



2012/13 LIGUE 1 PREVIEWS

AC AJACCIO

COACH: ALEX DUPONT



Newcomers to Ligue 1 for the 2011-2012 season, Ajaccio were predicted by many to go straight back down again and, although they only secured safety in the last match of the season, with an impressive 2-0 away win at Toulouse, it is a testament to the team's performances during the season that their manager, Olivier Pantaloni, was shortlisted for the manager of the year award.

To general surprise, Pantaloni resigned from his post not long into the close season, citing the pressure of maintaining the club's success on a shoe-string budget (15 million euros last season). However, club president Alain Orsoni acted quickly to bring in Alex Dupont, widely thought to have been treated badly by Brest, who sacked him only five weeks before the end of last season.

Dupont, who has close to 30 years' experience in the dug-out, seems a good fit for the Corsican club, having managed similar-sized clubs throughout his management career and thus being well versed in the need to work with limited resources. By all accounts, Dupont has settled well into life at the Stade Francois Coty and as he embarks on a new season, he will know that his mission is the same as Pantaloni's was last year: staying up. Pre-season signs are relatively good so far, including an away win at Bordeaux and a draw at Toulouse.

Last season's relative success was achieved in the standard manner for a team of limited means - few star names but a great team ethic, everyone sharing the workload and ensuring that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The promising news for Les Ours and their fans is that the nucleus of that team remains. Last season's top scorer with six goals, Ilan, has left for Bastia, and midfielder Christian Kinkela has not had his contract renewed.

However, Dupont has cannily brought in a handful of players at no cost at all, including ex-Metz goalkeeper Oumar Sissoko, young Belgian defender Brandon Deville from Anderlecht, Malian international midfielder Sigamary Diarra from Lorient and midfielder Ricardo Faty from Aris Salonika. The last two are the most likely of the new recruits to receive regular game time within a settled side, where the biggest stars are arguably attacking midfielder Johan Cavalli (who was the end of season hero for his brace against Toulouse which kept Ajaccio in Ligue 1), and undoubtedly flamboyant Mexican goalkeeper Guillermo Ochoa, who alone is worth a few crucial points a season.

Those crucial points will mean even more this time, as Ajaccio begin their campaign with a two-point penalty, imposed for crowd trouble in their final home match of the season. Those two points may prove to be fatal if the season is as closely fought as the last. Conversely, however, they also give an indication of one of the other factors that Ajaccio have going for them - their home crowd and the hostile atmosphere that Corsican passion can create. It is not by chance that Ajaccio are unbeaten at home in the league since December 2011. That Corsican passion will be of particular interest now that Bastia have been promoted, and the brace of Corsican derbies promise to be two of the most colourful matches of the Ligue 1 season.



If they are to survive again, Ajaccio will need to improve in defence: despite Ochoa's heroics, Les Ours conceded 61 goals last season - only relegated Dijon shipped more. The fact that, of the new recruits, only the promising but inexperienced Deville is a defender is a cause for concern. The other is in the striking department; with Ilan gone, more responsibility falls on the much maligned Eduardo, at the top of a 4-2-3-1 formation, to lead the line and to put away chances. He will need to improve on his tally of five goals last season, and rely on support from Cavalli. Ajaccio were somewhat draw specialists last season, with 14 of their matches ending one point apiece. Despite their defensive woes, a little more clinical finishing could equate to a few extra points which could be crucial at the end of the season.

With the colour and passion of the Corsican fans, the ever popular Ochoa in goal and with the good PR of having a very popular charity as their main shirt sponsor, Ajaccio will no doubt win a lot of neutral support this season. However, I am not optimistic that this will be enough and I am reluctantly tipping them to be relegated.

As for a player to watch out for, I am going to go for new signing Ricardo Faty. Much was expected of him when he first appeared on the scene at Strasbourg, as a Clairefontaine graduate and French under-21 international. However, he became one of many French players whose careers suffered from moving abroad too early, and he struggled at Roma and Bayer Leverkusen. He has recently found form at Salonika and become a Senegalese international, but he is now drinking at the last chance saloon in terms of the top leagues. This is a great opportunity for him and his new team; if he can establish himself as a reliable, effective midfielder, he could help Ajaccio to remain in Ligue 1 for another season.

FFW PREDICTS - 18TH PLACE

SC BASTIA

COACH: FREDERIC HANTZ



The 2011-12 campaign was an unprecedented triumph for Bastia, as they sealed a return to the top flight by outlasting Reims and Troyes to win the Ligue 2 title. Il Turchini were imperious throughout the campaign, and led by the experienced head of former Monaco and Paris Saint-Germain midfielder Jerome Rothen, the Corsicans lost just nine games all season, scoring 61 goals in the process.

Most of the goals came from the veteran forward pairing of Tolifou Maoulida and David Suarez, who scored 22 goals between them. Fellow striker Yassine El-Azzouzi also contributed greatly with eight goals. Bastia despite their depth of veteran talent, also relied heavily on young midfielders Wahbi Khazri and Sadio Diallo, and the two 21-year-olds did not disappoint, Khazri getting nine goals while Diallo notched eight as the Corsicans displayed a knack for finding goals from all areas of the team.

Despite Bastia's free-scoring form, the Ligue 2 title was not clinched until the 35th game of the season with a 3-0 win over Metz thanks to two goals from Diallo and one from Maoulida. That comfortable victory booked their place in Ligue 1 for the first time since 2005, and the 1978 Uefa Cup Finalists can now look forward to a derby with island rivals AC Ajaccio.

Bastia have recruited heavily this summer without spending a great deal of money. With David Suarez leaving the club for Ligue 2 side Arles-Avignon, Manager Frederic Hantz moved quickly to strengthen his forward line, securing the services of Bordeaux striker Anthony Modeste on a season-long loan and former West Ham United forward Ilan on a free transfer from AC Ajaccio.

The Corsicans' primary aim for the new season will undoubtedly be to retain to their Ligue 1 status, and with that in mind Bastia have looked to recruit a mix of both youth and experience. 32-year-old defender Sylvain Marchal has been brought in on a free transfer from Saint-Etienne to strengthen the back four, while 23-year-old midfielder Sambou Yatabare and 25-year-old Julian Palmieri - who began his career at Bastia - have joined the Ligue 1 newcomers from Monaco and Istres respectively.

Goalkeeper Landry Bonnefoi will fight for a starting spot with Brazilian stopper Macedo Novaes who has joined from Amiens for an undisclosed fee. However, any expense will have been offset by the sale of Diallo; the Guinean midfielder will now play his football in Brittany as Stade Rennais sealed his signature after agreeing a fee to take him to the Stade de Route de Lorient.

Had he not elected to move to pastures new, Diallo would surely have been the player featured in this segment. However, with the Guinean international choosing to chance his arm with a different Ligue 1 side, the spotlight will instead fall on Bastia's other midfield livewire, Wahbi Khazri.



The experience of Captain Jerome Rothen will undoubtedly be vital if Il Turchini are to attain their goal of Ligue 1 survival, and fans will look to the likes of Ilan, Modeste and Maoulida to spearhead another free-scoring campaign like the one they enjoyed last season. However, neither Ilan nor Modeste have ever been particularly prolific in front of goal and therefore goals from other areas of the pitch are likely to be required if Bastia's tilt at a strong mid-table position is to be a successful one.

That is where Khazri comes in, the 22-year-old scored nine goals last season in Bastia's charge to Ligue 2 glory, and his rapid upturn in form has not gone unnoticed. English side Blackburn Rovers were linked with the midfielder back in March, and his array of eye-catching displays have also seen his international fortunes rise dramatically.

The Corsican native originally opted to represent Tunisia at international level, however he only made a single appearance for their U-20 setup before being called up to the French U-21 side by Manager Erick Mombaerts in November of last year. Khazri now has a good opportunity to advance through the ranks of the national team, and with a strong first season in Ligue 1 under his belt, he could well be representing Les Tricolores at the 2013 U-21 European Championships in Israel.

Last season, Khazri was without doubt one of Il Turchini's most influential players, as he added a superb eight assists to his impressive goal tally. Able to play on either flank and in behind a main striker, Khazri's versatility could well be a huge asset to a side largely lacking in dynamism. If Khazri can replicate his marvellous form from last term, then Bastia's task of remaining in the top flight of French football will be made a whole lot easier.

FFW PREDICTS - 15TH PLACE

GIRONDINS DE BORDEAUX

COACH: FRANCIS GILLOT



Bordeaux won just two games in the opening three months of the 2011/12 Ligue 1 campaign in what was a woeful start to the season for Les Girondins. However, their form improved in mid-season to pull them away from danger.

In February FCGB competed in what was perhaps the best game of the season, as they squandered a 4-1 lead at Lille, who levelled in the 90th minute through Nolan Roux. However, Bordeaux had the final say when Ludovic Obraniak - who had just joined the club from Les Dogues in January - hit home his second of the game with a stunning volley in injury time to give Francis Gillot's men the win.

That triumph failed to ignite Bordeaux's season however, and it wasn't until late April that Les Girondins really found momentum. A late penalty from Benoit Tremoulinas gifted Gillot's side a draw at Nancy, and following that reprieve they went on to win their last six games of the season, striker Yoann Gouffran playing a key role as Les Girondins snatched a 5th place finish and a spot in the Europa League.

Typically, Bordeaux sealed their place in Europe in an end of season thriller, overcoming Saint-Etienne 3-2. Striker Cheick Diabate netted a double before Gouffran clinched victory with a 68th minute strike.

It has been a quiet summer for Les Girondins, there have been no new faces through the door at Stade Chaban Delmas, while midfielder Salif Sane departed for Nancy and striker Anthony Modeste joined Bastia on a season long loan. Modeste has never managed to make his mark for FCGB despite early promise, and the 24-year-old will be hoping that a year with the newly-promoted Corsican club will kick-start his career.

Midfielder Gregorz Krychowiak has departed for Stade de Reims while Evan Chevalier has joined GFCO Ajaccio on loan. Serbian defender Vujadin Savic will spend this season on loan at German 2. Bundesliga side Dresden and Argentinian midfielder Emiliano Sala has been loaned to National side US Orleans, but overall Gillot will undoubtedly be pleased to have kept hold of the nucleus of a squad that surprised many with an impressive late season charge.

Bordeaux's pre-season form has been mixed, but on the whole their preparation for the new campaign has been solid. Gouffran has already found the net this summer, as he scored the only goal in a 1-0 win over Spanish side Real Sociedad.

It would be easy, given his 14 league goals last term, to pick Gouffran as Bordeaux's player to watch. Henri Saviet - who was featured in last season's Le50 - would also be a good candidate. However, the 20-year-old has so far failed to make the step up to the first team and a loan spell at a lesser club may well prove more beneficial to the striker's career.



Bordeaux have an exciting team, but is far from a young one; many of their squad failed to shine in the early years of their careers, but since moving to the Delmas a good number have gone on to prosper in recent times.

One such player is 27-year-old midfielder Nicolas Maurice-Belay, who enjoyed a promising season in Bordeaux after joining from Sochaux in the summer of 2011. Maurice-Belay failed to make the grade at Monaco after coming through the club's youth ranks, and made just 15 appearances for the principality side before eventually signing for Les Lionceaux after a loan spell at Sedan. Maurice-Belay did enjoy increased playing time in the years he spent at the Stade Auguste Bonal, but still failed to make a real impression until his final season with the club, when he netted three goals and notched seven assists.

That proved to be enough to convince Gillot to take a gamble on Maurice-Belay as he brought him to Bordeaux on a free transfer, and the former France U-20 international duly repaid the faith shown in him, as he found the net four times - scoring twice in the 5-4 thriller with Lille - and chalked up five assists in a strong first season in Western France.

The midfielder can play on the left side of midfield or in behind a lone striker, and his versatility may prove vital as Les Girondins look to build on the success of the previous term. Gouffran is sure to be a marked man in Ligue 1 after amassing an impressive goal-scoring tally last season. He and towering striker Cheick Diabate are just two of the many threats that

Gillot's side possess, however if Bordeaux are to replicate that form, service from the likes of Maurice-Belay will surely be key. If he can improve on his promising first season with FCGB, then the 2008-09 Champions may be able to gatecrash the top six once more.

FFW PREDICTS - 7TH PLACE

STADE BRESTOIS 29

COACH: LANDRY CHAUVIN



With only weeks to go before the end of the season it looked a sure thing that Brest would not be part of Ligue 1 for the new season. The sacking of Alex Dupont looked like the final nail in the coffin for SB29. Only a handful of games remained, the team looked despondent, and the new man in charge, Corentin Martins, as good as he was as a player, had virtually no experience at the highest level. Beaten 4-0 by fellow strugglers Auxerre in his first game, that was it - Brest were all but down. Then, somehow, they managed to win two of their last four games, and with Caen's self destruction Brest had managed to knock on death's door but survive.

Former Nantes manager Landry Chauvin has come in to pick up the reigns permanently and his first aim will be to keep the club in Ligue 1. Anything more than that seems very unlikely, even a mid-table finish these days still keeps you guessing right to the end. This is Chauvin's first test in Ligue 1 and it will be very interesting to see how he handles himself and what new ideas he can bring to this club. Alex Dupont is a hero for the fans that fill the Stade Francis le Blé, and his shoes might seem a little big for Chauvin to fill.

It's not just in the dugout where changes have been made; there has been lots of movement in the playing squad and it is difficult to assess where Brest are now. Gone is the experience of Steeve Elana, Romain Poyet and Jonathan Zebina but in come Geoffrey Dernis, Alexis Thebaux, Kamel Chafni and journeyman full-back Bernard Mendy. If Mendy can enjoy the same Indian summer that Zebina enjoyed with his move to Brittany then Chauvin could have a very experienced midfield and defence.



The problem comes from the same place it did for both Dupont and Martins - how do they replace the goals of Nolan Roux? Yes, Roux moved eight months ago now, but Brest still can't seem to find the back of the net with regularity. Still on the books are Jonathan Ayite, Eden Ben Basat and Alexandre Alphonse, but not one of them looks like being a goal threat. Good news is that Issam Jemaa has gone, so that instantly gives you a better chance upfront. Now the lack of firepower puts a lot of pressure on the shoulders of young Charlison Benschop, the 22-year striker moving to France from Holland's Eredivisie who comes into the season as a bit of an unknown quantity; let's hope we're talking about converted chances and not missed chances.



One player the new manager can call upon is the mercurial Bruno Grougi, by far the best player in the Brest squad and there is no doubt he will still pull the strings from the midfield; the question, however, is from what part of the midfield Grougi will be conducting. Easily better when pushed forward behind a striker, it looks from the pre-season games so far that Grougi will operate behind a three man attack in a 4-2-3-1. An experienced midfield of Culma, Grougi, Chafni and Dernis with the addition of a talented youngster such as Sissoko or Guideleye should make the middle of the park a difficult area to break down.

A 3-1 win for Brest over Rennes will no doubt give the side confidence going into the new season. It would be very, very surprising if they weren't involved in the relegation battle again this season, and the most they can possibly hope for is to be in with a chance come the final day. The defence looks strong with Johan Martial and Paul Baysee in the middle, the midfield looks to have the right amount of guile and experience. They just need to find that oh-so-vital element ... goals!

FFW PREDICTS - 17TH PLACE

EVIAN TG

COACH: PABLO CORREA



Despite a risky managerial change midway through the season, Évian finished last season in ninth place - a fantastic achievement for the top-flight first timers. That impressive finish may prove difficult to replicate, as the club have lost a number of players who were key to that success.

Punching above your weight to such a degree comes at a price as Les Croix de Savoie have found out this summer with the departures of Christian Poulsen, Thomas Kahlenberg, Jérôme Leroy and Guillaume Rippert amongst the biggest names out of the door. Manager Correa has moved to replace these players by scouring the transfer market for exceptional value but has found domestic bargains harder to come by than last year; Iheb M'barki, Zouheir Dhaouadi, Ali M'Madi, Mickaël Salamone and Djakaridja Kone are hardly names to whet the appetite but it is difficult to replicate the same quality of the outbound players when you operate on a modest budget.



Correa's ability to scour the transfer market for potential bargains is admirable but realistically Évian approach this season as a weaker side. Capable of playing excellent football and holding their own against sides with more attacking firepower, the midfield will be weaker without the Danish duo of Kahlenberg and Poulsen who were offered a chance to resurrect their faltering careers by the Savoie club. The permanent purchase of Daniel Wass however is a big plus; the young Dane enjoyed a massively impressive first season in Ligue 1 and his acquisition from Benfica shows his importance to the side. Otherwise, the team looks short of numbers and is an ageing unit.



Given the players who have left the club over the summer, the biggest question for Évian this year will be how to strike a balance between being tight in defence and potent up front. Cédric Barbosa has looked evergreen for the side since he arrived but at 36 years old, how much can Correa afford to rely on his ageing legs? The same goes for Sidney Govou who spent a large part of last season sidelined through injury.

With no Leroy from the bench and no Kahlenberg and Poulsen to provide the steel in midfield, the frontline will suffer further from the likely departure of last season's 10-goal top scorer Yannick Sagbo, before the end of the transfer window. That means Correa will have to depend on the unpredictable Kévin Bérigaud and Saber Khelifa as well as the old guard for goals. Right now there are a lot of question marks surrounding the side but of course, that can all change before the close of the window. The biggest positive for ETGFC this season is that there will probably be teams weaker than them that end up propping them up in a mid-table berth.

One player to definitely watch out for is Daniel Wass - the 23 year old Dane who had never played in Ligue 1 until last season has a burgeoning reputation. Versatile and with an eye for goals, is Wass the player to relieve the pressure on Correa's beleaguered attacking options?

FFW PREDICTS - 14TH PLACE

LOSC LILLE

COACH: RUDI GARCIA



The reigning Ligue 1 champions fought to the very end last season, they eventually relinquished their crown to Montpellier in dramatic fashion. Les Dogues went to the south of France and threw everything at Montpellier but in the 94th minute they relinquished their crown, losing to the eventual league winners in the 94th minute. In the end only a miracle would have given the northern side a chance at retaining their title but Rudi Garcia would have been happy in the end with a third place finish.

In fact during the amazing run to the title the pre-season target had been third place, so to qualify for the Champions League was the minimum requirement. For this club's development playing at Europe's top table has to be a requirement, anything less would signal a backwards step. Of course the main reason for having to finish third was the chance to usher in a new era at Lille, an era that started as soon as the final whistle signalled the 4-1 win over Nancy at the Stade Lille Metropole. The new emblem was revealed, it signalled Eden Hazard's final game in the red of Lille and it closed off their tenancy at the "temporary" stadium.

Fittingly it will be Nancy that come to town for the opening game of the new Grand Stade Lille Metropole. Hazard is now gone and it is a new look Lille team that will take on Jean Fernandez side in the second game of the season. Marvin Martin joins from Sochaux, Salomon Kalou comes in after playing in the Champions League final for Chelsea. Add to that Steeve Elana, Djibril Sidibé and Dorian Klonaridis and so far it has been an excellent summer for Les Dogues.

As well as the excellent signings there have been no unexpected departures so far. The Joe Cole experiment didn't work on the field, he was nowhere near as good an option as Kalou or Martin are now, it also gives a chance for Dmitri Payet to blossom, he did show signs of improvement during the last third of the season and the fans really do hope he turns into the sort of player he definitely has the potential to become. Much is also expected of Nolan Roux, with a full pre-season under his belt, no more confusion over his future he also has the ability to score 15+ goals this season.

Expectations around the club are exactly the same. Nothing less than a third place finish is expected from the league campaign. Garcia would love to take his side into the knock-out stages of the Champions League, but most of that will depend on the group draw. A cup run in one of the French cups would be an added bonus and the way the club is heading the tag of France's second best team could be Lille's if they can continue to build and develop in their impressive new home.

On the pitch the side actually looks more flexible with the departure of Hazard, there is no doubt his quality will be missed but the option to switch up the attack will be easier without his dependence. Rudi Garcia is able to line his side up in either a 4-2-3-1 or the more familiar 4-3-3 - this gives the coach more options in both the midfield and attack. Kalou can play all across a midfield three and could also play upfront as a #9.



Martin adds creativity and versatility to the midfield. If Pedretti and Martin could combine their passing prowess on the same pitch it would be a wonderful chance for Nolan Roux, Tulio de Melo or Kalou to get the goals.

There is a worry about the defence, the same worry that was there for most of last season. Mauro Cetto has moved on so Lille will look to Marko Basa and Aurelien Chedjou to play in the centre, and if (when) Mathieu Debuchy moves on the most competent cover in Franck Beria could be made to play at right-back. Too many points were lost last season in the closing stages of games. Go back to the 5-4 defeat to Bordeaux and the draws against Sochaux, Auxerre and Nice, each one of them at home and a potential nine points lost at home that could have been easily avoided. Enough points to have won the league. Concentration in the latter stages of games needs to improve if they are to compete on more than two fronts.

The feeling around the club is one of real positives, it is a good time to follow Les Dogues, now the new stadium is in place there are no limits to where this club could go.

FFW PREDICTS - 2ND PLACE

FC LORIENT

COACH: CHRISTIAN GOURCUFF



If one French football club was to be labelled as a work in progress, it would certainly be the FC Lorient currently shaping up for the 2012-2013 season. Back in the top flight in summer 2006, the Bretons had always assured their survival in Ligue 1 without major scares, achieving safe mid-table positions and even a 7th place in the final standing in 2009-2010. This time, however, Les Merlus were threatened with relegation until the final game-week, finishing 17th in Ligue 1.

This season, Lorient will once again primarily be looking to avoid the drop, in what is already looking like a year of transition before the club's new training centre and academy are unveiled. Indeed, Lorient is not only developing its infrastructures but also embarking on a development program with the aim to "attract, train and educate the best young players in Brittany" in a project "inspired by the FC Barcelona", according to Christian Gourcuff. To achieve this, Lorient have named a former coach of the highly-rated Stade Rennais academy, Régis Le Bris, at the head of their own academy, and President Loic Féry has invested much time and money in a program which will be the guideline for the club's mid- to long-term future.

What about short-term? Now this is where dangerous uncertainty lies. Les Merlus are coming into this season with very few certainties. Christian Gourcuff and his men will hope to better their performances from last season and avoid another late-season relegation battle. To manage that, Lorient will not only need to concede fewer goals, but principally to score many more. Badly hit by the combined departures of Kevin Gameiro (to Paris) and Morgan Amalfitano (to Marseille), who together scored 27 of Lorient's 46 goals in the 2010-2011 season, Lorient is yet to make up for the efficiency of their lost attacking duo.

In order to address their attacking worries, the Bretons have recently shown some interesting activity on the transfer market. They first managed to sign a player who had caught much attention with Auxerre last season, Alain Traoré. The man from Burkina-Faso scored nine goals for Auxerre, including four in his first four games. Equally able to play as an attacking midfielder or in a more defensive position, Traoré didn't score as regularly throughout the season, but he was certainly one of Auxerre's rare satisfactions in a dreadful season for the club from Burgundy. A few days later, they announced the capture of Ludovic Giuly. The former French international had terminated his contract with Monaco a couple of weeks earlier, and although he isn't getting any younger, he will certainly bring all his flair and goal-scoring ability to the service of a team needing goals to cap their moves.

Apart from these two arrivals, there is very little to report on the transfer market in Lorient. Sigamarry Diarra has left Lorient after three seasons in Brittany and Joel Campbell is back at Arsenal after his season-long loan. All this is making for a mainly unchanged squad which will try to exploit the difficult situations of last season to try and address its issues. The revolution will certainly not arrive on a tactical ground, however, with Christian Gourcuff sticking as ever to his game based on ball possession and rapid passing. For him, the challenge will be to find the recipe to make it count in the final third and get the ball towards his strikers Jérémy Aliadiere,



Innocent Emeghara and Kévin Monnet-Paquet in good scoring position, without losing the team's fine balance and exposing his team to fast counters on the break.

Against teams that are now used to the way his team plays and have also become accustomed to playing games on a synthetic surface (Lorient and Nancy are the only two teams in France to play their home games on a synthetic pitch), Gourcuff will either have to find out how to get the best from his men or adapt his game to get the points whether the style is convincing or not. One thing is certain: Lorient need to assure their future in Ligue 1 to build on their ambitious project of future Breton and national glory. If les Merlus fail to do so, however, the transition could turn into a long ordeal for Lorient. Failure is not permitted!

FFW PREDICTS - 11TH PLACE

OLYMPIQUE LYONNAIS

COACH: REMI GARDE



This season marks the first occasion in twelve years that Olympique Lyonnais will not compete in the Champions League. A 4th place finish last season was not enough to secure a spot at European football's top table but the side can still look forward to the Europa League in the coming season.

Lyon have found it tough to balance the books in recent times with a new stadium on the way and following years of overspending. The fact that the dominant days of the 2000s ended rather abruptly has meant that the task of remaining competitive whilst spending smartly has made Rémy Garde's task even harder. This is especially true with the financial muscle of Paris Saint-Germain coming to the fore once again this season.

With this in mind, club president Jean-Michel Aulas has said that the club may once more look to offload some of their more experienced talent. Brazilian veteran Cris is one such player, though the 35-year-old defender seems in no rush to move on in his career. Hugo Lloris was also linked with a move to the Premier League, though the rumours seem to have quietened down for the moment. Kim Kallstrom is on his way to Russia after Spartak Moscow agreed a fee with Lyon for the Swedish midfielder.

For many fans, the question may not be who is leaving the club but who will replace them. It could be argued that Lyon's smart-spending policy worked to mixed results last season although the club are likely to give some of the young talents in the squad some more first-team exposure. It is unlikely this will bring immediate results for OL but it will give these youngsters some necessary experience for the future.

Despite not qualifying for the Champions League, it cannot be said that Lyon's season was a complete failure. Lyon did win the Coupe de France, beating Quevilly 1-0, and made it to the final of the Coupe de la Ligue before being narrowly defeated by Ligue 1 rivals Marseille. This ensured that Rémy Garde was able to bring home Lyon's first trophy after three seasons without silverware. This is not a bad achievement with it being his first season in charge of the side.

With a pinch of realism, it is not expected that Lyon will be amongst the title contenders this season. It is unclear what the summer's spending plans will involve with Jean-Michel Aulas having shown interest in Ryad Boudebouz and Marvin Martin. Martin has since joined former champions Lille whilst Boudebouz attracted rumours of a move to Marseille. Fans want players to arrive at the club but the talk at the moment focuses on who is leaving.

Lyon's pre-season has had mixed results so far. The side's only friendly victory has come against MLS side Montreal Impact, albeit on penalties. Lyon did, however, defeat Ligue 1 champions Montpellier in the Trophée des Champions in New York in front of a small crowd. This match was also won on penalties.



Fans will be looking to see the impact midfielder Yoann Gourcuff can make on the side this season. It seems that the playmaker has lost some of the potential he had a few years ago and has only shown glimpses of his true talent in a Lyon shirt. Having spent plenty of transfer cash on Gourcuff at the time, Jean-Michel Aulas has been reluctant to sell, adamant that the player will come good for Lyon.

Of the younger players, expect Alexandre Lacazette and Clément Grenier to be called upon on a regular basis in order to support the forward line. Lacazette's versatility on the right wing may prove useful for Lyon in the long run. With both of these players now aged 21, it is certainly time for them to begin to impose themselves on the first team and stake their claim for regular spots in the side. Manager Rémy Garde is likely to bring through more youth this season and these two will be amongst those assured of some regular playing time in this coming campaign.

Rémy Garde's motivational qualities were clear to see in the early stages of last season, bringing a much-needed sense of togetherness to a squad which had previously been quite individualist under his predecessor Claude Puel. Lyon are unlikely to contend for the title this season but will make an attempt at qualifying once again for the Champions League. The side are expected to have a decent Europa League run and qualification for European football's second tournament seems a likely achievement for them.

FFW PREDICTS - 4TH PLACE

OLYMPIQUE DE MARSEILLE

COACH: ÉLIE BAUP



If Didier Deschamps leaving the Stade Vélodrome had been on the cards for a while and was not a huge surprise for OM fans, then the club's fast appointment of Élie Baup as Deschamps' successor must have been a big shock.

Since the start of the campaign Les Phocéens hit some patchy form and the club spent the early days struggling at the foot of the table. Soon after the rot had set in, cracks emerged as it became clear that Deschamps and sporting director José Anigo were not seeing eye-to-eye. By the time the season had reached its climax, the divide had become a crevasse and Deschamps had backed himself into a corner with little room for manoeuvre following a season of barbed comments aimed at his superior. OM toiled through last season finishing in 10th place despite starting the season as one of the favourites for the title, only a Coupe de la Ligue victory provided some brief success.



The former France captain leaves the Vélodrome having brought some much-needed success to the club including a first Ligue 1 title in 18 years, but last season it became painfully obvious that the club are ceasing to compete with their rivals, especially on a financial level. His replacement Baup is an uninspiring character who has enjoyed little success as a manager but still manages to get new work despite limited success at the helm of some of Ligue 1's biggest names. The 57-year-old coached Bordeaux to the title in 1999 but also had spells with Saint-Etienne (1994-96 and 2004-06), Toulouse (2006-08) and Nantes (2008-09) - before taking over at OM following a three-year absence from football.



With the team currently containing such talents as Loïc Rémy, André Ayew, Jordan Ayew, Mathieu Valbuena, Steve Mandanda and Nicolas N'Koulou but no signs of major investment this summer, Vincent Labrune's comments towards the end of last season that one or two big names would be sold ahead of this season suggests that OM have accepted being second best for the time being.

It would be unfair to judge Baup before he has had a chance to prove himself but he has hardly got the credentials that suggest he has the experience and ability to make the most of the talent at his disposal despite the lack of funds. Now inheriting a gifted but troubled side, Baup's challenge is to work within the board's financial constraints whilst trying to remain competitive.

This season will be one of adaptation for Les Phocéens who are now be bracing themselves for bids for their star names. The hierarchy are seeking to further cut an over-inflated wage bill with little room to strengthen on the pitch. Depending on who is first out of the door, a few departures could easily turn into an exodus which may leave the club staring at some meagre years ahead.

It is going to be a tough season and all eyes are on Loid Remy. The best of a bad bunch you could say but with 12 goals last year before injury curtailed his campaign, Rémy enjoyed a good spell of form and propelled himself into the international setup. If he stays, he will be key for OM this year.

FFW PREDICTS - 5TH PLACE

MONTPELLIER HSC

COACH: RENE GIRARD



The French champions (isn't it nice to write that) will kick off the new season against Toulouse. A perfect chance for the home fans to welcome their title winning side to the Stade de la Mosson in what should be a fabulous atmosphere for the new Friday night kick-off. This has the potential to be another excellent season for La Paillade and although the starting line-up may have a different look, it still maintains that really positive energy that carried them to glory last season.

One big departure from the winning side is obviously 21 goal hero Olivier Giroud, but the money spent by Arsenal on the French international has been very wisely invested and the squad actually looks a lot stronger than it did at the start of last season. Outside Giroud's departure, the experience Geoffrey Dernis has left and the sparsely used Gregory Lacombe has gone to Clermont. Coming into the side are Anthony Mounier from Nice, Daniel Congre from Toulouse, Gaeten Charbonnier from Angers and Emanuel Herrera from Chilean club Union Espanola.

Already Mounier and Congre look like excellent signings, Mounier is an obvious upgrade from Dernis and the former Lyon man is ready to launch himself onto the big stage, perfect move for both player and club. Obviously the 21 goals of Giroud had to be replaced, so instead of heaping all that pressure on one forward both Herrera and Charbonnier can share that load, and from the friendlies this summer they both look like they could easily score ten Ligue 1 goals. Herrera could be one of the surprise players of the season.

The positives keep coming for La Paillade as they have managed to keep hold of Younes Belhanda, Mapou Yanga-M'Biwa and the wonderful young talents of Benjamin Stambouli, Jamel Saihi and Remy Cabella. The future of Yanga-M'Biwa may still be up in the air, but the signing of Daniel Congre, who was the club captain at Toulouse, is a major step in the right direction, he instantly brings hardwork and experience to the back line, add this to Henri Bedimo and Garry Bocaly and with or without the excellent "Yanga" the backline is still one of the best in France. Tactically the system that Rene Girard applied last season will easily transfer towards the new players. Mounier provides options on either flanks, how do you play both Cabella, Belhanda and Mounier in the same team and of course the Nigeria hero that is John Utaka. At times last season Girard didn't have a bench he could call on, now he seems to have a few different across the pitch. Upfront the choice of Charbonnier or Herrera upfront to lead the attack will provide a variation on the system that was built for the skills of Giroud.

Off the pitch it was inevitable that owner Louis Niccolin would have his say and in his brash outspoken way he has actually played down expectations for the new season. Sixth place would be a good result according to Lou Lou, but when you assess the league you have to think this team is capable of so much more. Like Lille they are more and likely to push for a place in the top three. The test will come with the Champions League, that will be a huge ask for this group of players, but they have nothing to fear.



The league is more important and will be given precedence over the European exploits, who would bet against them causing a shock at some point though.

The squad assembled by Nicollin and Girard is much better than so many of the teams in Ligue 1. When you look at rivals Lyon, Marseille, Bordeaux even Rennes, they are not in the same strength or depth as MHSC. The work done by this club so far is just the beginning of what is a wonderful future, there is no doubt players will leave to bigger things, but players can do a lot worse than further their careers in the south of France.

The fans and players of Montpellier will enjoy their season as champions, no one is expecting the same level of performance from them again, but they still need to play with pride and push on, a place in the top three will help keep players like Stambouli, Cabella and Saihi for another 12 months, and help continue to bring players like Mounier and Herrera to the Mosson and with the outrageous Nicollin and fantastic Girard in charge, who knows where this team can go.

FFW PREDICTS - 3RD PLACE

AS NANCY

COACH: JEAN FERNANDEZ



Nancy pretty much met expectations last term, as they secured a comfortable mid-table finish despite totalling just seven more points than relegated Caen. Les Chardons struggled for goals throughout the campaign, and finished the season having netted a measly 38 times. Romanian forward Daniel Niculae top scored for the men from Lorraine, the on-loan Monaco forward finding the net six times in what was a barren season for Nancy's front-men.

Jean Fernandez's men made a woeful start to the campaign, and didn't record their first win until the 22nd October when a goal from Niculae earned them a 1-0 win over Nice. ASNL's form gradually improved, and among the highlights of their campaign was a 1-0 win at big-spending Paris Saint Germain. Fernandez's side still struggled for consistency during the winter months despite that success, but in early March they found their feet, claiming a number of big scalps as they steered themselves away from the relegation fight.

Lyon and Montpellier were both put to the sword at the Stade Marcel Picot, and Nancy soon completed a league double over PSG with a 2-1 home win thanks to a goal from Bakaye Traore and a late winner from Yohan Mollo. The wins began to dry up in April but by that point Nancy had done just about enough to maintain their Ligue 1 status, and a battling win 3-2 win over Saint Etienne in their final home game of the season encapsulated their fighting spirit and demonstrated exactly why so many teams find it difficult to overcome Les Chardons away from home.

Perhaps the biggest blow to Nancy's ambitions this season has been the long-anticipated loss of Bakaye Traore to AC Milan. The midfielder was an integral part of the club's late season surge, as he scored vital goals to help ensure that ASNL kept their place among France's footballing elite.

ASNL have reacted well to the loss of Traore, and of Samba Diakite to Queens Park Rangers, and have moved quickly to re-enforce their midfield. Thomas Mangini and Salif Sane have both joined permanently from Monaco and Bordeaux respectively after successful loan spells last term, while 20-year-old defensive midfielder Abdou Rahman Dampha will hope to add more steel in the middle of the park after signing from Swiss side Neuchatel Xamax.

Midfielder Thomas Ayasse will look to fill the goal-scoring void left by Traore; the 25-year-old scored eight goals for Arles in Ligue 2 last term, and Fernandez will be hoping that Ayasse can reproduce that form at the highest level.

Romain Grange has also been brought in from Chateauroux to add more drive to the engine room of the midfield, while left back Vincent Muratori will compete for a starting berth after moving from Monaco on a free transfer. Striker Simon Zenke has been recruited from Turkish side Samsunspor to carry the goal-scoring mantle after Niculae's load spell ended and he returned to Monaco before a permanent move to FC Kuban Krasnodar.



Undoubtedly the biggest move of Nancy's summer however, was the permanent capture of winger Yohan Mollo from Spanish side Granada. The 23-year-old was sensational during his loan spell last season, scoring three times and notching six assists. Les Chardons wasted no time in securing his signature on a full-time basis, as they agreed a fee in the region of €1.8m with the Spanish side to keep Mollo at the club until 2016.

Mollo will be vital to Nancy's fortunes this season, and with none of the club's strikers really known for their goal-scoring prowess, the onus will be placed on him to deliver the goods. The Martigues-born player has yet to fulfil the promise he showed in the early stages of his career. His life in football started at the age of seven when he was spotted by Marseille, and after a brief spell at Aubagne he eventually joined Monaco at the age of the 15.

Four years later and Mollo had worked his way into the first team at the Stade Louis II, enjoying a superb first full season as he scored twice and added six assists, although Monaco endured a disappointing campaign as they finished 11th in Ligue 1.

However, Mollo failed to replicate that form in his second season on the Cote d'Azur, and he was loaned out to Caen in 2010. His fortunes took an upward turn during his time in Normandy - he tallied four goals and two assists - and his relative success attracted the attention of Granada, who offered him the opportunity to test himself in the Spanish top flight.

In the end though, Mollo soon found himself heading back to France, as after making only six appearances for the La Liga new boys, he was loaned to Nancy in January, who after witnessing the former France U-20 international inspire ASNL to a number of surprise results, decided to make him one of the focal points of their attack for the new season.

With Traore gone and many of Nancy's new signings untested in Ligue 1, the focus will be on Mollo to display the same kind of form over a full season. If he can, then Fernandez's men may be able to surprise once more and challenge for a top half finish.

FFW PREDICTS - 10TH PLACE

OGC NICE

COACH: CLAUDE PUEL



Last season Nice were one of the eight teams that entered the final day with the threat of relegation hanging over them. It would have taken a spectacularly unfortunate set of results for that to have happened, and in the event Nice saved themselves with their epic 4-3 win against Lyon at the Stade Gerland. However, it was yet another year of under-achievement for a big city team that should be well ensconced in the top half of the table.

As the Aiglons embark on a new season, the impression given by their fans is that they are now just biding their time until the opening of their new stadium next summer, and if they can keep out of trouble, bed in a few youngsters, allow newcomers to settle and maybe have a good cup run, they will tolerate that, in the hope of better times ahead.

The leader of those newcomers is Claude Puel, who has come in to replace the ousted René Marsiglia as head coach. The experienced manager, who has also been given the title of sporting director, returns to Ligue 1 after a year out following his departure from Lyon, and will hope to be given time to replicate his successes at Monaco and Lille. Unless things go very badly, he is likely to be given assurances that he will remain the manager into next season, and that comfort - something he could never have at Lyon - should help him to develop the team in his image.

The team itself will see some major changes from last season, the most marked being the departure of last year's player of the season Anthony Mounier, who has joined champions Montpellier and the promise of Champions League football, for 3.5 million Euros. Two other notable exits from the Stade du Ray are experienced midfielder Julien Sablé, and reliable French international right back François Clerc who has moved to Saint-Etienne. The absence of these two older heads may be a cause for concern should things begin badly for the Niçois, and it could be crucial to the whole season of the club, as well as the blood pressure of the fans, that they make a good start.

The exits of the reliable old stagers have been tempered by the signing of some promising youngsters. The capture of Eric Bauthéac after his excellent season at Dijon is a very good acquisition, while the signing of promising young left back Thimothée Kolodziejczak from Lyon will please those who get paid by the letter for ironing names on shirts, if not the Ligue 1 commentators. Joris Delle, signed from Metz, will provide good back-up and competition for the reliable David Ospina, and Argentine striker Dario Cvitanich, signed from Ajax, joins after a good goalscoring season on loan at Boca Juniors. Nice will hope that he is as successful as the rest of the team's South American contingent, comprising Ospina, the versatile left-sided Argentine and last year's top scorer Fabian Monzon, and man-mountain Argentine defender Renato Civelli. If all goes to plan, expect Nice to line up in a 4-2-3-1 formation, with Monzon and Bauthéac supporting Cvitanich. Nice's main problem last season was a paucity of goals and Les Aiglons will look to him to settle as quickly as possible to help solve that problem.



The bottom line is that Nice need to be in Ligue 1 come next season; the worst thing that could happen is for them to do a Le Mans and have the ignominy of being in Ligue 2 for the opening of their new stadium. Therefore, I think that they will do whatever is needed to stay in the top flight. This might mean some unattractive football at times, and some hairy moments - especially if injuries take hold, as the quality does not go very deep into the squad. But I expect Nice to stay up, finishing around 10th to 12th place, and can also see them having a good cup run. This might not be ideal for their fans, but I think that this year has to be seen as the beginning of a new period for the club.

As for my player to watch, I am going to go for Eric Bauthéac. Unlike Kolodziejczak, he has a full season's play behind him, and unlike Cvitanich, he does not need an acclimatisation period. He should therefore be able to hit the ground running and continue where he left off last year, cutting the mustard with Dijon. I definitely expect him to support the Nice frontline by weighing in with more than the three goals that he scored last season, and he could well be the first name on the first team sheet at the new stadium this time next year.

FFW PREDICTS - 12TH PLACE

PARIS SAINT GERMAIN

COACH: CARLO ANCELOTTI



After coming agonisingly close to their third ever Ligue 1 title last season, Paris Saint-Germain have sent ripples across the football world this summer with their acquisitions as they seek domestic immortality.

Coach Carlo Ancelotti has an array of talent at his disposal that has not been seen in France since the heydays of the 1990s. Marquee names - superstars in fact - in the form of Ezequiel Lavezzi, Thiago Silva and Zlatan Ibrahimovic are now a part of the fastest growing project in world football. With €100m spent on talent, the club can ill-afford to slip up in the forthcoming campaign. Outspending their competitors by a considerable distance, PSG simply must deliver with a league championship come next spring.

Qatar Sports Investments laid the foundations last summer following their takeover from Colony Capital. Bringing in Leonardo from Internazionale as director of football was a pivotal step in luring some of the country's top talent, as well as players from overseas. Leo's connections in Italy allowed the likes of Mohamed Sissoko, Salvatore Sirigu and of course Javier Pastore to make the move to France. The snaring of Pastore in particular was a real statement of intent, ushering the advances of Chelsea away to beat them to his signature. One of the most sought-after properties in European football had come to the conclusion that PSG were best suited to him, and his impact was immediate. Under Antoine Kombouaré PSG finished as Autumn champions but couldn't stop the former player being shown the door.

Carlo Ancelotti came in after Christmas and the team began to play with a lot more freedom and looked more threatening on the break. PSG had been accused of being too cautious at times by playing with three holding midfielders, a trait Ancelotti is known for. Nevertheless, although Kombouaré's dismissal was harsh, the new coach has brought a positive ethos to the club and his name alone attracts star names.

Ultimately, the club missed out on the title to Montpellier. It was left to hindsight once again as Les Parisiens pondered at what might have been. Regardless, QSI's main goal at the beginning of the season was to qualify for the Champions League, a holy grail that would open up a whole new dimension to the club. In doing so, it has been a much easier feat to lure big name players to the club and none of them come bigger than Zlatan Ibrahimovic.

Zlatan is one of the missing links that was needed. It was evident last season that goals were lacking. Kevin Gameiro's confidence was shot to pieces and was unable to prolong his stay in the team. With the arrival of Ibra, not only does he bring potency in front of goal but his attributes are so diverse he will have defences in France quaking in their boots.

One of the game's most valuable players, now playing his trade at the Parc des Princes; it all seemed nothing more than a fantasy a year ago but here we are. Not only that, he is joined by arguably the best centre-back in the world, Thiago Silva.



The Brazilian arrived for an eye-watering €42m and he will slot in alongside compatriot Alex in the centre of defence. It leaves skipper Mamadou Sakho's future up in the air with Ancelotti confirming that he is seeking a new man to take the armband - most likely Christophe Jallet.

Like all new signings, it leaves others in doubt and that also affects Nene following the arrival of Lavezzi from Napoli. Nene was outstanding again last term, more or less in the thick of everything PSG offered in attack. However, Lavezzi looks a foregone conclusion to start out wide on the left-hand side with Ibra playing through the middle and Jeremy Menez down the right. Again, it is a sign of just how strong this squad is but will Ancelotti be able to keep them happy? Time will tell.

Finally, youngster Marco Verratti has joined the fray from Italian minnows Pescara. For a fee of €11m he is seen as one for the future but do not be surprised to see Ancelotti utilising him a fair bit in the centre of his midfield. After all, he is dubbed the next Andrea Pirlo. Results in pre-season have been fairly positive. Although fitness and readiness are the key at this time of year, Ancelotti has utilised his squad well, even allowing Peguy Luyindula some valuable playing time. A successful tour of the USA was capped off by Ibrahimovic scoring within three minutes on his debut with a divine strike.

All in all, a frenetic yet exciting summer will be drawn out long into the season as the Parisian fans take in the events of the last month. The big name signings and the feel good factor around Camp des Loges puts them in good stead to finally bag a first league title in 18 years. Despite the wealth of talent, this will be no easy feat. The team will be juggling domestic matters along with the Champions League where their lower seeding may see them drawn in a group with some of Europe's heavyweights.

It is indeed an exciting time for the club and for France as a whole as they have attracted a global interest. All eyes will be on them and they cannot fail to deliver. The pressure is on Ancelotti to mastermind a successful campaign that could lead to outright domination in the coming years.

FFW PREDICTS - 1ST PLACE

STADE DE REIMS

COACH: HUBERT FOURNIER



Stade de Reims are back in the top tier of French football after a 33 year hiatus. The club has been in the doldrums of the lower leagues for over three decades but their resurgence over the course of last winter has resulted in a promotion back into Ligue 1.

Coach Hubert Fournier installed a mentality into his group that allowed them to go about their business quietly. Not considered a realistic contender for promotion at the start of last season, their form during the fall of last year put them in a position to really challenge the top three. This, and a culmination of Clermont's suicidal slump - who looked for all the world they would be promoted after leading for so long - resulted in their rise to prominence.

Now, they do not have to keep looking back at past glories and can look to the future. It is a club steeped in history and tradition, champions of France on six occasions, two-time European Cup finalists and now an aura of optimism to complement it. Make no mistake about it, they are deemed as one of the favourites to get relegated in the forthcoming campaign and it will be tough for them to avoid the drop. Nevertheless, they showed last season a good ethos with effective attacking football and a resolute defence. A traditional 4-4-2 was deployed by Fournier and there is no reason to believe that he will alter that this season. It was certainly effective and the partnership of Cedric Faure and Kamel Fathi was crucial in their promotion. Both strikers accumulated 29 goals between them and really set the tone for the rest of the team.

The bad news however is that the club failed to tie down Faure who has departed after failing to agree a new contract. It was certainly surprising for a man who has contributed so much in the last three years. Fathi has signed a permanent deal after spending last season on loan for Hull City which is great news. Being one of the more senior figures in the team at 28 years of age, his presence in the team along with his experience will be invaluable in a survival bid. Nicolas Fauvergue has arrived from Sedan for €600,000. The striker has been drafted in to replace Faure and much is expected from him. Having Ligue 1 experience during his time with Lille, the 27-year-old netted 12 goals last term but his discipline needs to be tamed, having racked up nearly a dozen yellow cards.

Polish international Grzegorz Krychowiak is the most expensive recruit this summer, €800,000, from Bordeaux. The 22-year-old had a successful loan stint at Nantes last season and he is a welcomed addition to the side. He is a versatile young man who can operate in central midfield, anchor it or even play in the centre of the defence. Other arrivals include Julien Toudic from Lens, Mohamed Fofana and Antoine Devaux from Toulouse as well as rookie goalkeeper Jeremy Malherbe via CFA club Gap.

During pre-season, they have only played three matches thus far with one more remaining against Nancy before they embark on their top-flight adventure at home to Marseille. A 5-1 demolition of Vannes was sandwiched in between a 1-0 defeat away to Dijon and a stalemate with Valenciennes.



A real shining light has been striker Gaetan Courtet who has been spry all summer, even netting a hat-trick over Vannes. Food for thought for the coach when he ponders his selection for the visit of OM in just over a week.

Survival is the objective for Reims this season. They have worked so hard in the last 12 months to get to this point and to just ease out of the trap door, back into the lower leagues. Of course the competition is tough but Fournier is an astute coach that is more than capable at instilling belief into his players. They showed plenty of endeavour last season and that will be pivotal once again. The loss of Faure is a massive blow for sure but all eyes will now turn to Fauvergue. A capable frontman that will complement Fathi up top in the traditional 4-4-2.

It may be a rocky road for the club when they face far more superior opposition but they are more than capable at springing a surprise or two over the course of the season.

FFW PREDICTS - 19TH PLACE

STADE RENNES

COACH: FREDERIC ANTONETTI



Every year, the story seems to repeat itself in Rennes. A good mixture of promising young players, graduates from the Stade Rennais academy and a few experienced players is put together and the team seems to show the sort of coherence that could guide the Breton outsiders towards mounting a good Champions League positions challenge, and more importantly try and win a trophy. Any trophy to reach a new level, it is indeed what Stade Rennes' billionaire chairman François Pinault had in mind when he bought the majority of the club in 1998.

Every season, however, something fails to work in the fine engineering, and a catastrophic run at some point of the season will end all hopes of glory for the Rouge et Noir. Last year's poor exit to third-tier Quevilly in the semi-final of the French Cup, followed by a sixth position leaving Rennes out of the Europa League positions in the penultimate game-week was yet another blow to the faithful Rennes fans used to late-season cataclysms, cup upsets to inferior leagues sides and this frustrating ability to match the quality of any top team (including the likes of Paris, Lyon, Lille, Udinese and Atletico Madrid last season) without showing the maturity required to kill the games when needed.

After a 2010-2011 season spent building the defensive asset of his team and a 2011-2012 season where he tried to develop the attacking side of his group, Frederic Antonetti thought he had found the missing link by managing the signing of Mevlut Erding (a player he had been chasing unsuccessfully since his arrival in Rennes), but the French-Turkish striker lacked the fitness required to prove himself as a real asset to his team. Not so surprisingly after months on the bench at Paris Saint-Germain.

This season, Erding could indeed be the difference for a Rennes team that has been struggling to convert its chances ever since the departure of its last great goal-hunter, Rennes legend Alexander Frei. To support him, the Rennes backroom staff have opted for an approach of continuity in what is expected to be Frederic Antonetti's fourth and final year in charge.

Except for Yann M'Vila, whose departure is agreed but yet to be materialised in the form of a transfer, the departures should not affect the team's fortunes a great deal: former captain and Rennes favourite Kader Mangane (Transferred to Al Hilal /Saudi Arabia) missed most of last season injured, Tongo Doumbia (loaned to Wolverhampton) was one of several options at midfield and Yacine Brahimi (transfer listed) never managed to make a real, lasting impact with the professional team. Victor Hugo Montano and Razak Boukari are two more players free to leave or to act as backup in attack, while Jires Kembo seem to have eventually decided against a transfer out of Rennes, and could even be signing a new contract in Brittany this summer. As new arrivals are concerned, only two new signings are to be reported. Sadio Diallo, a versatile attacking midfielder who took an important part in Bastia's triumphant return to Ligue 1 last season will be in competition with Julien Feret for the playmaker position, although both men could be seen playing alongside each other when match events require audacious, attack-minded tactics.



The second signing, although arriving from Ligue 2, is Clermont's Romain Alessandrini. After scoring eleven goals in each of his two seasons in the French second-tier, the left winger will try to confirm in the top flight and make a similar impression with the Rouge et Noir. Just like Erding, the little winger from Marseille will face great expectations as he comes to fill a position where Rennes has struggled to find the right player ever since the departure of former Rennes icon Olivier Monterrubio in January 2006.

Meanwhile, and as every season in Rennes, a few players should join the professionals from the Reserve squad. Having scored respectively 17 and 14 goals in the last CFA2 season, Cheick Diarra and Abdoulaye Sané will hope they can make an impact with the first team. They will have to prove their ability in training to try and gain some playing time in Ligue 1. Axel Ngando and possibly Abdoulaye Doucouré could also gain some playing time at midfield, while Dimitri Foulquier should comfort his position as first backup to Romain Danze at right back, and possibly start representing a real competition to his captain, or an alternative if Danze was brought to slide in at centre-back as he has done during the pre-season friendlies.

This season, Rennes will have a serious chance for Top 5 positions, as always in the last ten years. In order to avoid disillusion, Frédéric Antonetti will hope he can find true leaders in each line of his teams. Key players such as Costil, Apam, Danzé and Féret along with the expected "experienced replacement" to Yann M'Vila will be expected to play their leadership and example role fully to guide their team-mates to success and avoid any of the black holes that have always ruined all hopes of success for the Breton team ever since they became a major place of French football in the late 1990s.

FFW PREDICTS - 8TH PLACE

SAINT ETIENNE

COACH: CHRISTOPHE GALTIER



After flirting with relegation or languishing in mid-table in years previous, a 7th placed finish last season saw St Etienne narrowly finish outside of the Europa League placings. The side do, however, have a number of positives when looking at this coming campaign.

A mix of youth and experience from Christophe Galtier's St Etienne side saw them show glimpses of squad cohesion and general form, something which had clearly been lacking in years previous. The experienced Laurent Batlles was still able to bring something to the midfield when called upon whilst 17 year-old defender Kurt Zouma went from strength to strength with each game played. Zouma is expected to feature once again for St Etienne this year.

It is fair to say that St Etienne have impressed with their summer dealings so far. Former Lyon right-back Francois Clerc joins the club after two seasons with Nice where he was able to put his injury worries behind him, something which plagued him towards the end of his time with Lyon. With the potential of being named amongst the signings of the season when the campaign is over, €4m Romain Hamouma joins from relegated side Caen. Hamouma had been linked to a number of clubs across Europe but St Etienne were quick in striking a deal.

St Etienne's summer spending is not expected to be over just yet with a few areas still in need of some strength in depth. Midfielder Renaud Cohade will certainly add something the midfield, though there looks to be plenty of options already available in that area. This is something manager Christophe Galtier may look to utilise as the season progresses.

In the friendly outing against Portuguese side Sporting Lisbon, a 3-1 defeat left boss Christophe Galtier with some thinking to do. He was clearly not happy with the effort the side put in, dismissing the 'friendly match' tag and stating, quite clearly, that his side are not yet ready to begin their Ligue 1 campaign.

"The term 'friendly' does not exist in football and Sporting showed that. Even in making changes at half-time, the Portuguese side showed us that they weren't playing a friendly match. It wasn't easy and we need to put in a lot more effort both physically and mentally. If there is one positive to take out of the match, it's that we're not ready. It's a warning sign for us - we need to do much better."

This also shows that St Etienne are likely to try their luck in recruiting some more players in the transfer market. This opinion was made even clearer in a 1-0 defeat to Claude Puel's Nice side not long after.

Gabon international Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang has impressed for the club since his arrival on a permanent deal from Italian giants AC Milan. The 23 year-old scored a total of 16 goals last season, some of which occurred in impressive fashion and most coming in away matches, and looks to build upon this tally in the coming season.



Aubameyang is clearly a threat in the opposing half and his overall versatility is likely to be called upon over the course of the season as a whole.

Expect Christophe Galtier to use Kurt Zouma rather intelligently in the coming campaign. Galtier is aware that the player is in need of time to develop and is also aware of the talent he possesses, but it will be interesting to see exactly how much playing time he receives. If he continues to progress at the rate he showed last season, the sky is the limit for this young defender.

St Etienne do have the quality to once again push the Europa League spaces this season. Given the amount of competition in general at the top of the Ligue 1 table, it will be interesting to see just what Christophe Galtier has in mind for the remainder of the transfer window. Given the decline in form of local rivals Olympique Lyonnais in recent years, St Etienne may be looking to outdo them in this year's league competition, though this may still be out of their reach.

FFW PREDICTS - 6TH PLACE

FC SOCHAUX

COACH: ERIC HELY



Although last season's 14th place finish might suggest that Sochaux comfortably avoided relegation, the close-knit nature of Ligue 1 means in reality that les Lionceaux only assured their top-flight status for this season in the final pair of matches of their last campaign. The decision to swap Mehmed Baždarević for youth coach Éric Hély initially looked ill-advised but eventually it proved to be the push needed to get the club's underperforming stars to get their act together on the pitch.

Over-achieving to such an extent as the Montbéliard outfit did in 2010-2011 meant that following Francis Gillot was always going to be a difficult task for Baždarević so it was no surprise that chairman Alexandre Lacombe pulled the trigger on the Bosnian; the surprise was how long it took before FCSM took action. The club had managed to keep hold of the majority of their most talented assets but once Gillot left, a number became disillusioned with the club's ambitions to maintain their position at the summit of Ligue 1 and after unsavoury episodes involving the now departed Kévin Anin and Modibo Maïga, the squad was plunged into disharmony.

The fans' and media's raised expectations from the season before saw the weight of responsibility cripple attacking talents such as Ryad Boudebouz and new signing from Lille Marvin Martin whilst promising defenders like Sébastien Corchia were unable to make much of an impact on the pitch and keep les Lionceaux from shipping goals.

Having re-vamped the team this summer, Hély will be confident that without added distractions off the pitch he will be able to get the best out of his side. But despite strengthening the team with names such as Simon Pouplin and Roy Contout at the expense of some of the ageing and inefficient players, the team still looks like it is lacking the required quality to keep Sochaux far away from the drop zone.

The club may have managed to keep Boudebouz but how long will it realistically be before he gets frustrated at not being granted the chance to challenge himself at a higher level? Lacombe may have been championing the fact that his side are likely to keep the Algerian attacker but if he becomes a negative influence in the dressing room like Anin and Maïga were then Sochaux could be looking at another long, hard and ultimately disappointing season.

Boudebouz is however head and shoulders above any other player in the current Sochaux line-up; the Algerian is a fantastic talent but runs the risk of not fulfilling his true potential without leaving Stade Bonnal. He will be vital to their survival hopes but another season of shouldering the burden by himself at times will prove too much.



For most of the summer the talk has been more about the outgoings than the incomings. With Martin gone to Lille, Maïga off to West Ham and the veteran Teddy Richert leaving the club on a free, there are plenty of strong characters missing from the Sochaux dressing room. New signings Cedric Kante, Omar Daf and Simon Pouplin need to add their wisdom to this young side quickly or they risk being dragged down into the relegation battle once again, the problem this time is that they could lack the firepower or creativity to save themselves from another struggle.

FFW PREDICTS - 16TH PLACE

TOULOUSE FC

COACH: ALAIN CASANOVA



Take a cursory glance at the final 2011-2012 Ligue 1 table, and you don't need to be Zonal Marking to work out where Toulouse came up short. Despite having the joint meanest defence in the division, conceding only 34 goals - putting them level with eventual champions Montpellier - le Téfécé scored only 37 goals, making them the third most goal-shy team in the league: all three relegated teams were more prolific!

Despite this lack of a clinical edge, approaching the last month of the season, Toulouse were looking well set to win a place in the Europa League. However, a poor run-in, during which they failed to win any of their final six games, saw them stumble to an eighth place finish, matching the previous season's position and so failing to reflect any kind of progress.

If that anti-climactic end to the season caused Toulousain eyebrows to be raised, their transfer dealings over the summer have caused many of those brows to become furrowed! Toulouse have sold a host of players, most notably their Turkish "star" striker Umut Bulut - who in truth disappointed with only five league goals last campaign - and far more importantly, their captain Daniel Congré, who left the Ville Rose in a 5 million Euro deal after eight years as a first team regular, to try his hand in the Champions League with Montpellier. No Toulouse fan is likely to begrudge Congré the chance to test himself at a higher level after the service that he has given the club. However, the fans have been discouraged by the lack of new players that have come in: to date only two have arrived, one of whom - Olivier Blondel - is a substitute keeper who is hardly going to set pulses racing.

The other signature, however, may turn out to be a very shrewd purchase. The veteran former French international Jonathan Zebina has been signed on a free transfer from Brest and immediately been given the armband that Congré left behind. While the signature of a 34 year old is also unlikely to cause too many hearts to race, his experience at the top of the game, particularly with Roma and Juventus, is sure to add something to the Toulouse defence - both on and off the pitch. On a short-term playing basis, and with a longer-term view to passing his knowledge on to his young teammates, his could turn out to be a very astute signing.

It is those young teammates who will really be the focus of Toulouse's season. Last year saw many of Toulouse's younger contingent begin to establish themselves as first-team regulars, and the club's authorities are clearly making a brave statement in showing that they have faith in those players to progress from last year's often promising performances. This season could make or break several reputations, both on the playing staff and in the Toulouse boardroom.

To be fair to manager Alain Casanova and his employers, as long as no further players leave the club, there remains the potential for a very good team. The spine in particular is very strong, with excellent young keeper Ali Ahamada - still only 20 - marshalling a central defensive pairing of Zebina and Tunisia's highly rated Aymen Abdennour, and in front of them the energy and leadership of Toulouse's powerhouse and talisman Etienne Capoue.



Toulouse fans are no doubt counting down the days until the transfer window closes as his remaining at the club would be a major tonic for all concerned as the season begins. Note that the spine mentioned above stopped somewhere around midfield, and this is because it seems that Toulouse's main problem is again going to be in attack. Even in pre-season, some promising performances have been undermined by a lack of goals. It is therefore now or never for players such as Emmanuel Rivière, last year's joint top scorer, but with only five goals. He has been spoken of highly for some time now, and needs to begin to justify the hype, leading the line in Casanova's preferred 4-1-4-1 or 4-3-3 formations.

Rivière cannot be expected to shoulder the workload alone, however, and will need the support of a midfield including the more experienced Paolo Machado of Portugal, who will look to link up with either Ninkov or speedy attacking full back Serge Aurier on the right wing, and also the raw but promising talents of Franck Tabanou and Adrien Regattin, both of whom weighed in with goals and assists last year (indeed, one of the Toulousains' highlights of the season must have been Regattin's first Ligue 1 goal, a stunning overhead kick which made the goal of the season shortlist). Toulouse fans will also be hoping against hope that Moussa Sissoko regains some form.

Manager Alain Casanova is now entering his fifth season at the Stadium Municipal - already the second-longest serving manager in Ligue 1, behind Lorient's Christian Gourcuff - and this year will arguably be his toughest season yet. As the season begins, fans are entitled to question the ambition of the club in not using the transfer market to push on from the consolidation of the last two years. Instead they are putting their faith in a very young team with undoubted potential, which could go either way.

My prediction is that Toulouse will repeat an 8th-10th place finish, with no danger of relegation but also no hint of Europe or Cup glory. I think that the youngsters will begin to reach their potential but it is too early to expect the whole team to reach a good level of maturity all at once. So more consolidation, with the promise of a great season next year instead.

As for a player to watch, my left-field prediction is Wissam Ben Yedder. A skilful but raw striker who learned his stuff on the futsal court, I don't expect him to start too often, but I think he could come off the bench to score some important goals.

FFW PREDICTS - 9TH PLACE

TROYES

COACH: JEAN-MARC FURLAN



After a five year hiatus, Troyes AC are back in the big time of French football following their promotion from Ligue 2 last season. Coach Jean-Marc Furlan has kept the majority of his squad intact from last season and will look to orchestrate the club's tough survival bid in the forthcoming campaign.

Last season, the club claimed the last remaining promotion spot (3rd), finishing a point behind runners-up Stade de Reims. Their rise to Ligue 1 is nothing short of miraculous in truth. Finishing 16th the season before and playing in the third-tier of French football just a couple of years ago, they produced some stunning form in the second-half of the season, giving them the opportunity to go for promotion. Accumulating only four losses in the league after the winter break, they gained a pivotal 2-1 win away from home against Sedan back in February which they topped with a massive victory over Clermont a month later. That 3-2 win in particular gave them the momentum, dragging Clermont out of the promotion race in the process, and soaring into the top three.



The form of both Marcos Roberto and Raphael Caceres during the season was crucial in their rise, managing 22 goals between them. Marcos got himself on the scoresheet in the penultimate game of the season away to Monaco where the team sealed their promotion with a 2-0 win. Caceres has unfortunately departed the club after his loan from Dijon expired. It is a big blow for the club who were unable to retain his services and was somewhat of linchpin during his time.

Another key player that has left the club this summer is 19-year-old Djibril Sidibe. The promising right-back sealed a €2m move to Lille in July as a possible replacement for Mathieu Debuchy who could be on his way to Newcastle United. Nevertheless, players have been brought in without spending a single euro. Midfielder Benjamin Nivet from Caen, Stephane Darbion arrives from Greece, as too Granddi N'Goyi from Nantes and young rookie striker Georges Gope-Fenepej from Magenta. Their supporters have got used to living on a shoestring budget due to the club's lack of investment - nearly going bankrupt at one point in 2003.



Results in pre-season have resulted in zero victories. A heavy 3-0 defeat against Dijon and a 1-0 loss to Lille were sandwiched in between two draws with Brest and Nancy. Although results are not a necessity at this point of the calendar, it would have been nice to gain a bit of momentum going into their first top-flight game in five years against Valenciennes a week on Saturday.

On the basis of things, Troyes' squad is relatively inferior in comparison to other teams and this will make for a hard, gruelling campaign for them. Of course survival is on the agenda and they will be battling with the likes of Reims, Bastia, Ajaccio and Lorient in order to do so. Games against the aforementioned clubs - as well as others - will make or break their season and they can ill afford to slipup.

As last season in Ligue 1 proved, the battle at the bottom can go down right to the wire and unless Troyes can produce a miracle, they will experience similar anxieties in the closing stages of the season next spring.

FFW PREDICTS - 20TH PLACE

VALENCIENNES FC

COACH: DANIEL SANCHEZ



Valenciennes have developed the reputation for being a team languishing in mid-table mediocrity, finishing no higher than 10th since their promotion to France's top competition in 2006. Their impressive new stadium, le Stade du hainot, opened its doors before the season kicked off last season but the club found it difficult to entertain the home fans. Their first win at the new stadium did not occur until week 6 of Ligue 1, the third home game for the side. Fans may argue that it was, however, worth the wait with a 4-0 victory over Dijon ensuring the crowd left happily that evening.

The story of last season may have been Montpellier's fairytale title win but there was some more excitement at the other end of the Ligue 1 table with several teams having bravely fought off relegation by the skin of their teeth. Valenciennes' 12th placed finish last year may have saw them seal a mid-table finish once again but, on the other hand, relegation was only five points away (forgetting goal difference). Things may have been different for the club had they won some of the earlier games in the season.

Manager Daniel Sanchez has the task of showing what the club are really capable of, though another mid-table finish seems to be on the cards for the side from Northern France. He does have a number of talented individuals to select from but finding a good run of form has been a problem which has plagued the club for a number of seasons.

Versatile full-back Loris Néry is the club's only signing of the off-season with more expected to come. The 21 year-old Frenchman joined in a €500,000 deal from St Etienne and is certainly one-to-watch in the coming season. The side lost a midfield anchor due to the departure of Carlos Sanchez on a free contract but still boast a relatively talented midfield pool with Gael Danic still very much a mainstay in that area of the field. Renaud Cohade, another midfielder, also left on a free contract - opting to join Europa league chasing St Etienne.

Defender Gaetan Bong has attracted interest from a number of clubs but particularly from Marseille, who have been eyeing the player to bolster their defensive options. Should he leave, Valenciennes may be tempted to turn to the transfer market to boost their own depth in defence before the season kicks off.

Last season the club's attacking players were unable to really make a mark but expect young Vincent Aboubakar to begin to show his worth to the club. The 20 year-old Cameroonian struck six times for his club last season but will be looking to add more to his tally as his game develops over the season. He did receive plenty of playing time over the course of last season and will be looking to continue this into the new campaign.

Valenciennes have won only two of their six pre-season encounters at the time of writing but have found the back of the net on seven occasions. With the first match of the new season taking place on the 11th of August, it will be interesting to see just what Daniel Sanchez has learnt for their final pre-season friendly win 3-1 against Helmond Sport.



This will be the side's final preparation before the season begins and a chance for the players to really prove their capabilities with a first-team spot in mind.

One to watch for next season is 20 year-old defender Nicolas Isimat-Mirin. The young Frenchman scored twice in Ligue 1 last season but also showed a relatively hot-headed side in being sent off twice - one of which was a straight red card after just 14 minutes of play. He did, however, show potential and has the ability to be a useful asset for Valenciennes in the coming campaign. Of the more experienced players, Gael Danic should prove pivotal in the midfield but it remains to be seen just what lies in store for the attacking players available to Valenciennes in this coming season.

All signs point to another lower mid-table finish for Valenciennes but, given the heightened level of competition in all areas of the table, relegation may well face the club when all is said and done at the end of the coming campaign.

FFW PREDICTS - 13TH PLACE

LIGUE 1 TABLE

FFW PREDICTS

1. PARIS SAINT GERMAIN
2. LILLE LOSC
3. MONTPELLIER HSC
4. OLYMPIQUE LYONNAIS
5. OLYMPIQUE DE MARSEILLE
6. SAINT ETIENNE
7. GIRONDINS DES BORDEAUX
8. STADE RENNES
9. TOULOUSE FC
10. AS NANCY
11. FC LORIENT
12. OGC NICE
13. VALENCIENNES FC
14. EVIAN TG
15. SC BASTIA
16. FC SOCHAUX
17. STADE BRESTOIS 29
18. AC AJACCIO
19. STADE DE REIMS
20. TROYES



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We hope you enjoyed the previews, and we would love to hear your thoughts on the season as it goes throughout the year.

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Merci Beaucoup!

