosses very well and has a very good physique," Ranieri explained this year. A native of Segre, an hour's drive from the Stade de la Beaujoire, Dubois has been on the books at FCN since 2008 and has gradually risen through the ranks in western France, but over the course of the last 24 months the transformation undergone by the young Dubois has been revelatory.

Previously inexperienced, Dubois occasionally struggled positionally, was a little lightweight and suffered, as many young defenders do, from bouts of rashness. Nevertheless, Dubois' abilities remained evident, regularly imposing his mobility and ability on the ball, both in possession and from crossing areas, on games. Meanwhile the influence of Sergio Conceição, whose brief spell in charge took Nantes from the brink of relegation to the edge of Europe,

and now Ranieri, has helped turn promise into poise. "Conceição and Ranieri have the same understanding that pushes you to apply yourself," the full-back said, "The first is more direct, he empowers you. Ranieri has a more thoughtful attitude, more withdrawn, he lets you understand for yourself." Both methods have eked the best out of 23-year-old.

Ranieri's decision to make Dubois captain upon his arrival was a surprise given his relative inexperience but the Frenchman has slowly evolved into the role. Dubois is not a player to bellow and orchestrate, but to lead by example and represent his club and the local area in an exemplary fashion whilst employing a more contemplative, laid back attitude to leading the side. "I try to be the link between the players and the coach," explained Dubois to *SFR Sport*: "I am not someone who spontaneously takes the lead. It took me time to adapt, and as time goes by, 'experience' takes over. Some listen to me, and others are not receptive. My role is to speak before training, bringing everyone together in the dress-

ing room." A sizeable responsibility for one so young. During his blossoming this season, Dubois has proven his versatility, showing he is comfortable and effective when deployed as either full-back, the right side being his natural habitat, and further forward on the right of the midfield, which is understandable after seven assists last season. His thunderbolt effort to secure the win at Strasbourg in September may have been his first professional goal, but it underlined his ability and technique; Dubois' rise even earned him a place in France's talent congested under-21 set up last season.

Although he is happy at his boyhood club and with his displays, the rapidly developing Léo Dubois' contract is up at the end of the season and a new deal does not look likely to be agreed, with Lyon and Marseille circling. This is a precarious situation for Nantes, but a potentially lucrative one for a number of clubs throwing longing looks at this increasingly intelligent, technically gifted leader of a full-back.

MOUSTAPHA DIALLO

POSITION: MIDFIELDER
 CLUB: EA GUINGAMP
 AGE: 31



Kind, warm and benevolent. Those are the words that spring to mind when seeing Mustapha Diallo's demeanour and heart-warming smile. This in a way betrays his behaviour on the pitch as he is infamously the most red-carded Guingamp player of all time.

After finishing in 10th position last season, Guingamp can today still nourish European hopes, Rennes and 6th position being only two points away at the time of writing. However, they must also be wary of their pursuers as 18th placed Lille are only 5 points away. Everything is thus still possible for the club from Brittany and it is likely that Mustapha Diallo's performances will be instrumental in their success or failure.

In his early days at the club, Diallo played deep in the centre of the field as a number six, scavenging balls from the feet of his opponent thanks to his many defensive qualities. Over time, however, and especially since Kombouaré's induction, Diallo has discovered another facet to his game. He

is now often seen coming up into the box to head the ball into the back of the net using his height (1m92) to his advantage. Diallo himself relates that he feels more confident to venture high up the pitch in the new system established by the Caledonian manager: *"It's this confidence that leads me ever more into the box, because it is true that I am much more offensive than I was two years ago"*.

In that sense, this year has been no exception. He has scored seven goals, some of them being crucial such as against Lyon or Metz. He is currently the club's second highest goal-scorer of 2017, quite an achievement for a central midfielder. However, this new role has sometimes led him to be left out of Kombouaré's starting eleven when the team is setting up to be more defensively-minded as was the case against PSG back in August. Although his coach is grateful for his offensive contribution, he likes to remind him of his primary role: *"If he scores, that's great. But more importantly, if after*

that we concede four goals, that means he hasn't done his job."

Diallo's evolution has thus led him to defend less and concede less fouls and cards than in the past. The small number of cards he has received this season (two) is testimony to this.

The Senegalese is now in the middle of his 9th season at the club and is moving towards his 32nd birthday in May. What his future will be made of is unsure. Given his age, it is unlikely that he will move to a club of higher standing than Guingamp, although he might consider a move to a more exotic destination such as the Gulf or China. It is also equally as likely that he will choose to end his career in Brittany, where both he and his family are happy. Either way, it is very unlikely that Guingamp will let him go this winter as he is still considered a vital element for the team, his goals and tackles will still be well needed in Brittany in 2018.

FRANCOIS KAMANO

POSITION: ATTACKER
 CLUB: BORDEAUX
 AGE: 21



This year has undoubtedly been the one for François Kamano's breakout. In his first season since signing from Bastia, the young Guinean winger established himself as one of the most eye-catching prospects in Ligue 1. It was the tail end of Bordeaux's 2016/17 campaign in particular where he was able to consistently show himself to be an attacking outlet, and by May he had registered six goals and three assists in total.

The signing of former PSG man Jérémy Ménez had brought about optimism in *Les Girondins'* ranks as it was hoped that the winger would be able to set aside injury and personal issues to produce a revival season not unlike the one that Hatem Ben Arfa produced at Nice the season gone by. By the turn of the year, however, it was another summer recruit that was making waves. Kamano had arrived from SC Bastia to less fanfare than his team-mate, but by January he had adapted to the team and made the most of Ménez's poor form and consolidated his place in the team's starting line-up.

As part of a youthful front three named by the fans, tongue firmly in cheek, the 'KLM' - Kamano, Gaëtan Laborde and Malcom - Gourvennec's men were able to string together encouraging performances playing reasonably attractive football. While they were pipped to automatic qualification by a late Marseille revival, by recent standards Bordeaux had had a moderately successful season and Kamano was a central part of it.

Generally, the strengths of Kamano's game can be found in his willingness to shoot often and accurately, and taking on players on the wing through his blistering pace. He had been the most productive and efficient of the trio at the tail end of the campaign, with six of his goals coming in ten starts.

Nevertheless, the start of the 2017/18 season has seen more muted and disappointing displays from Kamano, even if the respectable tally of two goals and four assists to his name so far have partly absolved him of much crit-

icism. With the 'KLM' now dismantled - Laborde having sustained an injury, and then replaced by new signing Nicolas de Préville - the team's forward line has lost much of its chemistry. His poor performances have more widely been reflective of Bordeaux's overall predicament, now in the lower reaches of the table by winter. A brief experiment spearheading the attack - one of the ways Gourvennec has sought to bring back Bordeaux's taste for the goal - proved to be a dead end.

As a result, despite several high points, namely the home draw against Marseille in which he looked the most dangerous of Bordeaux's attackers but also a willing contributor to the (ultimately unsuccessful) defensive effort as they tried to hold on to their lead, on the whole we have yet to see him build on the 'KLM' performances. Jocelyn Gourvennec has suggested that he should look to vary his game more, adding that he is capable of using both feet just as well as Malcom, he just needs to show it.

EMILIANO SALA

POSITION: ATTACKER
 CLUB: FC NANTES
 AGE: 27



So often, we picture Argentine footballers as being from one of two camps. They are either the most gracious of players, able to produce feats of quality that most of us could only dream of, or are hard-nosed, hot-headed men that are always an inch away from feats of madness.

Ironically, Emiliano Sala does not quite fit in either of those categories. He is not the most graceful of players to say the least and without a red card yet in France, it is hard to say he is aggressive either when most of his yellow cards are traditional striker fouls.

Instead, picture Bambi on ice. Limbs flailing everywhere, no real sense of purpose but one difference, he still manages to be effective.

The tune of 12 goals last season proves that, with nine coming in 2017. Many lambasted Nantes for their lack of goals from their forwards but the 27-year-old was as useful as he needed to be under Sergio Conceição, who turned *Les Canaris* from relegation candidates to European contenders.

A big part of that transforma-

tion was breeding confidence in the players at his disposal, giving them time on the pitch and providing them with more freedom to express themselves. That, in turn, really improved Sala's game as his former famine turned into a feast; the team were finally giving him the chances he thrives on.

While the Portuguese man has left the nest, Claudio Ranieri has tried to keep the positivity around the camp. He has strengthened their backline again and Sala is still his most important forward player, with five goals so far this year at the time of writing.

The perfect summation of the forward, came in his goal against St Étienne, with scrappy possibly being a slightly kind description of it. He air-shots his initial chance which is only half cleared, the ball comes back in and is nodded back into his path.

He squeezes nicely between two defenders trying to shut him out, controlling the ball with his nether regions before one of those opposing players belts the ball into his knee, which cannons into his face and into the bottom corner.

A goal that would have graced all of the Christmas videos in the past, it wonderfully sums up how awkwardly efficient Sala can be in the right areas.

However, there are worries that Nantes are taking a few backward steps in the attacking third. They are creating less opportunities and as a player that requires accurate service in order to be effective, Sala has often struggled to get into games.

The hope in 2018 is that they get him some more support, as well as a strike partner who can score consistently too. If Ranieri's side have real ambitions of pushing for the Europa League or one of the cups, they need more firepower around Sala.

If he can be the lynchpin at the top of the team, pulling everything together, then they have always got half a chance. He has never been the player to produce the consistently spectacular nor has he proven that he is above a certain level of quality. However, at the same time, Ligue 1 knows exactly what it gets from the Argentine: entertainment.

RENAUD COHADE

POSITION: MIDFIELDER
 CLUB: FC METZ
 AGE: 33



This season has so far seen not only FC Metz struggle to defeat their Ligue 1 opponents but also one of their main footballers struggling against a far more formidable opponent: time.

When the Lorraine club announced Cohade's signing in the summer of 2016, he was one of the central players in *Les Grenats'* plan to build around a nucleus of experienced talents.

And Cohade has certainly been around the block. In his fifteen-year professional career, he has completed his own Tour de France, representing Nîmes, Bordeaux and Sète in the south, Strasbourg and Valenciennes in the north and St Étienne somewhere in between, experiencing promotion, relegation and a 2013 Coupe de la Ligue victory.

This experience at both ends of Ligue 1 made him the perfect candidate for Metz and, as the other experienced 2016 recruit Yann Jouffre has continued to be blighted by injuries, Metz's game has been built around Cohade.

A versatile midfielder who

can play a defensive role, be the link between defence and attack, or fit the playmaker position - he has even played as a second striker at times - Cohade has missed only three league matches for Metz in 2017, showing his importance to the team.

And this, perhaps, is a blessing and a curse for Metz and for Cohade this season. Last season Cohade's all-action displays were a big factor in *Les Grenats'* survival. Tackling like a demon, dictating Metz attacks and always prepared to shoot from distance, he provided leadership and impetus to his side's offensives. It wasn't always pretty; it certainly didn't always work - but it worked enough to keep Metz in Ligue 1. It was perhaps fitting that it was a long-range effort from Cohade that secured the 1-0 win over Lille that ensured Metz's safety.

This season has seen more of the same from Cohade. Except that, at 33, it feels that age is beginning to catch up with the Swiss Army knife of a footballer. Perhaps mindful that the team remains reliant on him - particularly after

Metz lost the excellent Ismaila Sarr in the summer and failed adequately to replace him - Cohade may now be trying to do too much. He no longer has the legs to cover so much of the pitch, throwing himself into tackles one minute, threading passes the next, before next busting a gut to in the area to finish off moves. His attempts to be everything to everyone mean that each part of his game is suffering.

Cohade has one goal and two assists to his name this season, which doesn't look too bad considering that Metz have only scored 10 in total at the time of writing. Again, this is the issue: when he plays well, Metz have a fighting chance; when he doesn't, they don't. This is the paradox of Cohade: he has enough ability for a club to hand him the keys to the team; but he is no longer in his prime and is now struggling to display that ability on a regular basis. Renaud Cohade deserves his place on this list, as he would have done for much of the last decade. It would be a big shock, however, if this was not his last appearance.

JORDAN AMAVI

POSITION: DEFENDER
 CLUB: MARSEILLE
 AGE: 23



You will find a number of players in the GFFN 100 whose fortunes in the last 12 months have completely changed – for better or for worse. Jordan Amavi falls into that category, though fortunately, for the better. The 23-year-old has enjoyed a strong year in his quest to continue fulfilling his potential.

The year started off quite bleakly, in Cardiff as Aston Villa lost to the Bluebirds in what ended up as the first of seven defeats in eight games. January had proven to be a difficult month for the former France U-21 international who was continuing to find some form following a severe injury the previous year.

But that did not put off Marseille, who were among the suitors in the January transfer window, the first under the direction of Frank McCourt. A transfer fee was submitted, but understandably rebuffed by his club who curiously demanded, and then stated that they had received a far superior offer from China. Alas, the left-back still had six months to look forward to in the West Midlands.

Nevertheless, Amavi's performance levels rose in the Championship towards the end of the

2016-17 campaign, often being utilised further afield as a left winger to varying degrees of success. Villa would later cross the line in 12th place – but no one was under any illusion that one of AVFC's most bankable assets was on the move.

And for a while, it seemed that move was to Spain with Sevilla – a curious, but understandable move for a club who has done well with imported French talent in recent years. Having also signed the well-liked but perennially, and criminally underrated Sébastien Corchia, it seemed a good fit.

That move however was kicked into touch after a failed medical. Marseille were the major beneficiaries however, and that seems to have paid off after impressing continuously on the south coast of France.

After a false-start in the 6-1 defeat to Monaco in August, where the left-back was taken off in a tactical overhaul by Rudi Garcia, the 23-year-old has not looked back. OM had been craving the services of a young, dynamic left-back since the exit of Benjamin Mendy in the summer of 2016. The team had been limping on last season

with the likes of Henri Bedimo and Doria at that position, with the injection of a well-past-it Patrice Evra in January doing little to satisfy those cravings.

And Amavi has taken to his new surroundings well, providing adequate defensive capability but restoring the attacking potency on the left-wing. It was very clear to all who watched OM that they often preferred to attack down the right wing given the imbalance on the left. It was a trait too easily found out and nullified by opponents.

His early season promise has also gained an unexpected call up to the national squad in October for the key World Cup qualifiers. While that was only down to withdrawals elsewhere in the squad, it proved to be an endorsement of his potential by Didier Deschamps.

Having now made the left-back slot at Marseille his own inside six months (thanks also to Patrice Evra's sacking). Who knows what 2018 may hold for the former Nice man. The target of the national team remains the obvious goal, as Cardiff does seem a long way away now.

MARCELO

POSITION: DEFENDER
 CLUB: LYON
 AGE: 30



Marcelo Guedes Filho, best known as Marcelo, has not exactly kept a low profile since arriving in Europe. He has regularly played European football with the likes of Besiktas and PSV Eindhoven, but has, despite being a consistent performer for those clubs, seemed to evade both the praise of the footballing cognoscenti and of the selectors for Brazil. A move to Lyon from Besiktas was, in part, brought about by, at age 30, wanting a change in that situation, as the club's strong history with the likes of Sonny Anderson, Fred and Juninho has shown Les Gones are firmly on the radar of O Seleço's bosses.

Whether or not Marcelo earns a trip to Russia next summer remains to be seen (he had featured for Brazil's U-20s at one point) but even if overcoming the likes of Marquinhos, Jemerson and Thiago Silva fails to come to pass, he has already added much-needed stability to Lyon's back line. After a rash of dropping points from winning positions last season, the team clearly needed a radical makeover at the back. Nicolas N'Kou-

lou was sent on out loan, and promising youngster Emanuel Mammana was sold to Zenit St. Petersburg, clearing the way for the arrival of two left-backs, (which allowed Jrmy Morel to play centrally) and Marcelo, for €7m.

Success has not always been immediately forthcoming; witness a string of 3-all draws against Dijon, Bordeaux and Angers, in the last of which Marcelo was sent off for inadvertently knocking a card out of the referee's hand. But Lyon have also had some truly impressive runs, including seven consecutive clean sheets in all competitions to see them climb the table in Ligue and qualify for the knockout stages of the Europa League in that span.

Playing every match save the win over Monaco, for which he was suspended, Marcelo has been a rock for Lyon this season. Usually impressive positionally, but without being immobile, his intelligence has allowed Morel and Mouctar Diakhaby, his other regular partner, to get forward reliably without being at sea. He is also superb in the

air, ranking in the top five in aerial duels among centre backs in Ligue 1, and doing similarly well in a Europa League group stage that saw Lyon concede just four times on their way to recording eleven points.

Though strong at clearing the ball, he also has a subtler side to his play, with some of the better passing statistics outside of Paris among the league's defenders. He may be guilty of the odd gaffe, such as against Amiens in December, but he also brings a sense of calm and experience that Lyon have been lacking at the back since the departure of Cris.

While his newly arrived status means he will never be likely to wear the captain's armband, Marcelo still plays with a remarkable sense of leadership, even if he does have a propensity to jaw with the officials a bit too much at times. Still, though, his foibles are relatively few and that Lyon have lost just twice (compared to six times at this stage last season) in the current campaign can largely be put down to their ambitious and commanding defender.

100-76 RECAP

100	-	Alexander Djiku	(SM Caen)
99	-	Préjuce Nakoulma	(FC Nantes)
98	-	Denis Bouanga	(FC Lorient)
97	-	Rony Lopes	(AS Monaco)
96	-	Loïs Dony	(Saint-Étienne)
95	-	Iván Balliu	(Metz)
94	-	Bryan Dabo	(Saint-Étienne)
93	-	Andrea Raggi	(AS Monaco)
92	-	Naïm Sliti	(Dijon FCO)
91	-	Adama Niane	(ESTAC Troyes)
90	-	Ibrahim Amadou	(Lille OSC)
89	-	Ismael Traoré	(Angers SCO)
88	-	Jérémy Morel	(Lyon)
87	-	Benoît Costil	(Bordeaux)
86	-	Alexis Blin	(Toulouse)
85	-	Bertrand Traoré	(Lyon)
84	-	Nordi Mukiele	(Montpellier)
83	-	Faitout Maouassa	(Stade Rennais)
82	-	Léo Dubois	(FC Nantes)
81	-	Moustapha Diallo	(EA Guingamp)
80	-	François Kamano	(Bordeaux)
79	-	Emiliano Sala	(FC Nantes)
78	-	Renaud Cohade	(Metz)
77	-	Jordan Amavi	(Marseille)
76	-	Marcelo	(Lyon)

STEVE MANDANDA

POSITION: GOALKEEPER
 CLUB: MARSEILLE
 AGE: 32



Steve Mandanda continued the trend of former Marseille players this decade who eventually found out to his detriment that the grass in England is not always greener than it is in France. The former OM captain returned home after a difficult stint at Crystal Palace in the most recent summer transfer window.

Mandanda himself recalled earlier in 2017 that the first six months of the year were 'the most painful' of his professional career. And it is not hard to envisage why. A total of 0 minutes were played between January 1st 2017, and the end of Crystal Palace's season.

After a relatively average start to life in South London, the 32-year-old suffered a knee injury that would keep him out for weeks. In that time, the Eagles had dispensed with Alan Pardew in favour of Sam Allardyce who did not give Mandanda as much as a glance. The France international later recounted that he felt the manager's behaviour towards him was an injustice, believing that he merited better treatment in London given he was technically better than

the likes of Wayne Hennessey and Julian Speroni and he had the track record at European level to prove it.

Nevertheless, Mandanda used the early part of 2017 to engineer a move back to the south coast of France. Rumours were abounding as early as February about his eventual return, with club Sporting Director Andoni Zubizarreta meeting the goalkeeper on several occasions. Mandanda himself had returned to the city to undergo his rehabilitation.

And so it transpired five months later when the goalkeeper returned not so much to a hero's welcome, but more or less akin to seeing a family member return from a gap year. He dislodged his fantastic former understudy Yohann Pelé from the number one spot, but crucially did not regain the captain's armband he wore between 2010 and 2015.

He was afforded top billing in the pre-season friendlies and the first four Europa League qualifiers to get his fitness back on track. Rudi Garcia was under no illusions as to

who would be his first choice pick.

After a rather decent start in the championship, Mandanda shipped nine goals in two games against Rennes & Monaco. Much of it down to an inexistent OM defence, but the goalkeeper did not cover himself in glory either. However, redemption was soon to come.

A quite incredible performance in a satisfying 4-2 victory over last year's podium-finishers Nice earned the goalkeeper the Ligue 1 Player of the Month award for September (despite only featuring in two other games, one of which was the Rennes defeat). A record nine saves were made, including a penalty stop from Alassane Pléa.

It was followed up by another top performance against Lille as OM hurtled towards the podium after an early season slump. Mandanda has revitalised his career, and indeed his year upon returning to the Vélodrome. He ends the year in richer form than when he started it in the Crystal Palace reserves. All's well that ends well.

YANNIS SALIBUR

POSITION: ATTACKER
 CLUB: EA GUINGAMP
 AGE: 26



Yannis Salibur's 2017 has been defined by transfer sagas. In January, after an electric start to the 2016-17 campaign, he was just moments away from joining Hull City under the impressive Marco Silva. But a combination of botched paperwork and late night frantic dealings saw the window slam shut on his Premier League dream.

In September, he suffered a strong dose of déjà vu. Guingamp publicly declared they had received and accepted a bid from St Etienne on deadline day, but the deal collapsed, this time because Sainté's Roland Romeyer balked at Salibur's wage demands.

Alas, Salibur has had to see out the year at Guingamp. And in all honesty, that 'necessity' to feature for the Breton club has been reflected in his performances. *L'Équipe* wrote on September 2nd that the French wide-man would wake-up with a hangover after another unsettling transfer window. It seems that hangover has lasted for more than just a day.

That said, Salibur remains that game-changing, left-footed athletic winger that burst onto the GFFN 100

last year for the first time, just tinged with a feeling that he could be offering so much more.

Salibur has been something of a late bloomer, aided undoubtedly by the influence Jocelyn Gourvenec and Antoine Kombouaré. He started with much promise, having been selected to attend the coveted Clairefontaine academy before going in to join Lille. There, he turned pro, but despite featuring for many French youth international sides, he was never able to establish himself with *Les Dogues*. He made his first team debut in January 2009, just before his 18th birthday, but he spent the majority of his three years with the club in the reserves. In 2011, he joined US Boulogne, before moving into Ligue 2 with Clermont Foot. In 2015, now 24, he joined EAG for a reported €400,000.

A case of better late than never, Salibur stood out as Guingamp first staved off relegation, before storming into the top five at the beginning of last season before Christmas. Last year saw Salibur become a more consistent and mature performer, key to his club's successes. Unsurprisingly, the

suitors began to take notice.

Salibur is a quick, strong and productive wide-man who can play on the left and behind a striker, but is most often deployed as an inside forward on the right side. Here, he turns full-backs inside out, capable of either cutting inside or hitting the by-line. His end product has improved at Guingamp, for he is a good crosser and an adept set-piece taker. For many, he has all the attributes to be a top class player.

This year was supposed to be the year that Salibur took his game to the next level, but despite the interest, he never found a way out of Le Rou-dourou. His form, perhaps as a consequence, has not necessarily declined, but it has stagnated, not helped of course by Guingamp's underwhelming start to the new season by comparison the last.

But, with time, and help from coach Kombouaré, there can be little doubt that Salibur can forget this year's disappointments, and make 2018 the year 2017 was supposed to be.

YOHANN PELE

POSITION: GOALKEEPER

CLUB: MARSEILLE

AGE: 35



It is normally quite strange to see substitute goalkeepers feted. More so, when that goalkeeper has been inactive for the best part of four years due to medical issues. But Yohann Pelé is no ordinary goalkeeper. He is indeed, a player who has confounded expectations.

2017 saw the continuation of Pelé as a man emerging from the shadows. Once mercilessly discarded by Toulouse in 2012 following a heart scare, he played just one match between 2010-14 before signing for Sochaux in the second division having felt well enough to resume playing. Though at the wrong end of 30, only he knows how much his interrupted career would last.

Eyebrows were further raised when Pelé signed for cash-strapped Marseille in 2015. It seemed at the time a kind move. Pelé was obviously a talented keeper in his heyday with Le Mans - (once followed by Manchester United!) - though with his medical issues and age, it seemed that he would very rarely play with club captain Steve Mandanda normally ever-present in goal.

When Mandanda left, it was

Pelé who stepped up to the plate as the club eschewed the search to find a younger, more dynamic goalkeeper. It couldn't last, surely? And yet, by December 2016 - the 35-year-old had notched up 10 clean sheets in 19 league games with a string of impressive performances.

The year began in difficulty for the high-flying goalkeeper. OM had struggled to maintain their fine end-of-year run with four consecutive victories, including their first two away wins in a row of the season. Faced with a largely superior Monaco and Lyon side in January, the defence simply collapsed. Seven goals were shipped, with Pelé himself looking rather foolish on a goal scored by Thomas Lemar.

The winter was relatively tough. Pelé's fortunes were more or less decided by a porous OM defence - the result being one clean sheet in six. He was critiqued further as part of the collapse in Nantes (3-2) and the infamous thrashing at home to Paris Saint-Germain (1-5). Questions began to arise as to why OM had not considered a goalkeeper in Frank McCourt's first January window which saw the club shell out €40m.

Faced with criticism, it is a testament to Pelé's character that the player pushed on in the final 10 games of the season. OM's Europa League place was largely secured thanks to the keeper's performance - notably against Nice, Lille and Toulouse. There were six clean sheets in the final 10 games, with OM going on an unbeaten run of 11 matches. Pelé himself only conceded four goals, none of which led to defeat.

That mazy run led to him being crowned 'Clean of the King Sheets' - notching 18 in 38 games, more than stalwart Mandanda had ever managed. Curiously, it was more than any goalkeeper in Europe's top 5 leagues managed also - the likes of Danijel Subasic, Manuel Neuer, Thibaut Courtois and Gianluigi Buffon all bested by the 35-year-old.

It was the platform to kick on in 2017-18, but faced with Mandanda's return, Pelé obligingly returned to the number two spot, being relegated to the odd Europa League and cup match. Nevertheless, he will always cherish his moment in the sun in the twilight of his career. In 2014, no-one thought this would have been possible.

DANTE

POSITION: DEFENDER
 CLUB: OGC NICE
 AGE: 34



Dante Bonfim Costa Santos is enjoying an Indian summer to a career which has taken him across the European continent. Perhaps best remembered for his role at the heart of Bayern's 2013 Champions' League-winning team, Dante's career had stalled in Germany and this aforementioned, late renaissance owes much to his 2016 switch from Wolfsburg to Mediterranean outfit OGC Nice.

The perfect team came at the perfect moment to give the Brazilian the ideal stage upon which to achieve, in a role that requires him to both lead and perform on the pitch, and offer advice and guidance to a young squad off of it. With a style far more Brazil than Brittany, Dante is not a classic Ligue 1 defender. In a league known for stereotypically reductive defending, Dante gives great value to possession and refuses to waste it. Rarely panicking and always aggressive in defence, his first instinct when he wins back possession is to find a team-mate. You will never see Dante aimlessly punt the ball down field regardless of the situation.

A simple short hand for Dante's style of play is David Luiz. Another long-haired Brazilian defender who hated to waste possession, Luiz provided a sort of archetype for Dante in his time at PSG. Much like Luiz, Dante forces opposition players to think quickly and he often brings about mistakes in this way. His passing out of defence was the secret weapon of Nice's surprise title challenge last season.

Exploiting the typically one-paced Ligue 1 backlines with raking passes in behind, Dante provided constant danger. Equally capable with either foot, Dante remains one of Europe's best exponents of the accurate long pass from inside his own half at the age of 34. Even as Nice have struggled this season, Dante has continued to shine as a long passer averaging three completed long balls out of five every game.

Dante does seem to have calmed down somewhat in his second season in France. He only rarely runs with the ball and has cut down on costly mistakes too, although there

was one recent brain explosion against Guingamp.

Dante has been the senior influence that a young Nice side needed and he was a large part of the reason that they finished in the Champions' League places last season. Hardly embarrassed this season, Dante continues to be one of the key figures for Le Gym as they climb the table, despite a clear regression in his positional play in the back end of this calendar year.

Dante has, overall, enjoyed an excellent year with Nice and could fairly have hoped that his Brazil career might be resuscitated alongside his club one. Sadly, having taken part in the infamous 7-1 World Cup semi-final defeat against Germany, it appears as though his international career is at an end. Regardless of his international exile, Dante has won back respect in the last year as he has helped Nice to unprecedented heights.

Nice have not won the league in well over 50 years so Dante's role in Le Gym going close has to count for something.

DAMIEN DA SILVA

POSITION: DEFENDER
 CLUB: SM CAEN
 AGE: 29



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There is no denying that certain characters thrive in differing environments depending on their personalities. Some have the ambition, hunger and nerve to play at the elite European clubs whilst others prefer not to push to climb those rungs, enjoying the local hero status that they might have earned at smaller sides. As a result, some players find themselves consistently challenging for honours whilst others, regardless of how talented they may be, regularly find themselves battling relegation. A good example of the latter kind is Damien da Silva of Caen. A superb, yet underrated defender who is always ready to battle his heart out for the cause and despite him not being someone who casual fans of Ligue 1 may recognise in an instant, he is certainly one of the most consistent defenders in the league.

Caen themselves may not have had the best of years in 2017 but that does not mean that Da Silva did not stand out, playing 36 games in Ligue 1 last season, missing just two games, both in 2017,

the 2-0 home defeat against Montpellier and the important 1-1 against Paris Saint-Germain which saved Caen from relegation.

What stands out immediately is Da Silva's impressive disciplinary record. In the first half of 2017, he only picked up three bookings and one red card, which for a defender in a struggling team is somewhat impressive and is explained by Da Silva's quiet, contentious temperament, relying on his brilliant positional awareness to prevent him from being in desperate situations where he is forced to make a professional foul.

As Caen managed to escape relegation on the last day thanks to that 1-1 draw at the Parc des Princes, could they start the second half of 2017 in a better vein of form? Yes, they did, and are going into the winter break in 12th position, 13 points clear of Metz at the foot of the table, five points clear of Angers who occupy the final direct relegation place, yet they are only three points off of Nice in 6th. With Da Silva once again remaining a regular fixture in

the side, it is no wonder that they have ended 2017 so well.

Da Silva is not the sort of player who can dribble out of defence and play a side-splitting long ball to take both the opposition midfield and defence out of the game, but he is a strong, resolute defender who takes some beating to bully off the ball and to win a duel or tackle against.

So what does 2018 have in store for the 29-year-old Caen man? If his club side keep going the way they are, Da Silva's name will be popping up in those "Most Underrated Ligue 1 XI of the Season" teams that media outlets offer at the end of every campaign, because he will have been a huge part in whatever success Caen have. Patrice Garandé's cautious, quiet, but effective approach is no better embodied by any other one of his charges. With Julien Féret being phased out of the team, it will not be long until Da Silva becomes Caen's undisputed captain and leader. Already a legend at the club despite joining as recently as 2014, Da Silva has created his own little Normandy paradise.

ALLAN SAINT-MAXIMIN

POSITION: ATTACKER
 CLUB: OGC NICE
 AGE: 20



This calendar year in football was dominated by young French talents. At Monaco, Kylian Mbappé stunned the world and carried his side towards a Champions' League semi-final before moving to French champions PSG. Whilst in Germany, Ousmane Dembélé impressed for Dortmund and earned a move to Barcelona to play alongside Lionel Messi and Luis Suarez. These two players have been hailed as the future of French football, but what has been lost in the noise of 2017 is a story of redemption for a player who was once labeled under the same tag. Allan Saint-Maximin, only 20 years old, is rebuilding his career in Nice after dour loan spells at SC Bastia and Hannover 96. Under the iron fist of Lucien Favre, Saint-Maximin has become a more disciplined player on and off the ball and the erratic brief glimpses of his talent have been replaced by consistency and stability with the French winger becoming a key cog in Nice's attack.

Saint-Maximin's fortunes could not have gone much differently to his Monaco team-mate Kylian Mbappé during the 2016-17 season. While Monaco and Mbappé marched imperiously towards the Ligue 1 title, Saint-Maximin struggled at Bastia who would eventually be relegated from Ligue 1. Saint-Maximin was one of the few

bright spots for a Bastia side that was desperately lacking in quality. However, to clutch for the "good player at a bad team" label would be a mistake.

Saint-Maximin's performances suggested a talented player whose decision-making let him down and lacked refinement to compliment his raw ability. Saint-Maximin would finish the season with just three goals and three assists in 34 league appearances. His performances were quite frankly not up to standard to play a role in Monaco's title winning season nor replace the departing Bernardo Silva at the beginning of the 2017-18 season. Saint-Maximin was still only 20, but he was in desperate need of a coach who could provide him with playing time and begin to mould him into the player his potential suggested he could become.

Nice had recently lost Younes Belhanda, Valentin Eysseric and Ricardo Pereira, all of whom had played a key role in their attacking success during the previous season. Nice needing reinforcements for the new season and already behind in the transfer window chose to opt for riskier signings in Saint-Maximin and Dutch legend Wesley Sneijder. The fortunes of the two signings could not be more contrasting.

While Sneijder has struggled for

form and playing time, Saint-Maximin has begun to iron out the weaknesses in his game with the help of Favre and while there have been bumps in the road, the results of his hard-work have become apparent. Saint-Maximin has always possessed exceptional dribbling ability paired with searing pace, but his decision-making and passing ability often let him down. Under Favre, Saint-Maximin has improved this side of his game and become a much more well-rounded attacking player than the one seen at Bastia. His performance against Monaco in Nice's 4-0 win over the Champions showcased his skill as he punished Monaco on the counter-attack again and again.

With Nice having suffered an abysmal start to the season, Saint-Maximin has played a key role in their revival and Nice sit 6th at the time of writing after four wins in a row. The French winger has a long way to go before he becomes a complete player, but the signs this season have been positive. If he can continue his current trajectory, then he may well become the player people thought he could be when he was a teenager. Who knows, he might even again be mentioned in the same breath as Kylian Mbappé and Ousmane Dembélé.

TANGUY N'DOMBELE

POSITION: MIDFIELDER

CLUB: LYON

AGE: 21



Lyon's academy regularly wins plaudits for the calibre of player it produces, with Karim Benzema, Alexandre Lacazette and Corentin Tolisso all having emerged in the last decade. As Lyon typically turn out younger sides, one might be forgiven for not knowing the back story of all of these players, but increasingly the club have looked to strengthen by bringing in young players from other clubs and improving their play. Monaco have used this strategy to great perfection and garnered no small amount of headlines, but Lyon appear to be treading a similar path with the likes of Lucas Tousart (Valenciennes), Maxwell Cornet (Metz), Kenny Tete (Ajax) and Bertrand Traoré (Chelsea) all playing important roles recently.

One player whose talent and importance may exceed any of those though, is Tanguy N'Dombélé, currently on loan from Amiens, but with an €8m option to buy at season's end. Only recently 21, the powerfully-built midfielder was a revelation for his parent club in the season's early going, and Lyon, having sold Tolisso and Maxime Gonalons in the summer, leapt at the

chance to sign the French U-21 international late in the summer window.

For the player, who came through Guingamp's academy before signing on with Amiens, the choice was an easy one to make, as he elucidated to Ligue 1's website recently; *"It was the best choice for my progression. This is an ambitious club, one of the top three in France. Once OL's interest was concrete, I wanted to come to Lyon and nowhere else. This is a change from being at Amiens, but being at Lyon is not an end in itself. I need to keep on working and making progress."*

That he doesn't view Lyon as an end is important. He clearly knows that the Rhône club exists not necessarily as a stepping stone, but as a place where he can burnish his reputation not only in Ligue 1 but also by playing European football regularly, with Lyon having clashed with Juventus, Roma, Ajax and Tottenham in recent Europa League campaigns. A return to the Champions' League would be ideal, but for now, the ambitious N'Dombélé has taken to the Parc OL pitch with a remarkable determination, showing

no loss of form in taking the "step up" to Lyon, even with European fixtures increasing his workload.

Whether partnering Tousart or Houssein Aouar in midfield or playing as part of a three, N'Dombélé has been one of Ligue 1's most impressive players this season. A truly complete midfielder, he possesses remarkable vision, displaying an almost-audacious creativity on the ball at times. His powerful frame, tackling nous and dribbling ability make him an ideal relayeur alongside the more prosaic Tousart, but he also thrives in a holding role when partnering Aouar.

From his first match against Paris Saint-Germain to a more recent, difficult return to the Stade de Gerland (where he led Lyon to a comeback victory), he has also displayed a good deal of mental strength, performing exceedingly well under pressure. Given France's wealth of talent in midfield, a senior debut is unlikely in the near future, but for the moment, he has impressed with *Les Espoirs* in much the same manner as he has for his club.

LUCAS LIMA

POSITION: DEFENDER
 CLUB: FC NANTES
 AGE: 26



In an unconventional calendar year for FC Nantes, one player, Brazilian left-back Lucas Lima has certainly had an interesting time in Western France, going from ever present under Sergio Conceição to being used a touch more sparingly by new coach Claudio Ranieri. Despite the period of 'successful turbulence' the club has faced, 26-year-old Lima has consistently proved his qualities whenever given the opportunity, and can now be counted as one of the club's key assets as they sit pretty (at the time of writing) in 5th position of Ligue 1.

An assessment of Lima's year must be placed in the context of playing for two coaches whose approaches to football has differed wildly. Under Conceição, Lima was an indefatigable element of a Nantes team whose expansive, attacking football rocked the Beaujoire for five crazy months, following the Portuguese's arrival after the horror show of the dour René Girard. Indeed, Lima played 90 minutes in every single game of that season, save the final 38 minutes at Lille where he was sent off.

The major asset in Lima's game, and one that was

certainly exploited by Conceição, is his appetite to deliver dangerous crosses with his mean left foot. Such was his insatiable desire to supply target man Emiliano Sala, that Lima finished the 2016/17 season as Ligue 1's most prolific crosser, with 376 attempted crosses, averaging a whopping 10 a game. A cynic would scrutinise those numbers and notice that all those crosses only yielded two assists, which for an attacking left-back is not spectacular. In the context of those games however, where they were but one element of the Conceição game-plan of bombarding the opposition with pace and numbers, then Lima's contribution should rightly be seen as an important factor in Nantes's charge to a creditable 7th.

The headlines that have accompanied Ranieri's time so far in charge of Nantes have not failed to mention just how good they have been defensively, and it is for this reason that Lima has struggled to feature as prominently as he did earlier in the year. Ranieri, the Italian, has taken a squad that he felt had its limitations, that was barely augmented in the summer and turned it into a defensive monster, straight

from the catenaccio school. Under this new regime, Lima, a player whose thoughts are always offensive has struggled to find his niche, resulting in regular substitutions, something which literally never happened last season.

"He must improve tactically, he plays left-back in training because I want him to improve," Ranieri said of Lima recently. This belies the fact that Lima has increasingly played further up the pitch on the left wing, being allowed to fully express himself going forward without worrying himself with the defensive discipline and diligence required of a Ranieri defence. In this team, where goals and attacking élan have been at a premium, Lima remains an important feature. His late winner against Monaco in November provided another vital three points for the Ranieri machine, and his enthusiasm for a cross has not been dampened by reduced playing time, averaging 2.8 accurate crosses per game. As the team starts to develop in an attacking sense, as Ranieri hopes, it is sure that Lima will be at the forefront, with his pinpoint left foot leading the way.

MEMPHIS DEPAY

POSITION: ATTACKER

CLUB: LYON

AGE: 23



Memphis Depay has sometimes cut a frustrating figure since his arrival in Lyon last winter, but despite his seeming diffidence, the Dutchman's raw numbers for *Les Gones* are simply too impressive to ignore entirely. A surprising move that many had thought would usher in a return of the sort of spending that saw Lyon shell out similarly big fees for the likes of Aly Cissokho, Yoann Gourcuff and Lisandro Lopez, Depay's arrival after a disappointing spell in England's northwest was a seemingly momentous occasion for the club, coming as it did on the heels of a sparkling new stadium and Chinese investment.

That has not exactly been the case in the subsequent window, though, as Lyon centred their purchases in the summer on a cadre of talented, but less expensive players, including Depay's countryman Kenny Tete and midfielder Tanguy N'Dombélé. Still, though, Lyon have seemed a club renewed of late after years of being forced to sell their best players. Depay, despite flattering to deceive at times, has delivered more than a few memorable moments, including a stunning long-range strike against Toulouse last

season. In total, in 32 appearances in the league in 2017, Depay has recorded thirteen goals and ten assists. One can fairly make the argument that given the quality Depay evinced earlier in his career at PSV Eindhoven, those numbers are far from exceptional, but still, it is hard to ignore the Dutchman, especially when he feels like playing.

That last clause, though, prevents him from being higher on this list, despite his exceptional attacking talent. It has also become a source of doubt as to whether he has been worth the €16m the club shelled out for him, a seemingly astronomical fee for an essentially unwanted player. Despite his placement on Ligue 1's scoring charts, he is probably not even part of Lyon's best eleven, with youngster Houssem Aouar offering a more complete presence on the left.

More complete, that is to say, in offering the kind of defensive support that allows Lyon's left-backs, Marçal and Ferland Mendy, to get forward effectively. The pair tend to require assistance defensively on either flank when they over-play in the attacking third. Depay was more than

frank about this in a sometimes-inflammatory interview in *L'Équipe* in November.

Speaking to the sports daily's Vincent Duluc, Depay remarked, "I'm not a left-back. The most important thing for me, what's expected of me, is the goals and assists. For the rest of it, I do my best, but when I'm asked to focus on defense, I want to say, "Do you not remember why you recruited me?" It was not to defend all the time."

This level of hubris has earned Depay unflattering comparisons to Cristiano Ronaldo. While his uneven form last year could be put down to adjusting to a new league and language, in the current campaign, given the level of talent around him, despite his young age, he simply must display more maturity on and off the pitch.

England did not suit him, that much is true, but if he does not soon change his tune and invest in showing he can become a more complete player, he may not be afforded another chance so easily, despite his manifest talent.

HILTON

POSITION: DEFENDER
 CLUB: MONTPELLIER
 AGE: 40



In the summer of 2011, Vitorino Hilton da Silva was ready to quit French football and head back to his native Brazil. It felt as if his career was coming to a natural close. Having played a limited role in Marseille's 2009/10 Championship season, he had fallen out of favour with manager Didier Deschamps and experienced the trauma of an armed robbery at his home. After nine years in Europe and some 260 appearances for Servette, Bastia, Lens and Marseille it was time to go home.

But fate then intervened; Montpellier manager René Girard, wishing to add experience to his improving Montpellier side and to plug a gap left by the departing Emir Spahic, persuaded Hilton to sign a one-year contract at the Stade de la Mosson. A free transfer and a short term commitment seemed to suit both parties. What followed was extraordinary; the centre back made no fewer than 35 appearances in 2011/12 and led *La Paillade* to their first and only Ligue 1 title success, conceding just 34 goals in the process.

Now 40, the Brazilian is in his seventh year at Montpellier and remains indispensable. Having made at least 30 appearances each season, and 13 so far this term, Hilton is very much the elder statesman and leader of a side that currently lies tenth in Ligue 1. Results may have been mixed but defending has certainly not been a problem, with just 13 goals conceded to date. The relationship of Hilton, Nordi Mukiele and last summer's recruit from Rennes, Pedro Mendes, appears to have a natural chemistry and 32-year-old Daniel Congré, another long serving Montpellier defender, offers further reassurance.

Picking out a single performance this season is difficult but Hilton's game versus St Etienne in October, a match his side won 1-0 with a goal from Isaac Mbenza, was a masterclass in composure and containment. Faced with a team intent on attacking with pace down the flanks, the centre back ensured his team-mates retained shape throughout and played the sweeper role to perfection as Montpellier took a valuable

three points from the Stade Geoffroy-Guichard.

So how long can Hilton continue? Apart from a niggling hip problem, the Brazilian has had a remarkably injury-free career and is famous for maintaining his weight at an unwavering 78 kilograms. At a modest 1.80m his game is based upon positional sense and timely interception rather than brute force. That said, having reached the landmark age of 40, Hilton's contract with Montpellier ends this season and it is thought likely he will retire and return either to his home city of Brasilia or to a coaching role at his first club, Chapecoense, a side that is still very much in rebuild mode following the tragic plane crash that decimated the club's first team squad in 2016. We can be grateful that he resisted the temptation of calling time on his career in 2011. Who knows for how much longer Ligue 1's most experienced central defender might wish to continue fighting in one of Europe's top five divisions. As 2017 comes to a close, he certainly has the ability to do so.

JONATHAN BAMBA

POSITION: ATTACKER
 CLUB: SAINT-ÉTIENNE
 AGE: 21



For a player to make an impression at two clubs in the same year takes some doing. You have to fit in to two different squads, two different styles of play and you have to be able to adapt to them very quickly. In 2017, Jonathan Bamba managed to make an impression at both St Étienne, his current and parent club, as well as Angers, where he spent the first half of the year out on loan at. At the time of writing, Bamba is playing a key role in attack for a rather struggling and mediocre St Étienne team, but he is showing signs of being that spark that may come in handy towards the back end of the season.

Bamba, a France U-21 international, made his Angers debut in mid-January in a 1-1 draw against Bordeaux, where he was hauled off just past the hour mark. After bedding into the team and figuring out where he was best off playing, Bamba was left out of the starting XI for the following two games.

Following this mini spell on the sidelines, Bamba came back into the starting XI as An-

gers won five out of the eight games of which he was a part, with the two losses coming at the hands of Toulouse and Marseille and a 0-0 draw against Rennes. This winning run pushed Angers up the table and into mid-table security, whilst Bamba was making an impact going forward, even if it did not show in the statistics columns.

However, despite his good start with *Le Sco*, Bamba again found regular playing time hard to come by towards the end of the season when Angers went through a sticky patch, losing six of their last 10 games. With the exception of a 3-0 win against Guingamp when he posted a goal and an assist and on the final day of the season against Montpellier where he once again registered a goal and an assist, Bamba was effective only intermittently.

He started against Marseille, Guingamp and Nantes in March but those three would be his last starts until he faced off against St Étienne's greatest rivals Lyon towards the back end of April, and even then he was subbed off after

75 minutes. What looked like being a good loan spell for the 21-year-old proved to be quite the opposite, but maybe a return to *Les Verts* could reignite his career.

Bamba has started almost every game for ASSE in 2017 since his return and he has already beaten his goal tally from his time at Angers, scoring five and having two assists. He looks confident but one could not help but think his development has been hindered by the poor season St Étienne are having both on and off the field.

Managerial changes have not seen Bamba's game time cut at all, but he needs to be wary that if he rests on his laurels, he could find himself back on the bench. He has looked quite effective on the left-wing so far, but if *Les Verts* are to claw back any European aspirations in 2018, most of the responsibility will fall on the shoulders of Jonathan Bamba. After that, he will likely move on to another adventure, with his current contract expiring at the end of the current campaign.

ALPHONSE AREOLA

POSITION: GOALKEEPER
 CLUB: PSG
 AGE: 24



In a team that has spent so much money on incredible, world class talent from all over the globe, it may be easy to forget those who have worked their way up the youth academy system and have established themselves within the team. For Alphonse Areola at Paris Saint-Germain, this may well be the case. His improvement and rise in 2017, especially in the back-half of the year, may have been forgotten given the world-record, summer signings of Kylian Mbappé and Neymar, but the young French goalkeeper has firmly established himself as PSG's number one, slowly beginning to show why he was so highly-rated as a bastion of French shot-stopping potential during earlier loan spells with SC Bastia and RC Lens.

However, whilst the latter part of 2017 may have been joyous for the 24-year-old, the first half was not one that he will at all be able to look back on fondly. His final appearance of the 2016/17 Ligue 1 season would come in February in a 2-1 victory over Lille at the Parc des Princes, before being immediately

dropped from Ligue 1 and Champions' League duties for Kevin Trapp, despite actually playing in every group game of that season's Champions' League until the infamous Barcelona tie.

It was clearly a set-back for Areola, who had a few shaky moments across the campaign but his flawless record in the Coupe de France gave him some hope of regaining his starting XI place. In five games in the Coupe de France, Areola did not concede a single goal and whilst that may not seem like something to scream off of the rooftops, it was certainly an impressive statistic going 450 minutes without conceding in a competition that PSG tend to approach laxly.

But as the first half of 2017 came to a close, the pre-season offered Areola a chance to prove to Unai Emery that he could exude confidence in high-pressure moments where Kevin Trapp had not. Between August and October in Ligue 1, Areola and PSG only conceded six goals, and it took him until November to concede his first Champions'

League goal, an early Moussa Dembélé opener for Celtic in Paris. Regardless of how defensively teams often set up against *Les Parisiens*, this is a reality that Areola deserves credit for.

The 24-year-old is fundamentally more secure in his all-round game this season, especially with regards to producing saves to medium-range shots, his distribution and, most importantly for him, how he commands his area at set-pieces. A major criticism of Areola was that he was too timid when a looping ball came into the box and he did not have the physical strength to come in and wipe out whoever was in front of him. This season, he has shown that he has learnt from his mistakes.

Hopefully for Areola, he will carry on this form as PSG likely walk to the Ligue 1 title, his development from the first half of 2017 to the second half has been impressive. If he continues to work hard, he will become the goalkeeper that PSG need to really become a truly dominant force in European football.

JEROME ROUSSILLON

POSITION: DEFENDER
 CLUB: MONTPELLIER
 AGE: 24



Being one of Ligue 1's most underrated full-backs, 2017 has awarded the 24-year-old Montpellier man Jérôme Roussillon a little more attention. Given the standard of his performances, this was bound to happen at one point or another. His pace, intelligence, physicality and versatility have led him to become one of Montpellier's most important elements.

In the first part of 2017, Roussillon would regularly alternate between playing as a left winger and a full-back under Jean-Louis Gasset's system. Amidst the southern formation's poor season, he was among the few players along with Ryad Boudebouz and Steve Mounié who prevented the club from relegation to Ligue 2.

The end of the season and the transfer window saw coach Jean-Louis Gasset resign as well as Ryad Boudebouz leave for Sevilla and Steve Mounié for Huddersfield Town. Gasset was replaced by former Nantes coach Michel der Zakarian but there was no significant investment to replace either of the latter two. Everything seemed to portend a nightmarish season to come

for Roussillon and his teammates. The first games of the season seemed to confirm this with only four points in four games against modest sides such as Dijon and Toulouse. Even Roussillon seemed to be underperforming, leading der Zakarian to send him over to the reserve team for a weekend.

This was not to last. Roussillon quickly reintegrated the squad and Der Zakarian's new 5-3-2 system started to bear its fruits. Unlike in the previous campaign under Gasset when Roussillon was regularly moved up and down the pitch according to Montpellier's opponent, this time Roussillon established himself as a left full-back. This new positioning is currently allowing Roussillon's many qualities to flourish as he needs not concern himself as he did last season with his defensive tasks due to the presence of the three centre backs covering his attacks. This allows him to exploit his offensive capacities (developed at a young age when he used to play as a striker) to their fullest extent.

Although this has not transpired through to his statistics (three assists and three goals

in 2017) Roussillon is, along with Aguilar the other full-back, the most important element of der Zakarian's team and his performances have allowed Montpellier to remain unbeaten against the top four, competing with and sometimes even outperforming Ligue 1's most proficient outfits. Montpellier's fixtures against Monaco, PSG and Marseille saw Roussillon systematically performing at a high level, demonstrating his ability to deliver against the best.

Given Roussillon's performances and Montpellier's habit of selling their best players very fast, this is undoubtedly Roussillon's last season at *La Paillade*. Given his many qualities in a position that is highly sought after on the European stage, he is likely to attract the attention from across Europe and recent rumours have reported an interest from Marseille. Whether or not Marseille truly are interested in him, Roussillon will be a free agent next summer after refusing a contract extension offer from Montpellier. At that time, he will represent one of the best bargains in Europe.

LAYVIN KURZAWA

POSITION: DEFENDER

CLUB: PSG

AGE: 25



Filling the boots of one of the most decorated football players of all time can be a daunting task but in contrast, the learning curve will certainly have been invaluable to Layvin Kurzawa during Maxwell's summative years at PSG.

In the early part of 2017, Kurzawa had earned himself the first choice left-back berth, wrestling the jersey away from the veteran Brazilian. But Kurzawa's displays were at times mediocre and below the standards set by Ligue 1's richest side. In fairness the ex-Monaco man was playing with a long-term groin injury that was affecting his performances. As the 2016/17 season came to a close, Kurzawa underwent surgery to rectify the problem.

But with a new season approaching, Maxwell retired and the nagging injury repaired, pressure was on Kurzawa to start to consistently deliver the kind of performances that PSG had paid a reported €25m to Monaco for his services in August 2015. So far this season, Kurzawa has been unable to deliver the dependable performances that PSG are expecting of their first-choice left-back. Too often, he has gone missing in games and for a player that has been given time to develop in a star-studded team, Kurzawa has disappointed.

Consistency has been the key area of his game that he has struggled to amend since his move to the capital and with the signing of Yuri Berchiche this summer from Real Sociedad as back-up, the French international doesn't, on the face of it, realistically have a tough battle on his hands to retain his starting place.

In truth, Berchiche offers little threat to Kurzawa and the Frenchman knows it. The Spaniard provides a rotation option at left-back and has no experience of note in European competitions, a scenario that isn't particularly helpful to Kurzawa's performance level as he does not feel obvious pressure. This has led to the current league leaders making contact with Juventus's Alex Sandro among others.

There is no doubting Kurzawa's potential and on his day he can be a wonderfully gifted full-back. When fit, he offers an exceptional attacking threat and can be combative defensively. His link-up play in advanced offensive areas with the likes of Adrien Rabiot and Neymar is occasionally both rapid and threatening, but not consistently enough.

Kurzawa is capable of doing extraordinary things such as his incredible display against Anderlecht in October where he crafted

three excellent finishes as he became the first left-back to score a Champions' League hat-trick.

But there seems to be no in-between, either Kurzawa is excellent or he is poor and with PSG and France both reliant on the ex-Monaco man, this could be the biggest season of his career to date.

Kurzawa has some huge honours to compete for in 2018 and he is in the very unique position of realistically being able to win every trophy that he competes for. If that is to be the case and if we are to see the true potential of Kurzawa come to fruition then he must improve his level of dependability and show that he is one of the best left-backs in Europe.

To do that he must not create off-field dramas for himself where at times his actions have plagued his career, like this year's hot-mic shisha bar Didier Deschamps insult incident, and concentrate on what is a huge 12 months for him.

If we start to see the best of Kurzawa, then PSG could have a polished cog of their team ready to fight on three fronts, and France will also be bolstered ahead of their assault on the World Cup next summer.

FREDERIC GUILBERT

POSITION: DEFENDER
 CLUB: SM CAEN
 AGE: 23



Sometimes, you have to take the long way round. Frédéric Guilbert was a part of the Caen youth system growing up but after a detour that took him to AS Cherbourg and Bordeaux, he is now entrenched as the first name on the team sheet at the Normandy club.

Which does sound a little strange, given that back in the 2015/16 season, he was *Les Girondins'* second-most used player. However, new manager Jocelyn Gourvennec did not have him in his plans and allowed him to join his boyhood club on loan for the season.

Back at SMC, he thrived. While his team often flirted with relegation, his performances added an extra dimension to both their attacking and defensive play. It was enough to convince them to snap him up on a permanent deal and they'll be very glad they got it completed quickly too. A number of English clubs, including Brighton, were lurking in the background and the riches of the Premier League could have pulled him away at the last minute.

The pull of both his hometown club, the President Jean-François Fortin and the fan base helped him decide to stay in Ligue 1, with even one fan promising to jump in the port if he signed.

The second half of 2017 has only got better for the 22-year-old and for the club he loves. They have undergone a real resurgence, led by the joint-third best defence in the division behind Montpellier and Paris Saint-Germain.

The former France under-21 international has played a big part in that too, as his fleet-footed nature allows him to cover plenty of ground and get back to defend. His experience of playing more centrally on occasion while at Bordeaux has really helped, with Caen playing an incredibly narrow defensive line when they try to shut up shop for the many one-goal wins they have enjoyed so far.

It is not just Guilbert's pace that stands out, the timing of his runs to ensure he covers back is excellent and highlighted by the 2.5 intercep-

tions he has been averaging per game this season.

He is also excellent in attacking areas, willing to sprint past his wing partner and provide some of the great aerial balls that a target man like Ivan Santini thrives upon. His range of passing is also superb, able to switch play with relative ease and with either foot as well, something not many midfielders can produce.

The local boy will hope that 2018 will progress in the same vein, with him continuing his current record of playing every single minute for the club so far this season. He will also want to help his team continue to punch above their weight and if he remains in rich form, he might even catch the eyes of Didier Deschamps, with right-back a well-known problem area for the national team.

Yet right now, no matter how long it took to get there, Guilbert will just be happy to be playing in the same shirt that he, his father and grandfather all adored.

CIPRIAN TATARUSANU

POSITION: GOALKEEPER
 CLUB: FC NANTES
 AGE: 31



A good goalkeeper can be hard to come by in today's world of football. Everybody is looking for a flashy shot-stopper like Manuel Neuer or David De Gea, individuals who can make world class saves at the drop of the hat. However, oftentimes it can be just as productive a strategy to build a defence around a goalkeeper who does not make mistakes and represents a concrete pillar between the sticks.

When Nantes managed to take Ciprian Tatarusanu off of Fiorentina's hands for just over €2.5m, it may have passed people by, but his signing has proven to be a critical part of Nantes' superb defensive record this season in Ligue 1.

The Romanian was *La Viola's* first choice in Serie A in 2017 and only conceded 22 goals in his 16 appearances under Paulo Sousa. Whilst his form and ability may have flown under the radar somewhat, perhaps because he was not "flashy" enough for some fans, Claudio Ranieri and Nantes felt he was the right man to place at the back of their defence.

Tatarusanu missed the opening game of the season, a 3-0 away defeat to Marcelo Bielsa's Lille, but did find his way into the side in the following game, a narrow 1-0 defeat at the hands of Marseille. That game proved to be the last loss he or Nantes would face for two months as they went on a superb run of wins and in the process, only conceding three goals in eight games.

Many people had ignored Nantes in pre-season after they lost Amine Harit to Schalke 04 and manager Sergio Conceição to Porto, but Ranieri's defensive tactics and counter attacking style ensured that Tatarusanu's skills were called upon many times and as the results show, he has done extremely well to keep out opposition time and time again.

Has it taken many by surprise? It sure has, but when you watch them play you can tell how defensively sound and well-drilled they are. A lot of that stability comes from the goalkeeper and his presence behind the main defenders sends out the right signals.

The most recent run of form has not been too impressive for *Les Canaris*, only winning twice since the 28th October, but if Nantes regain their defensive solidity, Tatarusanu can become a key player for the club. After conceding just 15 goals in his first 16 appearances for the club, it will be a tough task to keep up that incredible ratio going into 2018 but with playing time almost assured for the Romanian international, he could do with regaining the awesome form that made Nantes so tough to beat in the first few weeks of the season.

So what is ahead of the Romanian and Nantes for the rest of the season and 2018? At the time of writing, Claudio Ranieri's side sits in fifth place, five points behind Marseille who occupy the final Champions' League spot, but with their solidity at the back and their ability to pick up 1-0 wins, it would be foolish to count Nantes out of a surprise place in Europe's premier competition. Who knows, maybe a European adventure could be on the cards for Tatarusanu?

VALERE GERMAIN

POSITION: ATTACKER
 CLUB: MARSEILLE
 AGE: 27



Everyone roots for the underdog and no-one has quite felt like that more throughout their career than Valère Germain. The forward had to fight for his place at Monaco with the Russian riches that came in, then proved his worth in a loan spell at OGC Nice before returning to the Stade Louis II, only to be forgotten about in the stead of some youngster who likes to cross his arms.

You see, the 27-year-old has always been a favourite of Ligue 1 viewers. Diminutive in size but not in stature, willing to run all day long if necessary and into all the areas the more glamorous strikers do not like to dwell, simply for the good of the team; this year really felt like his own little Cinderella story.

Germain's 2017 started off better than many people probably care to remember. The emergence of Kylian Mbappé made many think that the former club captain had to take a back seat but instead, in order to fight on two fronts, he continued to be a key contributor.

Seven of his 10 goals in that title-winning campaign came in the second half of the season, starting in the majority of league games. With Mbappé almost exclusively used in the Champions' League, it was up to Germain to hold down the fort when needed in Ligue 1 in order to maintain their title fight, which he did without question.

He also did not grumble when he was left out in place of the youngster, fully aware of the great talent that was blossoming in front of our very eyes. Instead, he remained as industrious and as much of a team player as he had before, willing to put in a shift whenever it was necessary as the Principality club went on to lift the title.

In his first press conference for Marseille, he struggled to highlight his delight at finally calling the Stade Vélodrome his home. He said:

"My father had his story here, I want to write my story, I hope it will be as beautiful as his. If I had finished my career without playing for L'OM,

I would have missed something. I have come for that, to realise my childhood dream."

So far, it has been a stuttering start. A hat-trick in his debut in the Europa League qualifiers flattered to deceive, where he also notched a double over NK Domzale, with the Frenchman struggling to score domestically.

L'OM were desperate for a source of goals and with fellow new signing Kostas Mitroglou failing to hit the ground running, attention again turned to Germain. He finally broke his duck with a brace against St Étienne, with the relief clear not only on his face but in the fans' jubilation to see him strike. He is one of their own and that really matters in football.

Maybe that was him inking his first line in what could be a beautiful chapter in his story at Marseille. The plucky upstart that never quite got the chance, maybe it is poetic that Germain may finally be fully appreciated at the club he always wanted to be at in the first place.

WYLAN CYPRIEN

POSITION: MIDFIELDER
 CLUB: OGC NICE
 AGE: 22



Don't you just hate injuries? They can derail big games, months, seasons and even years of a player's career that should instead be enjoyed with them dazzling us with their outstanding abilities.

Instead, they have to lament on the sidelines, desperate to be kicking a football again while we get glimpses of them in the stand, hoping that they are another rehabilitation day closer to being back on the pitch. It is a part of the game but one that can really take its toll on a player, especially on a long absence.

That is what unfortunately befell Wylan Cyprien in 2017, a year that could have seen him catapult himself onto the European stage but instead, nine months were spent in the fitness room. The fact that he is even on this list given the amount of time he's been without a game shows just how much of an influence he had when he did manage to lace his boots.

The year started off much like the end of the previous one, with the youngster being a real spark in a surprising Nice team. His continued excellence really helped the team

continue to impress and even fight for the title until it slowly slipped away around March.

What moment helped derail them, you ask? It was an unfortunate cruciate knee injury suffered by Cyprien against Caen that cut his 2017 dreadfully short. At the time of writing, the midfielder is back in training but has managed just one appearance this campaign, in a Europa League dead rubber fixture against Vitesse.

It was a real hammer blow for both club and player, with the former struggling to rediscover their form. With a number of players moving on in the summer, they have lacked the kind of inspiration the French under-21 international brought with his vivacious, infectious style.

A player that could do a little bit of everything, the 22-year-old is a nightmare for the opposition. With great close-ball control, excellent timing of late runs into the box and an artist from dead ball situations, his great statistics of eight goals and three assists in just 29 games have often been forgotten because he has missed so much time.

An explosive footballer, he never seems to do things by halves. Able to play in the middle or out wide, able to score goals from close range or from distances where fans scream obscenities at even the audacity to try from there, he really feels like a Swiss-army knife footballer, encouraged by his Swiss boss Lucien Favre to express himself to his heart's content.

If there is any wish for 2018, it is for Cyprien to return and it feel like he never left. With any injury, you worry that players may never reach the same heights again and if the example of others like Nabil Fékir is anything to go by, it could be even another year before we see the same exciting footballer that exploded into life at the Allianz Riviera back in 2016.

Should he scale those heights again, there will be no doubt that not only will he be higher on this list but that a queue will start forming for his services. That is just how good he was and our fingers are crossed that he can illuminate our screens again sooner rather than later.

MARIANO DIAZ

POSITION: ATTACKER

CLUB: LYON

AGE: 24



2017 has really been a year of two halves for Mariano Diaz. 12 months ago, Mariano Diaz was the fifth choice forward at Real Madrid. He rarely got a game and left his mark even less often, scoring just five games for the senior side. Four of those goals came in a Copa del Rey tie against the hapless Cultural Leonesa. Cultural would go on to lose the tie 13-2 on aggregate.

Those goals were impressive but it was clear that Mariano was never likely to break into Zinedine Zidane's two-time European Cup-winning starting line-up. Mariano was however prolific at youth level. He scored 50 goals in 90 games for Real Madrid Castilla and the now defunct Real Madrid C team.

Madrid's starting number nine, Karim Benzema, recommended the young Dominican to his former club and Lyon President Jean-Michel Aulas. Aulas snapped him up and Mariano is now enjoying the best spell of his young career.

Sitting third in the Ligue 1 goal-scoring rankings behind

only Edinson Cavani and Radamel Falcao at the time of writing, and looking like one of the best signings of the season anywhere in Europe. Ostensibly the replacement for the Arsenal-bound Alexandre Lacazette, few could have expected him to so ably replace a departing legend and so quickly too.

Not only have his 13 goals so far filled the void of Lacazette's scoring, Mariano also loves to drop into pockets of space on the flanks and allow Nabil Fékir or Bertrand Traoré the freedom to attack. Deadly from close range, Mariano is also a terror when he does drop out wide. With room to move, he paralyses defenders.

His thumping header against Marseille showed yet another quality. The man is a goal-scorer, make no mistake. Mariano is a triumph for Florian Maurice and the scouting department and Lyon's excellent start to this campaign owes much to his arrival.

13 goals in 17 games, with a superb conversion rate of 25%, is a fantastic return for

a young forward in his first real season of first-team football. With an elegant quick-footed running style, Mariano is reminiscent of a young Cristiano Ronaldo. Like the Portuguese icon, Mariano never misses a chance to shoot at goal and possesses truly remarkable shot power.

He also never lacks for confidence in another trait he shares with Ronaldo. This half-season at Lyon has been so impressive that Jean-Michel Aulas has been forced, endlessly, to deny the existence of a buy-back clause with Real Madrid. The fact that such a question is asked, let alone repeatedly, portrays just how impressive Mariano has been.

The man himself has set his sights on the top. A goal-scoring debutant for the Dominican Republic in 2013, Mariano has since refused call-ups with a view to representing the country of his birth, Spain. Were Mariano to win a place in the Spain squad ahead of a World Cup that they enter as one of the favourites, it would represent a transformative period in his young career.

IVAN SANTINI

POSITION: ATTACKER
 CLUB: SM CAEN
 AGE: 28



Ivan Santini is one of an increasingly rare breed... a striker who consistently scores goals, no matter which country he is playing in. This may sound like an obvious statement, but there are many frontmen who, when they move to new club, especially when that side is overseas, will fail to hit the same heights in their new surroundings. However, this has rarely been an issue for Santini.

The 28-year-old Croatian, who is of Italian descent, has played club football in his home country, as well as in Germany, Belgium and now France. With the exception of his two spells in the German Bundesliga, firstly with Ingolstadt 04, where he made only six appearances, all of which were goalless and three years later at SC Freiburg during a season long loan when he hit just a solitary goal, his goals to game ratio is close to one in two, a statistic that many of the strikers in Europe's top leagues would envy.

Born in Zadar, in Southern Croatia, he played youth football for his home town

side, before moving to Inter Zapresic in the summer of 2006, where he signed his first professional contract and made four first team appearances and scored his first professional goal. The following season he moved to Red Bull Salzburg where he spent the entire 2007-8 season as a youth player.

On 8th March 2009, he made his professional debut when he came on as a 72nd minute substitute for FC Ingolstadt in the Bundesliga second tier against TSV 1860 Munich and had a dream start, scoring his first goal. For the next three years, he returned to his homeland to play for his home town of Zadar, which is where his career, and his goal-scoring, really took off, scoring 26 goals in 64 appearances, which brought him into focus to teams around Europe.

On 31st January 2012, it was SC Freiburg who took the plunge by taking him to the Bundesliga on a six month loan, which included a clause that they could buy out his contract if the move was a

success. However, he only hit the net once in a quarter century of appearances.

His next move was to the Belgian Superlig in the summer of 2013, where he enjoyed success in front of goal with first KV Kortrijk, for two seasons, and then Standard Liege. During his time in Belgium he averaged better than a goal every other game.

Caen came knocking in the summer of 2016 and took him to Normandy in a €2m deal, for three years.

The 1.90m striker may not be the quickest, or the most agile, but he can certainly be relied upon to put the ball in the net, and that has continued at the Stade Michel d'Ornano, with 21 goals in 52 league appearances to date.

He revels as a traditional target man, holding the ball up and bringing others into play. He is also cool, calm and very reliable from the penalty spot. Caen will be hoping to hold on to him for the duration of his contract and far beyond.

BENJAMIN BOURIGEAUD

POSITION: MIDFIELDER
 CLUB: STADE RENNAIS
 AGE: 23



Meet the French David Beckham. Well, at least according to his former coach Olivier Bijotat.

Benjamin Bourigeaud has burst onto the Ligue 1 scene this season. One of a number of young players brought in over the summer as part of Rennes' attempts to inject life into their regressing year-on-year form, Bourigeaud has been the most impressive, instant hit, of all four, quickly establishing himself as one of the first names on the team-sheet, playing a key part in both Christian Gourcuff's and then his successor Sabri Lamouchi's plans.

Bourigeaud spent 13 years with Lens before joining Rennes. During that time, he featured in Ligue 1 during the 2014-15 campaign, scoring twice as Lens were relegated back to Ligue 2 after finishing rock bottom. There, he made 100 league appearances, quickly becoming a fan favourite, before reaching a point where he decided that if the club were not able to grow with him, he would have to reluctantly seek pastures new.

In Rennes, he chose a club

capable of helping him realise his potential, and he has started the season superbly. Already with four goals and four assists to his name at the time of writing, he is on course for his best season to date and has looked at home in the French top flight.

The comparisons to Beckham are not unfounded either. Bourigeaud has an incredible right foot. This has been illustrated by his sumptuous strikes against Marseille and St Etienne. The first saw the 24-year-old drive from midfield to around 25 yards out, before firing the ball past a well-beaten Steve Mandanda. The second oozed technical class, as he delicately chipped Stéphane Ruffier after stealing the ball back high up the field.

Beyond goals, Bourigeaud has always shown a stunning range of pass, able to pick players out across the pitch. In Ligue 2, he would run matches for fun, spraying passes inside full-backs as well as whipping incisive crosses for deep.

Like the former England international, he also uses his

golden boot to great effect from set-pieces. In pre-season he scored a stunning free-kick against Caen, perhaps setting the tone for what was to come as he has since scored from a set-piece against Lyon and laid on stunning assists for Benjamin André against Angers and Amiens.

While Rennes lumbered out of the blocks, ultimately costing Gourcuff his job, Bourigeaud has consistently performed at Roazhon Park, establishing himself as a player capable of featuring at the heart of midfield as well as on the right flank. So far this season he has featured in 29% of his team's passing moves at the time of writing, and 18% of his team's goals. It would not be out of place then to say he has helped power Rennes' recent revival.

Rennes have historically been a platform for a number of talented players to shine, from Ousmane Dembélé to Petr Cech, and if Bourigeaud carries on in the same vein as he has started life at his new club, then they might be on to something special once again.

DIEGO CARLOS

POSITION: DEFENDER
 CLUB: FC NANTES
 AGE: 24



"It's my personality, I like to laugh, smile and approach people. It's important to be available and give back some of the love the people show to me", Diego Carlos said of his popularity amongst the selfie hunters who wait for him outside the club's Jonelière training complex. The Brazilian has, since his arrival in 2016, become something of a poster boy for a club who have been known to struggle at times with the PR side of modern football. Indeed, Carlos is regularly put up for press conferences and other media commitments by the club who know that they have in him a charming, eloquent and serious individual who is at ease in the spotlight.

On the pitch is where Diego Carlos earns his corn however, and it is here that he has quietly and assuredly shown himself to be one of Ligue 1's most impressive performers of the past year. The 24-year-old centre back, a €2m signing from Portuguese side Estoril, has fast become an indispensable member of this Nantes team, featuring in all but four league games last season, and all but three so far this season, only missing out on those matches through injury.

"I've come to Nantes to progress and to make myself known,"

Carlos said of his career ambitions in April this year; and his performances are certainly helping with those two goals, too much so, some at Nantes may worry, lest he be snapped up by a club higher up the pecking order.

Much has been made of Ranieri's defensive machine that has implanted itself on the banks of the River Erdre since his arrival in the summer, so it may come as something of a surprise to learn that it has been by no means consistent in terms of personnel used. One consistent however has been Diego Carlos, who Ranieri views, alongside impressive goalkeeper Ciprian Tatarusanu, as an indispensable linchpin in an otherwise fluid backline.

A consideration of Carlos's playing style can be made by comparing him to Nicolas Pallois, his most regular companion at centre back, with whom Carlos has struck up an effective partnership. The Frenchman is an old school, hard-as-nails defender who, while not technically the most gifted, provides the perfect amount of nastiness and grit required of Ranieri's machine. Carlos on the other hand is a Rolls Royce of a defender: comfortable on the ball, skilful, intelligent and with an eye and

the ability for a long pass. Despite being defensively astute, Carlos is certainly aided by the willingness of Pallois and defensive midfielder Abdoulaye Touré to do the dirty work and win the ball: *"Ranieri is strong at working our defensive lines, but when we have the ball we must play,"* Carlos said recently. In Ranieri's robust Nantes team, Carlos is certainly one of the 'players'. To top this all, and perhaps inevitably for a Brazilian, he's also a free-kick specialist, his superb strike proving the winner away at Montpellier in September. For a team that are somewhat parsimonious going forward, having a player of Carlos's dead-ball ability is useful.

FC Nantes' poster boy provided one of the most memorable images of the early season when, after injuring his shoulder against Marseille, had to soldier on with heavy strapping after Ranieri had used all 3 substitutes. Nantes may have lost that game, Ranieri's first home match in charge, but the dogged performance exemplified by the be-slunged Carlos has arguably set the tone for Ranieri's Nantes side so far this season, and manager and fans will hope for more of the same from the Brazilian in the year to come.

MARÇAL

POSITION: DEFENDER

CLUB: LYON

AGE: 28



After seven years of obscurity in the European football landscape, Fernando Marçal Oliveira, known simply as 'Marçal', is determined to make a name for himself playing for one of Ligue 1's biggest clubs after breaking through in the French top flight last season. A left-sided full-back, Marçal is a technical, modern defender whose work rate and range of passing allow him to be very active in both halves of the field.

The 28-year old São Paulo-born left-back is midway through his first season of a 4-year deal with Olympique Lyonnais. He caught the eyes of the French giants after a stellar 2016-17 campaign on loan in Ligue 1 at Guingamp. After leaving his native Brazil for the Portuguese 2nd division, he was eventually snapped up by domestic giants SL Benfica. He never made an appearance for the Eagles as he was sent on two consecutive season-long loans to the Turkish and French top flights.

Marçal was one of the Guingamp club's most important players during the 2016-17 season as they achieved the club's highest point total since their promotion to Ligue 1 in 2013, the club's third stint in Ligue 1. His seven assists in Ligue 1 were joint best for a defender, despite playing five full matches less than his counterpart,

Léo Dubois. Remarkably, he led the Breton-based club in chances created from defence with 54, while his eight defensive actions per game average was the third best on the team.

Benfica signed off on his transfer to Lyon in June for a fee of €4.5m. He was the first signing of a busy offseason for *Les Gones* that also saw a second signing at left-back: Ferland Mendy, a promising youngster from Ligue 2. Marçal expressed his desire to play for the Brazilian national team and cited Lyon's pedigree of developing Brazilian players as one of the reasons for his move.

The switch to the technically superior Lyon has limited his time on the ball, averaging just 0.1 dribbles per match compared to 0.8 with Guingamp whilst his key passes per game have been cut in half.

Although he contributed two Ligue 1 assists in a Lyon shirt, early in the season he was often left out of important matches, such as a tight clash with Paris Saint-Germain and a lively 3-2 home win over Monaco, in favour of fellow new signing Ferland Mendy. He was also not in the squad for Lyon's quarter-final exit of the Coupe de la Ligue at the hands of Montpellier.

Marçal has also increasingly found his opportunities limited in Lyon's Europa League campaign. Since starting in their underwhelming 1-1 draw to Apollon Limassol, he was left out of three of the five subsequent European matches; both ties with eventual group winners Atalanta and a home tie with Everton.

He has shown improvement in matches against big clubs, logging 90 minutes in a 5-0 clash at OGC Nice and a 2-0 home win in the Olympic Derby. However, with his compatriot Rafael and new signing Kenny Tete adding an attacking dimension from right-back and increased competition from Ferland Mendy, Marçal's opportunities to impress his club and national team manager are becoming increasingly limited.

2017 has been a success for Marçal; he was one of the most effective Ligue 1 full-backs during the 2016/17 campaign. Having earned a move to a club with European ambitions, Marçal is experiencing the teething problems associated with existing in a competitive squad. In 2018, Marçal will aim to continue to fend off Ferland Mendy and add the attacking verve he made a name for himself with at Guingamp to his performances at Lyon.

YOUSOUF SABALY

POSITION: DEFENDER
 CLUB: BORDEAUX
 AGE: 24



A part of the victorious under 20 World Cup winning squad from 2012, alongside the likes of Paul Pogba, Samuel Umtiti and Florian Thauvin, big things were expected of right-back Youssef Sabaly. Sadly, for the player a nomadic period followed in the form of four consecutive season-long loans. Finally, in summer 2017, Sabaly found a permanent home after Bordeaux struck a permanent deal with PSG to bring the player to the Stade Matmut Atlantique.

The move was long overdue for a hard-working player who has gone relatively unrewarded for much of his young career. Playing without a real home has not made significant progression an easy thing for Sabaly to produce with season after season having to go through the belief you may finally break into the PSG squad, only to be farmed out on loan. It is testament to Sabaly's attitude that he has been able to continuously get over that disappointment to put in consistently good performances for his temporary clubs.

Under Bordeaux coach Joce-

lyn Gourvennec, one attribute that has always shone through with Sabaly is his reliability. Only minor injuries have seen him miss a handful of games for Bordeaux and his levels of performance has always remained at a consistent level. In recent weeks he has also shown versatility after being asked to fill in in an unfamiliar left-back role, which although clearly not his preferred option, he has performed in with his usual high levels of professionalism, *"if the coach selects me to play at left back there are no worries"*.

Sabaly's strengths have always been of a more attacking nature, as with most modern full-backs, he looks far more at ease pushing forward and supporting the midfield and attackers. He is comfortable on the ball and willing to take players on. His delivery from out wide and his passing in general remain of a very high standard and only a fairly tame Bordeaux offensive line has prevented him from registering more assists than he has to date.

For all those strengths, Sabaly

should not forget his defensive duties as it is this area that probably represents his weakest, albeit still at a proficient level. With all the forward runs he makes, he can often be a little slow or forgetful of getting back to cover the space he left behind. Against lesser quality opponents he can get away with that but not against sides capable of counter-attacking at pace.

Despite having gone through the youth team ranks for France, including that under 20 World Cup triumph, Sabaly elected to play for the country of his parent descent as he accepted a call-up from Senegal in November 2017. He has since gone on to earn his first two caps for his country however there may be some within the French Football Federation who may feel *Les Bleus* have missed out, especially with the obvious dearth of decent, young right-backs available. If a solid, dependable, hard-working option is needed, which it is, then unfortunately for Didier Deschamps et al, they have missed a trick.

DJIBRIL SIDIBE

POSITION: DEFENDER
 CLUB: AS MONACO
 AGE: 25



To many Monaco players, 2017 must have seemed like a rollercoaster but none more so than for French international full-back Djibril Sidibé. From an ideal, versatile signing that added to their great attack to a defensive liability that might not start for the Ligue 1 side in 2018, things for the right-back have pretty much emulated the trajectory that the Principality side have been through for the past 12 months.

Starting with the positives, his marauding runs from right-back were a real staple of the club's success in their first Ligue 1 title for 17 years. Himself and Benjamin Mendy provided the much-needed width to their exciting 4-4-2, as the "wide-men" like Thomas Lemar and Bernardo Silva, cut inside to support the strikers.

Sidibé has an excellent delivery, either from the by-line or from deep and his six assists last campaign attest to that. He even popped up on the wing on a few occasions and covered at left-back when Mendy was suspended, so his versatility over the course of the season was invaluable.

It was then, though, that you

also could see his weaknesses. Teams were exploiting his defensive frailties, his poor positioning and the space he left when pushing forward but it was papered over with the incredible offensive prowess the team had.

Basically, they scored so many goals that they didn't really need to defend.

In fact, the 25-year-old was one of the first-team players many thought that the Monegasques would be willing to part with in the summer, given the ready-made replacement of Alamy Touré was waiting in the wings. Indeed, Monaco wanted to offload the former Lille man, but offers failed to materialise, Sidibé stayed as other stars left and after a shaky start of the season, real criticisms began to arise.

With the team struggling to adapt in an attacking sense to the loss of their stars, the lack of experienced defensive reinforcements has crippled them. Without an extra defensive midfielder to protect him, Sidibé has become more and more exposed, to the point where many are questioning his worth to the team.

Leonardo Jardim has tried him on both sides of the pitch and further forward, but to no avail. As he becomes less of a factor going forward, he has become even more insignificant in a defensive sense and that has led many to call for the more athletic, but defensive-minded Touré to start in his stead.

But like any rollercoaster that has its ups and its downs, they also have their ends. That's not to say that Sidibé's career at Monaco is coming to a close, more that we are now seeing what level the Frenchman is really at.

Having been on a meteoric rise over the past few years, 2018 will really be his defining moment. With such a lack of depth in France at right-back, he is still expected to start if fit for the national team in Russia this summer and that feels like his tipping point.

Shine and his faults will be forgiven, with a chance to regain the favour he's seemingly lost. Fail and it could lead to both of the sides he represents, for his country and his club, to start exploring other options come next season.

75-51 RECAP

75	-	Steve Mandanda	(Marseille)
74	-	Yannis Salibur	(EA Guingamp)
73	-	Yohann Pelé	(Marseille)
72	-	Dante	(OGC Nice)
71	-	Damien Da Silva	(SM Caen)
70	-	Allan Saint-Maximin	(OGC Nice)
69	-	Tanguy N'Dombélé	(Lyon)
68	-	Lucas Lima	(FC Nante)
67	-	Memphis Depay	(Lyon)
66	-	Hilton	(Montpellier)
65	-	Jonathan Bamba	(Saint-Étienne)
64	-	Alphonse Areola	(PSG)
63	-	Jérôme Roussillon	(Montpellier)
62	-	Layvin Kurzawa	(AS Monaco)
61	-	Frédéric Guilbert	(SM Caen)
60	-	Ciprian Tatarusanu	(FC Nantes)
59	-	Valère Germain	(Marseille)
58	-	Wylan Cyprien	(OGC Nice)
57	-	Mariano Diaz	(Lyon)
56	-	Ivan Santini	(SM Caen)
55	-	Benjamin Bourigeaud	(Stade Rennais)
54	-	Diego Carlos	(FC Nantes)
53	-	Marc Cal	(Lyon)
52	-	Youssef Sabaly	(Bordeaux)
51	-	Djibril Sidibé	(AS Monaco)



ROMAIN THOMAS

V 27

50

Club: Angers SCO

Nationality



Position: Defender

International Caps 0

Born: Landerneau

At Club Since 2013

Age: 29

League Games in 2017 37

Angers are a club without honours, their highest Ligue 1 finish to date was third in 1967. Up until their Coupe de France final clash with PSG this year, their only cup final appearances had been a solitary Coupe de la Ligue final berth in 1992 and a 1957 Coupe de France runner up spot. The closest they have come to a winning reputation is a pair of Ligue 2 titles in 1969 and 1976, as well as the boast that the legendary Stade de Reims and Real Madrid forward Raymond Kopa wore the black and white stripes of the Pays de la Loire club from western France in the 1950s. 50 years on from their last Coupe de France final appearance, Angers saw off Guingamp at Stade Raymond Kopa, renamed after the Frenchman's death in March, to finally have another shot at silverware and they could not have done it without one of Ligue 1's best centre backs; Romain Thomas.

In June 2010, Romain Thomas was released by Brest. After two years as a professional he had only managed three Ligue 2 outings and a loan to CFA (4th division) side Pacy-Sur-Eure. Left unemployed and with little prospect of another full time contract, another 4th tier side, Carquefou, offered Thomas a last chance. Three seasons with the CFA outfit and a move from holding midfield to central defence caught the eye of Ligue 2 side Angers where Thomas signed a two-year deal in 2013. By the start of the second of those years, Thomas had grown in stature to captain the side following a standout rookie season in the second division as Angers finished 9th. *"I'm not the new kid anymore."* Thomas explained to *Ouest-France*.

Having been close to football's exit door upon being unceremoniously dispensed with by Brest, Thomas knew his fortunes could change in flash and, as he has since, remained the model professional. *"This will be the year of confirmation for me. I will have to be even more focused because more is expected of me. It will be for me not to rest on my achievements... I have to keep working."* Thomas' hard work paid off for both the man and his club as Angers roared to a third place spot and automatic promotion back to Ligue 1 for the first time in 21 years.

Thomas' calming influence, unflappable defensive style and exceptional reading of the game made him invaluable to Angers' return to Ligue 1. At Christmas, Stéphane Moulin's charges sat third after six months of upsets and memorable moments, Thomas had formed a stoic and often impenetrable partnership with Ismaël Traoré, a summer signing from Brest. The two men's thrifty, powerful defending resulted in Angers boasting the second best defensive record in Ligue 1, trailing only PSG in fewest goals conceded.

While Angers' forwards' output fluctuated over the course of the year, a constant issue for *Le SCO*, the solid base provided by Thomas and Traoré's partnership remained unwavering and became crucial to Angers in an attacking sense too. Moulin utilised the height that had been interwoven into his wily counter-attacking side, by exploiting every set-piece opportunity; Thomas notably contributed a key goal in the win over Marseille at the Vélodrome. Two years after Thomas helped Moulin's side to 9th in Ligue 1 in his first full season as a full professional. His indefatigable defensive displays lead *Le SCO* to another 9th placed finish in Ligue 1.

While their second season failed to live up to the first, with relegation looking a possibility around Christmas time, the performances of Thomas and Traoré refused to splutter and their solidarity largely remained intact as some of their colleagues around them started to flag. Given his importance to the side and his long-held consistency, interest in stealing Thomas away from Stéphane Moulin has long rumbled under the surface. A string of top end Ligue 1 clubs have been mentioned as interested alongside Premier League attention, notably from West Bromwich Albion.

Angers were eventually able to fairly comfortably extricate themselves from the bottom three last season, ultimately finishing a very creditable 11th but their zenith was yet to be reached. A flying Alexandre Letellier save from a Jimmy Brand penalty late on in the Coupe de France semi-final meeting with Guingamp set up Angers' biggest game perhaps since their previous cup final appearance, 60 years before. A late own goal from Issa Cissokho proved to be the slightest of differences between Angers and PSG as the Parisians robbed Angers of their fairy-tale but it felt, nonetheless, like destiny had been fulfilled.

Now 29 and signed on with Angers SCO until 2022, the chance of another big move for Romain Thomas may have already passed. However, for a player like Thomas, cut adrift by Brest and having to fight for his chance in the CFA before taking it so gloriously, and a club like Angers, who have one of the smallest budgets in the league, just being at the Stade de France and playing at the highest levels of French domestic football are achievements that cannot be underestimated for club nor man.



ALBAN LAFONT

^ 39

49

Club: Toulouse FC

Nationality



Position: Goalkeeper

International Caps 0

Born: Ougadougou

At Club Since 2014

Age: 18

League Games in 2017 36

Depending on when you read this, should it be after January 23rd 2018, Alban Lafont will be nineteen years of age and could have up to 80 Ligue 1 appearances under his belt. To put that into perspective, this man is a month younger than teenage sensation Kylian Mbappé. That stat alone boggles the mind, given the Toulouse shot-stopper has been in the limelight for a year longer than arguably the heir to the best player in the world. But what that should also be stated, given his strong spot on this list, is the calibre of talent *Les Violets* have on their hands. Almost two-and-a-half seasons already under his belt, Lafont has grown into a man in front of our eyes and has all the ability to become France's next number one.

For his club, 2017 has certainly had its ups and downs. In the last half of the 2016/17 season, he kept seven clean sheets as the team slowly slid back down the standings after a strong start to the campaign. However, the real highlight of his year came in their 0-0 draw away from home against Paris Saint-Germain. Having beaten the giants at home earlier in the season, with Lafont pulling off an incredible reaction save to deny Edinson Cavani, they proved that it was no fluke as they again kept one of the best attacks in Europe at bay for 90 minutes.

The goalkeeper certainly played his part, helping in organising his defence and claiming crosses with relative simplicity. While he only faced four shots on target, his concentration was sharp enough to deal with any serious threat to his goal. The 2017/18 season so far has followed a similar pattern, with ebbs and flows. A battering at the hands of PSG didn't help matters but fits of good form for a month have then been followed by some really tepid displays too, with the defence starting to buckle just a little.

The youngster is also not completely blameless in this either, with a few softer goals allowed to pass through his fingertips. A stronger hand here, a quicker dive there, fractions of what we should be expecting from a teenage goalkeeper, but also upholding the standard that he has already set for himself. That being said, his skills need to be sharpened further if he wants to reach the top of the game. Some bemoaned his soft hands but on occasions, he is using almost too firm of a hand and pushing it back into the danger area rather than out and away.

He also needs to improve his timing and decision making when coming for crosses. Sometimes he is too early and waiting or flying at a cross that bends too far out which catches him flapping at thin air, which is frustrating when knowing that when it is needed, he can be excellent at plucking the ball into his grasp, just not consistently. What should still impress scouts is his distribution, which is only getting better. He looks far more comfortable with the ball at his feet than he did two years ago, able to switch play and spread it out wide with accuracy when needed.

There can also be no question about his reflexes, which are razor sharp. He almost always picks the right body part to stop the ball with too, whether it be his feet or his hands, and is showing an even better ability to get back up after the initial save. His one-on-ones have been impressive too, he has the speed to close the distance and is learning to stay on his feet as long as possible. Doing that helps make less confident strikers nervous and it is certainly an improvement from his formative years.

Unquestionably there will be some interest in his services in the summer but it still feels a little too early for the young goalkeeper. That is not questioning whether he is ready for the step up, it is more a case of which new club would offer him a regular spot in the starting eleven while also upping the quality around him at the same time. At the moment, if he is joining a side to become a back-up, it could roll back some of the progress he has made. He is currently part of a strong defence, that has some great familiarity to it as well and a wrong move could really unsettle a moment in his career where increasing questions are being thrown at him.

2018 could be an enormous year for him. With the third spot in the national team wide open, a string of impressive performances could see him at least with the group for the World Cup in 2018, a taste of what could be to come if he carries on at his current trajectory. Missing out will not be a huge blow but the opportunity to make such a leap before the start of next season will be an enormous boost and a goal to strive for. It is incredible to think that we could potentially be seeing this young man play football for the next 20 years and if he plays his cards right, it will almost certainly be at the very top of the game as well.



KEITA BALDE



48

Club: AS Monaco

Nationality



Position: Attacker

International Caps 14

Born: Arbucies

At Club Since 2017

Age: 22

League Games in 2017 28

When Monaco agreed to buy Keita Baldé for €30m last summer it was assumed by many that the Senegalese striker was a direct replacement for the Paris bound Kylian Mbappé. That's a lot of pressure for a 22-year-old playing in a new country and it was not until match-day 10 before he opened his scoring account with a goal against SM Caen.

Monaco themselves have been in transition this season and in truth Baldé has been quicker to settle than other high profile purchases such as Stefan Jovetic and Yuri Tielemans. And whist four goals in 12 appearances at the time of writing may not be a stellar return, it matches his scoring rate during a four-year spell at Lazio.

Born in Catalonia, Baldé spent his teenage years at Barcelona's La Masia academy before joining Lazio in 2011. Two more years of youth football followed before the left-sided forward made his debut in Serie A at the age of 18. Then, in 2016/17 under the direction of new manager Simone Inzaghi and partnering Ciro Immobile, Baldé enjoyed a standout season scoring 16 times in 31 appearances, including a memorable brace in a 3-1 victory over city rivals Roma and a hat-trick in just five minutes against Palermo. A move to Tottenham or Juventus looked likely in the summer but then Monaco, flush with funds, stepped in with a decisive offer.

So what have Monaco bought? Not the finished article just yet, but a huge talent. Quick, a clean passer and blessed with the dribbling skills to cut in from his favoured left-side and create chances. Monaco manager Leonardo Jardim has already demonstrated a willingness to use his new signing in a number of roles - as a sole striker to relieve the burden on an ageing Radamel Falcao, as El Tigre's partner in a 4-4-2 formation or, perhaps most obviously, as a left sided forward in a 4-3-3 structure. Baldé's movement, touch and relative two-footedness are transferable skills. The only persistent criticism is a mild reluctance to track back when possession is lost.

Whilst the newcomer has adapted to life in Ligue 1, his team has had a chastening experience in the Champions' League group stage, finishing last in the group with just two points from six games. Baldé started three matches but struggled to make an impact. He will hope for another opportunity with Monaco next season, having also suffered defeat with Lazio in a play-off for Champions' League entry in 2015/16, losing 3-1 on aggregate to Bayer Leverkusen. For now, it seems the exit from European competition has given the club some psychological relief, with three consecutive league victories following the decisive defeat at Porto. Baldé himself has responded, with a surge in form, both scoring and assisting in Week 18's 4-0 win at St Étienne, and has become a preferred starter ahead of fellow striker Adama Diakhaby. Jardim will be optimistic that Baldé will contribute strongly in the second half of the Ligue 1 season.

The outlook is more favourable at international level; born in Spain but of Senegalese parentage, Baldé was eligible for both countries but opted for the latter and will expect to feature in the 2018 World Cup in Russia, with his side facing Poland, Colombia and Japan next summer. Senegal will certainly carry a goal threat with ex-Rennes and Lille striker Moussa Sow and Torino's Mbaye Niang alongside Baldé, and compete in one of the more open groups.

An odd footnote in the player's career is a single appearance in an unofficial international match between Catalonia and the Basque Country. The match took place in December 2015, with Baldé playing for 45 minutes in an invitation side including Gerard Piqué, Sergio Busquets and Jordi Alba. Staged at the Nou Camp, the Basques won 1-0. With increasing demand at both domestic and international level, it seems unlikely Baldé will feature again.

It feels reassuring that Baldé is under the watchful eye of Leonardo Jardim who has an enviable track record in developing raw attacking talent into the finished article and, yes, selling them on at great profit. If his latest recruit can follow a similar trajectory to the likes of Thomas Lemar, Bernardo Silva and Yannick Ferreira Carasco then Monaco will have another prize asset on their hands.

In his unveiling press conference this summer, Keita Baldé responded to a question about him replacing Kylian Mbappé in the squad by rebuking comparisons with the PSG starlet and replying that he is his own unique talent. In his first six months in the Principality, Baldé has shown that he is no Mbappé. He is not as quick, has yet to display as much close control, but might be positionally more aware than French football's new darling. In 2018, Baldé will not be able to cling to excuses such as teething problems to explain his inability so far to set Ligue 1 on fire - only time will tell if he is up to the task of turning that around.



JIMMY BRIAND

^ 13

47

Club: EA Guingamp

Position: Attacker

Born: Vitry-sur-Seine

Age: 32

Nationality



International Caps 5

At Club Since 2015

League Games in 2017 35

Big things were expected of Jimmy Briand. At one point, while receiving an education at Clairefontaine before his move to Rennes, he was touted of as the next Thierry Henry. He went on to be part of the Rennes youth side that secured the Coupe Gambardella in 2003, and at that point, it was thought the sky was the limit for him.

But circumstances conspired to ensure he would never reach the lofty heights that were once touted. Injuries played their role as much as unfulfilled potential, underlined by a knee injury he sustained with the national side in March 2009, which was described by the surgeon who operated on him, Professor Pierre Hamon, as more like a road trauma injury rather than anything sustained in football.

His career saw him play for Rennes and Lyon, to whom at the latter he is forever endeared for that 93rd minute winner in the Rhône Derby in 2013. At times he showed great promise, but he could never take his game to the next level. Yet after a journeyman career that promised so much, he seems to have found a home at le Stade de Roudourou.

When the 32-year-old returned to France in the summer of 2015 after an unsuccessful stint with Hannover, you would have been forgiven for thinking Guingamp had taken a gamble on Briand. His Bundesliga experience had not been fruitful, making 30 appearances, but netting just three times. He is a different player to his youth, no longer able to sprint past defenders, having lost that yard of pace that used to be so integral to his game.

But Guingamp saw in Briand an experienced player capable of leading their young charges, as they sought to establish themselves as a permanent fixture in the French top flight. In his first season, they pulled away from the drop zone, and last season, we saw a Jimmy Briand that had regained his mojo, found a new level, but as a completely different player.

Briand was converted from a wide-man into a central striker by Jocelyn Gourvennec and then Antoine Kombouaré, becoming a focal point rather than a support act, allowing Guingamp's multitude of younger, quicker wide-man to flourish. His aerial ability serves him well in this role, coupled with his technical skill and passing range. It was a move that got the best out of him, and helped EAG to storm into the top five before Christmas last year, where their counter-attacking flare drew praise from across the country.

2017 has not been as exciting as the end of last year had hinted. Briand, though, still returned his most successful campaign statistics wise, scoring 12 goals and chipping in with five assists, his best return since his days at Lyon, where he scored nine and set up nine in 2011.

Captaincy has brought the best out of Briand. Still, when the going gets tough, it is Briand that the *Guingampais* turned to in order to get them out of trouble. This season, we have seen it again and again. Against Strasbourg, Guingamp were clinging on to a one-nil lead, only for Briand to settle the nerves with a superb bit of forward play, dropping his shoulder after a dummy run, creating the space to coolly slot home and secure the points. In the "Celtico" against Rennes, with Guingamp once more a goal to the good, he produced a moment of real quality to spin and slot the ball home to ensure the points. When it matters, and when Guingamp need him most, Briand is there.

It is no surprise then that when questions began to mount over his future at the end of last season, there was palpable relief when the Frenchman signed a new two-year contract extension. He has become integral not only to the way Guingamp play, but also to the infrastructure of the club. With a number of young exciting forwards in their squad, from Ludovic Blas and Marcus Coco to Marcus Thuram, in Briand, they have a leader whose experiences will be vital towards their development. Importantly, Guingamp has become integral to his life too. When signing his new contract in May, he put it succinctly. *"I had two great seasons here, I felt right at home, and at a certain age, there are three things that are very important: that your family feels good where they are, that they want to be by the club, the coach and the fans, and be happy with his contract, today all three criteria are met and I am very happy to continue the adventure."*

This season hasn't started as well as the last for Guingamp. They have once again struggled away from home, picking up two wins, and receiving a battering in Monaco along the way. But after a stuttering start, and a bleak October, it seems Antoine Kombouaré's side look finally to have found some consistency, and unsurprisingly, they find themselves at the time of writing in the top 10 once again. Their top scorer with five goals, is a certain Jimmy Briand. Briand was coveted at Rennes, he was adored for a moment in Lyon, he was lost in Germany. But now, at the age of 32, he is settled at Guingamp, producing some of the best displays of his career.



CHRISTOPHER JULLIEN

v7

46

Club: Toulouse FC

Position: Defender

Born: Lagny-sur-Marne

Age: 24

Nationality



International Caps 0

At Club Since 2016

League Games in 2017 37

At the moment, French football is awash with superb central defenders. They are many young, speedy on the ground, good with the ball, rocks at the back; all the things that the modern manager looks for in their top draw middle men.

That, however, does not mean there is not a spot for the more classic rendition of the centre-half. Step in 24-year-old Toulouse man Christopher Jullien, the throwback that has more than made his mark in Ligue 1 over the past calendar year.

The end of the 2016/17 season was a great success both for Julien and his fellow defenders at *Les Violetes*. They finished with the joint-best defence outside of the top three, which included a clean sheet against Paris Saint-Germain in a commanding performance.

He was also potent inside the opponent's box as well, scoring four goals and even producing an assist. That led to the club offering the player a one-year extension to his current deal in July, meaning the former Dijon man would be contracted to the southern club until 2021 and was also named the new club captain.

However, with great power comes great responsibility and his performance level dipped. A particularly dire performance against Marseille saw manager Pascal Dupraz single-out the defender for criticism, stripping him of the armband and handing it to his defensive partner Issa Diop. In an interview with *L'Équipe* almost two months later revealed his exact thoughts on the matter:

"I am not going to say it just passed me by but since last season, I knew it was coming back to Issa Diop. He's a club boy."

A decision that would have crushed a smaller man, but Julien managed to roll with the punches, eventually. He said in the same interview that he felt he had lost some of his aggression and still backed his manager but in saying that, he wanted to prove a point. A few mistakes have contributed to Toulouse's recent downturn in form as they allowed other out-of-sorts teams like St Étienne and Metz leave the Stade Municipal de Toulouse with a point each before consecutive defeats in winnable affairs against Dijon, Nice and Lille.

A big stand against Caen in a 2-0 win before the winter break stands as a platform to build from. He looked like the old Jullien, battling successfully against the brutish Ivan Santini, who can be a real handful on his day and was the away side's primary attacking option. That looks more likely of a sign of things to come. With their attackers gaining in confidence again, the pressure is slowly being lifted off a defence that many expected so much from this season but has yet almost exclusively disappointed. In fact, Jullien's assessment of himself is absolutely correct. The centre-back has always been best on the front foot, battling opponents to win the ball whether it is on the ground or in the air and trusting in the cover of Diop to assist him when he is out of position.

There are still certain elements to work on; he can occasionally panic when on the ball and has often lumped the ball up-field more in hope than in expectation. He needs to treat it less like a game of hot potato at the back and control himself, just to the point where he makes a simple decision rather than frequently giving the ball straight back to the opponents.

Without a goal so far too, the hope will be that he can rediscover his prowess in the opposition's box. Julien has a fantastic, towering leap and a great ability to thump the ball with his forehead that forces teams to stick a man so close to him that he cannot breathe in the box.

2018 will be a huge year for Jullien for a number of reasons. The first is obvious, he needs to gain that consistency he showed last season, otherwise he might become an afterthought after two years on a real upward trend. The second is Toulouse may need him more than ever come the summer, with mounting interest in Diop. RB Leipzig were rebuffed this year but with more predators likely to come soon, he will be determined to prove he is just as good in Diop's absence and with a different defensive colleague.

Finally, as he begins to hit his peak, he needs to decide where his career lies. A strong end to the season could spark transfer rumours for himself again, with a few English clubs giving admiring glances before the start of this campaign. Should that situation arise, he could be an ideal fit in the Premier League. Strong, unafraid of the physical side of the game and a regular performer sound exactly what the likes of West Bromwich Albion and Southampton are looking for to bolster their back lines. For now, those are all ifs and buts, the fact of the matter is this current situation will define the rest of his career. Can he get back in the groove permanently after such a public set-back? Or will his sudden nervousness put others off taking a risk to such an extent that he cannot truly recover from it?

Only time will tell, but it certainly has that feeling that this will be the making of Christopher Jullien.



KEVIN MALCUIT



45

Club: Lille OSC

Position: Defender

Born: Chatenay-Malabry

Age: 26

Nationality



International Caps 0

At Club Since 2017

League Games in 2017 26

During the January 2017 transfer window, Kévin Malcuit was the subject of rumours linking him to a multitude of Premier League clubs including West Ham, Newcastle, and even Manchester United. His name was also being talked about in the Bundesliga. The strong interest was well deserved, following his 2016-17 performances, where he gained increased recognition in France as one of the country's most promising modern full-backs. The Île-de-France native made a sensible decision by sticking with St Étienne and Christophe Galtier at the start of the calendar year, as *Les Verts* prepared to tackle the Europa League knockout stages and the remainder of the Ligue 1 campaign.

However, it took him time to earn a starting spot. Before earning his way into Galtier's preferred XI, he was faced with the task of displacing Kévin Théophile-Catherine, who despite being inferior intrinsically speaking, was already a regular due to a mixture of experience and the latter's focus on defensive work. Malcuit was often criticised for his defensive shortcomings, as well as his lack of discipline, having earned four yellows and two reds in his final season at St Étienne.

Be that as it may, Malcuit's attacking contribution has always been noteworthy, which is perhaps due to his beginnings as a striker with Racing Club de Paris. After eventually displacing Théophile-Catherine in his final season, Malcuit rarely disappointed, and exhibited the traits of an exceptionally imposing full-back - energy, bombing up and down the flank to provide a constant attacking threat. Furthermore, we saw improvements on the defensive side of his game, which he owes in large part to *Les Verts'* former manager, Christophe Galtier, notorious for his defensive outlook. Most notably, Malcuit attested to the coach insisting heavily on video sessions.

Apart from their one-club veteran and captain Loïc Perrin, Kévin Malcuit was one of St Étienne's best-performing players during his last six months there. Under Galtier's tutelage, Malcuit worked on his positional play and reading opposing players' body language, which has aided his defensive, reactive decision-making.

This has helped Malcuit in one-on-one situations, both going forward and defensively. Ligue 1 wingers often struggle to get past him, and he has corrected his ill-discipline, which opponents previously sought to pray on. Going forward, he is often able to beat opponents with ease, not only due to his speed, but impressive touch, enabling him to get behind opposing full-backs and create space. He has a penchant for dribbling and taking on defenders, but unfortunately, his end product, crossing, still needs perfecting, even though he racked up three assists with St Étienne in his 25 matches last season.

In the early stages of the Europa League, against Mainz and Anderlecht away from home, Malcuit wobbled, but these fixtures serve as excellent markers to prove his incredible progression since. Later on in the round of 32, despite St Étienne getting trounced and consequently eliminated, he managed a pair of valiant performances against Manchester United, with St Étienne's only real attacking threat being the former Niort man, especially at Geoffroy-Guichard, to such an extent that José Mourinho took note.

While 2016-17 was Kévin Malcuit's most impressive season in his career to date, St Étienne executed a mediocre end to the campaign, finishing ninth and missing out on qualification for Europe. At the end of the season, he was linked again to a Premier League move, but ultimately ended up at Lille's ambitious project for €9m, a combination of advice from his agents that it was too early to leave France and the lure of learning from Marcelo Bielsa proving the principal factors in his decision. This was furthered by discussions with Lille Sporting Director Luis Campos and club CEO Marc Ingla.

Kévin Malcuit's initial steps were very promising with Lille, following a high octane pre-season. The match-day 1 opener against Claudio Ranieri's Nantes side was undoubtedly one of his strongest ever Ligue 1 performances, offering an intense, bit-between-his-teeth and intelligent display, which warranted him a place in *L'Équipe's* team of the week. However, since then, he has suffered from injuries and quarrels with Bielsa, which resulted in him starting 11 games from a possible 22 in all competitions this year at the time of writing. Lille have suffered without him; Marcelo Bielsa has been suspended from his duties.

2017 was frantic for Kévin Malcuit. After earning interest from Premier League and Bundesliga clubs following stellar performances, his move to Lille could be argued as short-sighted. Yet over the course of 12 months, his presence and absence have always been felt on the pitch. In St Étienne's extremely defensive set-up, he improved to become a bulletproof option, crucially adding to his already potent attacking skill-set. In an uninspired Lille side, he has been one of the more consistent performers.

In a period where French football lacks depth in terms of potential international full-backs, many Ligue 1 followers consider Kévin Malcuit to be a stellar and underestimated player. Aged 26, Malcuit is entering the business end of his career. With Lille facing the prospect of being forced to raise €25m by French football's financial watchdog, the DNCG, in the January window, Malcuit is a more than bankable asset who should take advantage of this situation and move to a club that is not in disarray, so that he can continue to excel.



JORIS GNAGNON



44

Club: Stade Rennais

Position: Defender

Born: Bondy

Age: 20

Nationality



International Caps 0

At Club Since 2014

League Games in 2017 36

Much is expected of Joris Gnagnon. A member of the same youth team as Ousmane Dembélé and coming from the same town as a certain Kylian Mbappé, Bondy, his footballing pedigree, at least, is surrounded by success.

His development has been far slower than those stellar names that can be awkwardly tied to him. While Ousmane Dembélé was tearing up Ligue 1 at the beginning of 2016, Gnagnon, the same age, was making his first tentative steps at Roazhon Park. He made his debut against Troyes, before featuring intermittently for the remainder of the season.

Gradually, he became a more permanent fixture at the heart of the defence, establishing himself last season as Christian Gourcuff's go-to centre-half. For Gnagnon, 2017 has been the year he announced himself as one of France's leading young prospects, earning his first international call-ups for the Ivory Coast, and flirting with moves to some of Europe's elite.

Fortunately for Rennes he elected to thwart the interests of Chelsea and others to continue his steady, upward trajectory under the tutelage of Christian Gourcuff. Gourcuff's role in his development cannot be understated; the Algerian was willing to take risks on the plethora of talent at his fingertips in Rennes' coveted academy, ushering Gnagnon into the first team. Before long, circumstances changed where Gourcuff came to rely on Gnagnon for his own survival, ultimately falling on his sword as the youngster's form dipped.

For many, Sabri Lamouchi's decision to drop Gnagnon recently has come as a surprise. Rennes' start to the season was however littered with defensive mistakes, and with Gnagnon at the heart of that said defence, such a change is hardly surprising. Evidently it has worked, with Jeremy Gélín, another young 20-year-old defender, stepping in to stabilise the previously error prone and creaking back four.

Confined to just nine minutes in the derby against Nantes as one of four such substitute appearances this season, Gnagnon has since expressed his frustration. For a player who was so close to leaving in the summer, for Rennes supporters, this change in circumstance has been one blot to their recent resurgence copy. But, after the 2017 Gnagnon has had, it can only be a matter of time before he returns to a starting berth, and potentially, supporters will get a glimpse of that much desired partnership of young prodigies Gélín and Gnagnon.

From relative unknown to first team regular, Joris Gnagnon has profited where many at Rennes have come under fire. He is an athletic centre-half, blessed with intelligence and thus an astute ability to read the game. His good turn of pace and competence on the ball ensures that he is a defender with attributes that suggest excellent potential, even if of late his concentration has been questioned.

Since October 2016 he has been a staple in the first team but for injury. He made 27 appearances from that point, and this term, he has started 12, making four further appearances. He received his first call ups for the French under 20 squad this year, before accepting the call of *Les Éléphants* more recently, although he is yet to make his international debut for the Ivory Coast.

Gnagnon has shown a level of maturity that has belied his age and experience, and this bodes well for his future development. This is underlined by his summer deliberations, electing to stay in Brittany instead of opting to join Chelsea or following in Dembélé's footsteps by going to Dortmund, concluding that it is more important to play than sit in the reserves.

Further, being thrust into the first team is never easy, but after the departure of Pedro Mendes in the summer to Montpellier, and with little by way of experience coming in to replace him, Gnagnon has marshalled a young defence, partnering either Mexer or Rami Bensebaini, who by contrast to Gnagnon had regressed under the watch of Gourcuff, predominantly due to his insistence on playing him at full-back.

Even without Mexer, or Bensebaini alongside him at centre-half, Rennes' lack of leadership at the back has not been helped by the departure of goalkeeper Benoît Costil behind them. The role of chief-marshall has fallen on young Gnagnon shoulders, and he has coped well with that responsibility. But the impression that has been given off more recently, which may explain Rennes' defensive woes prior to the arrival of Lamouchi, is that Gnagnon would benefit from a senior partner, someone to learn from and guide his development, similar to Thiago Silva at PSG, who has undoubtedly aided the improvements in Presnel Kimpembe and Marquinhos.

But 2017 has been a standout year for Joris Gnagnon. In the space of 12 months he has gone from an unknown young prospect to arguably being one of the most outstanding young defensive talents in Ligue 1. If 2018 follows a similar pattern to this past year, do not be surprised if you see the French-Ivorian linked once again to a number of elite clubs in the summer, or if you see him among Europe's elite in years to come.



RONNY RODELIN

V 26

43

Club: SM Caen

Nationality



Position: Attacker

International Caps 0

Born: Saint-Denis

At Club Since 2015

Age: 28

League Games in 2017 37

On 20th May 2017, Ronny Rodelin wrote himself into SM Caen folklore with a 92nd minute equaliser in the Parc des Princes against PSG, which kept the Normandy club in the French top flight for a fourth successive season. Having had a penalty saved earlier in the match, which many would have predicted had seemingly consigned the team to relegation, it showed great character to carry on and be the man who preserved their Ligue 1 status.

Arriving in France at the age of ten from his native Guadeloupe, he got his break in the lower leagues with Rodez and debuted at the age of 18, making 23 appearances, before being noticed by Nantes, but he failed to make an impact with the Breton club. He went on loan for a largely unsuccessful stint at ESTAC Troyes, before moving north to Lille in 2011, where he signed a four-year contract.

However, he failed once again to fit in at his new club and, despite making over a century of appearances, the majority of these were from the bench and the predominant coach, René Girard, failed to accommodate his tactics to the talents and strengths of Rodelin and his style of play. As a result, he was on the move again with another loan spell, this time to Lille's sister club, Royal Mouscron in the Belgian league, where he at last began to flourish, being used as an attacking midfielder and proving instrumental in their push for top spot in the Europa League group stages.

Having returned to Lille, determined to make his mark, Caen came calling and offered another loan deal, although this one was eventually to become a permanent move away from the Stade Pierre-Mauroy, signing a three-year deal. Settling in rapidly at Caen, he quickly became a fan favourite and it was evident from the off that his dribbling, pace and finishing would make him a real asset, as SMC had nobody else in the same mould, immediately adding a new dimension to the team, particularly on the counter attack.

It has been at Caen where Rodelin has found his feet and flourished in the role that Patrice Garande has assigned him. At times he may look disinterested and occasionally even lazy, but his languid style is deceptive and he is a player who can, and often does, quite suddenly produce the unexpected or a sublime piece of skill to affect the outcome of a game. Picking the ball up, often in his own half, with a sudden burst of unrivalled pace he will glide past the opposition and create or score chances. With his ability to both score and create goals, along with his versatility, he is a valuable asset to Caen.

Whether playing in a front two, usually alongside Ivan Santini, just behind the frontline, or out wide, the rangy front man has become a firm favourite at the Stade Michel d'Ornano since signing for the club on a permanent basis at the beginning of the 2016/17 season, having initially joined on a season-long loan from their Ligue 1 rivals.

There is an argument that perhaps he should score more goals, having notched just nine in the league last season, including that dramatic late equaliser in the final seconds of the Ligue 1 campaign, but he is so much more than just an orthodox frontman. Often asked to play out wide, sometimes as a wing-back when Garande switches his formation to three at the back, means that he works extremely hard for the benefit of the team, becoming something of a talisman.

Rodelin is also well-known for his excellent temperament, having been booked only a handful of times in his career. For a player with such pace and trickery, and therefore someone who may often find himself on the wrong end of mistimed or intentionally antagonistic tackles from opposition defenders, it is testament to him that he does not react or go seeking retribution, preferring instead to react to any misdemeanours by simply dusting himself down and carrying on. It is rare for a player of Rodelin's type to display such self-control and for that he should be widely credited in the current age of players diving and berating referees to gain an advantage for their side.

Caen's 2017/18 campaign is already a marked improvement on their close escape last year, with lessons clearly learnt, and, at the halfway stage of the season going into the winter break, they find themselves flirting with the prospect of European football next season. Whilst he may only have netted three times so far in the campaign, Rodelin's contribution has already been significant, with match winning goals against FC Metz and Troyes, as well as conjuring up an acrobatic injury time volley to rescue a point against OGC Nice.

Rodelin is clearly happy to let his feet do the talking and is firing on all cylinders. Who knows, this time next season, he could be enjoying a European sojourn and even harbouring outside hopes of a call up to the international scene, and who could say he would not deserve either.



JAVIER PASTORE



42

Club: PSG

Position: Midfielder

Born: Cordoba

Age: 28

Nationality



International Caps 30

At Club Since 2011

League Games in 2017 23

When he eventually leaves Paris - be it this winter or in the coming years - Javier Pastore runs the very real risk of being remembered as nothing more than a cult hero, a luxury player - fan favourite that would occasionally conjure a piece of magic that reminds us all of his scintillating talent. Save for his fantastic first season at the club, be it down to injury or competition in his position, the Argentinian has not imposed himself as an indispensable part of the many PSG line-ups that have been and gone over his six years in the capital.

This autumn, however, Unai Emery has opted for the midfielder in his teams increasingly often, and Pastore has repaid the favour in both goals and assists. His more significant role this campaign - aided by Marco Verratti's wavering form following the transfer saga that nearly saw him leave the club this summer - is a sign that he is still able to produce when called upon. Perhaps symbolically, his switch in shirt number - he gave up his number 10 for Neymar when the Brazilian arrived over the summer, reverting back to his original number 27 he had been wearing for his first four years in Paris - has allowed the Argentinian to enjoy something of a renaissance. Last year's league campaign was one to forget for Pastore, who racked up only five league appearances as a starter, mainly owing his absences to injury. Off the pitch, he had his house raided by police in a tax evasion investigation. One of the bright spots of his year was his performance in the 5-1 away win to Marseille, in which a delightful back-heel pass set up one of Cavani's goals.

Unai Emery, speaking earlier this season about his midfielder's chances of going to the World Cup with Argentina, stated that Pastore is more "*consistent and regular this season... he has individual quality and talent which is important for the team,*" he goes on to say. President Nasser Al-Khelaifi reiterated this sentiment at the start of the year, labelling his €42m man "an artist". Having played both in his preferred central midfield positions as well as a left-wing experiment, Pastore has already racked up 20 appearances in the first half of the season, even if that number could have been greater but for the depth of the club's squad and Emery's squad rotation. By no means is his place secured again - and to talk of a revival is premature - as rumours have already flown out of the PSG camp of a possible January departure. He himself admits that if the manager is not willing to play him more often, especially in a year where he needs to prove his worth to coach Alejandro Sabella before the Argentina squad is finalised, he will have to consider finding game time elsewhere - especially since PSG will be looking to cut down on its wage bill after the club's astronomical spending this summer has raised several eyebrows with regards to Financial Fair Play.

El Flaco's talent is undisputed and has been on display countless times over the last few years. Elegance and creativity shine through the technicality of his passing and dribbling, and even if it does sometimes come at the expense of efficiency, the show that Pastore is able to put on when he is at his best is one of the most pleasing on the eye in the continent. In many ways, his style of play harks back to another era, where the archetypal, whimsical, number 10 reigned supreme in the football world - for now, though, the former Palermo man has to make do with being a part of Emery's midfield three or a spot on the wing. Granted, Eric Cantona may have exaggerated when he named him as the best player in the world, but supporters and detractors alike are in agreement that on his day the former Palermo man is a creative force almost unmatched. The sticking point comes when his ability to consistently and productively do this for a sustained period is questioned.

PSG's first major recruit of the QSI era back in 2011, Pastore had quickly become one of the favourites of the Parc des Princes faithful with a barnstorming first season in which he notched 13 league goals and displayed his class on the ball and finesse in his general play, making him one of the main pillars of the team straight away.

He now finds himself at a crossroads. There would be no shortage of potential reputed suitors should he decide to prioritise game time, and his improved displays this season have reminded everyone of his potential to pull the strings in any team, in the mould of a traditional playmaker. For PSG, on paper Pastore would not necessarily be a major loss - even if as we approach the second half of the season, the team's depth will be tested. The Argentinian is much more than a joker with a box tricks, though. As the flagship signing of the project, his departure could be seen as a defeat for QSI. On talent alone, Pastore could find himself much higher in this list, but his recovery in 2017 has to be recognised.



YOUNOUSSE SANKHARE

^ 14

41

Club: Bordeaux

Nationality



Position: Midfielder

International Caps 6

Born: Sarcelles

At Club Since 2017

Age: 28

League Games in 2017 32

When Younousse Sankharé signed for Bordeaux in January, it was off the back of a series of poor performances at the end of the year at Lille. The impression was that the club was offloading a player who was surplus to requirements, despite a generally positive impact upon his arrival the previous summer. In his first calendar year in the south west of France, though, he has shown himself to be anything but.

Having begun his career as a promising talent at PSG, Sankharé would eventually leave the capital in search of playing time, having been at the club for ten years. Looking back on his rise through the ranks in Paris, he recalls that *"I had been given the tag of a difficult boy, a trouble maker, but I don't see it that way. Nothing's been given to me, I've always had to go and find things. I will never let myself start dragging my feet."* It is precisely this ambition that led him to make a permanent move to Dijon before settling at Guingamp, where he formed a part of the team that stunned French football by winning the Coupe de France, beating Rennes 2-0 in the final, and play a part in the Europa League. This success earned him a move to Lille in the summer of 2016, and after a fairly muted six months in the north of France, he headed down to Bordeaux to link up with former coach Jocelyn Gourvennec again.

A deceptively reliable source of goals – four already in the league this term – the Senegalese has been one of Gourvennec's most prominent fixtures in the team. Playing in the familiar role of a box-to-box midfielder, his association with young Argentine Valentin Vada in the centre of the park had been one of the keys to the team's moderate success at the start of the season. Sankharé is adept at carrying the ball and projecting attacks forward – often going on to finish them off – as well as providing stability in mid-field and reinforcing the team in its defensive phases. A ball-winner as much as a playmaker. It should not be surprising, then, that the lanky Senegalese international has stated that he idolised World Cup winners Patrick Vieira and Emmanuel Petit growing up – *"I had a similar style of play, so I watched them a lot."* Evoking a more contemporary example, Sankharé has also mentioned Yaya Touré as an individual he follows, even to the point of trying to imitate the Manchester City midfielder.

The relative freedom given to him by a coach he had already worked under at Guingamp is primarily as a result of Bordeaux's 4-3-3 system in which the sentinel – be it Otávio or Lukas Lerager – allows him to maraud forward in the knowledge that there is still a defensive shape to the midfield, resulting in him often being the recipient of crosses put in by the team's wide men, François Kamano or Malcom. This schema had been a winning formula for Bordeaux for the start of the season, for the most part. Gourvennec has praised him for bringing to his squad an *"athletic presence in the middle"* and for being able to *"push the ball up and play in different systems"*. The recognition is mutual, as Sankharé has praised his manager for helping him progress *"both as a player and as a man"*. An untroubled reunion.

Nevertheless, his form has trailed off of late, as Bordeaux have somewhat fallen off the map in recent months. While this frank assessment applies to the majority of the team's players, the fact remains that Sankharé does not look the same player as he did when he first arrived at the club. Even if he was the club's top-scorer in the early stages of the campaign – including a double in the Europa League play-off first leg of a tie which was ultimately lost to Hungarian giants Videoton – on the evidence of recent performances it seems that the manager cannot rely on him as much anymore, to the point that Sankharé is starting matches on the bench as summer signing Lukas Lerager is moved further up the pitch.

Now, as Bordeaux find themselves in dire straits going into 2018 with the team, coach and management all under pressure to improve their performances, Sankharé will look to rediscover his scintillating form that had made him such an instant hit when he first arrived in the south west of the country. The midfielder knows that the time is now to make his mark as a player, having already recognised that he is now in his prime – *"At 28, a player should be at his peak, it's the ideal age. A footballer's career can go by very quickly"*.

Overall, this year has marked a considerable progression on his part as a footballer, and he has finally settled and made his presence felt in a team which is able to rely on him. If the midfielder is true to his word in saying he does not drag his feet, then it should not be long before we see him rediscover his best form in 2018.



LUCAS TOUSART



40

Club: Lyon

Nationality



Position: Midfielder

International Caps 0

Born: Arras

At Club Since 2015

Age: 20

League Games in 2017 31

2017 has seen Lyon midfielder Lucas Tousart progress very much from apprentice to master. It has been as seamless a transition as any *Les Gones* fan could have wished for as the youngster has taken on the midfield anchor role previously occupied by the now departed club captain Maxime Gonalons.

Tousart's initial breakthrough came with his captaining of the successful French Under 19 European Championship winning side in the summer of 2016. Having played an integral part of that side, Lyon coach Bruno Génésio saw that the time was right to bring the player into the first team fold. The 2016/17 season therefore saw Tousart start to make his mark with a series of impressive performances either alongside or often in place of Gonalons. His form, especially at the start of 2017, resulted in many who saw him play to declare he was already streets ahead of his club captain. Therefore, once the summer came round, aside from the emotional reasons, many saw the sale of Gonalons to Roma, as a departure that could be easily lived with. A ready made replacement, and arguably improvement, was within the ranks.

Having lost so many key players in the summer, it would have been easy to write Lyon's season off from the very start as one of transition and an attempt to steady the ship. Whilst the likes of fellow youngster Houssein Aouar, the revitalised Memphis Depay and new captain Nabil Fékir have taken the vast majority of the plaudits so far this season, they have only been able to star thanks to the ever-present stability offered by Tousart. As goalkeeper Anthony Lopes recently said *"we talk a lot about Houssein because he shines through his goals or assists, however the work that Lucas does is extraordinary. The balance he brings to the team is tremendous"*.

As with so many French defensive midfielders, Tousart occupies himself with the simple things, but accomplishes them with aplomb. His positioning and reading of the game allow him to nip attacks in the bud and whilst he is not an overly aggressive tackler, his combative physique allows him to calmly take charge. It is no surprise that he has picked up the nickname "the scavenger" with comparisons made to the likes of Didier Deschamps and N'Golo Kante. He possesses a very good engine which enables him to provide continuous defensive protection throughout ninety minutes. This is only highlighted by the fact that he has played all but a handful of minutes at the time of writing. Génésio himself is clearly a fan acknowledging that *"whilst you do not necessarily see the work he does, the work he does do is important. We know that without him there would be no stability"*.

His on-pitch leadership, which was honed during his experience as leader of that under 19 side, means that despite his age, he is unafraid to organise more senior players. Before Fékir was named new club captain, many believed the honour could well have gone to Gonalons replacement. There is now no doubt that Tousart has very quickly become an integral member of Génésio's side. The CIES Football Observatory noted that at the time of writing, he is the most used under-21 defensive midfielder across the top five European Leagues.

That being said, there are still areas that Tousart could look to improve on as it is very easy to forget that he is still only 20 years old, something his performances belie. Whilst his reading of the game is excellent, there are times where his distribution can let him down. There are of course plenty of occasions where the simplest pass is the best option, but Tousart could do with being a little more adventurous in terms of how he moves the ball. With Lyon such a swift side on the attack, a quick, dynamic pass can make the difference between consolidating possession and launching a promising counter. Tousart has also identified this as an area he wants to improve, telling *So Foot* that *"we know that I am there to recover the ball and make the tackles but I want to be a real launching pad for the team"*. It feels like quite a petty area to pick on, and that in itself is perhaps the greatest recognition for just how incredible a 2017 that Tousart has enjoyed.

With full international recognition all but guaranteed, Tousart again likes to keep his ambitions in check: *"in my position it is complicated as there are so many good players. For now, I am happy with the under 21s and the rest I put in the distance"*. It is perhaps no surprise that Tousart is already attracting the watchful eyes of several European giants with the likes of Barcelona, Juventus and Manchester City all having sent scouts to monitor the midfielder. Tousart though continues to show maturity beyond his years, sweeping off the rumours by claiming *"it's flattering of course. I read what's in the press and it's nice but I am still young, I am here in Lyon and I will stay for as long as is necessary. I am happy here"*. Whilst it is always encouraging to hear younger players maintain focus, it is only a matter of time before one of the elite sides make their move.



THIAGO MOTTA

^ 33

39

Club: PSG

Nationality



Position: Midfielder

International Caps 30

Born: São Bernardo do Campo

At Club Since 2012

Age: 35

League Games in 2017 23

Still applying his trade at the highest level, at times Thiago Motta has been the calming influence in midfield at PSG, providing the likes of Marco Verratti and Adrien Rabiot with the licence to influence games so effortlessly.

It looked unlikely that Motta would stay at the capital club this summer after they stalled on offering the aging Italian a new deal. But after PSG's pursuit of AS Monaco midfielder Fabinho was rebuffed by *Les Monegasques* and with Financial Fair Play proving a continuously problematic hurdle, PSG were resigned to offering Motta a new deal on the eve of the new Ligue 1 season. Thiago Motta has become more of an important figure than an important player for PSG and the club's hesitation on offering him a new deal outlines that. It is likely that this will be Thiago Motta's final season as a PSG player, with the Italian promised a youth coaching role at the club at the end of his current contract.

Despite this, Motta still plays a unique role in the PSG team and one that the other midfielders in the squad are not as competent playing. The ex-Inter Milan player provides protection for the back four as well as being able to breaking up the play and start attacks. Motta still displays a good range of short and long passing and provides a threat on set-pieces. Predictably, age has caught up with Motta and he has become less mobile over the last 12 months which he has been able get away with domestically but ultimately it has shown up in the Champions' League against higher calibre opposition.

This is set to be a problem for PSG, particularly during their assault on the knockout stages of the Champions' League in February, without any other like-minded players. Julian Draxler could replace Motta but this may upset the balance of the midfield which is a risk that cannot always be taken in big matches. This is why Motta still has important responsibility between now and the end of the season even if his best days are behind him.

Motta's experience has been vital this year for PSG particularly with big personalities and experienced campaigners exiting the squad over the past 18 months such as Zlatan Ibrahimovic and Maxwell. Motta is the vice-captain to Thiago Silva and with Silva's body becoming more fragile and with the Brazilian less reliable than he was two years ago, Motta's presence is still important more so for on-field guidance and leadership.

Ligue 1 is where Motta is best utilised due to the intensity and level of opponent he will face. With PSG strong favourites to take back their Ligue 1 crown it could be a satisfying fifth title win in France for a player that has had a decorated career and played for some of Europe's biggest clubs.

At 35 years of age, expectation maybe should not be as high as previous years as the Italian enters the climax of an admirable career. Whilst Motta may have delivered some lackadaisical displays over the calendar year he has also been able to roll back the years with a number of fine performances. Consistency has been a problem for Motta and whilst he can provide a perfect foil for his midfield cohorts, Marco Verratti is the key component to the way Motta is able to function.

Verratti's copious energy reserves enable Motta to efficiently manage his own levels which is a smart and well-managed approach to such a demanding assignment. Verratti's positional play when PSG are defending gives Motta much needed support, specifically when faced with a more dynamic opposing midfielder that is able to find pockets of space between the lines. This is a scenario that Motta's diminishing mobility has showed signs of struggling with and with the youthfulness and energy of Rabiot and Verratti, Motta is more often than not afforded a lifeline in what can be a precarious situations.

PSG have been heavily linked with a January swoop for a defensive midfielder and a number of promising players have reportedly been courted, indicating that this is the top priority for the club ahead of what looks to be a crucial second half of the season. Thiago Motta now has an uncertain six months ahead as his contract winds down. His recent knee injury has allowed Unai Emery to experiment with the likes of Julian Draxler and Giovanni Lo Celso and in doing so, the ex-Sevilla boss has found relative success.

In general, 2017 has been a stable year for Thiago Motta. A year that has seen multiple of highs and lows from the 'Remontada' in the Camp Nou, to a domestic cup double, but the former Italian International has contributed to another year of growth and further establishing arguably world football's most ambitious project. Motta is held in high esteem at PSG for his service to the club and along with Dani Alves and Neymar, he is the only player within it to win the Champions' League. If Motta is able to get his hands on the trophy again in June, then that would be a fitting way for the Italian to bow out.



JEMERSON

▲ 48

38

Club: AS Monaco

Position: Defender

Born: Jeremoabo

Age: 25

Nationality



International Caps 1

At Club Since 2016

League Games in 2017 36

Jemerson's 2017 has been somewhat up and down. Integral to a Monaco defence that provided the backbone to a stunning title charge last season, this campaign, by contrast, he has looked at times like a fish out of water.

This season's contrasts can be pinpointed to a week in late November. On the one hand, the Brazilian defender received his first international call-up, linking up with a side who look a completely different animal than in recent times ahead of the 2018 World Cup in Russia. Tite's side qualified from the South America qualifying rounds with a stunning 41 points to their name, losing just once. But despite going on to win his first caps against Japan and England, staking his claim for this summer's showpiece event, that week was a drastically poor one domestically.

It started against Paris Saint-Germain. Monaco were torn apart by the Parisians' famed attacking troika, with Jemerson lost in a back-three that seemed to hinge entirely on Kamil Glik. Certainly, playing in a tactically-altered backline would have been slightly unfamiliar for the Brazilian and Andrea Raggi also failed to cover himself in glory, but Jemerson struggled to read the game, finding himself torn inside and out. Somehow, the game finished only 2-1.

A few days later, Leipzig came to the Principality, and Jemerson registered his worst performance in a Monaco shirt. The tone was set early on, when he turned in Marcel Sabitzer's cross into his own net, before giving the ball carelessly to Kevin Kampl, who fed Timo Werner to notch a second. By the break, Monaco were 4-1 down, and Jemerson, whose partnership with Glik was so highly rated by most French commentators last season, had earned himself the rare but merited score of 1 from *L'Équipe*.

Monaco have been a completely different side this season and this has evidently affected Jemerson's form. It appears the loss of Tiémoué Bakayoko has been more profound than many expected, with Fabinho's shine also tainted, as Yuri Tielemans and João Moutinho struggle to compensate for his midfield screening. But, whilst Jemerson has struggled compared to last season, the wave of recent criticism is so harsh because of the standards he has set for himself. You do not become a terrible player overnight, and you cannot discount his form last season, when he was so pivotal to Monaco's title assault.

Jemerson had earned the controversial nickname 'Blackenbauer' during his time at Atletico Mineiro, and while this label is wholly inappropriate, the comparisons to the legendary German centre-half were founded in more sensible reasoning. Quick, agile and competent with the ball, Jemerson is a ball-playing defender, capable of recycling possession and transitioning the ball quickly from defence to attack. He is comfortable on the ball, with a modicum of flair to boot, aptly illustrated by the overhead kick he scored against Dijon earlier this season.

Despite possessing most of the attributes required of an elite defender, what lets him down is his concentration. While his speed allows him to make up for any errors, this season we have seen him exposed more and at the highest level, under greater pressure from opponents than he has previously experienced, this has been made increasingly evident. It is a complaint that has stuck with him throughout his career, and it was one that he will need to address if he is to establish himself at the heart of Brazil's defence.

In early 2017, we witnessed a Jemerson who showed himself capable of being a top, international centre-half. His speed made him a good counter-weight to the stopping ability of Glik, and alongside the rampaging Benjamin Mendy and Djibril Sidibé, screened by Bakayoko, Monaco conceded just 31 times from 38 games, a total only bettered by PSG. He has rapidly improved since arriving from Brazil in January 2016. After being slowly weened into the first team by Leonardo Jardim, making his debut at the Parc des Princes of all places, by the start of the new season, he had already established himself as first choice alongside Glik.

It is perhaps to his detriment that competition for places at Monaco in the back-four has declined since his arrival. He was undoubtedly aided by Ricardo Carvalho, the experienced Portuguese defender, who helped him through games during the early days, while Andrea Raggi remained a first rate option for Jardim to call on. Today, beyond Glik, there is little by way of competent options for Jardim to turn to, leaving Jemerson unopposed, but also exposed to dips in form. Last season, playing with confidence in a set 4-4-2 system, Jemerson quietly excelled, allowing the talent in front of him to shine, while he competently went about his work. This season, Monaco have welcomed a number of new faces, and Jardim has experimented with a 4-3-3, a 4-5-1 and as was the case against PSG, a 3-5-2. Without a settled line-up, Jemerson has struggled.

But the Brazilian has risen in this year's rankings and that is more than merited. It is easy to look at his recent form, and Monaco's struggles relative to last season, and go overboard in criticism. Yes, there are some flaws to his game that have become apparent this season. But Jemerson remains a defender, who at 25, still has his best years ahead of him, and after his superb season last year, there is plenty of scope to suggest that the start of the new campaign has been just a blip, and that it will not take long before he returns to his increasingly upward trajectory.



ARNAUD SOUQUET



37

Club: OGC Nice

Nationality



Position: Defender

International Caps 0

Born: Paris

At Club Since 2016

Age: 25

League Games in 2017 37

When Arnaud Souquet rejected invitations to join PSG's academy and overtures from the national football institute at Clairefontaine as a youngster, he may not have realised that he was signing up for the long road to the top of French football. Souquet's parents insisted that he focus on his education and complete his Baccalauréat (high school diploma) before turning his attention to football and so those opportunities passed him by.

Souquet's development was not entirely stalled, though. He played youth football alongside future internationals Blaise Matuidi and Yacine Brahimi at Olympique Vincennes. Eventually joining Lille's prodigious "centre de formation", the same football factory which counts Eden Hazard among its graduates, Souquet was a late bloomer.

Although he made a goal-scoring debut for Lille in the Europa League at just 17, he was unable to break into Rudi Garcia's first team. The now Marseille boss sent Souquet out on loan before the youngster was eventually released at 22. Not dissuaded, Souquet landed in the National 3 (the fifth tier of French football) with Jeanne d'Arc de Drancy where he even briefly collected unemployment benefits to get by.

After only a few weeks, an injury to the starting right-back at Vendée Poiré-sur-Vie Football, in the French third division, gave him a fortunate break. Recruited to fill the gap, Souquet seized his chance. After 18 months, he moved to Ligue 2's Dijon. Playing a key role in their promotion to the top flight, Souquet was snapped up by OGC Nice in the summer of 2016 for €1.25m.

Since joining *Le Gym*, Souquet has emerged as a superb right-back, one consistently linked with Arsenal among other elite European teams. Five assists and 13 key passes last season, despite battling with Ricardo Pereira for the starting job, were an excellent return in a first full Ligue 1 campaign. Souquet began 2017 in career-best form, winning the club's Player of the Month award in January. Nice's slide from title contenders to distant third-placed finishers was a disappointment for the club, but on a personal level Souquet continued to shine and won his battle with Pereira for the starting job. That impressive form followed Souquet into this season when, despite Nice's drastic collapse, he has continued to impress.

This has been an excellent year for Souquet as his elegant style of play has marked him out as a unique full-back. In a league renowned for strength and aggression, Souquet glides about the pitch, using the ball intelligently and letting his speed of mind more than make up for his relative lack of fleet-footedness. Nice boss Lucien Favre praised Souquet as a hard-worker, always open to criticism and hungry to develop. These tendencies are personified in a player not over-encumbered with natural gifts. Instead of relying on pace or strength, Souquet uses his footballing mind makes the difference.

In fact, while he lacks the elite speed of many Ligue 1 right-backs, Souquet is still quick enough to exploit gaps left by lazy marking and his vision allows him to do so with aplomb. Although his top speed is unremarkable, his ability to accelerate out of trouble is impressive. Nicknamed 'Souquetinho' by his teammates at Nice after one particularly mazy run in a Europa League game against Zulte, Souquet has shown a real capacity to embarrass defenders when not carefully watched. It is not running with the ball though, that marks Souquet out as a special player. A truly excellent crosser of the ball, Souquet is deadly with the ball at his feet.

He is a master of both the high cross and the driven low ball, picking out teammates with remarkable accuracy. Mario Balotelli has been a particular beneficiary of Souquet's wicked delivery. He provided five assists last season but only has one to his name in this campaign. This should not be understood as a drop in his own form, he is consistently putting the ball in dangerous areas, but a quirk that will likely correct itself by the end of the campaign.

Souquet also has impressive versatility. He is a capable central defender and a solid defensive midfielder in a pinch. Having begun his youth career in midfield, Souquet has carried some of the skills he learned there into his professional career. His passing, vision and positional sense make him a unique full-back in the rough and tumble of Ligue 1. Souquet has never been called up for the senior France squad, despite 32 youth international caps, but simply must be in contention after 18 impressive months with Nice. France boss Didier Deschamps is notoriously reticent to bringing in unfamiliar faces but his impressive squad has one of its few weaknesses at Souquet's right-back position. Behind consensus starter Djibril Sidibé, incidentally Souquet's former team-mate at Lille, there is a vacuum of top quality.

Were he to make a late charge and sneak into France's squad, it would complete a remarkable comeback. Souquet himself says he has given up hope of getting the call, but *Les Bleus* could do worse. From the unemployment line to the World Cup in four years? Hollywood films have been made of less.



NICOLAS DE PREVILLE

^7

36

Club: Bordeaux

Position: Attacker

Born: Istres

Age: 26

Nationality



International Caps 0

At Club Since 2017

League Games in 2017 37

The phrase “cult hero” fits only a certain category of player and in French football not many optimise that more than Nicolas de Préville. At every club he has played for so far, fans fall effortlessly in love with the diminutive Frenchman who worked his socks off to be where he is right now and shows just as much effort out on the football field as many donning the replica shirts would if they had a chance to. There is no excuse for not working hard and that can never be a label thrown at the former Reims forward. Having finally bloomed a little later than planned at the Champagne club, putting on sterling performances that almost saved them from the drop in 2016, he got his move to a more established Ligue 1 club in the form of LOSC Lille.

The 26-year-old began 2017 much like any other of his Ligue 1 seasons to date, with a point to prove. His summer move to Lille had not quite hit into high gear, instead he flittered between the starting line-up and the bench as the team sank towards the relegation place. However, from January onwards, he was an indisputable starter. The striker hit 11 goals in the second half of the season, leading to his best-ever total of 14 as he assisted Lille into the safer reaches of mid-table.

With the adoration of the fans and the respect of his peers, the platform was made for him to become the talisman that *Les Dogues* had been searching for for years. Too often they had in-and-out forwards that could not score consistently but here he was and with Gérard Lopez’s money coming, things could only get better. They started well, with de Préville scoring in their 3-0 win against Nantes on the opening day of the season, but proceedings turned sour from then. Two defeats and a draw later, in which his goal helped salvage the point, he was shipped off to Bordeaux.

It was a bitter pill to swallow. In the club’s 3-0 defeat to Strasbourg, de Préville went in goal when no one else would step up after Mike Maignan’s red card and all the substitutes had been used.

All 1.82m of him.

Does that not underpin his commitment to the cause or his adoration for the club? Instead, he stated that the club needed to sell him for the money, which should have sent alarm bells around the Lille faithful. His claims have since been validated as *Les Dogues* have been banned from making January window signings owing to their continued financial troubles.

So off he trotted to another club desperate for a goal-scorer but again, there have been some growing pains. Mixing with the likes of Malcom and François Kamano has not quite produced the attacking trio people might have anticipated, with the Frenchman only scoring once and notching two assists. This team runs through the mercurial Brazilian to his right and because of that, de Préville has yet to carve out his own niche in southern France. Often caught running into the space that the two inside forwards drive into or dropping too deep to get involved, vacating the space where he can actually get his goals – the attacking partnerships forged earlier this season have been clumsy and have not allowed de Préville to produce his best work.

Much like his first half-season with Lille, this might be the case of him taking his time to embed himself at another team. His work-rate will only get him so far, what he now needs to do is adapt to those around him again to become a more productive member of the team, especially as Bordeaux have started to sink before the winter break. Experimenting with his position and the team’s formation might benefit him best. He did some of his best work at Reims as a supporting player, his nine assists in their relegation campaign proves that he can be as much of a creator as a scorer. The wider positions are pretty occupied and while *Les Girondins* might explore other attacking options in the window, why not try the one they have free in a number 10 role?

Similar to how Antoine Griezmann is more effective in the national team when he can drive at defences, de Préville will benefit from having room to breathe. Not only will that potentially benefit the team from an attacking sense, his willingness to press and get back to defend will also ensure that having too many forward-thinking players will not unbalance the team. It is almost like we are just waiting for things to click because on paper, they should. He scores all types of goals, makes clever runs in-behind, links play well and dribbles comfortably with speed, which should make him ideal for a team where he can even switch with the other forwards on a whim without losing a beat.

His 2018 starts yet again with questions about how good he really is. Was the year at Lille a flash in the pan? Is he really of a quality where he can succeed at an upper-tier Ligue 1 club or is mid-table his true ceiling? Another chapter begins in the redemption story of a downtrodden hero, you will do well not to doubt that de Préville can rise above that all to prove everyone wrong yet again. Even if he does not quite hit the high notes again, you can bet that he will almost die trying.



ELLYES SKHIRI



35

Club: Montpellier

Position: Midfielder

Born: Lunel

Age: 22

Nationality



International Caps 0

At Club Since 2010

League Games in 2017 35

Too often, many of Ligue 1's best young players are linked with moves abroad. Whether Germany, Spain, England or Italy, the financial incentives of a move to one of Europe's biggest leagues have generally made player traffic move in one direction. This season alone has shown, however, that these youngsters must choose their destinations wisely at the peril of their development. Witness the likes of Yann Karamoh, riding the bench at Internazionale, or Adam Ounas, late of Bordeaux and now similarly bereft of playing time at Napoli.

This summer, another of France's more intriguing prospects was similarly linked with a move to Italy, with Montpellier's Ellyes Skhiri being pursued by Fiorentina. *La Viola* eventually plumped for Jordan Veretout, and the former Nantes player has done quite well, but did Stefano Pioli miss a trick in not opting for the Montpellier midfielder, either as an alternative, or in addition to Veretout? He is certainly not as naturally gifted an attacker as Veretout, but in terms of his maturity and absolute ability, may be a better player on balance.

Born not far from Montpellier in the small town of Lunel, after a brief spell at Nîmes, Skhiri was signed by *La Paillade* in 2010, making his full debut on his twentieth birthday, in the late stages of the 2014-15 season. Initially used as an attacking midfielder, he had been played more as a number six at U-17 and U-19 levels, and that first match actually saw him line up at centre back. Now resolutely a box-to-box midfielder, Skhiri's combination of positional nous, tackling ability and physicality have seen him become one of Ligue 1's most consistently effective players, epitomising the southern club's eye for young talent.

Building on from his debut, the following campaign saw him used sparingly, but the sales of Jonas Martin and Bryan Dabo in the summer of 2016 were clear evidence of the club's confidence in the youngster. Despite only having played some 800 minutes in the prior campaign, Skhiri became the anchor of Montpellier's midfield last season, playing in every match bar one. While the club's placement was hardly as high as many would have liked given the club's recent history, Skhiri's energy and composure allowed the team to play attractive football without fear of relegation.

Granted, Montpellier's maintaining their place in Ligue 1 was no easy feat, as Frédéric Hantz was dismissed in January, with Jean-Louis Gasset leading the club in the run-in, but both managers were eager to rely on their young stalwart, who has continued his good form into the current season. Now under the tutelage of Michel der Zakarian, Montpellier have evolved from playing swashbuckling football on the counter to become one of Ligue 1's most solid defensive sides. That is due in large part to the former Nantes boss opting to play three at the back, but also to the ability of Skhiri to screen the defence and break up play, having formed a mightily effective partnership with Paul Lasne.

While last season often saw Skhiri partnering one of the more attack-minded Stéphane Sessegnon or Morgan Sanson, making him necessarily a more defensive presence, this season, he and Lasne have played a more equal partnership, which allows each more general freedom. Played centrally in what has often been a 3-4-1-2, Skhiri has consequently been on the front foot more often, and the results have been impressive indeed. There has been the odd frustrating result, but the progress the club are making is best summed up by a recent stretch that saw Montpellier get a result against each of last season's top three.

Speaking recently to the French edition of *Goal.com*, Skhiri reflected on how Der Zakarian's influence has allowed him to affect the team's attack more this season. *"The system that's been put in place should give us an optimal solidity while still keeping the speed for rapid counter-attacking. We've evolved against these sort of ball-playing teams, playing more on the front foot. Of course, this gives us spaces into which we can counter. Even against Saint-Étienne, we've had the presence of mind to score quickly and to lock the game up."*

This new relationship has not been all positive, as Skhiri has recorded a slight up-tick in bookings (three already after recording the same amount in the entirety of last season), which recently saw him miss a scoreless draw against Lyon, but there is still a general sense of progress in the player's form and outlook. Drawing upon his variety of positional experience, Skhiri emphasised in that same interview the importance of his improving a still-nascent relationship with Lasne, who was often kept out of the team by Morgan Sanson before the latter's move to Marseille. *"The first objective is to protect each other in turn, always keeping a level of security; that's where my versatility best serves me."*

As Skhiri's play continues to improve, this polyvalence may eventually see him called up for Tunisia. So far, aside from a lone youth-team call-up, he has turned down entreaties of the Eagles of Carthage, but with the country having qualified for the World Cup next summer, Skhiri's head may be further turned. No matter his international future, as his development, unfettered by time spent on the bench at a bigger club, continues apace, Skhiri remains one to watch.



DANIJEL SUBASIC

^ 10

34

Club: AS Monaco

Position: Goalkeeper

Born: Zadar

Age: 33

Nationality



International Caps 35

At Club Since 2012

League Games in 2017 35

Looking back, 2017 must have felt like a fever dream for Subasic. No one had expected anything of Monaco, too many were fixated on the sheer might of Paris Saint-Germain that nobody paid a moment's attention to the team slowly rising in the Principality. Much like the man himself, who was often seen as a weak link in a position in which Monaco needed to improve their quality. One of the very few surviving members of the team that won the Ligue 2 title in 2012, the 33-year-old had proven everyone wrong before and was keen to do that again.

Subasic was riding on the crest of wave, as Monaco's attacking prowess and defensive solidity saw them win their final 12 games in a row in the 2016/17 campaign. That record stretched to 16 matches into the start the 2017/18 campaign or an even more startling stat of 21 victories in 23 Ligue 1 matches, a truly remarkable run. Of those 23 games, the Croatian kept 11 clean sheets and for the entire 2016/17 season, he stopped the opponents from scoring on 17 occasions. A string of excellent performances between the sticks not only led to the title for the Monegasque but also the award of Goalkeeper of the Year in the end-of-season Trophées UNFP.

A terrific shot-stopper with great reflexes and athleticism, he always seemed to handle every shot thrown at him with relative ease. The fact he was also almost untested in some games is a testament to his concentration skills, an absolutely vital attribute for goalkeepers at the very highest level. It even attracted interest from the likes of Arsenal and Napoli, but such attention from these sides were fleeting at best. The club confirmed a contact extension back in September, with the shot-stopper tied down until 2020.

A real beacon of leadership during a superb season, he often refocused the team at pivotal moments, such as this said before the club's league match against Dijon, just days after beating Borussia Dortmund 3-2 in the quarter finals of the Champions' League:

"The league remains our main priority, the Champions' League is a bonus, it will be a difficult game against Dijon, but we want the three points. We need to win six more games to be crowned champions. I would happily win all of them 1-0 after a difficult game."

However, lingering doubts concerning his overall solidity remained. In the bigger games, he seemed to become shaky and do silly little things that would make Monaco fans put their head in their hands. In the Champions' League, it seemed most evident. A poor mistake at the Etihad against Manchester City gave the Citizens an unwelcome advantage that Monaco eventually overcame, whilst in the semi-final against Juventus, he seemed a little too erratic, almost like the enormity of the situation the club was in had begun to overwhelm him.

He would run out of his box in risky scenarios to boot the ball up field, drop crosses and just look like a bag of nerves. While it was not his mistakes that completely sealed Monaco's European fate, he did little to breathe confidence into a defence that had to battle twice as hard against several strong opponents. The worry is that it has reared its ugly head again during the club's recent downturn in form in November. A particularly horrendous display against Troyes, where he gifted them two simple goals with boneheaded mistakes, should be ringing alarm bells around the Stade Louis II.

Was it the pressure of living up to expectations after an almost unimaginable season beforehand? Is it the presence of a more-than-capable stand-in coming in the form of Diego Benaglio in the summer distracting him, especially when he performed decently during the Croatian's injury absence?

Only time will truly tell but there is more on the line than just his club place in 2018. The Zadar-born glove-donner has also helped his nation qualify for the World Cup in Russia, with his space on the plane all but assured given the lack of competition in his position. Saying that, you never want to give any manager an excuse to drop you. In a competitive group with Argentina, Nigeria and Iceland, one mistake could cost them a place in the knockout rounds and something a proud footballing nation like Croatia will look to avoid at all costs.

Looking ahead now, 2018 will not be the year that defines the man but can quite easily be a notable one depending on how things shape out. If he can rediscover the consistency that we saw last season, he might be able to help recover Monaco's image before mounting another unlikely title fight in the following campaign.

As for his international form, it is paramount that he remains strong, given the fact that this is likely the last time we will see a number of gifted Croatian footballers in their prime vying to be dark horses. Should he stumble, history might start looking at him as an inconsequential cog within the machine rather than the fuse stopping everything from imploding. Given his and his number two's age, as well as their defensive struggles, the goalkeeper position might be the next place Monaco look to invest in, so these could be the last few moments at the top and Subasic will be desperate to shine there again.



ISMAILA SARR



33

Club: Rennes

Nationality



Position: Attacker

International Caps 6

Born: Saint-Louis

At Club Since 2017

Age: 19

League Games in 2017 20

Notwithstanding an injury dogging his start to his Rennes career, Ismaila Sarr remains one of Ligue 1's brightest young players. Despite being used with some regularity by Philippe Hinschberger in the beginning of last season, 2017 has unquestionably been the former Metz winger's breakout year, having been a driving force as *Les Grenats* avoided relegation as well as becoming a regular for Senegal. Still just 19, Sarr will have his work cut out for him to justify a transfer fee that could rise past the €20m mark, but on the evidence of his brief career to date, he certainly has the potential to do so.

Another in a fairly distinguished group of Senegalese players to have spent time early in their careers with Metz (Diafra Sakho, Sadio Mané, Papiss Cissé), Sarr was born in the northern suburbs of Dakar and came to eastern France via *Génération Foot*, an academy there that is affiliated with the club. After impressing in the 2015 U-23 Africa Cup of Nations, he made the move to France last summer, signing a five-year deal. A broken clavicle saw his preparation time be relatively limited, but he often appeared from the bench in the season's first half, playing behind the aging Yann Jouffre.

Given Jouffre's propensity for fitness issues, it was not long before Sarr became a first-team regular. Impressive enough before the winter break, he came back from national team duty with a renewed sense of purpose, setting the league alight with his pace, dribbling ability and deceptive strength, making Metz a real threat on the counter. He contributed just five goals last season, but among them were some truly spectacular efforts, and all of them came in matches where Metz, haunted by relegation throughout the season, earned points, underscoring his ability to perform under pressure.

Able to play on the left or the right, he tended to play slightly more on the left flank, making use of his ability to cut inside onto his favored right foot. He also, as a result of his close control, showed a remarkable ability to draw fouls, as his skill on the ball often simply left opposing defenders with no choice. As Hinschberger told Ligue 1's magazine show in April, *"He runs at opponents, he's quick and he's someone you don't like to defend against, so we like to have him."*

Metz did eventually avoid relegation, of course, and at season's end, speculation on Sarr's future soon ramped up to fever pitch. Hotly pursued by the likes of Lille, Newcastle and RB Leipzig, he eventually made the westward move to Rennes, looking to become part of a project with a strong focus on young talent. There, he joined the likes of Benjamin Bourigeaud and Faitout Maouassa as the club sought to re-invent themselves after finishing on the fringes of the top six for several seasons running. Bourigeaud and Maouassa have impressed this season, but Sarr was seen as the real coup for Rennes, particularly by then-manager Christian Gourcuff, who had campaigned hard for Rennes to sign the player for what seemed an eye-watering fee.

Under Gourcuff's direction, Sarr was bizarrely often used as a striker, hoping to get the best of his shooting ability and pace. Sarr himself had been candid about his polyvalence, telling *Ouest-France*, *"It doesn't matter; left, right, in front, too. It's the coach who will decide. What I like to do is be in the attack; you make decisions, dribbles, you get a lot of balls. Scoring goals (is what makes me happiest)."*

Goals, though, and success for the club, especially given their summer investment, were at a premium for Rennes in the season's early going. As a result, a chorus of questions surrounding Gourcuff's decisions began to emerge, and Sarr, given his fee, was also party to some criticism.

Sarr, despite these seeming travails, continued to give his all for the Breton side until a serious ankle injury, courtesy of a nasty tackle by St Étienne's Kévin Théophile-Catherine, assured he would be out until 2018. Since Sarr's absence began, Gourcuff, has been replaced by former Ivory Coast boss Sabri Lamouchi, and Rennes' placement in the table has dramatically improved. With Wahbi Khazri now being played as the striker, ahead of Firmin Mubele, there would seem ample opportunity for Sarr to be played in a more natural wide role; his versatility will allow him to feature on either flank, or be played just off the Sunderland loanee. Given the compact nature of the table below the top four sides, Rennes making a run for the top six remains a distinct possibility.

Sarr, given the massive fee paid for him and the opportunity to feature for his country this summer, ought to be eager to return to first team football. Becoming a first-team regular for Rennes and Senegal and improving his goal and assist tallies should leave him in good stead and perhaps even prompt a move to another, larger club. That, of course, remains to be seen, but on the evidence of the tremendous potential that he showed over the year's first nine months, Sarr's return should be keenly awaited, not only by fans of Rennes but by any observer of young talent.



MARIO BALOTELLI

^ 51

32

Club: OGC Nice

Nationality



Position: Attacker

International Caps 33

Born: Palermo

At Club Since 2016

Age: 27

League Games in 2017 27

Whisper it quietly, but Mario Balotelli is back to his best. Over the last year he has regained the form that he showcased with Inter Milan, Manchester City and during his first spell at AC Milan. There was a period during Balotelli's disastrous time in Liverpool and his loan to AC Milan that it would not have been unfair to question whether Balotelli would ever regain his form. However, "Super Mario" has rebuilt his career in Nice and is now pushing for a recall to the Italian national team.

Balotelli's time in Nice has not been without its troubles and there were times when it seemed that his petulance would spell the end of his adventures in France or that Nice manager Lucien Favre simply could not mould Balotelli's languid style of play. However, Balotelli has responded to these accusations by almost single-handedly dragging Nice from a relegation dogfight into the top six. His goals helped Nice qualify for the Champions' League during the 2016-17 season and he has become a more consistent, well rounded player this season and his improvement has helped fill the void left by key departures such as Ricardo Pereira, Younes Belhanda and Dalbert.

Balotelli arrived in Nice to much fanfare in August of 2016 and his early exploits seemed to fulfill the narrative of him rebuilding his career at the French club. However, after an initial period of good form, Balotelli soon cooled off and during the months of January and February 2017 he scored just once in five league appearances and missed two matches thanks to red card suspensions. During this period, Balotelli was also the subject of racist abuse from SC Bastia supporters during Nice's fixture against them.

Bastia would eventually be ordered to close part of their stadium for three matches and were given a one-point deduction. Balotelli's form began to improve during the month of March which coincided with an injury to Nice striker Alassane Pléa who had at times overshadowed Balotelli. The Italian striker scored five goals in his final eight league appearances to help push Nice over the line towards a third place finish and Champions' League qualification.

One of Balotelli's goals came in arguably one of the best games of the entire Ligue 1 season as Nice took on PSG at the Allianz Riviera. The match was pivotal for a number of reasons: Nice were still chasing Champions' League qualification while PSG desperately needed three points to keep up with Monaco in the hunt for the title. Balotelli opened the scoring in an eventual 3-1 win, which all but ended *Les Parisiens'* title challenge. It was a triumphant end to the season for Balotelli and Nice as they clinched qualification, however, there were still doubts about Balotelli's future at the French club. He had only initially signed a one-year contract and there was speculation that he would leave the Mediterranean after a single campaign. Balotelli put these doubts to rest when he signed a new contract in June, thus tying himself to the club for another year.

The beginning of this season was not a good one for Nice or Balotelli. Key players such as Ricardo Pereira, Dalbert and Younes Belhanda departed without being adequately replaced and Balotelli found himself being publicly criticised for his lack of effort by Lucien Favre after Nice crashed out of the Champions' League qualifiers against Napoli. In the past, Balotelli has responded negatively to criticism but he seemingly took Favre's words to heart and answered them on the pitch. Nice were in 18th place after 14 matches played and it is not controversial to say that without Balotelli they would have been in a bigger hole.

The Italian striker scored six goals in just nine games during that period including a brace in Nice's 4-0 demolition of Monaco. Balotelli was praised for his improvement by Favre in October with the Swiss manager saying: *"He has really improved in his movement. He's becoming more altruistic and effective. He still has a lot of work to do, but we know what that is. He works hard in training; he presses when he has lost the ball. It's a little step forward, but it's an important one"*. However, despite Balotelli's good form, Nice struggled to overcome the loss of key players and the poor form of several individuals such as Jean Michaël Seri and Yoan Cardinale. Lucien Favre seemed to be coming under increasing pressure, and the morale within the Nice squad was at an all-time low. Thankfully this poor form was turned around through four consecutive wins against Toulouse, Nantes, Metz and Bordeaux, with Balotelli scoring in each match.

The Italian's skills have been complimented by several improvements in performances from Nice's players and the fact that Nice have finally been able to form a settled attacking trio in Pléa, Balotelli and Saint-Maximin. While it remains to be seen whether Nice can continue their resurgence, Balotelli's return to the player we saw earlier in his career is a good omen. If he can continue his growth and remain focused, then we may well look back at his time at Liverpool as an aberration rather than a representation of his career.



DIMITRI PAYET



31

Club: Marseille

Position: Attacker

Born: Saint-Pierre

Age: 30

Nationality



International Caps 37

At Club Since 2017

League Games in 2017 29

Dimitri Payet's star-crossed career continued apace this year with his January move to Marseille the source of much consternation. Fans at his former club, West Ham United, were disappointed in the manner in which he had seemingly downed tools following on from a superb 2015-16 season. Experts in French football were quick to decry the move as well; for the €30m spent on a player soon to turn thirty, an impressive assortment of younger talent could have been brought in. Despite being definitively labeled as the poster child for Marseille under Frank McCourt, i.e., an example of a player who is being signed for the present, and perhaps more because of his name than his abilities on the pitch, Payet has had a decent enough year with l'OM.

A native of Réunion, Payet first came to France on a youth contract at Le Havre but was unable to break into the first team, dogged by accusations of a lack of character. After a brief sojourn back home, he signed on with Nantes, impressing with their reserves and in a subsequent stop in St Étienne, but problems of an infantile nature continued to dog him, as he was involved in an altercation with Blaise Matuidi while with *Les Verts* before forcing a move north to Lille.

After a season in which he often came off the bench behind Eden Hazard, Payet sparkled in the 2012-13, recording twelve assists and an equal number of goals. When Champions' League regulars Marseille came calling that summer, Payet made the move eagerly. His first season was a bit disappointing, as Marseille finished sixth, out of Europe, and were embarrassed in the Champions' League, failing to pick up a single point as Payet himself was sent off in the final match against Dortmund.

2014-15 and the arrival of Marcelo Bielsa brought about a sea change in Payet's play, as his laissez-faire attitude seemed to disappear almost overnight. Positionally, he thrived on being converted from a wide player into a more central role, recording an outstanding sixteen assists as his creativity saw Marseille lead the league for much of the season's early stages. Lyon and Paris Saint-Germain eventually passed them up, but the verdict on Payet as an individual seemed to be that he was finally ready to deliver on his promise.

A move to West Ham that summer saw his profile increase even further, and a solid European Championships ended with France as runners-up and Payet in the Team of the Tournament. The intervening eighteen months, though, have been less than charitable as Payet, disappointed in West Ham's failure to progress up the table in the Premier League, forced a move back to his former club, remarking in an interview with *So Foot*, *"I acted like a d**khead. It's a little game. When I want to piss everyone off, I do it. My managers understood that: when I sulk, they talk to me. It's a way for me to be heard. Those who know me play along, and, in the end, it goes well."*

Well, of course, is a relative term. Payet's return to the Vélodrome has been, to be charitable, a slow burner, as his time away from the team in England had seen his fitness drop precipitously. Marseille managed to finish fifth last season, but the arrival of the dynamic Morgan Sanson and the scoring acumen of Florian Thauvin and Bafétimbi Gomis were seen as the driving force of the team, even as Payet was often being handed the captain's armband in the absences of Patrice Evra.

This season has also been relatively fitful, as Sanson's continued emergence has often seen Payet played on the wing again, or dropped very occasionally for Lucas Ocampos. On the left, his relationship with the electric Jordan Amavi has often floundered, as the dynamic full-back's attacking qualities can be limited given Payet's indifference towards tracking back. Injuries have played their part in this slide, but on the whole Payet seems to lack a holistic take on how he fits into the team. To wit, his desire to be a central figure in attack is often to his detriment, especially as Thauvin now looks firmly to be OM's most potent threat going forward.

For France, too, his crown has started to slip, as Thomas Lemar, despite his own recent fitness issues, looks a more likely bet to start on the left side of France's attack this summer, particularly given the Monaco man's more diligent approach to his defensive duties. Still, though, even for a player who may be on the decline, Payet can offer the odd moment of magic. He remains a force to be reckoned with, both from free kicks and corners as well as further out on the pitch, where his ability to play pinpoint through balls remains undiminished.

Perhaps a bit guilty of trying too hard, taking shots from ill-advised positions, Payet is also no longer the scoring force he once was, but he is still able to conjure the odd bit of creative magic every now and then. If he can play as a complementary presence and return Marseille to the Champions' League, he will have done much to restore his reputation, but for the moment, his avaristic tendencies and seeming indifference towards hard work have given us a player whose career, despite its odd flashes of genius, is looking increasingly likely to be remembered more for what it might have been than what it was.



MORGAN SANSON

^ 26

30

Club: Marseille

Nationality



Position: Midfielder

International Caps 0

Born: Saint-Doulchard

At Club Since 2017

Age: 23

League Games in 2017 33

2017 saw a high-profile move for the talented Morgan Sanson. For many, he was the real long-term face of the 'OM Champions Project' following his transfer from Montpellier to Marseille in January. The first signing of the McCourt era, he was heralded as the first of many young, talented French players that would lead OM going forward.

And the optimism was rightly there. Sanson had shined in November 2016 in a stunning 3-1 win against his future club for Montpellier, before following that up with a sumptuous showing against Paris Saint-Germain (3-0). He was also leading the league in assists during the first portion of the campaign. His fluidity and versatility earned him a €12m move to Marseille who were looking forward to finally freeing themselves from the shackles of austerity after a difficult few years. Nevertheless, his debut occurred in a somewhat nightmarish fashion at the Groupama Stadium against Lyon.

OM wasted no time in fielding the 23-year-old against their rivals in a 4-3-3 alongside Maxime Lopez and Frank Zambo-Anguissa. It was a tactical misstep from Rudi Garcia, and Lyon duly punished him for it as the stronger pair of Gonalons-Tolisso dismantled the midfield, leaving the wingers to finish the job. Sanson, for all his efforts did earn an assist - though it did not affect the outcome of the match. That nightmare in Lyon earned him a place on the bench for the next two games. But the young midfielder did manage to rebound - scoring or assisting in each of his following five games as Garcia continued to show faith in his new signing, at least when associated with the more robust and reliable William Vainqueur.

The good form continued for Sanson, whose addition to a flagging Marseille team shorn of creativity and guile had hampered them in the first half of the season. Alongside Lopez, an intricate midfielder with good passing ability, it helped OM create further attacking opportunities through the middle of the field rather than its usual reliance on route one football or 'hit & hope' crosses from the left. With Sanson assured in his performance, OM cracked on - enchainning 11 games without defeat (he was spared the ignominy of facing PSG in the 1-5 defeat in February). In total, Sanson assisted seven goals and scored one of his own to propel Marseille to fifth position in the league. It also earned him a surprise award as the player with the most assists in the division, defeating more established names including the likes of Thomas Lemar and his own team-mate and friend in Florian Thauvin.

The 2017-18 season on the outset appeared full of promise for Sanson - particularly with the possibility of being partnered with fresh blood in the heart of the midfield. With Vainqueur out, in came Luiz Gustavo as the bed-rock in a 4-3-3 or 4-2-3-1 formation. While the former Montpellier man started the season well in the qualifiers of the Europa League, scoring twice against NK Domzale and KV Oostende - August brought some concern. Performances in the first couple of league games were average to say the least. Meanwhile, at one point it seemed that while lauded for his versatility at Montpellier, the current tactical set-up by Rudi Garcia meant there was a risk that there would have been no place in the starting 11 for the midfielder.

Rudi Garcia had begun to dispense with the 4-3-3 formation and the main losers were players who did not have a specialised position - namely, Sanson along with Lopez and Rémy Cabella, the latter shipped out to St Étienne on loan. Garcia had privately confided that he felt Sanson lacked aggressiveness to perform adequately in a defensive midfield role, and was second in the pecking order to Dimitri Payet in his favoured no.10 position. The young midfielder was not helped in this assessment by two very poor performances in the defeats to Rennes and Monaco in the late summer while Garcia himself was justified in his tactical selection by going with Anguissa and Gustavo at defensive midfield against Nice - OM would later rally from 2-0 down to win 4-2 as a consequence, with Gustavo shining in intercepting passes of the opposition.

He was given a runout against Strasbourg in October in place of the suspended Brazilian, scoring the second goal in a 3-3 draw, but reverted back on the bench against rivals PSG. Garcia's plan worked again as OM battled to a 2-2 draw, their strong midfield intensity praised for withstanding the Parisian barrage. But Sanson continued to push his way into the team, this time aided by an injury to Payet. And boy, did he take his chance - scoring three goals in his next three games including the solitary goal in the win at Lille, as well as a 93rd minute equaliser away to Bordeaux to earn a point for his side.

Sanson continues to offer alternatives to Rudi Garcia - but right now, at the end of 2017 - his campaign does have an air of stagnation around it which has allowed the manager to look elsewhere in his team for traits he can use. While he is the understudy in two positions, Sanson has his work cut-out to carve out his own place if he wants to continue being the face of the OM Champions Project.



ISSA DIOP

v7

29

Club: Toulouse FC

Nationality



Position: Defender

International Caps 0

Born: Toulouse

At Club Since 2006

Age: 20

League Games in 2017 33

Toulouse's Issa Diop is a real rising star. The 20-year-old centre back has been a regular for *Les Pitchouns* since his debut two years ago. That day, when he helped Toulouse to a much-needed clean sheet and victory against Nice that lifted them out of the relegation zone, he was a last-resort. Today, he is one of his club's key players. After joining Toulouse as a nine-year-old, Diop is an emblem of their impressive youth development system but he has only just begun to tap into his vast potential.

The first thing that strikes you about Diop is his size. At 20, he is already 1.94m and weighs over 90kg. As might be expected of a man of his gargantuan dimensions, he is imperious in aerial duels at set-pieces. At attacking corners, he is invariably double-marked and yet still often gets a head on the ball. His clever movement, often unanticipated by the defence, is excellent. Consistently managing to drift away from his marker and threaten the opposition goal, Diop has scored five goals of startling similarity. In open play, Diop does not win all the headers he should. With his size and jumping ability, he should be virtually unbeatable but that is not yet the case. Certainly for a youngster still learning the tricks of the centre half's trade, this is a forgivable flaw.

Diop attacks the ball with real aggression, both in the air and on the ground, but is occasionally caught out of position as a result. He does not panic but he is a risk-taker. If he sees that the ball is there to be won, he goes for it. It is both a strength and a weakness in his game. It often allows him to snuff out threatening situations but he can be beaten by a clever touch. He is a capable, but not excellent long passer and is generally not a risk-taker in possession. Somewhat inelegant with the ball at his feet, Diop only rarely attempts to dribble out of defence.

Diop counts Vincent Kompany, Jérôme Boateng, Kurt Zouma and Mamadou Sakho among his playing idols and there are elements of each in his game but he does not particularly resemble any of them. The media in Toulouse refer to him as 'le patron' (the boss) despite his youth and he follows in the footsteps of French legends like Laurent Blanc, Patrick Vieira and Michel Platini in captaining a Ligue 1 side in his early twenties. Finding his place on this list for the second time in as many years, the question is not whether Diop will retain it in future but only how high he can climb.

This has been a nightmare year for Diop's club and he cannot entirely escape that fact. Toulouse have won only seven of their 35 league games and their once watertight defence has begun to leak uncharacteristically. With Toulouse chasing games far more often than they would like, Diop has been left exposed.

In one-on-one situations his relative slow-footedness can be a real problem. Like many other giant defenders, Per Mertesacker springs immediately to mind, Diop needs to be protected to a certain extent. This has been far from Diop's best season but, as discussed, the fault for this small downswing cannot be laid entirely at Diop's feet. However, he continues to exhibit many of the flaws often seen in young players. His concentration levels, obviously crucial for a centre half, are inconsistent. He can be caught unprepared on occasion and that simply cannot be allowed to remain a part of his game.

Similarly, his aggression can border on rash at times. Refining these aspects of his game requires attentive coaching and it is possible that in a relegation battle his manager simply lacks the time to spend on these issues. Either way, Diop is not taking the great strides in competence to which we have become accustomed. In the summer of 2017, Diop and Toulouse rejected transfer bids from Monaco and Inter Milan among others.

Given the difficulties Monaco have endured, that looks like a good decision but if Diop had joined Inter he would have been competing for a Scudetto rather than scrapping for survival in Ligue 1. If Toulouse do go down, there is no chance Diop will stay with his hometown club.

Having steadily advanced with *Les Violetts*, it would be too much to ask Diop to sacrifice a full season of his young career. It seems unlikely that Diop will find a place in Didier Deschamps' World Cup squad. Although capped 36 times at youth level, Diop has not yet even been called up by the senior team. There Deschamps is playing a dangerous game. Diop's grandfather Libasse Diop was a Senegal international and, reputedly, the first Senegalese footballer to play in Ligue 1. While Issa was born in Toulouse, he remains eligible for the Taranga Lions who have drawn a very reasonable group for next year's World Cup. He has, for now, turned down the overtures of Senegal and insisted that his future lays with France but with so many good, young defenders ahead of him in the pecking order, he could yet change his mind.



THOMAS MANGANI

^ 30

28

Club: Angers SCO

Nationality



Position: Midfielder

International Caps 0

Born: Carpentras

At Club Since 2015

Age: 30

League Games in 2017 36

"Underrated" has become a footballing cliché. Present day pundits seem to use the term for anyone; manager, player, referee, mascot, that has not had been praised lavishly in the last fortnight or so, even if their qualities remain very much at the forefront of the collective footballing consciousness. As a result, any distinct meaning has readily evaporated. Angers' midfield conductor Thomas Mangani however, may just be an apt description for underrated's original definition.

The now 30-year-old Frenchman has led something of a meandering career to date which began in earnest at Monaco's youth academy as a left-back in the early 2000s. This was a position Mangani filled as he joined Hatem Ben Arfa, Samir Nasri, Karim Benzema and Jérémy Ménez in winning the 2004 U17 Euros. A loan with AC Ajaccio for the 2007/08 season saw Mangani successfully moulded into a holding midfielder, leading Guy Lacombe to deploy him as the midfield sentinel upon his return to the Principality.

Mangani's Monaco career ended alongside the Principality's Ligue 1 status as they were relegated in 2011, AS Nancy, still a top tier club, were the beneficiaries. Nevertheless, despite an 11th place finished after Mangani's arrival, the Lorraine club were relegated the following year. This time Mangani stayed to aid their promotion push but with ASN finishing down in 4th, Mangani, a naturalised Italian due to his grandfather, was snapped up by Serie A club Chievo. Here it seemed the lingering promise of Mangani's career was finally extinguished, used sparingly in Verona during the first half of the 2014/15 campaign, Mangani returned to Ligue 2 and perpetual also-rans off-late, Angers SCO.

Finding the right position has long been, in hindsight, Mangani's issue. Although it was quickly realised, despite his success in the role, his guile and ability on the ball made left-back as a position a waste of the young Mangani's abilities. His switch to what the French would call the 'sentinel' at the base of the midfield was not too far wide of the mark, but Mangani struggled to fit into the industrious, ball winning persona of a holding player, his inability to recover position was often a source of frustration for Monaco fans. Angers' coach Stéphane Moulin however, had other ideas.

Although Mangani was occasionally used as a central midfielder at Nancy, he usually found himself as the deepest lying midfielder. Moulin nudged his new acquisition further forward still. "We trust him and we need him," Moulin said after the win at Amiens in August, Mangani's goal and assist proving the difference in a 2-0 triumph. Mangani was entrusted with a creative, ball-playing, number eight role and he now runs Moulin's Angers team, leading by example. With the security of firstly Olivier Auriac in defensive midfield as Angers were promoted and now Baptiste Santamaria, as well as Romain Saïss before, Mangani has been free to play and impose himself on Ligue 1.

Given Angers' superb 9th and 11th placed finishes upon their return to the top division, despite having one of the smallest budgets in the league, Mangani's importance is difficult to understate; pivotal to everything that Angers do well. Angers' storming return to Ligue 1 had the club a miraculous third at Christmas, a success based on lightning counters, organisation and set-piece prowess.

Mangani's pinpoint, whipped deliveries from corners and set-pieces saw him match Angel Di Maria and Memphis Depay for assists last season (seven), his intelligent passing and ability to maintain the momentum of a counter proved crucial to the success of Angers' pacey forwards Abdoul Razzagui Camara and Billy Ketkeophomphone while, combined with Cheikh N'Doye, Saïss, Santamaria and company, he has formed one of the most effective midfield trios in the division over the past few seasons. Their ability to keep the ball in tight spaces, under constant pressure, was arguably the main factor in Angers' glorious early season form upon promotion and continued presence in Ligue 1 since.

Aside from Mangani's usefulness and effectiveness it is his grace and finesse that makes him an under the radar delight. A superb lob over Amiens' Regis Gruttner in August, reminiscent of Wayne Rooney's strike against West Ham, competes to lead his highlight reel against a superb feint and finish to help Angers into the Coupe de France final in May and one of many beautifully disguised passes to assist Nicolas Pépé during the visit of Guingamp in March. The last few months of 2018 have been more difficult for Mangani and Angers however. As Moulin struggles to find a regular source of goals and a replacement for powerhouse Cheick N'Doye, Mangani's workload has remained on the border of overwhelming, forcing the Angers' coach to rest his midfield general in December as his form started to falter.

2018 is promising to be a pivotal year for Angers and Mangani, struggling in the relegation zone having been unable, as is often their issue, to turn performances into results. With key players such as Mangani, Ismaël Traoré and Romain Thomas finally starting to feel the effects of their three years of near constant use in such a physically demanding division, a New Year return to form for their underappreciated midfielder may make all the difference. Mangani's displays however have finally started to attract the attention of some bigger sides, with Bordeaux seemingly front of the queue. Either way, Ligue 1 will only be enhanced by the continued presence of the guile and vision of Thomas Mangani.



LUIZ GUSTAVO



27

Club: Marseille

Nationality



Position: Midfielder

International Caps 40

Born: Pindamonhangaba

At Club Since 2017

Age: 30

League Games in 2017 32

A treble with Bayern and 40 Brazil caps makes for impressive reading, but one thing Luiz Gustavo has lacked throughout his admittedly prestigious career is stature. Despite his list of achievements and the big name clubs of which he can call himself an alumnus, Gustavo has long been found in the shadow of better players or on the fringes of greatness, as a result restraining some aspects of his footballing persona that may have otherwise flourished despite his obvious ability. This is not the case at Marseille.

Edging into his thirties this summer after a disastrous season for then employers Wolfsburg, the relegation play-off saving *Die Wolfe* from a humiliating demotion despite their talented squad, Gustavo's career was edging towards its autumn without him truly finding a home. Three impressive seasons at the emerging Hoffenheim thrust trust him into the Bundesliga shop window having arrived from Corinthians Alagoano (a smaller club with the same name as the São Paulo giants) in 2007, helping his new German employers with promotion to the top division after an initial loan.

A €20m move to perennial Bavarian heavyweights Bayern Munich followed, but despite an impressive trophy haul, Gustavo failed to impose himself consistently in the first 11 with Bastian Schweinsteiger, Toni Kroos and Javi Martinez often understandably ahead of him in the queue to Bayern's midfield, particularly during the latter half of his three season stint at the Allianz. Cash-rich Wolfsburg added him to their growing list of Bundesliga stars in 2013 and Gustavo enjoyed status as one of the first names on the team-sheet. Consistent form in a side that finished 5th and then a superb 2nd in the 2014/15 Bundesliga.

However, injuries hit in the latter half of 2015 and Gustavo's consistency, fitness and overall form have been on a downward trajectory, in parallel with the club, and perhaps not surprisingly given his importance to the team, ever since. Despite the relative stature of the two clubs, at the time the €12m move to Marseille in June seemed like something of a step down for the Brazilian ball winner, but it could prove to be his most successful transfer yet.

The effect that Gustavo has had on the Marseille midfield has been as startling as his superb individual displays. Thankfully managing to stay injury free so far, Gustavo has immediately assumed the responsibility as a leader at the Vélodrome, captaining the side on occasion this season and dictating midfield battles in Ligue 1 with a serenity and assuredness that OM have long lacked. Gustavo has also remained one of the few Marseille regulars to carry any semblance of form into what has been a drab and close to disastrous Europa League campaign, barely scraping out of a simple looking pool. Gustavo's influence has been so great that his stay on the French south coast could come to define his career as he now has the chance to become something of a Marseille great.

Marseille are a proud and historic club and arguably the biggest in Ligue 1, despite PSG's recent dominance and vast pits of cash, with their list of heroes making daunting reading. Deschamps, Papin, Voller, Barthez, Boli and Drogba all count themselves as members of an exclusive club as legends of the cathedral that is the Stade Vélodrome and Luiz Gustavo has a chance to, one day, join them.

A sizeable caveat here is that the credentials needed to join the pantheon of Marseille greats has shrunk considerably in recent years. Gustavo will not be winning Champions' Leagues or even Ligue 1 titles as Didier Deschamps did as player then coach but crucially, in a short space of time, Gustavo has quickly embodied the fans' desire and personified them through his excitable, yet tough style of play. Performances that the Mediterranean club's faithful have not seen from a midfielder in this decade. Assuming that Gustavo can maintain his level and perhaps lead the developing 'Champions Project' to domestic or Europa League silverware over the next five years, his hero status, cult or otherwise, will be assured.

Rudi Garcia is perhaps his biggest champion, having attempted to lure the Brazilian to Rome, he finally got his man with OM, noting this December his abilities as a leader and a consummate professional. *"He's a gentleman and important in the dressing room. He has charisma and a good relationship with everyone."* Upon the Brazilian's signing, a delighted Garcia spoke of his potential influence on the squad as a whole: *"It is above all about character, we have a very young midfield between Maxime Lopez, Morgan Sanson and Franck Anguissa, we needed a boss and a player of this caliber to give this team a little more confidence."*

In a more immediate sense, Gustavo's goal-scoring has been one of his more sizeable contributions to the team, with five in Ligue 1 so far this campaign including a stunning long range effort in *Le Classique*. He does however have a tendency to pick up cards; seven in his first nine Ligue 1 games, one of which was red.

Success in Germany for Gustavo came through medals rather than the adoration of supporters, in France, his OM career is off to a flying start. The 'gentleman' of the Vélodrome now has a shot at both, and perhaps even an enduring legacy at one of Europe's most historic clubs.



ANGEL DI MARIA

^ 8

26

Club: PSG

Position: Midfielder

Born: Rosario

Age: 29

Nationality



International Caps 92

At Club Since 2015

League Games in 2017 27

Just how do you solve a problem named Angel di Maria? The question continues to confound Paris Saint-Germain, who despite having a vastly talented player on the books seemingly have no idea how to utilise the Argentine superstar in the French capital.

Now halfway through his 3rd season at the Parc des Princes, Di Maria has seemingly been usurped by a dynamic front-three in Kylian Mbappé, Neymar and Edinson Cavani – the first two bought for a collective sum of over €400m. That has relegated the relatively cheap Di Maria to the bench – along with a cluster of players that included Julian Draxler and Lucas Moura among others.

2017 began intermittently for the former Madrid and Manchester United man. He was afforded just two starts in seven games with the arrival of Draxler in January, and the subsequent hot streak from the German further complicated a sustained run of matches. Nevertheless, he returned with the typical aplomb with a goal and assist in a 3-0 destruction of Bordeaux. It was no coincidence that this performance came through his favoured left-wing position, having spent most of January and February on the right to accommodate the new signing.

It was seemingly around this time that rumours begin to spread about Di Maria's distinct unhappiness in Paris, or rather unhappiness that stemmed from disagreement with his coach, Unai Emery. He would later recount at the end of the season – *"I know that not everything went well last season (in 2016-17). At first, I didn't quite understand what the coach was asking me. Then we gradually got to know each other."*

Most people judged that statement as confirmation of Di Maria's continued disapproval of Emery's methods. Following the Champions' League elimination at the hands of FC Barcelona, he nevertheless gained further trust from Emery who stabilized his 4-3-3 formation around Draxler & the Argentine, this time relegating Lucas Moura to the bench. A run of seven consecutive starts followed producing a total of four goals and one assist. With more regularity came more confidence, and with more confidence came the typical bombastic performance that has made Di Maria a household name across Europe. Nevertheless, PSG's faint title hopes had taken a fatal blow on one balmy spring evening in Nice.

A feisty game at Lucien Favre's swashbuckling side surprised the then-league champions. The normally calm Argentine spilled into a moment of madness in the 90th minute, hacking down an opponent with mindless precision. The score had been 3-1, the title was more or less lost. But the 29-year-old picked up a straight red card, and with it a two-match suspension. In his absence, PSG won both games 5-0 against SC Bastia and St Étienne, with the reinvigorated Moura beginning to sow doubt into the future of Di Maria in the French capital. Now, here was a player who would happily play second-fiddle to whichever big star arrived in Paris over the summer. The €60m Di Maria was perhaps just too good to play a bit-part role for 2017-18. In the end, Di Maria's disappointing return of six goals and seven assists in 29 league games also contributed to further discussion as to whether *Les Parisiens* would discard him in the close season.

And, they almost did. The arrival of Neymar & Mbappé, along with the unsold Lucas Moura and Draxler has created a migraine, let alone a headache for Emery. Five fantastic wingers on the roster had given rise to the belief that Di Maria's two year stay in Paris was over. Barcelona came calling. It was later reported that the Catalans had all but agreed a deal to take on the Argentine, having lost their own talisman to the Qatari-backed side in a somewhat controversial fashion earlier on in August. A spectacularly mistimed press release from UEFA put-paid to any deal. In it, PSG's financial spending was placed under review. Barcelona took the opportunity to negotiate a more flexible price with the consequence being the deal fell through.

And predictably, it is the 29-year-old who has been the major loser of PSG's spending this summer, having fallen down the pecking order to two insanely talented and expensive players. Di Maria in essence, has turned into what Moura found to his detriment last season – a highly talented player capable of taking PSG to the next level, only to find themselves demoted in favour of the next big ambitious signing in PSG's quest for European glory. Having started in all four games at the beginning of the season prior to the closing of the summer transfer window – Di Maria would only start two of the next seven. With Emery focusing on his preferred front-three of the 'MCN' in Neymar, Cavani and Mbappé – Di Maria has become option no.1 off the bench if any of the front three becomes unavailable for whatever reason.

There is no question that 2017 has turned into a rather disappointing year on a professional level for what previously was one of Ligue 1's top talents. And it seemingly will not get much better as the Argentine hurtles towards 30 years of age. In a World Cup year, Di Maria can scarcely afford not to be a first-team regular on the field. For continued success in a glittering career, it is just that he has to find that elsewhere.

50-26 RECAP

50	-	Romain Thomas	(Angers SCO)
49	-	Alban Lafont	(Toulouse)
48	-	Keita Baldé	(AS Monaco)
47	-	Jimmy Briand	(EA Guingamp)
46	-	Christopher Jullien	(Toulouse)
45	-	Kévin Malcuit	(Lille OSC)
44	-	Joris Gnagnon	(Stade Rennais)
43	-	Ronny Rodelin	(SM Caen)
42	-	Javier Pastore	(PSG)
41	-	Younousse Sankharé	(Bordeaux)
40	-	Lucas Tousart	(Lyon)
39	-	Thiago Motta	(PSG)
38	-	Jemerson	(AS Monaco)
37	-	Arnaud Souquet	(OGC Nice)
36	-	Nicolas De Préville	(Bordeaux)
35	-	Ellyes Skhiri	(Montpellier)
34	-	Danijel Subasic	(AS Monaco)
33	-	Ismaila Sarr	(Stade Rennais)
32	-	Mario Balotelli	(OGC Nice)
31	-	Dimitri Payet	(Marseille)
30	-	Morgan Sanson	(Marseille)
29	-	Issa Diop	(Toulouse)
28	-	Thomas Mangani	(Angers SCO)
27	-	Luiz Gustavo	(Marseille)
26	-	Ángel Di María	(PSG)



JOAO MOUTINHO

^ 22

25

Club: AS Monaco

Position: Midfielder

Born: Portimão

Age: 31

Nationality



International Caps 105

At Club Since 2013

League Games in 2017 34

For Monaco midfielder João Moutinho, 2017 has been a year of battling for a starting role. This year has not always gone smoothly for the Portuguese midfielder. His individual success has seemingly come at a time when Monaco are struggling, while his lack of playing time during the second half of the 2016-17 season coincided with Monaco winning Ligue 1 and reaching the Champions' League semi-finals.

The beginning of the 2016-17 season saw the emergence of the now famed Fabinho and Tiémoué Bakayoko's midfield partnership in Leonardo Jardim's 4-4-2 system. Despite Moutinho's superior technical quality, Jardim preferred the solidity that Fabinho and Bakayoko provided which in turn gave Thomas Lemar and Bernardo Silva more room to operate. Moutinho is a talented player, but he is not a defensive player. By playing Fabinho and Bakayoko, Jardim gave Silva and Lemar licence to roam inside which then enabled Dijbril Sidibé and Benjamin Mendy to provide width on the overlap. At times, Monaco resembled a 2-4-4 when in possession and this was only possible because of the defensive discipline that Fabinho and Bakayoko provided. Moutinho was usually one of Jardim's first substitutions, especially when Monaco were chasing a game. His superior technical qualities gave Monaco more creativity from midfield and a more dynamic threat when dribbling the ball.

Towards the end of the 2016-17 season, Moutinho began to see more playing time as the toll of Monaco's deep Champions' League run necessitated that Fabinho and Bakayoko be rested occasionally. Moutinho's inclusion into the starting line-up did not seem to hinder Monaco as they marched onwards towards Ligue 1 glory and the latter stages of the Champions' League.

Monaco's Champions' League tie against Borussia Dortmund was a pivotal one for Moutinho. Monaco were without Bakayoko through suspension which meant that Moutinho partnered Fabinho in midfield. The game showcased both the strengths and weaknesses of bringing him into the starting line-up. During the first half, Moutinho put in a composed performance playing in a more advanced position in front of Fabinho and Monaco went into half-time 0-2 up. However, during the second half Dortmund coach Thomas Tuchel made several substitutions which gave Dortmund a great threat on the wings and pinned Moutinho and Fabinho into more defensive roles. Dortmund dominated the second half and Monaco lost control over the game and narrowly won 2-3. Dortmund managed to find another goal through Shinji Kagawa and it showcased Moutinho's lack of defensive ability as he lost a tackle which gave Kagawa an opportunity inside the box.

During the second leg, Moutinho started and once again played the advanced role in Monaco's midfield, but this time it was Bakayoko playing as the more defensive of the two thanks to Fabinho's suspension. Much like the first game, Monaco hit Dortmund on the counter-attack, with Moutinho playing a vital role, but once again his defensive weaknesses were at times exposed by the German side. Despite the 3-1 score-line in favour of Monaco the game was closer than suggested. Moutinho's inclusion gave Monaco a more dangerous counter-attacking presence, but also contributed to a lack of defensive security against top level opposition. Jardim understandably opted for his preferred pair of Fabinho and Bakayoko during the first leg against Juventus before bringing on the Portuguese midfielder with 24 minutes left and Monaco losing 0-2, which rather summed up Moutinho's season. Despite his contributions to Monaco's success, there was a sense that he was slowly losing his importance to the French club because of the way Jardim chose to play.

However, the sale of Bakayoko to Chelsea during this summer has given Moutinho a chance to earn his status back. Because of their numerous attacking departures, Monaco have required more creativity from their midfield and this gave Moutinho the chance to become a key player once again. The Portuguese midfielder has even eclipsed new signing Youri Tielemans who was expected to replace Bakayoko in the line-up. Leonardo Jardim has begun to favour a 4-2-3-1 system instead of the 4-4-2 of last season and this has given Moutinho the license to pull the strings from deep while Fabinho provides defensive support. Moutinho has also improved defensively which has made the idea of a Fabinho-Moutinho pivot more feasible. Despite Moutinho's improvement, Monaco have seemingly regressed this season.

The losses of Kylian Mbappé, Silva, Mendy and Bakayoko have been severely damaging and despite Moutinho's defensive improvements, Monaco are a worse side than a year ago. However, some of these accusations have been superficial. While Monaco have been very poor in the Champions' League, they sit 2nd in Ligue 1 at the time of writing with just one fewer point than at the same time last season. Expecting Monaco to compete with a PSG side capable of purchasing Neymar and Mbappé in the same campaign is unrealistic. Monaco have been impressive in Ligue 1 and no small part of this has been down to Moutinho's contribution.

Moutinho at the age of 31 has impressively wrestled back his starting place, but must continue to contend with Youri Tielemans in the duel for the position next to Fabinho. In this battle, Moutinho has triumphed for the moment but the talent of Tielemans will be hard to ignore in the future. Do not expect the battle between Moutinho and Tielemans to end anytime soon.



MARQUINHOS

^ 14

24

Club: PSG

Nationality



Position: Defender

International Caps 24

Born: São Paulo

At Club Since 2013

Age: 23

League Games in 2017 29

They say every cloud has a silver lining and that has been the case for Marquinhos during his time in the French capital.

Signed from AS Roma in July 2013, Marquinhos initially found himself as the understudy for compatriots Alex, and more recently David Luiz. Marquinhos has had to be patient and at times has been deployed at right-back and even as a defensive midfielder whilst he waited for his opportunity. After Paris Saint-Germain offloaded David Luiz to Chelsea in August 2016, Unai Emery was adamant in declaring his ratification of a Thiago Silva-Marquinhos defensive pairing as the club moved into a new era.

Since Marquinhos was handed his chance he has taken his opportunity and has developed into a generally dependable centre back. Not only has he cemented his place in the PSG team but he has also become a starter under Tite for the Brazil national team and is a certainty to go to the World Cup next summer barring injury. Marquinhos is now a senior player at PSG and one of the longest serving players in the squad. The Brazil international is third in line to the PSG captaincy behind Thiago Silva and Vice-Captain Thiago Motta and his on-pitch demeanour indicates that he is deserving of this and is developing into a future PSG captain, not afraid to scream orders at some of the world's most expensive talents mid-game.

His performances rarely deviate from the high standards he sets and although comfortable in many Ligue 1 games, Marquinhos is also able to step up a level in the Champions' League when facing a higher calibre of opponent. Key to Marquinhos' development has been his centre back partner Thiago Silva. The pair have been able to build a formidable partnership based on communication and understanding. It helps that both defenders are able to continue to grow their partnership at international level now that Thiago Silva has been brought back into the *Seleção* fold.

Impressively over the last 12 months, Marquinhos has also developed a strong centre back chemistry with academy graduate Presnel Kimpembe. With Unai Emery opting to rotate the centre backs, Marquinhos has been able to mentor Kimpembe, particularly in Ligue 1. However, arguably PSG's most impressive defensive performance of 2017 was against Barcelona in the first leg of the Champions' League round of 16 when Thiago Silva was ruled out through injury on the eve of the tie. With the formidable Messi, Neymar and Suarez to contend with, a then 22-year-old Marquinhos inspired a 21-year-old inexperienced Kimpembe to shut out arguably the world's deadliest attacking trio as PSG went on to win 4-0.

PSG are in the unique position of being able to pair up any two of the three centre backs together and still be confident of success. But with Thiago Silva now 33 years of age and signs of physical fragility creeping in, Marquinhos has become indispensable to the squad in terms of experience and defensive organisation. Marquinhos is additionally threatening from attacking set pieces, particularly with his aerial ability and has weighed in with some important goals in a PSG shirt including the opener in 5-1 thrashing of Marseille in February and a goal in the Coupe de France semi-final against rivals AS Monaco in April.

Moreover, the ex-Corinthians defender has improved in all areas of his game in 2017 and has developed in terms of decision making and positional play. His reading of the game and anticipation have also progressed especially in big games. Marquinhos looks fitter and more importantly stronger than he has ever been which is evident when faced with physical centre forwards where he is able to hold his own. This is testament to the sports science staff at the club as well as Marquinhos himself who has evidently worked on this element of his game.

Like many of the PSG squad, Marquinhos can occasionally lapse in concentration particularly when playing against some of the lower teams in Ligue 1 and this will be an area that Marquinhos will seek to remedy as he heads into a critical six months for club and country. PSG's and principally Marquinhos' defensive performances will this season be measured on how they cope with the pressures of the Champions' League. PSG are more often than not capable of outscoring their domestic opponents even when in second gear.

But Marquinhos and his team-mates will not have that luxury in the latter stages of the Champions' League and concentration will need to be at its sharpest. Time will tell if PSG have the centre-back pairing to conquer Europe. The quality is there, the belief is also seemingly present but with significant investment and the addition of compatriot and serial winner Dani Alves, there is now an expectancy to deliver.

Marquinhos has a critical six months approaching where he will be fighting for the top honours in the game with club and country. The Brazilian has a fantastic opportunity to win a clean sweep domestically, the Champions' League and the World Cup; a unique feat that would unlikely be repeated. But he has developed his game to put himself in a position to be able to compete for these trophies. An exciting period ahead for an ever-improving talent.



BENJAMIN ANDRE

^ 51

23

Club: Rennes

Position: Midfielder

Born: Nice

Age: 27

Nationality



International Caps 0

At Club Since 2014

League Games in 2017 35

Benjamin André's stature continues to grow. The supposed interest from Liverpool in the summer, with *France Football* claiming a bid of around €17 million was considered, underlines the Stade Rennais captain's rise, becoming one of the best holding midfielders in Ligue 1.

André has stood out in a Rennes side that has been, quite frankly, bleak at times in 2017. In the second part of the 2016-17 season, Rennes only scored more than once in a game on three occasions, winning just four times in the league in five months. That turgid football continued into the new season under Christian Gourcuff, despite a hefty outlay in the summer on bright young talent. A lacklustre start to the campaign saw André's Rennes slip into the bottom three, an outcome that sealed the former Algeria manager's fate, even if his side did pick up before his removal in November.

Benjamin André has been a constant throughout this time, a reliable, consistent performer who seems to have emerged unblemished from Rennes' stagnation. Indeed, as Rennes look to have discovered new life under manager Sabri Lamouchi as the year comes to a close, it appears Benjamin André may well have found a whole new level entirely. André's upbringing gave him a mental toughness. He lost his father at an early age, before taking the difficult decision to leave his home near Nice to cross the Mediterranean for Corsica aged just 16, to pursue his dream to play football.

His willingness to succeed has made him open to different challenges and this is reflected in his versatility, a key factor in explaining his in-game intelligence and how he has developed into such a consummate midfielder. During the six years he spent at Ajaccio, he found himself moving from the right-hand side to anywhere across the midfield. This, on the one hand, perhaps hindered his progression as a master of a particular art, but he was no sub-standard jack of all trades either. Wherever he played, André maintained a high-level of performance.

His versatility continued to be apparent when he joined Rennes in 2014. He was signed by manager Philippe Montanier originally to compete with Romain Danzé at right-back, but he would never play in that position, soon finding himself deployed in the centre of the park, where he again excelled. His education across the pitch helped him become comfortable on the ball, quick in the tackle and adept at reading the game.

It is here that André found his home, so to speak, affirming himself as a holding midfielder, shedding the skin of a versatile, bit-part player. He has reinvented himself as a deep midfield rock, organising and structuring how Rennes play, a deep-lying, consistent, metronome at the base of midfield. In the summer, as Danzé began to fall away from the first team, Christian Gourcuff turned to André, as the second oldest player in the squad, to become his captain. It appears this is a role that once more has taken the midfielder up a notch, becoming a leader of a side filled with young, burgeoning prospects.

André's lack of a set position has meant that his attacking statistics have always dwindled. For Ajaccio, he scored eight goals and made 11 assists in 96 appearances. He is not a good finisher, but he is excellent from a dead-ball, although new prodigy Benjamin Bourigeaud has somewhat stolen a march on that front this season.

Defensively, he is far more comfortable. He is excellent at reading the game and retaining possession, both recovering and recycling it. He is the base through which Rennes operate, and increasingly, he is orchestrator in chief, a role enhanced by his appointment as captain. André appears to be a player improving all the time. Rennes' recent upsurge in form, particularly the first three wins under new coach Sabri Lamouchi, have all seen André take a dominant role in performances. He even scored twice, his first goals since 2014-15 campaign.

It is beginning to feel like the 27-year-old is on the verge of a new departure. After years of being shuffled across the team and quietly but efficiently going about his business, André is now being asked to stand tall, to lead and to run games. So far, as he has always done whenever faced with a new challenge, he has stepped up to the mark. He has arguably become Rennes' most important player. In a squad filled with youngsters, many of whom with limitless potential, including the aforementioned Bourigeaud, as well as Ismaila Sarr, Faitout Maouassa, André has been tasked with leading them into battle on the field. The captaincy at Rennes has taken on a new level importance, requiring a player who can lead, be sympathetic, and encourage the development of the bright, but fledgling talents, that surround him.

After a difficult start, André has shown he can step up to lead a side, and is slowly becoming a vital influence in every match he plays. With such outstanding displays against Nantes, Angers and Amiens, it is clear that he is beginning to add elements to his game that make him a more complete and well-rounded midfielder. The quiet, versatile, unassuming but competent André of the past seems to be evolving into a leader of men and a dominant figure in midfield. With big clubs already taking notice of the Frenchman, the question now is, how far can he go?



PRESNEL KIMPEMBE



22

Club: PSG

Nationality



Position: Defender

International Caps 0

Born: Beaumont-sur-Oise

At Club Since 2005

Age: 22

League Games in 2017 23

After the uncomfortable exits of the likes of Mamadou Sakho and Lucas Digne, Paris Saint-Germain seem to have recently adopted a healthier approach to providing younger players with first team opportunities under Unai Emery. Marquinhos is blossoming into one of the world's best young centre backs, Adrien Rabiot is first-choice in midfield, and even Giovanni Lo Celso and Christopher Nkunku have had their opportunities under the Spaniard. However, perhaps no player has benefitted more from Emery's arrival at the capital club than Presnel Kimpembe.

A little over a year ago, Kimpembe seemed to have reached a crossroads in his career at the Parc des Princes. He had just received his first call-up for the senior side in France, in place of the injured Eliaquim Mangala, but after starting regularly early in 2016-17, even the sale of David Luiz was not affording him consistent opportunities on the pitch. Despite his obvious talent, he was also struggling to come to a contract extension agreement with the club, even demanding a personal meeting with Nasser Al-Khelaifi.

That extension was eventually signed, through 2021, and the youngster has continued to improve, crediting his relationship with Emery, both on a personal level and on the pitch. Speaking to *Onze Mondial* in October of 2016, he remarked, *"With Emery, there's more communication. Personally, I've had more communication with the current coach; that wasn't always the case with Laurent Blanc."*

Buoyed by that improved relationship, Kimpembe's situation now seems settled, as he remarked in that same interview, *"I want to be here for ten years, for the rest of my career, even!"* Born not far from Paris in Beaumont-sur-Oise, Kimpembe signed with PSG in 2005, and his determined approach to the game has served him well, succeeding despite the arrival of more ballyhooed (and better-compensated) stars. In 2017, the lanky young defender has quietly become one of France's best defenders, and even as last season frequently saw him rested. That Kimpembe fails to start in the club's biggest matches may seem a slight, but with Silva now 33, Kimpembe's combination of pace and positional acuity serve the leaders better as opponents seek to try to catch them out on the counter.

That is not, of course, to suggest that Kimpembe can't turn in up in the biggest matches, as his performance in the Champions' League Round of 16 against Barcelona proved last season. With Silva unavailable, Kimpembe, who had not yet played in Europe to that point, started alongside Marquinhos and the two easily displayed the kind of rapport and understanding that allowed the visitors to be shackled. Kimpembe was a veritable superstar, using his athleticism to get in front of Lionel Messi and Luis Suarez throughout the encounter, shutting them down from gaining any attacking momentum. Silva returned in the reverse fixture, that infamous 6-1 loss at the Nou Camp, turning in a poor display, and in some quarters, there were even cries for the captain to be dropped for Kimpembe.

Given Silva's outsized influence in the squad, that was never going to happen, but that match did make many sit up and take notice of Kimpembe, who has also earned the endorsement of Marquinhos, as the two have developed a very complementary relationship on the pitch. Frequently wearing the captain's armband in Silva's absences this season, the former Roma man has also come on leaps and bounds under Emery, and argues that his teammate's equal place alongside him this season is well-earned. Speaking to *L'Équipe* in October, the Brazilian was effusive about his relationship with the academy product, *"It's really impressive, his performances, how he plays, his personality on the pitch. If he now has this, it is really that he's deserved it."*

Kimpembe has impressed, but isn't quite yet the finished article. He is solid positionally but can be a bit rash in the tackle, averaging roughly a booking every third match in his career. For a player at 1.89m, he could also be better in the air, but his apparent bashfulness come from playing alongside the more aerially-inclined Silva or Marquinhos. These are relatively minor faults, though, as Kimpembe has often displayed an almost preternatural intelligence with the ball at his feet, as well as a good range of passing. While not quite blessed with the vision of Silva, he has racked up the second-highest pass completion rate in Ligue 1 in the current campaign, acting as a reliable conduit to the likes of Rabiot and Verratti.

For his country, Kimpembe has impressed for France at youth level (after a dalliance with DR Congo), but is still struggling to make an impact for the senior side. Much of this, though, is down to the superb play of Samuel Umtiti, who has been often lauded as the best defender in Spain this season. With Raphaël Varane and Kurt Zouma also in the mix, centre back is a crowded position for France, but Kimpembe is likely to continue to be called up given he can also do a job at left-back, despite his size. For now, though, the youngster seems satisfied with his place for club and country and will only continue to improve, making him likely to continue his rise in the years to come.



KARL TOKO EKAMBI



21

Club: Angers SCO

Position: Attacker

Born: Paris

Age: 25

Nationality



International Caps 17

At Club Since 2016

League Games in 2017 31

In the increasingly homogenous world of top flight football, where it is rare to meet a footballer who has not followed the standard route from talent spotting as a child to entering a club's youth development set up and on to professional status, it is always fun to follow the fortunes of a footballer who has broken the mould a little and has found his own path to stardom.

Angers' 25-year-old Cameroonian striker Karl Toko Ekambi is one such footballer. Born in Paris, he joined the youth ranks of Paris FC as a child and worked his way up to the fringes of the first team, marked out for success by his speed and technical ability. However, in part due to a knee injury, Toko Ekambi became disillusioned with the pressure that came with trying to make it as a professional and decided to walk away from football. *"I just played street football for 18 months. When I came back I said to myself I'll just play and if it works, it works; if it doesn't, it doesn't. It helped me as I played with no pressure, was free on the pitch and it allowed me to improve - in terms of dribbling and spontaneity."*

Re-enlisted by Paris FC, Toko Ekambi made a relatively slow start, but 14 goals in his fourth season attracted bigger clubs and he was on his way to Sochaux in 2014. An impressive 14 goals in 38 matches in his first season earned him a Ligue 2 Player of the Year nomination and interest from other clubs, including Angers. Toko Ekambi chose to stay for one more season, almost matching his first season's stats with 11 goals in 34 matches. His patience paid off as a still-impressed Angers snapped him up for €1.25m.

Last season, the Cameroonian's first in the top flight, inevitably saw Toko Ekambi's bare stats drop off a little as he adjusted to the higher level. However, they still make for impressive reading - particularly when one considers that he played much of the season in a slightly unfamiliar role. Whereas at Paris FC and Sochaux he was almost always played as the centre forward, for the majority of his first season with Angers, he was played on the left wing or on the left hand side of a front three, with Famara Diedhiou favoured down the centre.

In this role, Toko Ekambi managed seven goals and four assists (two of them to his strike partner) in 31 matches, an excellent return for a Ligue 1 newcomer, as Angers finished comfortably in mid-table, as well as reaching the Coupe de France final. Speaking of his talented forward, Angers coach Stéphane Moulin described him as *"unpredictable - for opponents but also for teammates as he is capable of coming up with something unconventional. That's his strength...there is still room for improvement but he's a pretty complete player. I think that if he can muscle up a bit it will be positive for him."*

A positive endorsement from his coach and an even better show of faith has come this season as Moulin, perhaps mindful of the fact that four of Toko Ekambi's seven goals last term came in only seven matches played as the central striker, has, more often than not, started him in that position, despite the presence of the less mobile Enzo Crivelli. The move has already borne fruit, with Toko Ekambi more or less matching last season's stats in half the time, currently sitting on seven goals and three assists.

Already blessed with good technical ability allied to the confidence to take on and beat his man, along with a strong, accurate shot and good prowess in the air, the striker was mindful of where he needed to improve: *"I need to be more consistent, take what works, improve on what isn't so good, and be good for 90 minutes."* This season thus far suggests that he is well on the way to doing so. Importantly, too, he is no flat-track bully - his goals have included strikes against Lyon, Monaco, Nice and miserly Montpellier - almost all of them directly leading to points gained too.

He has also taken Moulin's advice to improve on his physical presence. His goals this season against Caen and Strasbourg perhaps best demonstrate the spectrum of his abilities: against Caen he chased a long ball, used his strength to bully Damien da Silva off it, then powered a volley home. Against Strasbourg, he perfectly controlled a high ball wide on the left, exchanged a one-two with Thomas Mangani, nutmegged his opponent and curled a low shot into the net.

Angers, who have in recent seasons sold centre forwards Jonathan Kodjia and Diedhiou to Bristol City, may be resisting offers this coming summer for Toko Ekambi, who already turned down the opportunity to join Brighton & Hove Albion six months ago. In doing so, he showed rare maturity for a player at a modest Ligue 1 side by resisting a mega wage packet with the belief that a move to the Premier League at that point would have come too soon, that it might have slowed his progression and not accelerated it. Unfortunately, the Cameroon international, who featured up to the quarter final stage as the Indomitable Lions went on to win the African Cup of Nations, will not be going to the World Cup in Russia. However, if he retains his current form and his wise and levelled head, he may well still be making headlines this summer.



THOMAS MEUNIER



20

Club: PSG

Position: Defender

Born: Sainte-Ode

Age: 26

Nationality



International Caps 21

At Club Since 2017

League Games in 2017 20

In a season in 2016/17 that was not exactly filled with great moments for Paris Saint-Germain, Thomas Meunier established himself as one of the most important players in the squad and quite a popular player amongst the fans thanks to his hard work, consistent performances and social media flare. What speaks volumes about Meunier, however, is not his winning mentality, it is the fact that he is still an important part of a PSG side that has had both Serge Aurier and Dani Alves at right-back for the Belgian to compete with. Meunier has provided tough competition for the pair with his controlled performances and stability in big games.

The Belgian was a relative unknown on the European stage when he joined PSG in the summer of 2016 from Club Brugge, but after making a big impression on Unai Emery, Meunier became a fixture in the capital club's side at the turn of the year, featuring in wins against Rennes and Nantes as well as the 1-1 draw at home to Monaco when the future Ligue 1 champions stole a point late on thanks to Bernardo Silva. A sprained ankle would keep Meunier out for the next two games but his fantastic run of form continued against Bordeaux and Marseille when PSG beat the former 3-1 away from home and the latter in a 5-1 demolition at the Stade Vélodrome, where Meunier set up Julian Draxler for the fourth goal that evening.

One stat about Meunier in the first half of 2017 of note was that in all competitions, he only lost two games that he featured in. One being the 3-1 loss against Nice towards the back end of the season and the other being that fateful night at the Nou Camp when Barcelona completed the most incredible comeback in the Champions' League.

There was one thing that always sticks in our minds when it comes to Meunier, in a video featuring himself, Blaise Matuidi, Julian Draxler and Marco Verratti prior to that second leg against Barcelona. Verratti asks *"If we lose the game 5-1 but still go through, are you happy,"* to which Draxler and Matuidi say yes, as long as they go through. Meunier, on the other hand is the complete opposite. *"No, I'd be pi**ed. You lose 5-1 and people make fun of you, people would be like 'see PSG, we thought they were strong but you lose 5-1 to Barcelona it is not okay."*

This quote in the short promotional video is emblematic of the kind of mentality that the 26-year-old harbours. The type of mentality that PSG needed from all their players during the whole of last season and in that ill-fated second leg against Barcelona. This almost certainly endeared him to the Parisian faithful and has boosted his integrality to the squad morale of the world's most expensive dressing room.

With the disappointment of the 2016/17 season behind them, PSG looked to regain their Ligue 1 crown and go further in the Champions' League, adding Brazilian duo Neymar and Dani Alves. For Meunier, this posed a problem. His performances in the previous campaign had earned him a space ahead of Serge Aurier who was shipped out to Premier League side Tottenham Hotspur, but now he is once again playing understudy to Dani Alves.

The fact he was left to play second fiddle after such a strong first season must have been tough to take for Meunier, but his performances when called upon have shown that he is quite capable in his current role, although unlikely to be happy, but will give his best for the side when needed. He is still yet to make an appearance in the Champions' League due to Alves' presence but Meunier's Ligue 1 appearances - especially his performance-winning display away at Dijon - have been mightily important to PSG.

Without him, maybe Dani Alves would be quite worn out going into the end of 2017 and his performances might have waned along the way, but the rotation of the two means both Alves and Meunier get a substantial share of playing time in important matches, even if it is incontestable that the Brazilian is coming out on top in terms of Emery's playing time offerings at present.

Thomas Meunier, who was first taken notice of during EURO 2016, may not have featured in as many games as he would have liked but one thing is for sure; the Belgian international has a huge 2018 coming up for himself. He will almost definitely play an essential role in PSG's continued dominance of Ligue 1 as they look to recapture the league crown and if he carries on performing like he has done for *Les Parisiens* to date, chances are he will be the starting right-back for Belgium and Roberto Martinez at the 2018 World Cup.

Meunier is undoubtedly more than capable of holding down the right-back spot at PSG and is undeniably already one of the best in his position in the world, with his attacking guile, steadfast defensive abilities and swash-buckling, direct passing. The Belgian will hope that 2018 is the year in which he is finally unleashed, to make the starting role at PSG his own, in French and European matches.



MALCOM



19

Club: Bordeaux

Position: Attacker

Born: São Paulo

Age: 20

Nationality



International Caps 0

At Club Since 2016

League Games in 2017 37

It has been a while since Bordeaux has had the eyes of Europe's heavyweights fixated on them. Not since the days of Yoann Gourcuff leading *Les Girondins* to the league title has a young player burst onto the scene with such bombast and explosiveness. Since arriving from Corinthians in January 2016, highly-rated Brazilian winger Malcom's performances have earned him praise from every corner of the continent and the customary place in all the online transfer rumour pages. Despite receiving offers as high as €35m from the likes of Dortmund, who saw him as the ideal replacement for Barcelona-bound Ousmane Dembélé, Bordeaux's management stood firm and ensured that the Brazilian would remain for at least another year. At that point, late in the summer window, there was a certain attraction associated with staying in the south of France for Malcom. The team had gone six games unbeaten and he was a decisive part of that, effectively becoming the main creative as well as attacking force of the team.

The back-end of last season saw Malcom consolidate his place in the team's starting line-up, as well as form a partnership facetiously labelled 'KLM' by the club's fans with François Kamano and Gaëtan Laborde. Along with the phasing in of Valentin Vada in midfield, this was part of Gourvennec's successful rejuvenation of what had been a struggling Bordeaux side in previous years under the likes of Willy Sagnol and Francis Gillot. Off the back of this explosive and youthful front three, the club was able to qualify for the Europa League, just missing out on fifth place as Marseille pipped them in the final rounds of the season. After holding on to their main attraction over the summer and recruiting Lille's goal-scorer Nicolas de Préville and cover on the wing in the form of Ludogorets winger Cafú, there was fresh optimism going into the new season, despite an embarrassing loss to Hungary's Videoton in the qualifying rounds of the Europa League.

Several months on, with Bordeaux currently in one of their worst spells in recent years despite an encouraging start, Malcom's performances are arguably the only thing that fans have had to shout about this season. He was the most impressive player on the pitch in the 3-3 away draw to Lyon, in which he capped off his performance with a last-minute equaliser, a shot from outside the box that rocketed into the top left corner. His machine gun celebration will have endeared him that much more to the fans; an unmistakable call-back to Henrique, another Brazilian who made his mark on the club, and his goal in the League Cup final of 2007 against the same opposition which was celebrated in the same manner.

It seems Malcom has even made it a habit of scoring such goals, with another of the sort coming in the defeat to Dijon with a toe-poked hit from 30 metres out, and an identical strike from his left foot in the win against St Étienne not long afterwards. Overall, seven goals – already equaling his tally of last season – makes him the side's top scorer for the calendar year, and perhaps the only real attacking outlet in a team that is sorely lacking goals.

What sets Malcom apart, more than his goal-scoring prowess, is his versatility. While many a Brazilian wonder-kid would be content with hugging the touchline as they show off their box of tricks, Malcom has shown an ability to adapt to various attacking positions in his time at Bordeaux, featuring several times in a more central position. As a result, Gourvennec's 4-3-3 system has allowed him to drift inside when he feels the need to, effectively giving him an attacking freedom rarely afforded to forwards in the former Guingamp manager's teams. Able to make use of his dynamism and drive without compromising his technical ability, the former Corinthians man is one of a rare breed in football, and early season comparisons to compatriot Neymar have hardly been undeserved, albeit little exaggerated. Even if his defensive contributions are lacking, unlike his left-wing counterpart François Kamano, the consensus is that Bordeaux can afford to have him neglect this side of the game given his contribution to the attacking phase of play.

Unsurprisingly, interest in Malcom from Europe's royalty has not cooled off. Were Bordeaux to continue to slide down the table in the new year it would not be unreasonable to expect a move to come quickly for the young Brazilian. Whatever happens in the coming transfer windows, though, it is undeniable that Malcom has been yet another success of the *Girondins'* South American scouting network. A network which has already seen a multitude of successful players come to the club and go – the likes of Mariano, Wendel Geraldo, Fernando Cavenaghi and Fernando Menegazzo to name a few – and the acquisition of Malcom for a mere €5m could potentially turn out to be the best of the lot.

Fans have already come to terms with it; his outrageous talent is admittedly leagues above his current club. Although he has not gone unaffected by the drop in overall performance from his side, it is safe to say that in the first half of the new season he has proven that the previous campaign was no fluke, and that he is more than a flash in the pan and a more than deserved arrival on this list.



STEPHANE RUFFIER

V5

18

Club: Saint-Étienne

Position: Goalkeeper

Born: Bayonne

Age: 31

Nationality



International Caps 3

At Club Since 2011

League Games in 2017 32

Always the bridesmaid, never the bride. Stéphane Ruffier will be remembered as a fantastic goalkeeper, one of the best that Ligue 1 has seen over the last decade, yet not many outside of France will likely ever quite know how good he is.

Why? Because he just so happened to be in a similar generation as Hugo Lloris and Steve Mandanda. The perennial third-choice at international level, the 31-year-old decided that enough was enough and if there was not even a chance he could compete for the top spot, then there was no point in joining up any more.

While many might think that it is obvious that he is behind those two more well-known goalkeepers, neither have produced quite the level of performance that the St Étienne stopper has in recent memory. Arguably the top stopper in Ligue 1, he has been a force both when his team have been succeeding but has also prevented things from getting ugly when they have dipped. The momentum of 2016 didn't carry straight into the next calendar year, with an adductor injury keeping the goalkeeper out until a mid-February date with Lorient. The club's vice-captain finished the campaign with 10 clean sheets but just four came in that final half of the season, with the team struggling for consistency in the last few months of Christophe Galtier's reign at *Les Verts*.

In came Óscar Garcia and with that, renewed optimism that the team could continue to be solid at the back while building on formulating a more creative attack. Three straight shut-outs and three victories at the start of the 2017/18 season led to great optimism that St Étienne would finally make the leap but they quickly evaporated. Defeat to Paris Saint-Germain started the slow rot, culminating in the embarrassing 5-0 thrashing at the hands of bitter rivals Lyon. Ruffier was regularly left exposed by a lacklustre defence, facing one of the most potent attacks in Europe and if it was not for him, the scoreline could have been even worse.

Since then, it has been blow after blow. Garcia left and his replacement, Julian Sablé, has done little to inspire what was one of the most talismanic defences over the past few years in Ligue 1, who look a shadow of their former glory. Saying that, Ruffier is still pulling off the world class saves we know and love. Even with the team melting around him, opponents still know that they will have to produce something great to grab goals against what can be a brick wall when he is in inspired form.

Just as an example, take a look back at his last few games before the winter break. Time and again, he was called upon to be the team's superman, using his great athleticism and shot-stopping ability to deny opponents almost certain goals and he will be the difference in any turnaround they have. He has become especially important since Loïc Perrin's injury as well, with Ruffier being bombarded game after game after game. In those two games, with St Étienne beaten 3-0 by Marseille and 4-0 by Monaco, the goalkeeper faced 35 shots and he only played 53 minutes of that second game.

That was because of bizarre red card, that has since led to an eyebrow-raising four-match suspension, where Monaco's third goal in the 4-0 win was a clear offside, which infuriated the skipper. He made what the referee deemed as an aggressive, intimidating move to speak to the linesman in retaliation to the decision to allow the finish to stand. While very much a mountain out of a molehill, his incapability to withhold his emotion only serves to highlight the stress he is under. The most experienced head in that team exploded, exactly when his side probably need him the most.

Once he does return, which will be after the international break unless that dismissal is rescinded, he needs to rally around his team and inspire them to improved performances. He is certainly doing as much as he can between the sticks, but now is his chance to use his depth of knowledge in order to lift his side out of their alarming slump that should remind him of his slide with Monaco back in 2010/11.

2018 should be a very interesting year for Ruffier. Having been with ASSE for six years, the fact that the club have seemingly made one step forward to take another three back should be quite frightening for an incredibly ambitious footballer. That should worry any fan at the Stade Geoffrey Guichard, because players of Ruffier's quality do not come by so often. We sometimes forget that he is still well within his prime and could fit into most teams in Europe.

We have seen that Ruffier will not settle for second best for long, especially as there could be mounting interest in his services given that he is still only 31 years of age. Finding an incredibly consistent goalkeeper is so difficult in the modern game and not many in Europe have shown that over the past 18 months more than this man. There is no doubting that he will be manning the pumps for St Étienne's fightback for the second half of the season but he may have one eye on the lifeboats. Should they begin to sink or it begins to look like the boardroom will not fix up the holes, it might be time to jump ship.



DANI ALVES



17

Club: PSG

Position: Defender

Born: Juazeiro

Age: 34

Nationality



International Caps 105

At Club Since 2017

League Games in 2017 23

The emblematic Brazilian right-back was a surprise addition to Ligue 1's burgeoning cast-list of reputable stars this summer after a controversial move from Italian champions Juventus to capital club Paris Saint-Germain. His arrival signaled PSG's preference to court bigger names with tons of European experience to complement their existing squad as they sought to learn lessons from a disappointing 2016-17 and generate a much better return for this campaign.

Well, that was the official version anyway. Cynics among you will read this transfer as a process aligned to compatriot Neymar's own world-record move from Barcelona to the French capital. Alves has surmised as much earlier this year, noting his arrival in France was somewhat linked to the advice of his former Barcelona team-mate. He would go on to comment that he was the first person to know of the impending world-record move back in the summer.

Alves himself sought a change of scenery after two reasonably successful years in Turin. He had all but confirmed a move to Manchester City before a quirky turn of events that eventually led him to choosing Ligue 1. While remarking that there were more chances to win silverware in France, he also discussed his feeling of regret at having signed for Juve in the first place because of personal reasons. More or less though, PSG had gotten their man at the third summer of trying.

Alves' final six months at Juventus were largely intermittent. A fractured rib injury had put paid to any chance of featuring in January. Indeed, with Juventus fighting hard on three fronts – the former Barcelona right-back was largely spared for the major European nights. He would only go on to start in eight of the remaining 19 Serie A fixtures for the Bianconeri in 2017.

But Europe was where it was at. Having already gained three Champions' League winners' medals – he was in search of a fourth. He featured in the 3-0 aggregate win over Porto and was both defensively and offensively threatening in the rather impressive shut-out of Barcelona in the quarter-finals. His performance of the season came in the semi-final against future rivals AS Monaco, however. Having just turned 34 and largely written off – Alves put in a high quality display to dismiss the Monegasque side. He was involved in three of the four goals that Massimiliano Allegri's side scored against the Principality outfit over two games – the highlight of which being a frankly stupendous strike that beat Danijel Subasic in the 2nd leg.

The Old Lady had fallen in the final to an exemplary Real Madrid side, curtailing the right-back's hopes of another European winners' medal. He did however close his time in Turin with the Serie A and Coppa Italia titles ahead of a fresh challenge in France. There was not a lot of expectation as to how Alves' would contribute to PSG's quest for a first Champions' League title. They are of course, largely expected to sew up the Ligue 1 title to make amends for last season's misstep. Meanwhile, the ever impressive Thomas Meunier – himself capable of a show-stopping goal or two – would also be vying for the right-back position.

If Alves was to be an understudy, normally expected at 34, he would've been a rather expensive one with a reported €12m a year salary. Nevertheless, he made his debut in the Trophée des Champions in July in a man-of-the-match performance against Monaco, scoring once and assisting the other in a 2-1 victory to give a taste of what to come.

Alves has continued to belie his age with a range of impressive performances – not least in the Champions' League, where he has featured every minute of every game in the group stage – scoring twice. He has also relegated Meunier as his understudy, showing no signs of letting up – despite the Belgian's own impressive scoring streak in November (seven games, seven goals for club and country). The Brazil international did not feature in the Classique draw against Marseille, but attracted significant criticism for his comments before the game in which he claimed not to know a member of the Marseille squad. He was later reminded thanks to a wondrous strike from his own Brazil team-mate Luiz Gustavo during a highly-charged encounter.

Whether it was genuine forgetfulness or a meek attempt at mind-games, we will never know. But Alves' reputation off the field is continuing to deteriorate. Long regarded as a jovial larger-than-life player, there are considerable question marks on his influence in the PSG dressing room, or rather his influence on Neymar.

There is no question that the pair work superbly well together in the French capital – a shared past and culture will often do the trick. However, there are reports that their joint take-over of the dressing room is beginning to irk the longer-serving players. It first became apparent in the rather sorry 'Penalty-Gate' episode against Lyon in September, where the right-back waded in to defend his compatriot against talisman Edinson Cavani.

It is the only mark on a player who has taken to French football with considerable energy, and has repaid his hefty pay packet with a strong start to life in Paris. While becoming important on the field, it is rather essential for Alves to remain as professional and serious off it, as PSG seek European glory with no distractions or mini-crises whatsoever.



LOIC PERRIN

v7

16

Club: Saint-Étienne

Position: Defender

Born: Saint-Étienne

Age: 32

Nationality



International Caps 0

At Club Since 1997

League Games in 2017 25

St Étienne are a club in turmoil. Nine years of Christophe Galtier's steady hand came to a mutually agreed end last summer and the team have yet to truly recover. *Les Verts* had long been Ligue 1's most effective, but turgid side, as Galtier's unfathomable ability to eek the very best out of mediocre players for the better part of a decade made for a, largely, uninspiring watch. A brief hint at resurgence under his replacement Óscar Garcia in September was brutally extinguished by one of the darkest days in St Étienne's recent history.

Lyon's 5-0 obliteration of their ferocious rivals in the Rhône-Alpes derby this autumn, France's hardest fought and most keenly felt squabble, robbed the club and its vociferous fan-base of much of their pride, sending *Les Verts* spinning out of control. The crowd trouble that ensued brought about the suspension of the club's famous ultras, with Garcia resigning in the aftermath. The criminally inexperienced former youth coach Julien Sablé came in and has since been forced to take a back seat to Jean-Louis Gasset, but under both men, displays have only worsened. St Étienne's best hope in saving their historic club from a looming relegation battle is their iconic captain; Loïc Perrin.

It is telling for St Étienne that their silver haired defender-in-chief was absent for many of the more embarrassing events this season. A calf issue was not fixed in time for the derby loss and a hamstring injury saw him spared from equally depressing outings as his colleagues were torn apart in similar fashion by Monaco and lost limply at Marseille. Without Perrin, St Étienne are adrift. Now 32, fitness has become increasingly problematic for Perrin and *Les Verts* have had to often make do without him, failing miserably, winning just two of 19 games (losing 11) when their captain has been injured or suspended over this and last season.

Perrin's ability in the air, footballing intellect and keen awareness in both boxes, not to mention his rugged style that embodies his career long employers' persona, make him pivotal to their defensive cohesion, a defence that has been built around him for close to 15 years. However, it is his aura that *Les Verts* truly miss. In a side that lacks leaders, Perrin's calming and organisational manner keeps the men around him coherent and rigorous. Without him, they quickly fall into a state of defensive panic and hotheadedness.

An assured, unflappable nature has long been Perrin's major selling point as a defender, one that would make him well suited to both the Premier League and international football. And while Arsenal were strongly attracted to the player in 2014, Didier Deschamps and *Les Bleus* remain surprisingly less enamoured. While Perrin has made French national team squads from time to time, he is oddly yet to receive an international cap.

As age and a lengthening list of injuries start to catch up with him, Euro 2016 may have been Perrin's last chance, a fact not lost on the St Étienne man: *"I want to go, it's now or never,"* he said in the build-up to the squad announcement but injuries hampered his chances and was eventually left out with Deschamps stating as far as back as 2013 that fitness, even then, was a pothole on Perrin's path to *Les Bleus*.

Despite his status as the definition of a 'one club man' in Ligue 1, Perrin has long expressed his regret that a move to a top tier club has never materialised, a dream that now seems in the past. *"There were serious contacts via my agent,"* he explained. *"I think I was on a shortlist but not at the very top apparently. A club like Arsenal, I don't think many Ligue 1 players would refuse."* In a decision that now seems laughable, Arsène Wenger signed the admittedly more youthful Gabriel Paulista instead.

This lack of plaudits understandably bemused Perrin's long-time partner Galtier to whom the *Les Verts* legend proved to be an invaluable lieutenant: *"Loïc is my captain."* Galtier explained, *"He's my guide, someone who gives me the temperature of the locker room. Behind this laid-back man, there is a strength of character. The only regret I have for him, given his qualities, is the lack of recognition at national and international level."*

Given his leadership ability and his lofty status at the club, Perrin has long been mentioned as a future St Étienne manager, boldly sounding out the club's board upon Galtier's departure; *"The next coach? I'm interested, yes, of course. I asked Dominique Rocheteau where they were. But for now, it's still too early."*

For now, Loïc Perrin's only consideration will be returning to fitness and taking his place at the heart of the St Étienne defence. Ligue 1's most successful club are sorely missing their leader and talisman as they lurch from one disaster to another. Few men have become so iconic for a Ligue 1 club during their playing careers, but for now Loïc Perrin may be all that stands between *Les Verts* and their very Ligue 1 status.



THIAGO SILVA

v 14

15

Club: PSG

Position: Defender

Born: Rio de Janeiro

Age: 33

Nationality



International Caps 67

At Club Since 2012

League Games in 2017 25

At the age of 33, Thiago Silva is certainly heading towards the twilight of his career, with his best years now behind him. At times, we have seen hints of regression over the past year. But that said, PSG remain in need of their captain more than ever, during a time where the dressing room has threatened to fracture irrevocably.

Last year, the former AC Milan rear-guard took the number one spot on the GFFN 100. This was due to the leadership he showed in a squad of a multitude of egos, who coalesced to storm to the Ligue 1 title, before starting the new campaign in a similar vein. Yet, that leadership has been thrown into question over the past year, not only by the arrival of a testing new talisman in Neymar, but thanks to a night in Barcelona, where he was seen to abscond from his duties.

That night in March was one that Paris Saint-Germain will want to forget quickly. To lose 6-1 is one thing, but for it also to mean you forgo a 4-0 aggregate advantage takes it to an unparalleled level of humiliation. Central to the debacle at the Nou Camp was a brittle, spineless defensive line, led limply by a mute Thiago Silva.

He was not the worst defender on the night, that title fell to his deputy, Marquinhos. But in his moment of suffering, as Messi, Neymar and Suarez enchanted and mocked him in equal measure, he had no fall-back, no guide, for Silva went AWOL, unable to rally his troops, unable to stop a growing tide of embarrassment, which seemed to engulf him before anyone else. This is not the first time that Silva's big-game mentality has been questioned. During the 2014 World Cup, he was the captain that oversaw Brazil's capitulation. He was absent from the 7-1 annihilation but as Brazil stuttered through the tournament, they looked increasingly dependent on Neymar, rather than a captain who cannot bare to watch a penalty being taken, let alone lead the world's most successful footballing nation at a home World Cup.

Silva, though remains a world class defender and we must not overstate this failing. This year, he passed 200 games as captain for the French club, with whom he has won four league titles, three cups, four league cups and three super cups. This does not paint a picture of a fatally-flawed defender. Silva is a complete centre-half, competent in the air and in the tackle, but what sets him apart from the crowd is his passing ability. At the time of writing, the Brazilian once again leads the division with the highest pass success rate, on the right side of 96%, a stunning percentage even if you take into account the fewer passes he makes as a central defender.

This is a skill he inherited as a defensive midfielder. He was converted into a centre-half by manager Ivo Wortmann at Juventus in the early stages of his career, a switch that catapulted him from a lowly second division defensive midfielder to a national team player. Success, though, did not come immediately for Silva. This is underlined by his tough time in Russia with Spartak Moscow, where he contracted tuberculosis, ruling him out for six months, and leaving some to question if he would ever return. He rehabilitated his career in Brazil again with the help of Wortmann, this time at Fluminense. After three years he became the best defender in the country, attracting attention from Europe's finest. He opted to sit alongside the greats of Italian football, partnering Alessandro Nesta and succeeding Paolo Maldini at AC Milan.

He has been unquestionably Ligue 1's best defender since he joined Paris Saint-Germain at the age of 27 in 2012. But for the first time, it may be possible to say that Silva has now surrendered that crown to the likes of Kamil Glik, and for a minority, there is an argument that PSG are stronger with their apprentices Marquinhos and Kimpembe, who very much have age on their side. Some performances have raised questions this year. Against Bayern Munich, PSG's backline looked bereft of communication, underlined by the Bavarian's second goal, when Corentin Tolisso strolled between the Silva and Marquinhos to head home unopposed. Yet, PSG still appear a worse side without him. It is no surprise that defeat at Strasbourg came when Silva was rested from the backline.

The latter part of 2017 has posed new challenges for Thiago Silva. The arrival of Neymar has changed the entire complexion of the club and put renewed importance on his role as captain. The rumours of a dressing room divide, triggered publicly by the penalty debacle against Lyon between Neymar and Cavani, necessitated a stamping of authority, not just from the manager, but his most trusted ally, his captain. And this seems to have happened. Credit of course must go to Unai Emery, but Silva will also have played a vital role in cooling an overheating backroom. This was clearly illustrated by his birthday present for Kylian Mbappé. A teenage mutant ninja turtle mask may appear as a mere practical joke on the one hand, but on the other it smacked of a captain seeking to foster a positive environment in the dressing room, something that at one point, began to look impossible.

The tenets of leadership that were criticised earlier in this profile will be tested heavily this season, but so far, he has taken a lead, showed a maturity and a measured, respected assertion of control that his team has desperately needed. But questions today no longer focus purely on his leadership. As time passes, they will continue to mount on the fundamentals of his game, as Thiago Silva's imperious defensive standing slowly, begins to decline.

For now, he remains one of Ligue 1's finest central defenders.



ANTHONY LOPES

v 2

14

Club: Lyon

Position: Goalkeeper

Born: Givors

Age: 27

Nationality



International Caps 5

At Club Since 2000

League Games in 2017 37

With Danijel Subasic, the defending Ligue 1 Goalkeeper of the Year badly under par this season, would it be folly to suggest Lyon's Anthony Lopes is the best at his position in France? Steve Mandanda and Stéphane Ruffier offer strong rebuttals, as does the improving Alphonse Areola, but the Lyon stopper and Portugal international has continued to shine this season, despite navigating what is once again a defence in flux. The arrivals of Kenny Tete, Marçal and Marcelo were needed, but there was admittedly a shaky bedding-in period in the season's early going, as Lyon recorded a spell of 3-3 draws against the likes of Dijon, Bordeaux and Angers.

The latter Brazilian's energy and experience have been lauded for making Lyon a bit more formidable at the back this season, but the steady hand of Lopes has truthfully been as equally, if not more influential than the former. As Lyon's formerly packed stable of academy graduates has been cleared out in the last two summers (Alexandre Lacazette, Corentin Tolisso, Samuel Umtiti), Lopes, as befits his fiery presence on the pitch, has taken on more of a leadership role. This increased responsibility includes his wearing the captain's armband in the absence of Nabil Fékir this season and marshalling his back four superbly, including a recent run of seven consecutive clean sheets across all competitions.

Slightly undersized at 1.84m, Lopes is the third in a succession of strong goalkeepers for Lyon, following on from Grégory Coupet and Hugo Lloris. He lacks the sublime reflexes and flair for the dramatic of his predecessors, but in some ways is a more complete player, more adept in his positioning and stronger in the air as well. With Lyon failing to gain the notice that they grabbed a decade ago and stuck behind Rui Patrício for Portugal, Lopes has had to deal with often being underrated, but he has consistently kept up his excellence, even against long odds.

Under the tutelage of the now-departed Joel Bats, Lopes had to wait until he was 22 to become a first-team regular, owing to the presence of Rémy Vercoutre. When the veteran was injured down the back end of the 2013-14 season, Lopes took his chance and has scarcely looked back since. Born in the Lyon suburb of Givors, Lopes had an impressive youth career to that point. He won three successive titles with the club's reserves and was capped repeatedly for Portugal at various youth levels, qualifying for the country through his heritage, but he was hungry to feature for the club he had grown up supporting. His youth team goalkeeping coach, Gilles Rousset was certain of his talent and drive, even then, telling the club's website, *"He has the ideas, the passion, the courage. He is a rising goalkeeper, a little crazy, but it's a craziness which is a good thing."*

When Lopes took the gloves from Vercoutre, Lyon were then embroiled in dramatic battle for third place, but the youngster responded well, as Lyon managed to pip Nice and hated rivals St Étienne to the Champions' League. Despite a disappointing exit against Real Sociedad, Lyon made a deep run in the Europa League, losing to Juventus in the quarter-finals. After a dire performance in the Champions' League in 2015, Lyon again impressed in Europe, reaching the semi-finals of the Europa League last year in a run that included nail-biting ties against Roma and Besiktas.

A narrow loss to Ajax at that stage will surely have stung, coupled as it was with a fourth-place finish and a season that had seen Lopes physically attacked in Bastia and Metz, one might have expected the 'keeper to be fed up with Lyon's situation. Add to those frustrations that Tolisso and Lacazette were all but gone by that point in the season, something of a valedictory atmosphere developed at the club, but Lopes, for whom departure never really seemed an option, took the season's disappointments in stride, telling *L'Équipe* shortly after the season, *"It was a season that brought me sporting satisfaction but one that also has meant a lot to my humanity. In everyday life, for me, there are sometimes circumstances that make us less serene. On the pitch, there were also these types of events. This all influenced my perception of the world at large, it made me grow as a footballer but also as a man."*

The current campaign has made that readily apparent, as Lopes has continued to impress, with Lyon rising up the table domestically and navigating what looked to be a tricky group in the Europa League with, if not consummate ease, a series of very solid performances. In Ligue 1, Lyon will continue to face stiff opposition from Monaco this season, particularly as the champions are no longer involved in Europe, and Marseille are also a dangerous proposition. That said, if *Les Gones* do manage to return to the Champions' League, Lopes' play will have once again been key, even if the improved play of Nabil Fékir and the development of the club's midfield three (Houssem Aouar, Lucas Tousart and Tanguy N'Dombélé) may be more feted.



JULIAN DRAXLER



13

Club: PSG

Position: Midfielder

Born: Gladbeck

Age: 24

Nationality



International Caps 40

At Club Since 2017

League Games in 2017 33

It is easy to forget that Julian Draxler only signed for Paris Saint-Germain on 3rd January 2017. Without question it has been a rollercoaster of a year for the German World Cup winner after his reported £34m move from VFL Wolfsburg. Draxler has quickly become a fan favourite due in part to his seamless integration into the PSG team where he has added elegance, style and panache to an already well-oiled machine. In some ways it was the perfect signing at the perfect time. PSG were inconsistent and trailing runaway leaders AS Monaco. PSG's flopped summer signing, Jesé Rodriguez had been sent on loan to Las Palmas, Hatem Ben Arfa had been frozen out, Angel Di Maria and Blaise Matuidi were both out of form and Javier Pastore was struggling with injury.

PSG needed a lift and Julian Draxler provided it when he scored on his debut in PSG's 7-0 thrashing of SC Bastia in the Coupe de France. The World Cup winner then went on to add to his tally but most impressively Draxler was scoring big goals in big games including in the Champions' League tie with FC Barcelona and against domestic rivals Monaco, Lyon and Marseille.

Playing on the left of a front three, Draxler's impact on his team-mates was evident as PSG began to improve their performances as the business end of the season loomed. With the exception of Edinson Cavani, PSG were becoming predictable and complacent in attack and Draxler quickly showed why the club's hierarchy were so keen to get the transfer over the line. If truth be told, it has been one of the best pieces of business that PSG have done in the QSI era simply because of what he adds both in technical ability and also a strong winning mentality. It was a coup for PSG to sign a player of this calibre in the often difficult January window. His biggest endorsement this year came from his team-mate Marquinhos who said *"I have faced the three current greats, Ronaldo, Messi and Neymar but in purely technical terms it is Julian Draxler who impressed me the most. He eliminates his opponents through his control, his touches on the ball and his intelligence of the game."*

The former Schalke 04 man went on to score 10 goals in all competitions in his first six months in Paris; a very respectable return for a player that was enjoying a new lease of life in Ligue 1. Draxler was able to add two domestic cups to his already impressive list of honours in 2017 and things got even better for the World Cup winner when he captained a young and experimental Germany team to the Confederation Cup title in Russia in July; his second title for *Die Mannschaft* in just three years. Draxler was also named player of the tournament ahead of Alexis Sánchez and compatriot Leon Goretzka.

A successful summer turned into a bittersweet start to the 2017/18 season as Paris Saint Germain broke the world record fee for Neymar, a player that occupies Draxler's preferred left sided position. There was little Draxler could do as the season commenced with the German enjoying an extended summer break due to his exploits in Russia and the eyes of the world on the Brazilian. The PSG number 23 started the season on the bench and struggled to break his way into the team, resigned to making short cameo appearances in the latter stages of games. Draxler showed excellent maturity and patience in the face of frustration and waited for his opportunity. Nevertheless, we were led to believe that Draxler personified troublesome characteristics following his difficult last four months at Wolfsburg as he tried to secure a move away from the German club. Draxler's professionalism when faced with the impossible task challenge of trying to dethrone the world's most expensive footballer was exemplary and when Thiago Motta suffered a knee injury at the end of October, this offered Draxler the chance to re-invent his game and adapt to a deeper midfield role. Whilst some may have been sceptical about the balance of the midfield three (alongside Verratti and Rabiot) due to Draxler's natural attacking instincts, the German once again showed his ability to quickly adjust to a new setting and was able to deliver a string of fine performances.

Draxler has looked like a natural in central midfield both domestically and in the Champions' League. Moreover, Draxler appears better suited in midfield at times where he is able to use his creativity to greater effect, displayed by a number of classy assists so far this term. When Draxler is playing out wide and higher up the pitch, he has less influence on the game. Playing more centrally, Draxler is seemingly enjoying increased opportunity to manipulate the ball and engineer attacking situations. Granted, there are some concerns tactically from a defensive perspective and in some of the bigger games, particularly away from home, PSG may have to leave one of the trio out for a more defensive minded midfielder. Draxler has often expressed his happiness in Paris and the PSG faithful are honoured to have him at the club. Neither Draxler nor the club seem to want a parting of ways despite on-going links with a move to the Premier League. But a lot will depend on a clear outlook of what the future holds for Draxler in regards to where he requests to play, either on the left wing or centrally, and where Unai Emery wants him to play. PSG will almost certainly bolster their midfield within the next two transfer windows and with the attacking options already cemented and the impressive Gonçalo Guedes due back from his loan at Valencia next summer, competition for places will be ever-increasingly heated. The success that the German has enjoyed in adapting his game this year will stand him in good stead as he offers a strong option in multiple positions. But what is clear is that PSG would be weaker for not having Julian Draxler in their squad. The majority will hope that his foreseeable future is in Paris.



FLORIAN THAUVIN

^ 49

12

Club: Marseille

Nationality



Position: Attacker

International Caps 2

Born: Orléans

At Club Since 2016

Age: 24

League Games in 2017 38

2017 can be accurately classed as Florian Thauvin's best year since 2013. Then aged 20, the former Bastia man had hit double figures in his maiden Ligue 1 campaign, won the U-20 FIFA World Cup with an irresistible crop of highly talented French youngsters and named in *The Guardian's* list of top 10 future stars across the continent. A lot had gone wrong since - namely his stagnation during his first stint at Marseille as well as the infamous sojourn in England with Newcastle United. But Thauvin showed glimpses of his quality and a determination to right plenty wrongs. And so it ultimately proved after finishing 2017 as the most decisive French player in all of Europe's top five leagues.

Yes, you read that correctly. At the time of writing, Thauvin has notched 18 league goals with 14 assists - his total of 32 surprisingly ahead of compatriots Alexandre Lacazette, Antoine Griezmann, Kylian Mbappé and Nabil Fekir among others. 2017 is the year Thauvin shrugged off the petulant and disinterested child tag and has blossomed into a focused, mature and more serene individual. He has repaired (and then some) his reputation with Marseille's notoriously hard-to-please support, as well as being elevated to key player status in OM's new project under Frank McCourt.

That point was made clear just eight days into the new year when Rudi Garcia awarded the armband to Thauvin in a Coupe de France match away to Toulouse - this despite the presence of Rod Fanni, Rolando and William Vainqueur in the matchday starting line-up. The 24-year-old would later comment on the honour as a new milestone in 'Rebrand Thauvin' - a player in different vein to the one who left the North East of England with his tail behind his legs.

Nevertheless, if the player's mentality had undergone a makeover, the man on the field had yet to carry his momentum into the year. Only one goal - a penalty against Montpellier - was scored in the first seven weeks of 2017. He was also conspicuously invisible in the chastening defeats to Monaco and Lyon, further adding fuel to the notion that he is simply unable to turn up for the big games. That failed to deter him however, in light of Garcia's weekly positive eulogies. Come mid-February, Thauvin would score four goals and create two in four league games. The pick of the bunch being a superb strike against Rennes. On the back of a neat back-pass from Morgan Sanson - a former youth team-mate - Thauvin promptly launched a left-footed rocket into the top corner to set the Vélodrome alight.

He further excelled in OM's late surge in form as the team stabilised under Garcia's reign. The burst in form in March earned him a shock call-up to the France squad under Didier Deschamps - though he did not feature. Yet, the brief trip to Clairefontaine and the realisation that he finally had achieved a career milestone had distilled something into the player. No one quite knows what, but the performances hit another level thereafter.

Against St Étienne in April, Thauvin scored or assisted three of OM's four goals in what was largely regarded as the performance of the season from Marseille. He made a mockery of Sainté's defence, while also showing great guile and movement to receive the ball in difficult situations - something largely lacking in his game previously. The former Newcastle man was not done there either. After a stale evening against Nancy (0-0), he hit the first hat-trick of his career against Caen, as OM ran out 1-5 winners in Normandy. The winger was simply unplayable in a wet and difficult afternoon at Stade Michel d'Ornano - the pick of his goals being a well-placed chip up and over the static Remy Vercoutre.

In OM fans' eyes, this was it. This was the Thauvin they had longed for in four years. A player fulfilling his potential and proving decisive when it mattered. He beat his Bastia total with ease, ending the campaign with 15 goals and nine assists - the only player in the top six for both goals and assists in Ligue 1. Marseille subsequently and unsurprisingly made his transfer permanent in the summer of 2017. And Thauvin has kicked on with the same panache that made him a fan favourite the previous season. No longer is the 24-year-old invisible against the bigger sides - having been decisive in the games against PSG (goal), Lille (assist), St Étienne (two assists).

Unlike last season, he has been more productive across more games. For Marseille in Ligue 1, he has notched either a goal or an assist in 12 of OM's 18 Ligue 1 games to date. The plaudits keep coming also, from all corners - even that of rivals. Edinson Cavani praised the OM man as the player PSG most feared in the run-up to the Classique. In Clairefontaine, Deschamps has continued to partially reward Thauvin's now consistent form with four further consecutive call-ups. I say partially, as the winger only saw 11 minutes of action in five months, gaining only two minor appearances.

Nevertheless, all of the ingredients are there for a player who has gone from a Newcastle flop to the best French player of the year. It is a mark of who he has become both on and off the field to achieve that in a short time. The big clubs will come calling in 2018, that is for sure.



MARCO VERRATTI

v7

11

Club: PSG

Position: Midfielder

Born: Pescara

Age: 25

Nationality



International Caps 24

At Club Since 2012

League Games in 2017 28

It was PSG's ultimate revenge. Barcelona had not only humiliated the capital club in their 6-1 Champions' League thumping, but then had the temerity to make overtures for Marco Verratti, the jewel in the Parisian crown. Neymar's signing was, in part, seen as PSG's response, utilising the only weapon they have ever been truly able to rely upon; the Qatari Sports Investments company's billions. The signing of the Brazilian however distracted from a number of issues surrounding the 'Little Owl's' future.

Despite being a proud Italian, Verratti, having never played in Serie A and joining PSG at a young age from then Italian second division Pescara, has an unusually strong affinity with the French capital. It is where he is raising his family and where he has spent much of his adult life; it has become his home. He did not want to leave. Nevertheless, increasing European frustration at limp Parisian exits to Barcelona and Manchester City had, reluctantly, led the Italian's gaze to wander.

Barcelona and Juventus both made serious advances, both which were taken equally seriously but PSG's number six. "I expect Juventus to do something special in the next transfer window," Verratti's then-agent Donato Di Campli told *Tuttosport* in June while there were reports of discussions between the two parties in Monaco a month earlier, amid murmurings in France that Verratti had even asked to leave PSG outright. Although it is unlikely that PSG President Nasser Al-Khelaifi would have been convinced to sell, it is possible that without the Parisian club's renewed ambition that the Neymar and Kylian Mbappé signings underlined, Verratti would have been on his way this summer.

Verratti however had arguably earned the right to think that his incandescent talent might have finally outgrown his Parisian mentors. While his team struggled in the second half of last season, embarrassed in Europe and ambushed domestically by Monaco, Verratti's individual form was quietly astonishing. Where the first half of the campaign had been adequate enough, but in truth a tepid and sanitised version of the Verratti that has become one of the world's best was on show, as 2017 ticked around, the Italian rediscovered his most cantankerous, slippery, graceful performances while his colleagues around him often shrank. Crucial to this rebirth was the niggly, combative, yellow card-producing side of his game. Verratti is at his best when he plays with a scrappy intensity as he jinks his way around the midfield.

This often means that tackling can cross the border into reckless territory, and his arguments with officials drag on longer than patience allows, meaning that Verratti is often led away by a more senior colleague at that point. But it is his competitiveness and fight that gives Verratti his edge and it was something that previous coach Laurent Blanc had, foolishly, attempted to eradicate entirely.

Fast forward to the opening 19 games of this season and Paris' "Little Owl," a moniker assigned by his long term girlfriend, mirrored his displays from the end of the previous year rather than carrying his form throughout 2017, a contributing factor to his slip down this list. While Neymar and Mbappé's arrivals may have convinced Verratti to extend his stay in Paris, they have also contributed to the Italian being somewhat swamped, even overlooked, by the influx, his importance and prominence waning.

The visionary passing and accompanying sublime weight of ball remain, as does his waspish dribbling, but these are now often fleeting rather than integral aspects to Parisian play. Questions also remain over what his exact role in the side should be. With the 4-3-3 employed under Blanc and Carlo Ancelotti now ubiquitous under Emery too, Verratti has perhaps struggled to adapt without the often injured Thiago Motta alongside him or the water-carrying rumbustiousness of Blaise Matuidi ahead.

Although Verratti could play as the sentinel, the deepest of the three, this often lessens his influence on the attack and exposes his lack of consistency in clearing up in front of the centre backs. While Emery has previously earmarked Verratti as something verging on a number 10, especially as the 4-2-3-1 formation was initially his eventual aim upon arrival, and although he is a player that could do with contributing more to the team's goal tally, as he has done playing further forward in Europe, his space is often limited and his ability to orchestrate play is lost.

This season could end up reflecting the last. With a burst of good form at the close of the calendar year and PSG hoping to finally get Adrien Rabiot, Motta and Verratti all fit and playing in unison with the impending Real Madrid tie on the horizon, this is an occasion that in theory should allow the Italian to return to his best.

Either way, 2018 promises to be a pivotal year in Marco Verratti's career. Recently turning 25, it is time for the notion of 'potential' to be removed from the conversation, for Verratti to adapt to changing circumstances without it affecting his performances and to only measure himself against the world's best midfielders, on an equal footing. No excuses. It is time for Paris' Little Owl to finally grow up.



JEAN-MICHAEL SERI

v7

10

Club: OGC Nice

Position: Midfielder

Born: Grand-Bereby

Age: 26

Nationality



International Caps 26

At Club Since 2015

League Games in 2017 30

Jean-Michaël Seri is a man who is in no hurry. Whether on the pitch or off it, the 26-year-old Ivorian is confident in his ability, knows the direction in which he wants to go and is aware that he has time on his side. His much publicised aborted summer move to Barcelona may have been a small blip but, as ever, Seri has for the most part taken this in his stride and will not let it affect the upward trajectory of his career.

Born in the Ivory Coast, the young "Micka", as Seri is commonly called, joined the football academy established by former Marseille defender Cyrille Domoraud, who remembers Seri as being *"gifted, intelligent and respectful... in his young days he was one step ahead of the others, thanks to his ball control."*

By his late teens, Seri had broken into the ASEC Mimosas first team, where his raw ability and willingness to learn attracted the attention of Liga Nos giants Porto, who signed the young midfielder on loan. Seri failed to break into the first team but his performances for the reserves convinced Paços de Ferreira to sign him permanently. Over two seasons with the club, Seri helped transform them from relegation candidates to a comfortable eighth place, winning the club's Player of the Year title in 2014/15. Nice came calling and signed Seri for a bargain €1m in the summer of 2015.

Seri quickly became a household name in France, forming a dynamic midfield triumvirate with Nampalys Mendy and Vincent Koziello as Claude Puel's Nice, with Hatem Ben Arfa and Valère Germain scoring regularly, finished fourth in Ligue 1, Seri contributing three goals and six assists to the cause.

It was last season, however, that Seri went up a level. With Ben Arfa gone there was more onus on him to provide the creative spark and inspiration and he took on the new responsibility with relish.

Able to play as a defensive midfielder (a position where he can play with aplomb but which also curbs his excellent attacking instincts), as a deep-lying quarterback, dictating play Pirlo-style, or as a dynamic number 10, the fluidity of Nice's midfield under Puel and especially last year under Lucien Favre, saw Seri combine all three roles every match as he became one of the stars of the 2016/17 season. Seri, playing a little further forward than under Puel, showed off his range of skills consistently throughout the season, from his close control to his endless stamina, his long-and short-range passing to his set piece delivery, his impressive shooting to his positioning skills, his tackling to his interceptions.

A return of seven goals and 10 assists (second only to Morgan Sanson) is impressive but if anything is reductive as an illustration of Seri's displays for *Les Aiglons*, as he led the team to third in the table, highlights including a 4-0 win over Monaco, a 3-1 win over PSG and only four defeats all season. He led the league in passes attempted and completed and in touches of the ball. That Seri made the UNFP Team of the Year was a formality; that he was not among the four nominees for Player of the Year a travesty.

The two-legged Champions' League play-off in July and August this summer against Ajax saw Seri at his imperious best. As well as the usual display of ceaseless running, of excellent anticipation and ball winning, of constant probing, spraying passes short and long as well as bringing the ball forward with his excellent dribbling ability, Seri effectively won the tie for Nice with two outrageous assists. In the first leg, Seri received the ball on the inside right channel and ambled forward slowly, before a sudden acceleration took three Ajax defenders out of the game, allowing him to sprint to the touchline and cross for Balotelli to slot home and open the score. In the second leg, with Nice 2-1 down with 10 minutes remaining and heading out, Seri topped even this show of skill: released down the right by Pléa, but running away from goal and seemingly running out of space and time, an outrageous back-heel back into the danger area allowed Vincent Marcel to steal through a stunned Ajax defence to equalise and send Nice through on away goals.

Seri, when asked about his own abilities, is modest: *"I try to help the team go forward. I have good technical qualities. In this sport, the hardest thing is to play it simple". He does however concede that he has a favourite move, the no-look pass: "the aim is to give the opponent as little clue as possible. I pretend to look one way, and pass the other. It's a part of my game. Xavi did that at Barcelona all the time and I tried to copy him."*

Seri is the not only person to draw that comparison. Indeed, Spanish newspaper *Mundo Deportivo* referred to Seri last season as "the African Xavi", which piqued the interest of the Spanish original - who was impressed with what he saw:

"When I was told that there was a Nice player nicknamed the African Xavi, I obviously began to follow him closely. I didn't know him and I couldn't believe what I was seeing: I am not used to seeing such a midfield talent. Short game, long game, tactical intelligence, long shot, personality, game management ... Madre Mia! He would fit in perfectly at Barça... he can play anywhere in the midfield. Seri is fantastic. He has what we call in Barcelona the Barça DNA. Without a doubt."

After such a stunning season, Seri was unsurprisingly in high demand, with clubs including Arsenal, Manchester City, Liverpool and PSG all rumoured to be after the diminutive Ivorian. However, perhaps in part thanks to Xavi's endorsement, a clear frontrunner emerged in the form of Barcelona. As the end of the transfer window approached and with those Ajax performances surely removing any lingering doubts, it seemed that the deal was as good as done, with a €40m fee rumoured to have been agreed.

However, the deadline came and went and no deal was completed. Excuses were given on one side and the other – some saying it was about the money, Nice President Rivière saying that his Barça counterpart had apologised to him and said that the Barça coaching staff just decided they didn't want him after all – and Seri's agent suggesting that his client was the collateral damage of PSG ramping up the price and tempting Barça with Angel di Maria purely to wind up the Catalans.

Whatever the reasons, Seri was devastated, as he confirmed when giving his reasons for not playing for Nice in their first match following the end of the window: *"I'm not going to lie, I feel awful. I did not play for Nice this weekend because football should be about joy and I did not feel this. My dream of playing for Barcelona has been broken and this is terrible for me."*

Amidst the non-transfer fall-out – as well as Nice's adjustment to a reconstructed defence and the continued absence of two of last season's breakout stars Wylan Cyprien and Alassane Pléa – Nice's season has until recently been a disaster, with most of the last few months spent hovering just above the relegation places. Many put a lot of the blame for this on the failed Seri deal, with the midfielder seemingly distracted, depressed and way off the high standards that he set for himself last season. The fact that he had begun the season with the two startling Ajax displays and starring roles in early wins over Guingamp and Troyes, while the transfer window was still open, seemed to bear this theory out all the more.

Seri himself denies this and said, after an impressive performance in another 4-0 win over Monaco: *"the failed transfer affected me but now I look back on it with perspective. I focused on what I know, playing football. There was no other solution than to get back playing. Anything else wouldn't have served for anything. I admit it wasn't easy. But now there's nothing in my head about all that. I think about the future – there are a lot of good things to do."*

Be that as it may, there was a drop-off in Seri's form and he looked a shadow of last season's player in poor Nice defeats to Marseille and Strasbourg. However, with hindsight that can also be explained away at least in part by a niggling hamstring injury which has caused him to miss six league matches this season, including the three following the Strasbourg defeat, along with half of Nice's Europa League group stage matches. Since his return in late November, beginning with two relatively short run-outs, Seri has gradually been re-finding his form and fitness. And it is no coincidence that, as both the window and his injury niggles become a more distant memory, Nice have suddenly begun to find form, winning their last four straight Ligue 1 matches and climbing to sixth place as the winter break approaches.

Only one league goal and two assists bear witness to Seri's slower start, but he is now clicking up the gears and beginning to remind us what a talent he is. And as he does so, talk of transfers have resurfaced, some even suggesting that he could move this January.

Seri doesn't seem in any hurry though, mindful that he will now move only when the time is right and if it is to the right club that values him and his capabilities: *"I don't want to play second fiddle. I know what I'm capable of on a football pitch and I think I've shown that I have quality... If they choose me, I want them to treat me well, to make me a priority, not a compliment. That's why my head is focused on football."* The reality is that Nice will not sell him until next summer, at which time Seri and President Rivière have a gentleman's agreement to part ways.

Seri has proven time and again that he has a knack for making the right move at the right time, on and off the pitch. He may have been momentarily wrong-footed by this summer's transfer disappointment, but his strength of character has seen him surmount this and he will surely be continuing to do some wrong-footing of his own, at the very top of the world stage, in the years to come. Now, he will do his best to lead a resurgent Nice side deep into the Europa League knockout stages and on the tail of Ligue 1's top four domestically. A die-hard professional, a fighter and a maestro, it has been a pleasure to watch Jean-Michael Seri grace French football's pitches with his presence. If this is the last time that he will be eligible to feature in a GFFN 100 edition in his career should he seek pastures anew, we wish him all the very best.



ADRIEN RABIOT

^ 27

9

Club: Toulouse FC

Nationality



Position: Midfielder

International Caps 5

Born: Saint-Maurice

At Club Since 2010

Age: 22

League Games in 2017 33

The future of French football? Or perhaps just the new Yoann Gourcuff - another on an endless production line of 'should have been greats.' These are the genuine stakes as Adrien Rabiot's career reaches a crossroads. Rabiot has the potential to be the face of PSG's footballing 'project' for a decade or more. Already one of France's finest and most well-rounded midfielders at the age of 22, Rabiot could be the beating heart of a team that will contend for Champions' League glory every season.

The fact that he is one of the few French players in PSG's starting line-up also helps. Paris are, particularly in the post-Zlatan Ibrahimovic era, still finding their identity as a European super club. Rabiot's imperiousness, total confidence on the ball and aggressive physicality in defence, make him an excellent candidate for PSG's standard-bearer for years to come.

The arrivals of Neymar and Kylian Mbappé have helped somewhat in restoring the club's sense of self but there remains room for Rabiot to stamp his mark. In one sense, this has been another year of steady progress for Rabiot. A regular in the France side in 2017, he has also won a starting role for PSG where he is on track for comfortably his busiest season in terms of games played. After a peripatetic youth, during which he changed clubs seven times, Rabiot has found his place at PSG. The increasing maturity of his performances demonstrate as much. Once a frustrating, though clearly talented youngster, Rabiot would deliver flinty, incomplete performances. Now he helps make one of Europe's strongest teams, among the favourites to win the Champions' League, tick. While all this is true, Rabiot is still not deployed in his preferred midfield role at club or international level. Instead, he is largely used for the unglamorous graft.

Usually posted in the 'sentinel' role, as it is called in France, Rabiot is tasked with protecting the defence, winning back the ball and moving it on quickly, usually to Marco Verratti. Averaging five interceptions per game and two successful recoveries per game, Rabiot is well suited to performing that role but it is not his preference. The summer sale of long-term midfield rival Blaise Matuidi underscores the faith that PSG have in Rabiot's ability in that role but he wants to do more and is almost certainly capable.

His 2013 loan spell with Toulouse was both formative and informative. Playing with a freedom and élan which he has only rarely reproduced, Rabiot injected a thrilling aspect to a middling Toulouse side. His lone goal was a truly remarkable strike. Long-range, swerving and unstoppable, Rabiot delivered something special but it was far more than simply a well-struck shot.

Coming from wide on the right, Rabiot eschewed well placed teammates after spotting a flaw in the Brest keeper's positioning and exploited it with vigour. After a goal of such quality, Rabiot's Toulouse teammates nicknamed him 'Cristiano.' Those 13 loan appearances gave him his first real taste of Ligue 1 and helped reveal the quality which now shines through. It is sadly not often enough that we see Rabiot playing quite so freely as he did with Toulouse. Rabiot has consistently admitted in interviews that he yearns for the 'milieu relayeur' role. Basically one of the two wider central midfield positions in a three-man midfield, the role requires both the defensive contributions that Rabiot already makes as well as the passing and movement into dangerous positions of which he is certainly able.

When Verratti was out for several months last season, Rabiot missed an excellent opportunity to prove himself in his preferred role when he too succumbed to a hamstring injury. If Rabiot is to be, alongside Verratti, an indisputable piece of PSG's midfield, he must show that he deserves it. His most recent chance to prove himself came in the 2-1 defeat to Strasbourg. Rabiot started in his preferred role against the relative minnows but was incapable of running the game as the Parisians slipped to a first defeat of the season. It was Rabiot who committed the foul from which Strasbourg scored their opening goal and it was he who failed to set the necessary tempo from his midfield organising role.

It must be noted that he did provide the assist for Kylian Mbappé's equaliser, one of five assists he has made this season already. Picking his moment to break from deep, Rabiot arrived in time to fire Neymar's pass into the path of Mbappé. It was an excellent moment but came in a disappointing overall performance. That to a certain extent exemplifies Rabiot's 2017, but perhaps nothing does that better than the two-legged Champions' League round of 16 defeat to Barcelona.

Rabiot gave the best performance of his career as PSG trounced Barcelona 4-0 in the first leg. In a luminescent display, Rabiot took Barcelona apart. With the ball he was proactive and dynamic, driving PSG attacks forward in waves. Without the ball, too Rabiot was sensational. Inside the first minute he produced an excellent, aggressive interception and stormed into Barcelona's half.

His aggressive, almost brutal, dispossessions of Lionel Messi were terrifying for Barcelona fans and inspirational for his teammates who proceeded to rip the then Spanish champions to shreds. The fact that he was able to play with such controlled aggression despite a third-minute yellow card serves only to further inflate the maturity of his performance. Angel Di Maria scored twice but it was Rabiot's night in Paris. He showed all the excellent qualities he routinely displays in Ligue 1 on the biggest stage.

Sadly, he also started, carrying an injury it must be said, in the second leg. A match which has been immortalised as the 'remontada.' Barcelona did the seemingly impossible and PSG were reduced to mere spectators with Rabiot particularly bypassed by the Blaugrana. The point here is not to blame Paris' failure on Rabiot, only to lament what might have been if he had been fully fit in the Camp Nou.

His first leg display could have been regarded as the christening of a superstar but has been largely forgotten in the aftermath of the madness of the second. Regardless of the broader perception, PSG must be fully aware that they no longer possess an exciting young talent but a full-fledged professional approaching the top of his game.

With his PSG contract running down, he has only 18 months remaining on his current deal, Rabiot faces serious career decisions. Rabiot has often flirted with a departure, Arsenal and Tottenham Hotspur have led the charge from England, but he has stayed with his hometown club. He has been rewarded for his faith. Not only has he progressed through the ranks for both club and country, he has won nine major trophies already and is certain to add more if he remains.

Next year's World Cup must be paramount in Rabiot's mind though, as he contemplates his future. He has won four caps this year, starting twice, but the injuries suffered by N'Golo Kanté and Paul Pogba rather inflate that total. Had those undisputed starters been available, it is unlikely that Rabiot would have kept his place.

In Didier Deschamps' final squad for Russia 2018, it seems quite likely that all of Corentin Tolisso, Blaise Matuidi, Pogba and Kanté are assured of their places. That leaves one midfield place to be won by one a myriad of French midfielders. The likes of Moussa Sissoko, Geoffrey Kondogbia, Steven N'Zonzi and Tiémoué Bakayoko are all realistic contenders for that place.

Rabiot has a versatility and a talent ceiling higher than any of his rivals for a place in the national team but his inflexible club role and inconsistent performances make him something of a risk. Should Rabiot fail to win his place in a squad that goes to Russia among the favourites, he must consider that PSG is no longer the right place for him. The last year has been one of significant progress for Rabiot, the next could see things really shaken up. Having made youth international appearances at six levels, winning 53 caps in all, Rabiot has long been viewed as part of the future of French football. He was selected as a reserve for the 2016 European Championships on home soil but was never called into the final squad.

There is no doubt that he will collect a sizeable pile of senior international caps by the end of his career but Rabiot has the quality to be one of the foundational players, alongside Mbappé and Pogba, of the next generation of *Les Bleus*. In his PSG career his willing, or perhaps begrudging, self-sacrifice is admirable but is costing him in terms of his development. He will be 23 by the time France open their World Cup campaign on June 16, still very young in terms of international football, and so to miss out would be no disaster but it would be a frustration for a player who has shown impatience in the past.

His abortive six-month spell at Manchester City as a youngster is indicative of that restlessness and demonstrative of the fact that Rabiot knows his quality. It is incumbent upon Rabiot to push hard for his desired role at PSG but the club too should be wary of losing a player that could be a generational talent.

Premier League clubs would leap at the chance to sign a player with such rounded qualities, possessing both physical and technical gifts. La Liga giants Barcelona, long linked with his club teammate Verratti, could do worse than moving for Rabiot too. Were PSG to lose Rabiot, it would have to be considered a significant failure and yet another indication that the club's academy is taken for granted. Although Rabiot only joined PSG two years before making his first-team debut, he is considered something of an academy product.

Certainly his talents were refined in Paris' youth teams before he made his full debut. The Parisians lose so many gifted youngsters because of a failure to provide a pathway to the first team. Were even Rabiot to decide that the club could not adequately serve his career, it would be close to a final straw.

2017 will go down as the first foundational year in Rabiot's career. This was the year in which he took the definite step from a special young player to a senior star. He gave a career defining performance in a Champions' League knockout stage game and dominated arguably the greatest player to have ever played the game. His club too has taken a great leap forward this year.. The signings of Mbappé and Neymar mean Rabiot's stature as one of Paris' key men has taken a backwards step. The question is whether Rabiot and PSG can continue to grow together or whether the divorce, long mooted, will finally come.

If that is a necessary step for Rabiot to reach his full, remarkable potential, it will be worth it for France and French football.



NABIL FEKIR

^ 62

8

Club: Lyon

Nationality



Position: Attacker

International Caps 10

Born: Lyon

At Club Since 2011

Age: 24

League Games in 2017 33

From being compared to Lionel Messi to being labelled as an overweight and underachieving presence as he struggled to recover from a cruciate injury, from saviour to villain and back again, Nabil Fékir's career has been one of considerable drama, even as it barely seems to have started. Now 24, and installed this season as captain of his boyhood club, the Lyon skipper has come a long way since his auspicious breakout performance against SC Bastia late in the 2013-14 season. A surprise starter in the absences of Yoann Gourcuff and Clément Grenier, he boldly introduced himself that afternoon, registering two assists and a goal as Lyon earned a vital victory in their chase for European football. In that moment, the world seemed to be at his feet as the latest product of the club's vaunted Centre Tola Vologe, ready to follow Hatem Ben Arfa, Karim Benzema and Ludovic Giuly as impressive, all-action attackers. It has not always been a smooth ride, but on current form, Fékir now appears to be definitively living up to that potential.

Ligue 1's fourth-leading scorer (as of match-day 17), Fékir has thrived this season in Bruno Génésio's newly installed 4-2-3-1, a system which has privileged him as its centre. This is a new phenomenon for Fékir, who had previously worked to support Alexandre Lacazette, the now-Arsenal striker having been the focal point of the side for at least the last three seasons.

Equally adept at scoring as he is creating, Fékir's best previous work had come at the point of a diamond in 2014-15. Then, supporting Lacazette and Clinton N'Jie, his dynamism and power saw him rack up thirteen goals and nine assists in the league, with Lyon being unlikely leaders for much of the season. *Les Gones* ultimately let the title slip as Lacazette missed a handful of matches with a back injury in late winter, but despite the striker's prolific record, keen observers were quick to earmark Fékir as the team's beating heart.

Admittedly, he was not a player without his critics, even at that time. He seemed, for all of his skill, unable to play with the same verve and energy on the road as he did at the Stade Gerland, and there was also the matter of his temperamental style of play. Cautioned seven times that season, some observers doubted whether a player who wore his heart on his sleeve to such an extent could really be relied upon to be the focal point of a side given his inability to avoid suspension.

He also seemed not be too interested in contributing defensively, but some of that criticism should be ignored due to his position in the diamond. Neither playing wide enough to track the runs of opposing full-backs nor high enough to press the centre backs, his position on the pitch was, with good reason, seemingly solely given over to his ability to create. Still, though, for a first full campaign, the then 21-year-old was rightly even being linked with a move to Barcelona.

Such was even his influence at Lyon that by the following season, he was seen as a potential focal point for France, with Didier Deschamps opting to pair him with Karim Benzema ahead of Paul Pogba in a radical 4-3-1-2 in a September friendly with Portugal. Given how closely Deschamps had stuck to a 4-3-3 since taking over *Les Bleus*, that the manager would even entertain a different system was somewhat shocking, especially as Antoine Griezmann was the player who was being left out for Fékir.

What was more surprising, perhaps, was that this shift was brought about not at the hands of a recognised talent with a long track record of success and notice as he rose through the youth sides, but a player of 22 with only a solitary cap at international youth levels. In his rise to Lyon's first team, Fékir had spent time on the books of five different Rhône-area clubs before finally settling with Lyon only in 2011, as he struggled to establish himself as either a wide forward or an orthodox play-maker. Too, that Fékir would even play for France was a matter of some doubt, as Algeria had pursued him hard through the course of that first season; it was only in March of 2015 that he definitively decided on playing for the country of his birth over that of his parents.

He recalled agonising over that decision in a contemporary interview with *L'Équipe*: "I'm not afraid. I've made a personal choice and I hope that everybody will respect it. It was hard to say no to Algeria; many people were pushing me in that direction."

In the end, though, it was Deschamps, who has often been maligned in the French press for his bizarre selections, who tipped the scales for the young attacker: "I spoke with Didier Deschamps, who was very convincing and told me that he was counting on me, that I was an interesting player. There's an important deadline coming, Euro 2016, and I really want to participate. I am French of Algerian origin, and I am very proud of it, but I felt that it was in my interest to opt for France."

Sadly, of course, Fékir being the star of the show for his newly selected nation that summer never came to pass, as he ruptured his cruciate ligaments in that aforementioned match against Portugal, missing more than a year away from the game. Lyon, after a period of adjustment, scarcely seemed to miss him, with Rachid Ghezzal and Maxwell Cornet being superb foils for Lacazette down the back end of that season as Lyon confidently recovered from a rocky start to seal second place, albeit some thirty points behind Paris Saint-Germain.

Cornet and Ghezzal were impressive in that run-in to pip Monaco to second, but more concerning for Fékir at the beginning of last season was that he seemed to lack a natural place in Génésio's 4-3-3. As a player who was best with the ball at his feet, he was never going to be able to play as a wide forward in a three, and he lacked the physicality to play centrally as an alternative to Lacazette. This, combined with the improved form of Mathieu Valbuena, made last season tough going for Fékir, who struggled to make an impact for both club and country following a surprising October call-up.

Deschamps was effusive in his praise of Fékir upon that, telling a press conference: *"He has power, speed and a low centre of gravity. In the last 25 metres he creates openings with his sharpness and explosiveness. He can set up and score goals."* These things had not ceased to be true, and Fékir was equally magnanimous towards the trainer, speaking at the same time, *"the coach has told me that I have a special profile. He has been very important; we have spoken a lot. He has given me a lot of advice and he has faith in me. Now it's up to me to repay that faith out on the pitch."*

However, in that set of matches Fékir, who had been sluggish for Lyon, looked even more so for his country, having put on weight during his recovery and seemingly lacking the power and change of pace that had made his style of play so effective. Valbuena continued to impress, with some even tipping the former Marseille man for his own France recall, and things were further limited by both the January signing of Memphis Depay and by Génésio's experimentation with playing Corentin Tolisso as a second striker.

That Lyon were involved in three competitions deep into the season was perhaps Fékir's saving grace (to say nothing of Depay being cup-tied in Europe), and he did manage to score fourteen goals across all competitions. There were even flashes of his old form, but as some of these matches (a hat-trick against AZ Alkmaar, three assists and a goal against Montpellier in the Coupe de France) were against thoroughly overmatched opponents, it was hard to credit them as being a believable step towards a return.

However, rather than sulking in an off-season that saw many of his long-time teammates (Lacazette, Tolisso, Maxime Gonalons) depart, Fékir redoubled his efforts in recouping his former level of fitness and form, telling *20 Minutes*, *"I worked during my vacation. At the end of a season, we are forced to decompress but I knew that my period of relaxation had to be rather short. I needed to look after myself; it was a matter of making up for lost time after my serious injury."*

In concert with the departures of Tolisso, Lacazette and Gonalons, Lyon now had a void in leadership, as those three were the usual wearers of the armband last season. Anthony Lopes, like Fékir an academy product and a player who consistently evinced a great deal of passion on the pitch was touted as a potential successor, but many were surprised when Fékir, despite seemingly having failed to prove himself in the prior campaign, was named to replace Gonalons.

With new, added resolve, Fékir has looked a player reborn in the current campaign, playing as a nominal number ten in a 4-2-3-1. However, unlike the Fékir of old, the current iteration, having dramatically improved his fitness in the summer, is a willing runner, drifting wide to interchange with the likes of Depay or new signings Mariano Diaz and Bertrand Traoré, and dropping deep to allow the midfield's new faces, Houssein Aouar and Tanguy N'Dombélé to be involved in the attack. He is also able to regularly play ninety minutes, something which was also a limiting factor in his play and further evidence of his renewed commitment to his fitness.

That said, despite his improvements, both mentally and physically, there is still the odd caveat to his profile. He still is too often in the referee's notebook, with five bookings in fourteen matches to date, and while not all of these were the result of petulance (indeed, some may be coming as a result of doing more defensive work), he is sometimes too close to playing at a boiling point. This, coupled with a literally riot-inciting incident at St Étienne show that Fékir still has something to learn, even if he is an undeniable talent.

Questions still loom about his future, as links with Barcelona have cropped up once more, but for now Fékir seems happy at Lyon. Keeping his place in the France squad and returning Lyon to the Champions' League are his immediate goals, and certainly within reach. For now, though Fékir's tale of redemption is one to be savoured; if he continues on in this way he could find himself even higher on this list in a year's time.



KAMIL GLIK

^B

7

Club: AS Monaco

Nationality



Position: Defender

International Caps 56

Born: Jastrzębie Zdrój

At Club Since 2016

Age: 29

League Games in 2017 37

Kamil Glik, Monaco's stalwart centre back, has not had the easiest of seasons to date. Monaco, ravaged in the summer's transfer window, have stuttered often as injuries to the likes of Thomas Lemar, Djibril Sidibé and Yuri Tielemans have stunted what seemed a bright start to the season. After advancing to last year's Champions' League semi-finals, this season saw Monaco dumped out in the group stage, conceding a staggering sixteen goals over the six matches. Monaco were never the tightest unit in last year's competition, as their action-packed eliminations of Borussia Dortmund and Manchester City showed, but when coupled with losses to Lyon (3-2) and Nice (4-0) in the league, a disturbing trend has emerged this season.

The aforementioned injuries as well as the tactical indecisiveness of Leonardo Jardim and the often-woeful performances of Danijel Subasic have had their impact as well, but Glik is not entirely blameless in Monaco's (relative) slide. With his thirtieth birthday approaching, it is possible the big Pole, who played every competitive match for Monaco this season, as of Matchday 17 in Ligue 1, is beginning to feel fatigue, but he was similarly heavily used at his previous club, Torino, and in last year's title run (53 appearances) and seemed not to suffer any ill effects. Still, though, for a centre back whose mobility is a key part of his play, this development is rather worrying.

It may be that Monaco, with Lemar and company back in the side, recover brilliantly, qualifying again for the Champions' League and running Paris Saint-Germain close for the title, and that this piece becomes obsolete in five months' time, but that seems unlikely. It is a disappointing turn of events for Glik, whose star shone much brighter six months ago, having just completed a magnificent year of football in which he was not only imperious in leading Poland to the quarter-finals of the European Championship but also a key figure in Monaco's unexpected brilliance.

His performances in the Principality, particularly in the knockout stages of the Champions' League, seemed to be reward for a player whose rise from difficult beginnings, through a somewhat itinerant career had become the stuff of near-legend. A biography of Glik, published in Poland, was titled, "Character Matters," and his fighting spirit echoed that title, as his arrival, from Torino for €10m, seemed to single-handedly bring about a sea change in Monaco's play. 2015-16 had seen the team play decent football, but succeed more by dint of their superior talent rather than compete with any sort of ethos that echoed the superb achievements of Leonardo Jardim's first season in charge.

Classed in some quarters as too heavily manipulated by Jorge Mendes and what seemed a stable of underwhelming loanees (Wallace, Fabio Coentrão, Helder Costa, Mario Pašalić), Monaco failed to pip Lyon to second, were eliminated in embarrassing fashion in the Europa League and suffered from general instability. From the outset of Monaco's title-winning season, though Glik was hugely influential, playing centre back in a robust and commanding style and even chipping in with a few vital goals. Though the current campaign has seen some of the shine come off those title-winning performances, Glik's play and his compelling backstory are still scarcely believable.

Born in southern Poland in the city of Jastrzębie Zdrój, Glik had a hard childhood. His father, like many in the area, worked in a mine, and struggled with alcohol, eventually dying an early death. Speaking to *L'Équipe* earlier in the year, Glik was unflinching about his early years, recollecting, "*I grew up in... ..a sad little city where there were problems with the mining crisis. We were in the roughest district, with a lot of kids who stole. It wasn't an easy place to live... The only way was to become a footballer. When I play now, I leave my heart on the pitch! I play with my guts, because nobody has ever given me anything for free in my life.*"

Thus, that difficult upbringing was an important crucible for Glik's hard-nosed style, but when an offer came in from Real Madrid, he leapt at the chance. He soon became a regular for the C team, but with no clear avenue for progression available to him, soon returned to Poland.

Once there, he joined Piast Gliwice, preferring to be closer to his hometown and to have a better chance at playing time over a more lucrative offer from capital club Legia Warsaw. At Gliwice, he was hugely impressive over two seasons; despite the club being relegated at the end of that second season, he had earned several call-ups for the national team, a first for a player from unfancied Piast. Such was his affection for the club, and for the opportunity with which he had been presented, Glik often included their crest on his armbands after being made captain at Torino.

Too good for the Polish second division, Glik again moved abroad in the summer of 2010, with Palermo snapping him up for €1m. Glik struggled to fit in with the Rosanero, and was loaned that January to Bari. The southern side struggled mightily, but Glik was a solid enough performer to be purchased by Torino that summer. Then playing in Serie B, Torino were under the stewardship at that point of Giampiero Ventura, who had worked with Glik for a month at Bari before being dismissed. Despite Ventura's recent struggles with Italy, his reputation for improving players is formidable indeed, and Glik was no exception, joining the likes of Leonardo Bonucci and Andrea Ranocchia as defenders who prospered under the well-traveled manager.

Under Ventura, Glik's performances continued to grow with the team; Torino earned promotion back into the top flight, and not only finished in the European places but managed to qualify for the last sixteen of the Europa League. The club's league performances trailed off that season as a result, but Glik's classy play made him a local hero, becoming the first foreigner to captain the club in some fifty years. After a sterling European Championship with Poland, Monaco snapped him up as a replacement for the ageing, and out-of-contract Ricardo Carvalho.

Upon arriving at Monaco, Glik was instantly a key figure, helping the club through what had looked a tricky tie against Villarreal with almost preternatural ease. Even after being involved in the European Championships that summer, he was eager to join his new teammates in what was a vital qualifier for the Champions' League. Despite the briefest of summers, Glik slotted in at centre back and looked a natural, setting Monaco on their way to what would be a historic season.

His movement and pace were instrumental in allowing Monaco's full-backs to bomb on, and his clear sense of leadership exerted a calming influence on Jemerson, his partner in defence. The Brazilian, who has more recently received his first call-ups for his country, looked horribly at sea after arriving in Monaco in January 2016. He obviously had the physical gifts to be a quality defender, but his sense of positioning and acuity in the tackle were problematic, having been booked in two of his three starts that season.

Alongside the Pole, however, his composure and confidence grew measurably. Likely much of that was down to his ability to play with more freedom knowing that Glik's mobility could help atone for his errors, but the two also fostered a strong relationship that continues into the present, with the former Torino man never being shy about defending Jemerson's abilities.

That sort of commitment and sense of brotherhood towards one's teammates have always been the type of intangibles which have allowed Glik to make the best of his physical talents, but as his body becomes less willing, one again has to question if that experience and intelligence are enough to overcome the level of fatigue that seems to be currently having such a debilitating effect on his play this season.

Glik's discipline has also been an issue at times; for a player who rarely commits fouls (roughly one per match during his time at Monaco), the number of those fouls that results in a booking is almost absurdly high. With ten bookings in the league between this season and last, Glik is earning a place in the referee's notebook with roughly every sixth foul he commits. His enforced absences didn't cost his side last season (he had missed the first leg against Manchester City through an accumulation of yellow cards), but one gets the sense that were Glik a truly elite defender, this propensity for cautions would not exist, with the likes of Loïc Perrin, Thiago Silva and Marquinhos, other defenders who would be in the running as Ligue 1's best, habitually earning cautions much more rarely.

It may seem a niggling point, but it also reflects back on a statistical analysis of Glik's play. Where Glik excels in crunching the numbers is in clearances; only three players averaged more clearances per match in Ligue 1, but two of those, Christophe Jullien and Leo Lacroix, are both exceptionally tall. The third player, Mexer, of Rennes, is similar in style, fairly quick afoot but not the most elegant in the tackle. The fear here now becomes that, like Mexer, who was superb in his first season in Brittany, Glik, as his pace begins to go, is being exposed for a lack of ability in the tackle.

Whereas last season he could comfortably rely on his pace to avoid trouble, as he loses his ability to nip in ahead of opposing attackers, he is being forced to actually tackle more often, which consequently makes him something of a liability. Even on a subconscious level this could be affecting the player; knowing that his tackling is poor, he tries to avoid having to do so, and becomes thus increasingly exposed as his mobility declines. This does not necessarily negatively affect the numbers of clearances he makes (his numbers are comparable this season), but it does, in addition to making Monaco more exposed defensively, have the knock-on effect of diluting their effectiveness on the counter, lacking as they are the sort of firm base from which to get forward.

To wit, this is in no way meant to be a wholesale indictment of Glik. After all, his high ranking is undoubtedly deserved after being a key cog in Monaco's extraordinary season, but his seeming regression is a worry not only for his club, but also for the potential pitfalls of recruiting older players into a youth-driven league. Glik had mentioned upon his arrival that, for him, the style of play in France, compared to Italy was, "*more physical and attack-minded.*" After a fine first season, those proclivities on the part of Ligue 1 have borne fruit in a manner that is perhaps hitting too close to home for Glik.



EDINSON CAVANI

^ 15

6

Club: PSG

Position: Attacker

Born: Salto

Age: 30

Nationality



International Caps 98

At Club Since 2013

League Games in 2017 37

Cast your mind back 18 months; Zlatan Ibrahimovic was playing his last game for Paris Saint-Germain in the Coupe de France final against Marseille. Two symbolic moments occurred in the second half; Ibrahimovic was replaced late on by Layvin Kurzawa and bid his final farewell to the capital club, whilst Edinson Cavani raced through to score and celebrated in front of the PSG fans by pointing to the ground to signal that he was staying in the capital.

Cavani had long been linked with a move away from Paris Saint-Germain, due to the frustrations he endured with his role in the team. Atletico Madrid, Liverpool, Arsenal and Manchester United were all reportedly interested in signing the striker from Salto, Uruguay.

But amongst the frustrations, Cavani did not once push for a move away, unlike colleague Marco Verratti. Instead the Uruguayan international persevered and made the best of the situation for himself and his team-mates. Cavani was happy with life in Paris even if things were not going to plan on the pitch but he could foresee happier times ahead post-Zlatan. In Cavani's own mind that cup final was the passing of the torch and the time had arrived for the Uruguayan to be given the freedom of the forward line; something he had waited three years for.

However, not everyone was convinced; some of the club's fans expected investment in a new striker owing to Cavani's history of erratic finishing at key moments in big games. With Cavani spearheading the attack, fan expectation was lower than in previous seasons which was maybe a little unfair considering Cavani's impressive career goals tally to date. But the notion of investment in a new striker was quashed after the cup final when PSG President Nasser Al-Khelaifi declared that Cavani would be the man to replace the club's all-time leading goal scorer Ibrahimovic.

A level of trepidation ensued, not out of doubt regarding Cavani's ability but rather based on whether Cavani could be trusted to deliver in the big games. After all, there was little European experience in reserve in the form of academy graduate Jean-Kevin Augustin and Hatem Ben Arfa. Paris Saint-Germain needed their €64m man to step up under extreme pressure both to score goals and stay fit and since taking hold of the baton, the Uruguayan has duly obliged. After stepping out of the shadow of Zlatan, Cavani has not just been able to find the form he displayed at Napoli, he has exceeded those performances. Cavani is now in the peak of his career; his movement, strength and finishing are now arguably the best that he has ever displayed.

However, life for Cavani hasn't been easy in the French capital since his arrival in the summer of 2013. The ex-Napoli striker played second fiddle to Ibrahimovic for so long at PSG, playing out of position to accommodate the Swede. Cavani endured some off-field problems during his settling in period in Paris when he was required to frequently travel back to his homeland in early 2014 to finalise a difficult divorce. Add to that the lengthy and unfair criticism endured by the French media during this time and just when Cavani had become the new talismanic figure in the team, PSG broke the world transfer record for Neymar.

But credit should be given to the Uruguayan who possesses an incredible mental strength to work through the adversity and challenges he has faced during his time in Paris. Cavani possesses something unique in the PSG squad; a hard-working, motivated attitude to every match regardless of the opponent. Granted, PSG's primary motivation is the Champions' League but Cavani's approach is one that is unfortunately not shared throughout the squad particularly in some Ligue 1 matches. There has been some media suggestion that PSG will part ways with El Matador at the end of the current campaign, to either accommodate a new forward or to free up Kylian Mbappé to move into the middle of the front three.

This could be costly, should it happen. In Cavani, PSG have a natural finisher, capable of scoring at any given moment and more so when the team is struggling to get out of second gear, as sometimes seen in Ligue 1. In fact it is those types of games where Cavani is often the difference maker and if anything PSG should be building the team around him or tying him down to an improved deal. After all how many other strikers in world football boast Cavani's goal scoring figures? Moreover, where would PSG find another reliable striker of his ilk?

Although Cavani played three years as a left sided forward, he was still able to boast impressive figures in the scoring charts in all competitions scoring 25 goals in 2013/14, 31 in 2014/15 and 25 in 2015/16. Impressively, El Matador out-scored Ibrahimovic in all competitions in 2014/15 despite his wide position and with Ibrahimovic taking free-kicks and penalties. Unsurprisingly Cavani went on to score 49 in 2016/17 which was his first season post-Ibrahimovic. The figure was just shy of the 50 amassed by the swede in his final season in Paris.

Cavani recently became third in the all-time list of players that have scored in consecutive Champions' League games behind Ruud Van Nistelrooy (9) and Cristiano Ronaldo (8). It was a record that started for El Matador in November 2016 against Arsenal and ended in October 2017 at home to Anderlecht, scoring eight times during the run and once again showing that he belongs at the top table of European football.

Equally as impressive is Cavani's injury and disciplinary record. His longest period out injured at PSG was in February 2014 when he missed four weeks due to an Achilles problem. Since then, Cavani has been relatively injury free showing his reliability. In four and a half years at PSG, the ex-Napoli man has missed just five games through suspension.

However, Cavani, does n'ot just provide goals; the Uruguayan's movement is often an area of his game that he is praised for. Cavani is deadly in the air, particularly from corners and free-kicks. El Matador continually shows his unselfish side and is comfortable to do the 'dirty work' whether that is defending in his own penalty area or chasing down lost causes to create chances.

In 2017, Cavani has seemingly changed the media's perception of himself as well as those that were unconvinced that he could be trusted to take the club forward. He has done this through hard-working, defining performances and important goals in big games including both Champions' League fixtures against Barcelona, the Coupe de la Ligue Final vs Monaco as well as critical goals in Europe and domestically this term. Arguably Cavani's biggest and most important goal in 2017 was the injury time equaliser at Marseille in October. PSG were down to 10-men after Neymar's sending off and with Mbappé replaced after an out-of-sorts performance and with time running out, it was the Uruguayan that stepped up to salvage a point for the capital club.

Cavani is finally beginning to receive some of the plaudits he so rightly deserves. The perception has for so long been centred on his profligacy in front of goal and whilst he, like many other strikers, is capable of poor finishing, focus of attention is now on the positive effect he has on the team.

An Edinson Cavani chant is now regularly sang by PSG's ultras from the Tribune Auteuil. This is a clear indication that they have taken Cavani to their hearts. It is an honour that Cavani deserves for what he has given to the club. It is easy to gloss over the sacrifices El Matador has made for PSG, playing some of the most important years of his career out of position for the good of the team. It is fair to assume that the arrival of Mbappé and Neymar at PSG has taken some of the pressure off Cavani and allowed him to play with a lighter burden.

With the eyes of the footballing world on PSG's two new recruits, Cavani is able to express himself with far more ease than he did last season and is beginning to form an exciting forward line with Mbappé and Neymar. 2017 has also brought about a deserved Ligue 1 Player of the Season award for Cavani, as well as being named in the Ligue 1 Team of the Season - one of only three PSG players to do so.

This was even more impressive considering how dominant AS Monaco were in 2016/17 scoring an incredible 107 goals, helped by their array of star attacking players that were relentless on their way to winning the Ligue 1 title. Monaco were far superior to PSG particularly in Ligue 1 and with little to get excited about for PSG fans, it was a welcome sight to see their number nine take the award.

The fact that Cavani is seemingly now giving up penalty taking duties to Neymar after the disagreement with the Brazilian in September against Lyon, tells you about the measure of the man. His career at PSG has been about acceptance and in a football world of big salaries, huge egos and player power it has been refreshing to see the class with which Cavani has dealt with adversity. If truth be told, at times the Uruguayan has not been shown the respect he deserves by the club since his arrival in 2013.

With the poor form of Luis Suarez over the past year and the Barcelona man's minimal participation for Uruguay in recent months, it has been Cavani that has carried the weight of responsibility for Uruguay and scored the goals to fire *La Celeste* to next summer's World Cup in Russia. Few would argue that presently, Cavani is both more important to Uruguay and in better form than his counterpart.

Whilst Cavani has never been spoken of in the Ballon d'Or conversation, his performances and goal-scoring record in Ligue 1 and in Europe match up with the very best in world football. As Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo have shared the award over the past decade, the best Cavani could realistically hope for would be a place on the podium, currently occupied by his team-mate Neymar. Unfortunately for Cavani, although media perception with regards to him has shifted in a positive direction in the last 12 months, he is still no match for the global brands of Ronaldo and Messi.

It seems that it will not be until after his PSG career is over, that the majority will appreciate what El Matador has done for the club. Cavani may not be held in the same regard as past club legends such as Pedro Miguel Pauleta or Zlatan Ibrahimovic but he will deservedly be PSG's all-time leading goal scorer, surpassing the aforementioned players. However, if Cavani can fire PSG to Champions' League glory, then that would change the landscape of how the Uruguayan is remembered in the French capital. That reality might not be too far away.



THOMAS LEMAR

^ 14

5

Club: Thomas Lemar

Nationality



Position: Attacker

International Caps 8

Born: Baie-Mahault

At Club Since 2015

Age: 22

League Games in 2017 31

"Yes we bid €100m for Lemar [and] yes, we'll come back in for him." Arsène Wenger is not usually one for brash statements of intent but Monaco's 22-year-old midfielder Thomas Lemar is a thoroughly unusual player. Amid Radamel Falcao's rebirth, the juggernaut rise of Kylian Mbappé and countless other stories that made AS Monaco's title success so captivating, the success of Thomas Lemar remains the most typical of the French game.

The options available for any French national side in 2018, senior or otherwise, are frightening in their ability and astounding in their depth. Many such players are a product of an engrained development system that remains perfect for the cultivation of French footballing talent. Having cut their teeth in the sprawling fourth and fifth divisions, either for a tiny provincial outfit or a major club's B team, capable young players will readily find opportunities to develop their fledgling abilities as a professional at senior level either in lesser Ligue 1 sides or in the second division. When key assets are sold on, often for club sustaining fees to the top four sides or foreign leagues, French clubs will regularly look to their youth ranks to fill the void and start the process of development all over again.

Ligue 1's strong competitiveness, not overly expectant attitude and lack of a need to achieve immediately lends itself to a young player's maturation. Mistakes can be made, minutes racked up and crafts finessed all largely out of the spotlight until any such player draws the attention of the bigger clubs. These sides happily buy into this process, either in replacing sold stalwarts by promoting talented youth players, Houssem Aouar assuming Corentin Tolisso's mantle at OL a recent example, or by purchasing the mid and lower table sides' breakout stars affording them a next step before, hopefully, selling them on to the rest of the continent's top teams. It has become the model by which a number of clubs base their theory of recruitment. Monaco are perhaps the most proficient here and Thomas Lemar is a prime example.

Lemar's career began at Caen, firstly in their junior sides before helping the Normandy club out of Ligue 2. His intensity, pace and superb ability on the ball leant Lemar to Ligue 1 where he was swiftly swept up by Monaco in 2015 for €4m. The young Frenchman's development has only gathered pace at the Principality club where, with a Ligue 1 title and significant continental experience, at both domestic and international levels, to his name, he is now on the verge of the next step in what could be an illustrious career with further nine figure bids from Wenger and company likely not to be far off.

Although it seems unlikely that Lemar will leave the Principality in January, despite gathering media momentum behind various Premier League interests, a summer move seems to be very much in the offing. Well publicised mammoth summer bids from Arsenal and Liverpool suggest that they remain frontrunners for the player and could again place bids come the off season. Desperate turning down the last minute approach from Arsenal, given the minimal time to make a decision, a move to London could suit the Monaco midfielder. As is usually the case with Arsenal signings, his success depends on how Arsène Wenger plans to utilise the midfielder. Despite Alexandre Lacazette's goal-tally to date and some effective displays, his initial shunting out to the left and bizarre presence on the bench in some of the Gunners' trickier Premier League encounters has arguably led to, based on his ruthless Lyon form from last season, a diminished impact.

With the possible imminent departures of Mesut Özil or Alexis Sanchez or perhaps even both, it should be emphasised that Lemar should not be seen as a direct replacement for either man despite the similarity of his de-facto, natural positions.

During Monaco's rampaging title run last season, Leonardo Jardim's 4-4-2 and first XI, Mbappé replacing Germain in the spring aside, became virtually enshrined in the laws of the Principality outlet. Although there were occasional early season or injury enforced switches to a solitary striker and a bizarre attempt to go like for like with Juventus in a 3-5-2 for the Champions' League semi-final second leg, when everyone was available, the line-up was virtually untouchable in 2017.

This meant that Lemar played as the left sided midfielder, or winger, in the Monaco 4-4-2 but this role hardly defines Lemar's skill-set nor belies his ability to play this position at other clubs. Monaco's set up would perhaps be more accurately described at 4-2-2-2 with the marauding Benjamin Mendy and Djibril Sidibé, providing the width from full-back areas while Fabinho alongside rangy lieutenant Tiémoué Bakayoko anchored and indeed orchestrated the midfield, allowing Lemar and Bernardo Silva to drift in off of their flanks and afforded them the purview to operate almost as dual number 10s behind Falcao and Mbappé.

Although Lemar is fully capable, as a classical winger might, of attacking opposing full-backs at pace and providing beautifully whipped pinpoint deliveries, a particular delight reminiscent of David Beckham, the description as an out and out left sided player in a 4-2-3-1 would not do him justice. Should Wenger persist with a trio of central defenders as part of a 3-4-3 into 2018 and next season, Lemar would be more suited to either role deployed just off the central striker. Here, he would benefit from playing close to the other forwards while his keenness to the press and win the ball back would happily mirror Sanchez's intensity rather than Özil's.

There is a fierceness to Lemar's play, everything is executed with pace and power. He is constantly on the move, looking for an opportunity to influence the game both on and off the ball while he remains very much a part of the machine rather than a director of play who, perhaps unfortunately for any potential suitors, would not necessarily grab the game by its collar and drag this team out of trouble or out in front.

Should Liverpool persist with Jürgen Klopp, as is very likely, with his fluid 4-3-3, Lemar might fit more snugly, both with the design and ethos of play, at Anfield. Should Philippe Coutinho finally be ensnared by Barcelona in 2018, Lemar could be a worthy successor to the Brazilian.

A slot as the furthest forward of a more flexible midfield three would be his ideal position, encouraging him to play off those around him, to construct in tandem with others and to drop into awkward spaces making him difficult to pick up. Klopp's fluid set up would happily see Lemar drop into Jordan Henderson's slightly deeper position, or either wider role with ease when needed. While he has the skill set to be a success at Arsenal, Liverpool should be, external motivations that affect major modern transfers aside, his preferred destination if the choice were to arise which, if recent reports are accurate, seems to be the case.

Although his abilities may scream number 10, this is a position, or perhaps more accurately a responsibility, that Lemar is yet to completely master. Whether the admittedly youthful Frenchman truly yet has the capacity to lead a top tier side as its creative director is very much open to debate.

Yet, this more classic attacking midfield role does seem to be at the end of the path that Jardim is setting out for Lemar this season. However, this year's Monaco are a far-cry from the title winning side that graced us with their presence earlier in this calendar year. Potholes have been created by injuries across the autumn and the reduced glare on *Les Monegasques* this year after the exodus of key players over the summer and the Neymar induced shift of momentum north to the capital have made Monaco seem increasingly insignificant. As a result, Lemar has fundamentally failed to make an impact in the second half of 2017.

Reports that Manchester United are also vying for Lemar's signature are yet to be confirmed but both club and player should be wary of a union. Lemar may not suit the physical, efficient style José Mourinho has installed at Old Trafford, especially if he is deployed in a wider role, while Mourinho's over reliance on tactical and positional discipline may not be conducive in the nurturing of qualities that could make Thomas Lemar truly world-class; his ingenuity, guile on the ball and elusiveness in and around the box. Whatever Lemar's eventual destination, it is clear that, having only turned 22 in November, his best years remain ahead of him.

Didier Deschamps will perhaps be the keenest of observers with regards to Lemar's progress during the first half of 2018. With *Les Bleus* arguably already favourites for the World Cup in Russia this summer and considering the ludicrous levels of talent and the squad's equally obscene depth, Lemar may not yet be amongst France's starters, injuries aside, for Deschamps in June. Nevertheless, his presence in the squad is virtually assured after some superb displays across his opening salvo of international appearances at the end of last year. An eye-catching double in France's 4-0 demolition of the Netherlands at the Stade de France cemented the notion that, despite his lack of experience, Lemar is ready for international football. A devastating, fizzed half-volley was a true highlight of Lemar's fledgling career.

There is a hypothetical scenario, however, that makes Lemar integral to Deschamps plans. France have used variations of 4-4-2 in recent times while, given the influx of Monaco title winners to Clairefontaine, basing the French national team around Jardim's Monaco, and their variation of 4-4-2, could be the most efficient way to cajole optimum displays from some of Jardim's protégés. Sidibé and Mendy are both at their best when overlapping and putting their opposite number under pressure while Mbappé, despite adapting with relative success to a right sided role at PSG, is clearly happiest when played central and with a partner, the same could be said for Antoine Griezmann and Olivier Giroud. As a result, the addition of Lemar and even Bakayoko in their own favoured Monaco slots could aid the cohesion that Deschamps' team have long lacked, making Lemar's swift adaptation to the international scene potentially invaluable.

Wherever Thomas Lemar ends up and in whichever position, this exuberant young midfielder has the ability and the attitude to become one of the world's best. Crucially for Monaco, *Les Bleus* and the French game as a whole, Lemar's success is merely the latest example of a system in rude health that continues to mould world class players from the vast swathes of raw talent that exist in French football. Worryingly for the rest of the continent, Lemar's eventual move to the Premier League or beyond will not only help to develop this potential world-beater, but the next one too.



NEYMAR



4

Club: PSG

Position: Attacker

Born: Mogi das Cruzes

Age: 25

Nationality



International Caps 83

At Club Since 2017

League Games in 2017 29

Few would have anticipated seeing the world's most expensive player at Guingamp's Stade de Roudourou this time last year. Even fewer would have predicted that player would be Neymar. But, in early August 2017, Neymar switched the Nou Camp for the Parc des Princes, following a transfer that reverberated across the globe.

Neymar da Silva Santos Júnior, or as he is more commonly known, Neymar Junior, is no ordinary footballer. The Brazilian has been touted as a player whose calibre not only attracts admirers the world over, but from across generations. For PSG, he is the player that matches their ambitions, and for Ligue 1, it pulls the runt of the European domestic pack back alongside the continent's elite. His transfer blew everything that preceded it out of the water. It not only smashed the transfer record of Paul Pogba to Manchester United a year prior, but it more than doubled it, and led to subsequent transfers that reached over nine digits, something that was previously unheard of in the game.

There have been many questions surrounding his move. Chief among them, has been the word why. Why would one of the world's finest talents leave arguably the world's most attractive football club, playing with the greatest football genius of this generation, and in Lionel Messi, potentially of all time?

Much has been written and much conjecture has centred around issues of financial appeal and state soft power. There can be no getting away from the astronomical sums at play - a fee of €222m, coupled with a wage packet of €36.8m per year - and nor can the influence of geopolitics in the Middle East be dismissed as drivers for this transfer.

But for Neymar, this was a transfer that was greater than the sum of its capital value. The assertions that he is merely seeking to escape Messi's shadow perhaps mask the desires of a player to fulfil his potential off his own back, to have his own team, to be number one and prove his worth beyond just that of the glamorous man-in-waiting to the infallible king of Barcelona. It is this ambition, against the advice of his much-derided father, which saw him choose to join the Qatari backed residents of Saint-Germain, a club whose lust for the Champions' League trophy make Roman Abramovich's fixation appear nothing more than a passing fancy.

His ability is undoubted, and something that was touted from a very young age. He was only six when Betinho first spotted his potential, and after standing out playing futsal, it was not long before 11-a-side clubs came calling. He signed his first professional contract with Santos at the age of just 12, and as a result, the footballing elite already had a 'Neymar' on their radars. From there, he was exulted. His flair, the audacity to not only skip past fellow professionals but embarrass them, delighted and transfixed supporters.

In 2011, those who were not aware of a talent shimmering in the samba sun were made to sit up and take note, when Neymar picked up the ball on the left-hand side against Flamengo. He decided to run for goal, teasing his way past two defenders, before dancing past a third and a fourth after an accurate give-and-go. He slipped the ball into the net, a moment that secured him the Puskas Award, and the undivided attention of transfer columns for the following two years.

Barcelona were to win that subsequent transfer race, and so began four trophy-laden years. His first season saw him net 15 times, before inspiring a haphazard Brazil as the poster boy to a home World Cup semi-final, before injury ruled him out, and the Brazilians capitulated under the weight of expectation against Germany; an infamous 7-1 stain that Neymar blissfully averted. That summer came Luis Suarez, and MSN was born, unquestionably one of the greatest front trios the game has seen. In 2015, they secured the treble, with Neymar becoming the first player to score in both the Copa Libertadores and Champions' League finals. The following season, 2015-16, MSN hit 139, as Barcelona retained the league and cup. That season saw Neymar gain a glimpse of the coveted Ballon D'Or, after a trailblazing campaign that saw him score 24 times, his highest return in a Barca shirt.

The Catalonian adventure would become known as his bildungsroman, his coming of age. But it was not long before the apprentice wanted to equal his supposed master, a moment that can be pinpointed to March this year. Neymar's performance that night will be talked about in the annals of European football for years to come, when Barcelona pulled off the unthinkable to usurp PSG by six goals to five in the Champions' League Round of 16.

In the summer of '16, Neymar flirted with the Parisians about a potential move. This was a courtship that promised PSG everything a club could wish for, the elite, the fame and that Champions' League trophy. But the result of the affair saw the darling of their dreams sign a new five-year deal. PSG were jilted, their desires unrequited, and they were left feeling used. But one year on, a phone call changed everything, and PSG got their man.

2017 has hinted at being the year when Neymar traverses the hotly disputed path between an elite talent and a once in a generation phenomenon. There can be little denying that his move to PSG is with this process in mind, but it is a progression that started in Catalonia.

At Barça, Neymar played on the left of that infamous South American front three alongside Messi and Suarez. Cutting inside onto his favoured right foot, Neymar would look to isolate opponents one-on-one, with room for manoeuvre unveiled by the movement of his fellow forwards, with the Argentine magician in particular floating outside of temporal parameters into pockets of space.

Their interplay meant that in transition any of their forward arsenal could appear on any side, a nightmare for any defence. Neymar would often take a more back-seated roll, a secondary force going forward, accounting for his inferior number of goals compared to his counterparts. Indeed, Neymar found the net 20 times in his last season at Barcelona. Messi, meanwhile, hit 54 from 52 while Suarez chipped in with 37 from 51. Evidently, Neymar was not the main man. But his performances, while lacking the glisten and shine of an inordinate total of goals, looked to have taken on a new maturity. Underpinning this is his consistency, not only in terms of performances, ball retention and successful dribbles made per game, but also from set pieces. The Brazilian netted four free-kicks last season at Barcelona, a role he shared with the likes of Lionel Messi.

Sharing, though, is not something Neymar wanted to do. For the national side, he had already assumed the paragon of centrality. The 2014 World Cup, as miserable as it turned out to be, saw a squad built around Neymar, with everything positive flowing through his quick-thinking feet. This unhealthy approach to a team sport has relented slightly under Tite but he still plays to Neymar's strengths; a rare individual talent who can win games on his own.

Yet, whilst he may be the talisman for Brazil, he was not at his club. For a player being placed more and more frequently into the same bracket as Pelé, this was something that could not persist. After arriving in Paris his desire to be the main man quickly became crystal clear to his teammates after a fortuitous victory over Lyon. That night in late September will be remembered not for the result, but for a very public falling out between Neymar and Edinson Cavani, over who had the right to take spot kicks.

Reports of a fall-out exploded across the media both in France and internationally, with allegations that the two had to be separated in the dressing room before punches were thrown. This was all rather pathetic, but a clear outcome of a transfer that placed a player on a pedestal larger than the club itself, a club that already had its own collection of proud egos who were evidently not willing to forgo their privileges to this new moneyed pretender. Unai Emery somehow managed to paper over the cracks, but this episode is indicative of the major flaw in Neymar's game: his individuality spilling into selfishness, and consequentially, an ability to disappear in games.

One thing Neymar must quickly learn if he is to truly replicate the honours of his former teammate Lionel Messi is the importance of team before self. Messi is the best example, for he plays for the team in spite of the fact that the team evolves around him and his ability. At PSG, Neymar must not expect, as we have seen at times, for the team to play for him. He has also shown a worrying capacity to go missing in big games.

Against Marseille, he appeared disinterested despite the magnitude of the fixture, although it must be said this was a trait shared by all of his underwhelming teammates that night. In PSG's defeat to Bayern Munich, he was entirely anonymous, outgunned and strikingly, bereft of ideas. There have been other disappointing displays, against St Étienne, and even worse against Nantes. He has seemed like a condescending figure at times, as if everything is beneath him. Yet if he wishes to attain the Ballon D'Or, to become the best his nation has produced, the game remains a team one, and Neymar will do well to keep that in mind.

But, as well as the bad, PSG have already been blessed with a multitude of the good. Neymar has assumed his favoured role on the left hand-side of a 4-3-3, supporting the prolific Edinson Cavani, with Kylian Mbappé encouraged to adjust his trade to an unfamiliar right flank. There, he has looked every bit the player who left Barcelona, but with the added aura of knowing he is the best player on the field.

Neymar's irrepressible talent has never been doubted. A goal and an assist at the Roudourou on his debut has set the trend, and time and time again, he has shown glimpses of breath-taking ability. Against Toulouse, it was not his goals that awed, but an assist for Layvin Kurzawa, striking the ball from a corner with mind bending technique, so that it arched, unswerving, for the full-back to score. Against Bordeaux, he struck a simply stunning free-kick, before orchestrating a scintillating attacking display that left the Parisians 5-1 up at the interval.

I could go on. But as PSG's stars race away with the Ligue 1 title, for Neymar, there is a feeling that with each flick, each nonchalant pass and astute finish, he must continue to replicate it regularly, and on the biggest stages. If he can do that, and put the team ahead of his own ambitions, he will achieve everything that he sets his sights on, and Paris Saint-Germain will flourish along the way.



FABINHO

v1

3

Club: AS Monaco

Position: Midfielder

Born: Campinas

Age: 24

Nationality



International Caps 4

At Club Since 2013

League Games in 2017 37

12 months ago, this publication was effusive of his praise of Fabinho. The 24-year-old midfielder from Campinas had very much struck gold. Heralded as the best player in his position, he ultimately finished 2016 at number two on GFFN's 100 list – only behind the PSG stalwart Thiago Silva. What we wrote then was: “*What the Brazilian does do is bring his consistent quality from making the fundamentals looks so incredibly easy*”. Today, that statement for his 2017 balance sheet remains both true and false in equal measure in what many regard to be a year of high professional achievement for club and player, followed by a period of frustration, doubt, complacency and the burden of ‘what if’.

It is now four years since the midfielder first pitched his tent up at Stade Louis II in what retrospectively can be regarded as a failure for both the Rio Ave and Real Madrid scouting departments. Four superb years with more than 150 appearances in total for the Principality side in which he was renowned for his versatility, chance creation and vision. Yet, over the last 12 months – or the past season at least – he simply reached new heights in his intricate play at the heart of the Monegasque midfield. Europe had stood up and watched. One may even attribute the higher attendance at the Louis II to the number of scouts and intermediaries who have pitched up to take a closer look at the likes of Fabinho and the golden crop of players he was a part of.

2017 began explosively for Fabinho and Monaco, who among tricky ties in the domestic cups – were to face Marseille and Paris away and then-league leaders Nice at home in the first month alone. At the Stade Vélodrome, Leonardo Jardim's side tore OM to shreds in a 4-1 victory. The performance underlined Fabinho in a nutshell – typically devastating in midfield – yet upstaged by the more creative force of Thomas Lemar and Bernardo Silva who grabbed the headlines.

Such is the underrated level of deep-lying midfielders across the globe. They will likely not be filling sport columns the day after the match, but their contribution cannot be understated. Take a look if you can at the game once more to see the Brazilian's offensive qualities. With OM at sixes and sevens – Fabinho broke character to run into open pockets of space, thus creating plenty of greenery for the Monegasque offensive line-up to run into. Yet, he chose to go it alone with a stunning bamboozle of the defender with a fast in-step on his left. The shot was unfortunately parried by the goalkeeper – but Bernardo Silva was on hand to clean it up.

He followed up that performance with a largely positive outing at the Parc des Princes towards the end of January, as Monaco began to flex their title credentials with a well-earned but last-gasp 1-1 draw away to the then-reigning champions PSG. Alongside his midfield partner Tiémoué Bakayoko, the Monegasque pair were well superior to their Parisian counterparts.

The Brazilian would later be named man-of-the match thanks in part to a wondrous 16 balls recovered in the middle of the park. That figure is rarely achieved against what is usually a competent and imposing midfield trio of Blaise Matuidi, Thiago Motta and Adrien Rabiot. The midfielder severely disrupted PSG's usual rhythm with his industrious and combative style which later paid dividends as Monaco escaped the capital with a point in tow.

Jardim's men would later beat fellow title rivals Nice 3-0 to consolidate a lead at the top of Ligue 1 – and as you will read further on below, they would not look back. However, the real test was in Europe – in the Champions' League, after what already had been a highly successful sojourn so far. Monaco had already dispatched Fenerbahce, Villarreal, Tottenham, Bayer Leverkusen and CSKA Moscow. They were tasked with the unenviable challenge of deposing Pep Guardiola's Manchester City, a side previously credited with interest in Fabinho.

It turned out to be a see-saw encounter at the Etihad Stadium. The midfielder recovered from a rather timid start to register two first-half assists as Monaco surprisingly led the Citizens at home. The hosts would later reverse the score-line in incredible fashion, taking the upper hand in the tie with a 5-3 advantage.

Fabinho would later be praised by the (easy-to-please?) English press for his offensive contribution from a deep position in the field. The *Daily Mirror*, *Daily Mail* and *Manchester Evening News* were all highly praiseworthy – whereas their French counterparts lamented the Brazilian's poor defensive performance in a game in which he most notably was at fault for City's first goal.

He could have made an added impact at the Etihad also, with Falcao missing a penalty. At the time, Fabinho harboured a perfect 100% record in his professional career with spot-kicks. For one reason or another, it was Monaco's Colombian talisman who stepped up, and failed. Nevertheless, the game evoked an intriguing spotlight on Fabinho's performances. The 24-year-old's ball game lies on subtlety. Able to dictate proceedings from just about anywhere in the middle third, he has incredible ability in switching the ball with effective ease from one corner to the other. As highlighted in the Marseille and PSG games, it was his driving ability – running at opponents as opposed to away from them, or switching possession over at the first sign of trouble, which was heralded as his undoubted strong point.

While he also possesses interesting offensive qualities honed from his early days at right-back in Leonardo Jardim's side, one weakness is that he rarely showcases the best of both in any 90 minutes. Take any of Monaco's games in the last year - the midfielder received several plaudits, yet it was either for his defensive ability in the face of a highly dangerous opponent, or his contribution to one or several of Monaco's thumping victories in Ligue 1.

Perhaps this is a consequence of Monaco's changing identity. They were easily irresistible in Ligue 1 in 2016/17, until the end of February averaging three goals a game in the league. The importance of the Fabinho - Bakayoko midfield pair lay largely in their turning over the ball from defence through the middle for Monaco's creative duo in Silva & Lemar. They were rarely troubled in the league until the end of the campaign in May 2017 - with only a 1-1 draw at Bastia to add to that point in Paris. 17 wins and two draws in the 'phase retour'. Monaco were not just champions, but record-breaking ones too. The midfielder would later add four goals and two assists to his season scorecard - yet, if you watched closer, the real chance contribution tally was considerably higher.

The real test of Monaco's credentials however continued to be in Europe - an arena where Fabinho & Bakayoko were largely tasked with showcasing their defensive qualities in stark contrast to their Championnat exploits. It was he who got Monaco back in touch with City at 5-5 on aggregate with a well-placed finish to beat Willy Caballero from close range. His passing qualities stifled the City midfield, who were forced to retreat somewhat uncharacteristically for a Guardiola side. Fabinho had earlier spliced through their defence with a wondrous pass for Kylian Mbappé. Monaco would later go on to qualify thanks to Fabinho's midfield partner Bakayoko, whose bullet header knocked out the English side.

Borussia Dortmund were next up in Europe - but after a significant run of performances, Fabinho just did not turn up in Germany. Not that it mattered as Monaco won 3-2 in difficult circumstances at the Westfalenstadion, before winning 3-1 at home to become the first Ligue 1 side to qualify for the last four in seven seasons. Fabinho would miss the second leg thanks to an accumulation of yellow cards. On the back of a disjointed first leg performance came also the ignominy of missing his first penalty in Monaco colours. It was never going to last one imagined.

In the end however, Monaco fell to Italian giants Juventus. They were also beaten in the domestic cups by PSG - 1-3 in the Coupe de la Ligue final, and 0-5 in the Coupe de France semi-final in games in which the Brazilian did not participate in - either through suspension or being rested. And yet, 2017, leaning on a highly successful first six months of the year, remains overwhelmingly positive for the 24-year-old. He was later named in several end-of-season team of the year lists by various publications, alongside the Hexagoal trophy he received on an unforgettable night in May.

Like many of Monaco's superb crop of stars, vultures were circling. And if Vadim Vasilyev and company were only planning to sell two or three of their most bankable stars, it was unlikely that Fabinho would be part of that chosen group - many looked instead to Lemar, Bernardo and Mbappé with Benjamin Mendy and Bakayoko also vying for moves. Monaco lost players early - Mendy and Silva departing for old foes Man City, whilst Fabinho's midfield partner secured a move to Chelsea. With Kylian Mbappé on the verge of a scarcely believable €180m move back 'home' to Paris - the vanquished capital club tried their luck with a bid for the Brazilian midfielder.

On paper, it made complete sense. Fabinho would join a side in desperate need for a player of his profile - a ball-playing technical midfielder with distinct defensive qualities. Thiago Motta after all, was ageing whilst Matuidi had left for Italy in the close season. Moreover, Fabinho would also surround himself with a highly influential Brazilian contingent in Paris - bolstered further by the arrival of Neymar. Surely Brazil coach Tite would not avoid him then? Perhaps the only speck of failure for Fabinho in 2017 has been his inability to break into the Brazil squad despite a highly successful year on all counts. In the end, a move to Paris failed - and with it a golden opportunity. You would be right to suggest that performance levels have dropped since.

Fabinho himself is the first to admit to that. The last four months of the year have been challenging and somewhat disappointing given Monaco's now elevated status as reigning French champions. The loss of his midfield partner has also loosened Monaco's strength in that position somewhat despite João Moutinho and Youri Tielemans' best efforts. The player seems to be grappling with getting over the missed opportunity of joining PSG in the summer, and it definitely shows. The player admitted as much in a recent interview, confirming he was in split minds whether to force a move against a club that plucked him from relative obscurity in the first place.

2018 promises to be a big year for a player who has grown so much in the last 12 months, but has begun to plateau a little. The World Cup remains a goal in the distance. In what should be his final season at Stade Louis II, there is still much to play for, if not in the Champions' League. The onus is on the player to get back to, and maintain his fine performances from early on in the year to firmly put himself in the shop window for the summer transfer market. He will not want to spurn an opportunity like it again.



RADAMEL FALCAO



2

Club: AS Monaco

Position: Attacker

Born: Santa Marta

Age: 31

Nationality



International Caps 64

At Club Since 2013

League Games in 2017 32

Soner Ertek is hardly one of European football's more recognisable names but the Turkish born defender, who spent the majority of his career in France's sprawling lower divisions, remains infamous in Monaco for one solitary tackle. In January 2014, six months into Radamel Falcao's astonishing €50m move to the Principality from Atletico Madrid, Monaco were drawn to play lowly Monts d'or Azergues in the Coupe de France. Falcao's opener had predictably given Monaco the lead, a tally of nine goals in his first 17 league outings for Les Monegasques alongside fellow Colombian transfer bombshell James Rodriguez made Claudio Ranieri's Monaco title chasers upon their return to Ligue 1 thanks to owner Dmitry Rybolovlev's millions.

Despite the gulf in class, Ranieri remained concerned. *"On many occasions, I drew the attention of the fourth official to the hardness of the game,"* explained the Italian coach *"which was beginning to develop and on the danger that it posed to the players. I wasn't listened to and that's unfortunately not the first time that we have paid with the consequences."* Ranieri's warning continued unheeded and as Falcao span nimbly away from his marker he was scythed down by Ertek's rash, ill-judged lunge. Pounding the turf, Falcao's distress was immediately obvious. Replays showed that his knee had crumpled under the weight of Ertek's challenge; the resulting ACL tear would end his season and his World Cup hopes. *"I'm not going to hide that my sadness is huge, my heart is destroyed,"* said Falcao *"God makes the improbable possible, I believe in Him."* The proud Colombian's prayers, however, were not answered. Injuries aside, football came close to missing out on Falcao's predatory forward play altogether, having nearly opted for baseball when living in Venezuela as a child. *"I played it and was competing at a very high level. My father realised that I'd have to make a decision and decided that we should go back to Colombia so that I could focus solely on football. I had big potential at the time because I became good at it very quickly and if I'd kept playing, I could've gone very far in the sport."*

Struggles to fully recover from such a disastrous injury bled into equally ill-fated spells in England with Manchester United and Chelsea where the man Spanish speakers called "El Tigre" became something of a perpetual punchline for Premier League fans. It seemed as if European football had been robbed of one of its great strikers with a return to the form that Porto and Atletico fans enjoyed looking increasingly implausible as the Colombian moved into his thirties. Success in the Principality has been a long time coming for Falcao, but his unimaginable rebirth has been more astounding than even the player himself might have imagined.

The scene of his comeback is perhaps all the more implausible. Despite their initial outlay on the constellation of stars that included Jérémy Toulalan, João Moutinho, Rodriguez and Falcao, Monaco quickly changed tact to become the bastion of youth development that has served the club so well in recent times. As his stay in England petered out and the Chinese Super League beckoned, Falcao, now an elder statesman, seemed to be redundant to the new, fresh-faced Monaco side under Leonardo Jardim, especially after a long history of friction between club and player. Almost from the moment Falcao posed on a yacht with a red and white halved shirt overlooking Monte Carlo Bay, the relationship between club and player has been a tumultuous one.

The marquee acquisition of the Dmitry Rybolovlev era, the Russian oligarch who rescued Monaco from Ligue 2 obscurity, where the Principality club were incredibly bottom at Christmas in 2011, Falcao joined in the summer of 2013 but the Colombian's presence at the Stade Louis II was immediately brought into question. *Marca* reported that the player had almost immediately asked to leave before the end of that summer window, allegedly unimpressed with the 'sporting project,' with long-term admirers Real Madrid shooting longing glances across the Pyrenees. Real Madrid president Florentino Perez told *Punto Pelota* that Falcao wanted to join his current crop of 'Galacticos' at the Bernabeu. The player on the other hand duly reaffirmed, publicly at least, that he *"believed in the Monaco project"*. Meanwhile, rumours continued to persist that the LFP's, and former French President Francois Hollande's, attempts to make Monaco adhere to the same rate of tax as the rest of the league, a huge 75% for top earners in France, would cut Monaco salaries in half and force Falcao and James out.

Despite his initial form, abruptly halted by Ertek's challenge, Falcao's wavering faith in the Monaco revolution seemingly grew even thinner as he recovered, as the Monaco team he returned to was markedly different. Rybolovlev and right-hand man Vadim Vasilyev, had changed their policy dramatically over the course of the year. Although this turned out to be false, the seemingly modest 2014 off-season additions of Tiémoué Bakayoko and Bernardo Silva were in stark contrast to the James/Falcao whirlwind of the previous summer. Meanwhile, after his golden boot in Brazil that year, James was whisked away by the transfer hurricane that is Perez's Madrid and Falcao, now clearly wanting out, was hoping to be next. As a result, El Tigre eventually joined Manchester United on loan for the 2014/15 campaign and Chelsea for the next before, with a reputation shattered, his form non-existent and suitors diminishing, Falcao returned to Monaco tail firmly between legs ahead of last season. Beaten and belittled perhaps but quietly focused Falcao remained, determined to prove his worth and show that his predatory instincts remained undimmed. After an explosive opening half of last season, three separate offers from the Chinese Super League clubs were rejected last January, Falcao explaining; *"I want to win with Monaco and show that I have come back to 100%, that is my motivation."* That was the correct decision.

With the exhilarating emergence of Kylian Mbappé, Fabinho's Player of the Year worthy campaign and the breakout seasons from Silva, Benjamin Mendy and Bakayoko, which instigated their own mammoth transfers, Falcao's influence both in terms of goals and leadership on Monaco's glorious title-winning season has perhaps been understandably overlooked in some quarters, amid the furore of Jardim's carefully orchestrated ambush of their Parisian rivals.

Despite Falcao's early season Champions' League resurgence, scoring in both legs against Fenerbahce in the qualifiers, a troublesome hamstring issue followed by a nasty concussion, as a result of a collision with OGC Nice keeper Yoan Cardinale, forced the Monaco forward to miss 11 of 15 games from August to October. It goes to show how influential Falcao's presence was for Jardim's Ligue 1 winners as it was not until he was able to forge a consistent place in the side that the title charge truly gathered pace. A draw with Guingamp and a 3-1 loss at Toulouse also amounted to potentially crucial points dropped in Falcao's absence.

From Falcao's return against Montpellier at the end of October to the late December loss to Lyon, Jardim's charges last defeat of the whole Ligue 1 season, Monaco, with Falcao finally hungry, fit and firing, were insatiable in attack. Those intervening eight Ligue 1 outings produced six wins, two draws and 30 goals, nine from the Columbian as fellow top six contenders Marseille were unceremoniously dispatched 4-0 at the Stade Louis II, as were Bordeaux away from home, while Nancy and Montpellier had six rattled past them.

Where Monaco had been exciting and flamboyant across the autumn as Silva, Thomas Lemar, Valère Germain, Fabinho and company proved to be a thrilling attacking threat, Falcao's return made Jardim's Monaco ruthless and, as it proved, unstoppable. *"I was always sure that when I had continuity in matches and minutes, my form would return to the level I was used to and the goals, as a matter of consequence, would come,"* Falcao explained to CNN.

It turned out that Falcao, ingeniously installed as captain by Jardim upon his return, proved to be the perfect fit for this youthful Monaco side. His lingering stature, experience and willingness to prove himself added a sense of stability and assuredness to that incarnation of Monaco that few others were in a position to provide. Falcao, as one of the few more well-travelled players with major trophy winning chops, guided the team through crunch games and produced crucial goals at pivotal times.

Without him leading the way, and Kamil Glik anchoring the side at the back, Monaco could have descended into something akin to Kevin Keegan's 1996 Newcastle team; a joyful and enthralling team but ultimately an unsuccessful one. The faith Jardim placed in Falcao proved to be one of his most important moves of the whole season, as, without it, Monaco may have found themselves on the wrong side of the fine margins that won them the title.

With Falcao eventually partnered with the soaring Kylian Mbappé in attack, Monaco incredibly won 18 of their final 20 Ligue 1 games only drawing at SC Bastia and in Paris, a game they should have won comfortably were it not for a questionable penalty decision in favour of their under-pressure Parisian hosts, to romp home to a monumental Ligue 1 title win. Falcao ended the year with 21 league goals in 29 Ligue 1 outings, seven of which were as a substitute. Despite his impressive goal tally, an obvious response from the average and uninitiated Premier League fan was to point to the difference in class between the English and French domestic tier leagues as the reason for Falcao's return to form.

However, the Monaco man proved equally prolific in the Champions' League, netting seven times in his 10 starts as *Les Monegasques* enjoyed an equally enthralling run to the final four, dispensing with Pep Guardiola's Manchester City and Borussia Dortmund along the way. A glorious chip over Willy Caballero as part of what turned out to be a hugely important double in a classic encounter at the Etihad proved to be a personal highlight during a stupendous year for Falcao.

Having been close to laughed out of England, seemingly robbed of his prowess in front of goal by terrible injuries and his once bright career apparently winding down, Radamel Falcao has risen again to the summit of the European game with vintage displays reminiscent of previous memorable triumphs. The Colombian marksman's wide-eyed, arms spread, head-waving celebrations are once again a common sight, as the Monaco captain led his side to what could be the player's and the club's greatest ever achievement in usurping what might have been unending PSG dominance.

As one member of staff at Atlético Madrid once told *El País*: *"On the morning of the game, he's friendly and open. But by the time you leave the hotel for the ground, he's completely different. The contrast is huge. He leaves the dressing room last and if you see his face at that point, he's no longer Falcao; he's The Tiger. His only thought is the ball."*



KYLIAN MBAPPE



1

Club: PSG

Position: Attacker

Born: Bondy

Age: 19

Nationality



International Caps 10

At Club Since 2017

League Games in 2017 32

"Mbappé is a nice boy. He is not yet 19 but he didn't go crazy when the media storm erupted around him. He has to deal with pressure, but he has his head on his shoulders which means he can be even better. A bright future awaits him. He can be a world leader, I have no doubt."

In a recent interview with a Polish daily, Kamil Glik was rightly effusive in his praise of his former Monaco teammate, Kylian Mbappé, who turned 19 in December. Based on the heights that the young striker scaled at such a young age last season, the big centre back's words, which do seem to verge on the hyperbolic, have every chance of coming true.

His new club, Paris Saint-Germain, certainly seem to think so, having ponied up what is rumoured to be a fee of something in the €180m range to sign the youngster, an amount that will be paid in full when the dubious obligation to buy clause in this manufactured loan deal with Monaco comes into effect.

While that fee may seem on the extortionate side of things, that is only natural as Monaco would have been leery of strengthening a direct rival. That said, it may seem like a bargain come the next season or two, given that Mbappé has continued to score goals, even as he has had the odd trying moment in adapting to playing in a new position and in a new system. Add in that fee and the importance that he has been gaining for France ahead of the summer's World Cup, and the pressure that Glik mentioned swells to astronomical proportions.

Born in the Paris suburb of Bondy, Mbappé was fortunate enough to receive a footballing education from the famed Clairefontaine academy which he joined in 2011. From there, he caught the eye of Monaco and joined the Principality side in 2013, quickly progressing through the U-19 and reserve sides. Played both on the left and as a centre forward, he was a decent enough goal-scorer, but his small frame did not see him sparkle as he would, playing against players older and more developed than he. A call to the first team beckoned, though, and he received his first professional action against Caen in December 2015.

Making his full debut in the latter stages of the 2015-16 season, Mbappé became Monaco's youngest-ever player, and youngest-ever goal-scorer shortly thereafter, accomplishing both feats before his eighteenth birthday. Initially played on the left, he was soon deployed in more central role, and nearly immediately earned inevitable comparisons to Thierry Henry, who had experienced a similar change in position and likewise been a precocious goal-scorer. Henry's style of play took more advantage of his height, the former Arsenal man standing 1.88m, but Mbappé can rightly be compared to the Gunners legend as a driven player who not only has great talent but plays with apparent passion and hunger for success.

That summer saw Mbappé's reputation further enhanced as he sparkled at the U-19 European Championships. France are generally one of Europe's powerhouses at that level, but the way in which they took apart opposing sides that summer was something to behold, and Mbappé, played on the left of a 4-3-3, was at the heart of things for Ludovic Batelli's side. Still, though, when last season began for Monaco, Mbappé was, while not exactly an afterthought, still regarded as one for the future. Even as Monaco adopted an open, attacking style, Mbappé was on the sidelines for much of the early part of the season, having suffered a concussion against Guingamp in the season's first match.

Indeed, he did not make another start until late October, which makes his record last season (26 goals across all competitions) all the more remarkable. Quickly displacing club stalwart Valère Germain as the preferred partner for Radamel Falcao, Mbappé's pace and inventiveness made him the ideal outlet for stretching play on the counter. Unselfish as well, he laid on fourteen assists, including eight in the league, but really made his name in the Champions' League.

Monaco had topped what had seemed a challenging group without much involvement from Mbappé, with the youngster featuring from the bench in three matches. Even with his good form in the league, few would have ranked the Ligue 1 leaders as favourites to beat Manchester City, their opponents in the Round of 16. In a goal-filled tie, Monaco managed to advance on away goals, but it was Mbappé's electric performance in the second leg that captured the imagination. Having lost 5-3 at the Etihad, Monaco needed to win by two clear goals to secure their progress to the quarter-finals. Even with Manchester City fielding a patchy back line in the return leg, the hosts would have their work cut out for them.

After Mbappé opened the scoring on eight minutes, though, the result, and Monaco's advancing, seemed almost pre-ordained. With Falcao out with injury, Mbappé partnered Germain up top, and took full advantage of his fellow academy graduate's willing running, tormenting City's back-line and making sure the result never seemed in doubt, even after Leroy Sané had pulled one back in the second half. This match can thus be seen in retrospect as perhaps the moment a star was born; up to that point, Falcao had been the focal point of Monaco's attack, but in the Colombian's absence, with the stakes high, Mbappé took the team on his shoulders and deservedly earned far more plaudits than his previous supporting role would have.

Things did not appear to get any easier for Monaco in the next round though, as the Principality side were drawn against another side eager to play on the front foot in Borussia Dortmund. Poor tactical decision-making from Thomas Tuchel certainly played into Monaco's hands over the two legs, but there was no question that if Mbappé had not been noticed for his performances against City, his complete demolition of Dortmund sealed his reputation as a superstar in the making. With a brace in the opening leg, a 3-2 away win, and another goal in the return fixture, Mbappé had scored five goals in four matches in the knockout rounds of the Champions' League, all before his nineteenth birthday.

Monaco were outclassed by a well-prepared and superbly organised Juventus side in the next round, but Mbappé still did his best to make life nervy for the Bianconeri, with Gianluigi Buffon forced into some fine saves from the youngster over the two legs. Elimination in the domestic cups was a bit of a disappointment, but in the league, Mbappé continued to prove himself, adding vital assists in a win against Lille that all but sealed the title. At the same time, he was earning his first caps for France, where he has become a regular as well, even if he has perhaps been the primary beneficiary of the absence of Ousmane Dembélé.

Since coming to PSG, Mbappé has continued to largely impress, even if there have been some minor difficulties. He has certainly said all the right things, telling the club's website, *"I felt at home here straight away; it's been really ideal for me to settle in to a new team. Everyone has talked to me, we joke about as if we've known each other for years already. The guys have also looked to protect me, they've really tried to do everything possible to enable me to focus on giving my best on the pitch."*

Mbappé has given his best, that much is certain, but despite a good goal-scoring record both domestically and in Europe, he has at times been guilty of the odd bit of immaturity in his play. In draws against the likes of Montpellier and a narrow win against Monaco, shooting when he might have passed and failing to play wide enough to keep the team's 4-3-3 holding its shape have led to criticism in some quarters.

That said, Mbappé is playing a new position, that of a right-sided attacker, in a system to which he is unaccustomed. It is only natural that there be a bedding-in period, especially with so many of his teammates having a wealth of experience and understanding with each other prior to his arrival. The step up to Paris Saint-Germain, a club with grander ambitions was never going to be easy, but even with those aforementioned caveats, he has generally been superb.

He reflected further on his new situation in that same interview: *"You have to raise your game to the level of those around you. Then you have to maintain that high level, and by doing this I think I am improving naturally. I really think I've progressed since I've been here. This is just the beginning, so hopefully I can keep going now and keep getting better."*

Even if, at times, Mbappé can be a bit single-minded and wasteful, he shares that outlook with many of the world's best, driven by a belief in his ability and singular talent to change the outcome of a match. While there is certainly reason to be critical of Mbappé in the odd instance, perspective must remain important. It is only now, as of this writing, that he has even been a regular starter for a year, and he is still frightfully young. He has shown flashes of immaturity, and poor decision-making, that much is true, but much of what may be perceived as selfishness may also be rooted in a desire to win at all costs.

A recent example came in a match against Lille at the Parc des Princes. Having just lost two matches in a row, once each in the league and in Europe, the leaders were under no small amount of pressure. While most of his teammates, save perhaps Javier Pastore, seemed to play with a diffidence that has plagued the side too often under Unai Emery, Mbappé took to the match with an uncommon fire. After helping to open the scoring with a lovely scooped ball for Ángel Di María, his determination was key to sealing the result after Lille had sent their 'keeper up for a corner.

Pouncing on the loose ball, Mbappé ran the length of the pitch, defenders trailing in his wake as he finished neatly to finish up a 3-1 win for the hosts. It was a margin that flattered the leaders, to be sure, but it also served to underline the desire and passion for the game that drives Mbappé's play. In showing that much will and energy in the match's dying seconds, he, rather than any of his more experienced teammates, ensured his side a result that would do much to lift the pressure on them after a nervy pair of matches.

Learning to strike the right balance between channeling that manifest passion and consistently playing a team game will serve Mbappé well in the months and years to come, but for now, fans of Ligue 1 should enjoy a player who is unquestionably the world's best young talent.

10 TO WATCH IN 2018

Ten of France's most exciting young talents; our picks for a breakout year in the months to come.

PEDRO REBOCHO (22)

CLUB: EA GUINGAMP



Arriving from Benfica mid-way through 2017 for an unassuming €550k fee, few gave Guingamp's signing of Portuguese youth international Pedro Rebocho more than a second glance. Blessed with an impressive mix of exemplary close control and the tenacity and acceleration required for a full-back to drive himself out of tricky defensive situations, Rebocho has been locked in a fierce battle for a starting spot in Antoine Kombouaré's side with PSG youth academy product Félix Eboa-Eboa in the first half of the 2017/18 campaign. Despite Rebocho's game in its totality being far more refined than that of his colleague, Eboa-Eboa's superior physicality has given the manager such a selection headache that both individuals have been used equally so far this season. Having learned French from scratch in just three months and soliciting interest from Marseille & St Étienne in the meantime, Rebocho's stock is rising and he will surely be the undisputed starting left-back for Guingamp come the season's end.

HOUSSEM AOUAR (19)

CLUB: LYON



Currently proclaimed by European media as "the" breakout star to come out of the Ligue 1 2017/18 season, Aouar is the latest reminder of the terrifyingly consistent turnover of one of Europe's most heralded youth academies at Lyon. The technical dexterity of the teenager of Algerian descent has enabled him to pin down a starting spot in Bruno Génésio's first team in recent months, making *Les Gones* fans forget about Memphis Depay when playing as a left-winger and orchestrating Lyon attacks when deployed in the centre of midfield. Aouar's fluidity of movement and effortless penchant for beating opposing defenders in one-on-one situations, without being extraordinarily speedy, reminds viewers of team-mate Nabil Fekir when the latter individual first broke into Didier Deschamps' French national team. A stupendous talent who is destined to compete for world football's highest honours.

MARTIN TERRIER (20)

CLUB: RC STRASBOURG



Integral to his footballing style and mirrored in his personality off the pitch, Terrier's success to date has come as a result of a mélange of dogged determination and levelheadedness. Insisting on a loan move away from Lille this summer after conversations with management, Terrier ends 2017 as a cornerstone of Thierry Laurey's Strasbourg side who have thus far outperformed all expectations as a newly promoted outfit. The French youth international is in the midst of exploding into one of Ligue 1's most dangerous attackers, able to play on both wings and centrally owing to a combination of intelligent run-making, typically off the outside shoulder of centre-backs, and lightening-sharp acceleration (a trait that ensures that his defensive contribution is exceptional). This second attribute aided him to score one of the goals of the season when he dribbled more than half of the pitch before coolly slotting past Benoît Costil in a December victory against Bordeaux. In the midst of such bleak times of the type that Terrier's parent club are currently enduring, at least his return this summer will be something to which fans can look forward.

SAMUEL GRANDSIR (21)

CLUB: ESTAC TROYES



A quietly industrious winger who parallels Ousmane Dembélé in peculiarly several aspects, with a similar set of skills, the same region of birth and both having played for tiny Evreux, Samuel Grandsir embodies the gutsy attacking flare that characterises Troyes' Ligue 1 performances this season. Having set up ultra-defensively and failing spectacularly the last time the Champagne side had a crack at staying in the French top flight for more than a single season at a time, Jean-Louis Garcia's faith in an opposite approach has been handsomely repaid. Grandsir ends the calendar year with a pair of goals and four assists in Ligue 1 at the halfway point. This, though a respectable tally for a player at a side in the lower to mid-table, does not do his vivacity and awesome physicality justice. Picture that alongside the fact that Grandsir possesses composure far beyond his years when producing a final ball and you begin to understand just how devastating the France U21 man could become.

UMUT BOZOK (21)

CLUB: NIMES OLYMPIQUE



Umut Bozok is no ordinary centre forward. As we head into the New Year, the Turkish youth international sits atop of the Ligue 2 top-scorer chart, having scored 14 goals in 17 appearances with the first half of the campaign now at a close. A black belt in karate and a piano virtuoso, Bozok listens to classical music before every match because it provides him with peace of mind during those critical seconds he has to take a match-altering touch or shape a goal-scoring shot in the opposition's box. Whilst his physicality is undoubtedly his most effective weapon in the stylistically prosaic and cautious French second division, he is beginning to develop a late run-making strategy that shows a footballing intelligence that few in French football naturally possess, no matter in which division they play.

KENNY TETE (22)

CLUB: LYON



As a member of Lyon President Aulas' summer crop of imported youngsters, Dutch international right-back Tete has joined the likes of Mariano Diaz and Bertrand Traoré in hitting the ground running in the French top flight. With a modest frame, it was not obvious that the former Ajax man would become an instant hit for *Les Gones*, but it appears to be turning out that way. No individual in French football has thus far approached the Herculean challenge of being Neymar's opposite man more intelligently and with greater success than Tete, in a game in which Lyon matched PSG all the way, their eventual undoing being an own goal and a questionable penalty decision. Tete went toe-to-toe with Neymar and matched his vivacity, consistently striking the right balance between staying tight enough to the Brazilian, without putting himself in danger of being spun. With four league assists to date, Tete's industrious and balanced performances, deep rooted in his positional intelligence, have made him an asset both offensively and defensively, allowing him to dispatch ex-Manchester United right-back Rafael as competition in the process.

VALENTIN ROSIER (21)

CLUB: DIJON FCO



Plucked from the depths of the French fourth division, Rosier has been a professional footballer for just under two years. A rugged overall style is departed from only by the Frenchman's technically-sound dribbling ability. Initially a wide midfielder as a teen, able to play both on the left and right, Rosier has been used in both full-back positions in Dijon's 2017/18 league campaign. Often a little guilty of overplaying and lacking the intelligence required for securing possession which generally comes with greater experience, Rosier is far from the finished article. However, as his November call-up to the France U21s set-up shows, his raw attributes alone make for a beacon of potential that the French Football Federation wishes to tap into. On his day, Rosier is electric. Look no further than his one and only Ligue 1 assist to date in an encounter with Strasbourg. Here, he dumbfounded the opposition defence by using his engine to surge into the box, and produced a perfect cross, despite being off-balance.

THIAGO MAIA (20)

CLUB: LILLE OSC



Lauded as one of Brazil's most promising defensive-minded talents for a generation, it would not be unfair to say that Thiago Maia has been a considerable disappointment since setting foot in France at Lille in the most recent summer transfer window. Granted, there were a series of factors that worked against him, notably Marcelo Bielsa's insistence that the ex-Santos man begin the campaign in a completely unfamiliar left-back position. This tactical decision chained Maia to the touchline when his skill-set obviously lends itself to marauding along the width of the football field, breaking up play incisively and with precision. With the steady hand of defensive-minded coach Christophe Galtier replacing El Loco at the helm from the start of 2018, Maia will almost certainly be assured the necessary playing time in the correct position to properly acclimatise to a more physically-demanding division than he is used to and to make the Lille faithful forget about his 6-month false start engendered in tumultuous circumstances.

MOUSSA NIAKHATE (21)

CLUB: FC METZ



A transition to top-flight football for any footballer that has never experienced the highest echelons of the sport before comes with a myriad of challenges. Add to that a complete positional overhaul and you begin to understand what Moussa Niakhaté has had to contend with in his first six months at struggling Metz. Signing from Valenciennes in summer, the ex-Lille youth product was considered as one of Ligue 2's brightest defensive prospects during the 2016/17 campaign, but as a left-back. Owing to a series of transfer departures and untimely injuries to their replacements, the Franco-Malian's inexperience in this position has hurt *Les Grenats*, who sit bottom of the Ligue 1 pile at the half-way stage, but Niakhaté has still managed a series of bright moments. His aerial dominance and breathing-down-the-neck approach to marking opposition attackers have been some of the only sources of satisfaction for a side that seems doomed to relegation. Whether he moves back to his role on the left flank or not, Niakhaté will undoubtedly continue to impress.

GIOVANI LO CELSO (21)

CLUB: PSG



The capital club has been a destination in the last half-decade where promising young talent has withered, or even sometimes died under the weight of little to no first team opportunities. Kingsley Coman, Hervin Ongenda, Youssef Sabaly and Jean-Kévin Augustin; the list goes on. Giovanni Lo Celso could have been forgiven for supposing that he might suffer the same fate as the aforementioned cast. Confined to just four appearances and only one start during the first six months of his time in France, the Argentine has in the second half of the calendar year been an unlikely source of box-of-tricks creativity that has been used to good effect to unlock some of Ligue 1's most obstinate defences. With a lack of midfielders in Unai Emery's current squad as is combined with Thiago Motta's persistent string of injuries, the Spanish tactician has become creative with his choices in the centre of midfield, and Lo Celso has been a great beneficiary of these series of events. Javier Pastore and Angel di Maria could both be forced to leave Paris in the January window as the club chases to close the financial gap that will enable them to remain within the confines of Financial Fair Play regulations. Luckily for PSG, Lo Celso has the potential to harbour both of the individuals' best qualities himself.

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Note: All profiles were written in December 2017

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