



FRENCH FOOTBALL WEEKLY
PRESENTS

150



Le50 is a collection of the best young footballers currently playing in France. All of the players featured are 21 years-old or under on the 1st of January 2012. Ten French football fans helped select these 50 players, whittled down from the shortlist of around 200. There is little doubt that the players featured are the crème de la crème of talented youngsters that France has to offer.

Bon appétit

Andrew - French Football Weekly

FOREWORD

Recently, some listeners of BBC FiveLive's World Football Phone-In, led by Matthew Mildinhal, started a Twitter account entitled @WFPIBingo. Its aim is a simple one; to celebrate and spot the pundits' favourite phrases-cum-clichés that have made their way into the show's folklore. So you can cheer when you hear Tim Vickery mention a player's "low centre of gravity," holler when Sean Wheelock drops "Landon Donovan's wife" and maybe even stretch to an RT when this correspondent points out a useful "pinch-hitter."

One word that hasn't yet made the list is "Clairefontaine", though it probably should have. I've lost count of the number of times the near-mythical French youth academy has been brought up down the years when we've discussed player development in Europe. Opened in the late '80s, Clairefontaine has revolutionised youth development in France and set a gold standard for training and coaching which stands up against anything in Europe. Since its establishment, France's national team has won trophies at every representative level, and the women's side has also benefitted from its incorporation into the set-up.

Le 50 comprehensively examines where the latest hot young things to step off the production line are at today. Not all of them have come through Clairefontaine; clubs such as Rennes, Le Havre and even European big-hitters like Lyon have excellent academies and fully understand the importance of producing top players from them. The positioning of the Coupe Gambardella – France's national youth cup – as the curtain-raiser for the Coupe de France final at the Stade de France shows what an intrinsic part of the national game's culture encouraging the next generation is.

FOREWORD

Many of those produced in France have gone on to be world stars, such as Thierry Henry, Nicolas Anelka and Karim Benzema, and the likes of Yann M'Vila and Maxime Gonalons are now set to follow. France's youth production is what makes Ligue 1 special; historical precedent, along with the sheer promise on show, tells us that we're seeing the world-class names of tomorrow today.

As prime purveyors of everything Ligue 1 and France national team, French Football Weekly are ideally placed to break it down for you in a little more detail. Andrew and Jonathan show incredible dedication – not to mention great knowledge, insight and humour – in bringing us their weekly analysis of the game in the Hexagon. It's hard to think of anybody better to take you through the young French players that matter. Make your next bingo card a list of Le 50, as they go onto to fulfil their potential and entertain us in the years to come.

by Andy Brassell - @andybrassell - European Football Expert



KURT ZOUMA

Club: Saint-Etienne DOB: 27/10/94 Position: Defender

Sometimes the phrase "The next..." is used far too often in football. An Argentine playmaker is "the next Maradona", a German striker is "the next Muller". It can sometimes be a hindrance to any young promising player. It is usually the player that sneaks under the radar that becomes the real talent. This could explain why it took so long for Christoph Galtier to give defender Kurt Zouma a squad number with the belief that the longer Zouma's name was vacant from the back of his shirt the longer he could remain unnoticed and develop his skills at Saint-Etienne.

At first sight it is not obvious that this man-mountain of a defender is only 17. His physical attributes are that of a fully grown man in his 20's. At this summer's Under 17 World Cup in Mexico as France reached the semi-finals, Zouma stood head and shoulders above not just his teammates but most of the players in the competition. It quickly became apparent that his attributes didn't stop at his size. He showed composure and poise when on the ball, drawing comparisons with French great Marcel Desailly when breaking forward from the defence with his large strides, during the summer it was clear he was a talent but it wasn't until the French season began that we discovered just how talented this young kid was.

Les verts were unlucky to suffer a number of suspensions and injuries that meant coach Galtier had to call upon Zouma to make up the defensive numbers. Playing both at full back and centre back the 17-year old has looked fantastic. Showing pace to keep up with some of Ligue 1's most talented strikers he combines this with an impressive physicality to devastating effect. Not just a mountain to beat defensively, he has already shown his attacking ability at set-pieces. Brazil 2014 could be too soon, but France 2016 is a real possibility.



YANN M'VILA

Club: Rennes DOB: 20/06/90 Position: Midfielder

At only 21, Yann M'Vila is without a doubt one of the brightest prospects as well as one of the most sought-after young players in the world of football. Over 113 professional matches, 16 caps with France and a set of outstanding abilities that have caught the eye of scouts from all major European teams.

Born in Amiens, M'Vila went through the ranks of the renowned Stade Rennais Academy, in Brittany. Following in the footsteps of prestigious former alumni such as Sylvain Wiltord or Yoann Gourcuff, he led an exceptional generation of young "Rouge et Noir" to victories in both the U18 France Championship in 2007, and famously the Gambardella Cup triumph in 2008.

Already monitored by some of the biggest European clubs, M'Vila signed his first professional contract with Rennes a few days after the Gambardella Cup final. After waiting for a year, with Guy Lacombe denying him access to the professional squad, a loan was on the cards for him the following season until Frédéric Antonetti discovered him in the reserve squad following his arrival in summer 2009.



Within the weeks following his professional debut, M'Vila impressed fans and pundits alike and affirmed himself as an essential member of the Rennes eleven. Gifted with exceptional physical abilities, M'Vila initially shone with his capacity to repeat defensive efforts tirelessly game after game, proving one of the most efficient defensive midfielders in Ligue 1 through solid tackling and a superior ability to read and anticipate the moves of the opposition.

However, under the guidance of Antonetti he soon started exploiting what is arguably the strongest of his qualities and one of his personal trade-marks: focused vertical passing. Although a player of defensive vocation, M'Vila plays the role of a deep-lying playmaker using his outstanding vision and passing accuracy to deliver the perfect first-pass and create havoc within the defensive lines of the opposition.

M'Vila is not only gifted technically but also impressive of intelligence and composure on the pitch. Showing rare maturity for his age, he is rarely faulted despite receiving more balls and attempting (and completing) more passes than any other player in the league. Unsurprisingly, his natural leadership qualities and this influence on the way his team plays give him more responsibilities and the whole team seems to suffer whenever his level of performance dips even slightly.

Always eager to learn and improve his game, he impresses his manager every day by his ability to take every piece of advice on board: "He plays the game as if he were ten years older than he actually is" Antonetti admires, "The way he controls the game is incredible, and you only have to tell him something once for him to understand it."

Such qualities have naturally made M'Vila the target of all attentions over two and a half years as a professional and summer 2012 should see him play his first big international tournament and earn a transfer to one of Europe's top sides. This is only the beginning of the road for a player who, according to his manager, "reads the game like Claude Makélélé has the presence of Patrick Vieira and can pass the ball like Yaya Touré."

FREDERIC BULOT

Club: SM Caen DOB: 27/09/90 Position: Midfielder

Frédéric Bulot is originally Gabonese, but grew up in France and has represented the latter's international side at all youth levels. Before he came to Caen he was more of a box-to-box midfielder, but after showing great pace and technical abilities Franck Dumas started to use him regularly on the left flank. His crosses are the base of his many assists, both on a club and national level. His specialty is his set pieces, which tend to find the head of a team-mate. In an Under-21 game against Slovakia in November 2011 that France won 2-0, Bulot provided both assists for Raphaël Varane and Eliaquim Mangala from corners, and he was the difference between the two teams.

People tend to draw similarities between Bulot and Yohan Mollo aka "Monaco's Ronaldo". They are both pacey wingers who played in the Principality and at Caen. Mollo moved on to play for Granada in La Liga, but quickly came back to France and Nancy due to his inability to adapt. Bulot has expressed that his playing style fits perfectly in La Liga, and it will therefore be interesting if he decides to take the same approach as his predecessor. Feeling overlooked in Monaco due to their reluctance to use younger players, Bulot got a fresh start this season, and there is no doubt he has made a major breakthrough.

He got off to a great start, and had three goals and five assists by week 13. After that he has become somewhat anonymous, but this also has to do with Caen's difficulty controlling games. Dubbed "pretty boy" by his teammates with his Neymar-like hair style, he is still to decide whether to join Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang and Gabon or to continue representing France. It will all come down to his performances this season.



WILLY BOLY

Club: Auxerre DOB: 03/02/91 Position: Defender

That's Boly with a y at the end, as the Auxerre defender is keen to point out.

He has been compared physically to another former Ajaïste, Younès Kaboul, and with his height and size he makes a formidable barrier. But to suggest that he has got to this point on physical gifts alone would be to grossly underestimate him. Boly holds a Bac S, roughly the equivalent of top grade A-levels in maths and the sciences, and on the pitch he comes across as a more evolved breed of footballer. Elegant and always with his head up when in possession, Boly strolls out of defence with the ball like a man going for a walk in the park.

This can get him into trouble, and he himself admits that his biggest failing is his nonchalance. But he has benefited from playing alongside a rugged, experienced veteran in Stéphane Grichting, and one gets the impression that when Boly drops back to cover his partner challenging for a ball higher up the pitch, he's making detailed notes.

The future is bright, and possibly blue, for Boly. And once he makes a name for himself he won't have to check that everyone else spells it right.

NICOLAS N'KOULOU

Club: Olympique de Marseille DOB: 27/03/90 Position: Defender

When he joined the famous Kadji Sports Academy of Douala, Cameroon, an eleven year-old Nicolas N'Koulou had only one dream: he wanted to become the equal of his childhood idol, Laurent Blanc. Ten years later, the youngster has already made a fair share of his way to the highest level. With both Marseille and Cameroon – he is the vice-captain of the Indomitable Lions - he has installed himself as a force to be reckoned with at the heart of the defence.

At Monaco last season, Nicolas N'Koulou was one of the only positives for his club in a humiliating season punctuated with relegation to Ligue 2. Followed by Arsenal, N'Koulou preferred Marseille and he was soon proved right. Within weeks at his new club, he had split the favoured centre-back partnership of Stéphane M'Bia and Souleymane Diawara, replacing his international team-mate and fellow Kadji Academy alumni in central defence.



A strong player, although not of a particularly impressive build, N'Koulou is absolutely outstanding in his composure. Anyone watching the Cameroonian defender play can only be struck by the serenity in each of his interventions. Rarely overrun and barely ever over-powered, it sometimes looks like the trajectory of the ball is influenced by his positioning rather than the usual contrary. This is the secret to his effortless and efficient style on the pitch.

In all circumstances, Nicolas N'Koulou doesn't seem to ever falter. He doesn't complain either. He simply works harder and raises his game every time he is put to the test. He could certainly improve his passing and his play with the ball in general. But at only 21, he has the potential and all the time in the world to pursue his dream and one day, maybe, become an equal to Le Président.

PIERRICK CROS

Club: FC Sochaux DOB: 23/06/91 Position: Goalkeeper

Trained at FC Sochaux in the shadow of the great Teddy Richert, Pierrick Cros certainly didn't expect to step into the limelight so soon. However, a bad knee injury suffered by Richert and a poor run of performances by the first substitute Mathieu Dreyer brought him to the front of the scene at only 18.

Six months and sixteen games later, Cros had gained certainties and used all the good advice from his team-mate and mentor to assert himself as a reliable Ligue 1 goalkeeper. Strong in the air, inspired in his rushes out of the goal and sharp on his line, he was once described as one of the "most promising goalkeepers of his generation" by Francis Smerecki, then France's U-20 national coach.

While he still has some faults to correct, especially in terms of communication with his defence, the young man from Albi is ready to take over the goalkeeping duties in the Doubs. And with Richert turning 38 next September, it may soon be time for the youngster to start writing his own story in Sochaux. With his qualities and the expert guidance of Teddy Richert, the future can only be bright for Cros.

CEDRIC BAKAMBU

Club: FC Sochaux DOB: 11/04/91 Position: Forward

Young French striker Cedric Bakambu burst onto the scene in 2010 when he was pivotal in France winning the Under 19 European Championships on home soil. Starting with a bang, the Sochaux striker scored an opening-game salvo in an impressive 4-1 victory over the Netherlands. Bakambu had started ahead of the much heralded Alexandre Lacazette and Gilles Sunu.



Under-19 coach Francis Smerecki's decision looked justified when Bakambu scored the second as France came back to beat Croatia 2-1 in the semi-final. The home nation would go on to lift the trophy and the Bakambu name was no longer a well-kept secret.

At club level the 20-year old found playing time hard to come by. Behind the likes of Modibo Maiga, Brown Ideye and Edouard Butin it was clear that Bakambu would have to be patient for his chance to shine. 12 months and nine substitute appearances later, the forward born on the outskirts of Paris would get his chance. New boss Mehmed Bazdarevic lost Brown Ideye in the summer so Bakambu was thrust into his plans maybe a little before they would necessarily have planned.

Although he is only 20 Bakambu has the physical look of a much older player. Tall and strong he is a very powerful runner and has a great burst of pace that can take him past most defenders. At times he has looked like a world beating striker, but other times he has struggled to get into games, all part of the course for a young forward learning his trade in a very physical league. His club side has struggled this year but talent always stands out no matter how bad a team is playing. It would be a disaster if Les Lionceaux dropped to Ligue 2 it would be the perfect surrounding for Bakambu to learn his trade.



REMY CABELLA

Club: Montpellier HSC DOB: 08/03/90 Position: Midfielder

Rémy Cabella is the kind of player who gets your attention. And it's not just his carefully arranged and frequently terrible haircuts that draw the gaze. Cabella glides past defenders with the arrogance of a player fully aware of his own talent and keen to show it off to the world. Fans of Hatem Ben Arfa or Jérémy Menez would recognize his flair. But Cabella has the potential to be better than both, because make no mistake, there is a veritable well of substance behind the style.

Cabella does not possess great overall speed, but he disguises that by knowing when and where to run to maximum effect. He has excellent game awareness for a player so young and isn't the kind of player who always regards a wall of opposition defenders as a challenge of his technique to dribble past all of them (although when Cabella's on song it's within his capabilities). His love for dribbling hasn't prevented him from developing an excellent, varied range of passing, and he regularly demonstrates a keen eye for when and how to release the ball. Even when the move does not come off, the intention is generally the right one.

And while he is prone to drifting in and out of games, particularly when deployed on the wing, it is rare that he does not make a decisive contribution. It is this more than anything else that promises a dazzling future for the Corsican. Being able to just make things happen on the pitch is a gift few players are blessed with, one of the great unteachable qualities of the sport. During Younès Belhanda's absence at the 2012 African Cup of Nations, Cabella went beyond what was expected of him and played a key role in keeping Montpellier's title challenge going.

What could hold him back? Should he start to believe the hype around him, and there is a lot of it for a player yet to make himself a regular starter with Montpellier, his thus far continuous progress could be checked. A more immediate concern is the fact that, despite being lucky enough to be playing at a time when players of his kind are afforded greater protection than ever, his slight frame and cocksure manner make him something of a magnet for the boots of less scrupulous defenders.

Often young players are told that they will become better players once they become more mature. For a player like Cabella, however, what on-pitch maturity he needs is largely already there. It is the self-confidence and zest of youth that makes him dangerous, as well as his talent. If he can retain that, and provided his foibles remain harmless (silly hair, yellow boots, repainting his car in the blue and orange of Montpellier), then there is no reason for him not to develop into one of the stars of French football. It seems only a matter of time before his impressive efforts with the French under-21 side are transferred to the senior team.

GILLES SUNU

Club: FC Lorient DOB: 30/03/91 Position: Forward

Just a year back Gilles Sunu was reckoned one of the brightest prospects in the Arsenal setup, but he never got the playing time he deserved. At the end of his first loan spell at Derby he got injured, but recovered in time to represent France on home ground in the European-Under 19's championship where he captained the side to victory, scoring the equalizer in the final against Spain.

Yet again he got injured, more seriously this time. After two months on the sidelines he fought his way back into the Arsenal reserve squad, but was overlooked. As a result of his demands for more playing time, he was shipped to Arsenal's Ligue 1 affiliate Lorient. He impressed Christian Gourcuff that season and the deal was made permanent. It was ironic that he teamed up with former Arsenal prospect Jérémie Aliadière, who also signed with on-loan Gunner Joel Campbell.

Before the season Sunu stated that his objective was to play upfront and score ten goals, and also contribute with decisive passes. It took him quite some time to score his first goal, which came on the 6th of November against Ajaccio. Lorient fans thought this goal showed the makings of a great player and that he could fill the boots of Gameiro, but further progress has not been forthcoming. Everybody knows Sunu is a pacey, athletic striker with a great eye for goals, but just like Aliadière, he has problems realizing his potential. If Gourcuff, a mastermind when it comes to getting the best out of players, can't do it, nobody can. And just when you thought it could not get any worse, Sunu ruptured his ankle during training, and is now out for the rest of the season.

GUEIDA FOFANA

Club: Olympique Lyonnais DOB: 15/05/91 Position: Midfielder



As one of the brightest young talents in France at the moment Gueïda Fofana is an obvious pick for this top 50 list. The young and powerful midfielder made it into the first team of Le Havre AC in 2009, and has since then continued to develop as a holding midfielder. He appeared in his first professional match ever for Le Havre AC against Tours FC in the Coupe de la Ligue on the 18th of August 2009 and then continued to impose his powerful game on Le Havre's style of play. Interestingly, Fofana actually came through the academy of Le HAC alongside another great French talent: Manchester United's Paul Pogba.

Besides being an important figure for the Ligue 2 side, he has also captained every France team at youth level besides the under 21-team, an unbelievable feat for a young player and this has certainly given him a lot of additional experience points on his way to the summit of French football. In the summer of 2011 he signed with the seven times French champions Olympique Lyonnais for a modest sum of €1.8 million which could develop into €2.6 million depending on performances for Les Gones.

In terms of playing style, Fofana represents the more traditional French defensive midfielder, as he combines both physical and technical abilities, much like players like Patrick Vieira and Claude Makélélé, or even players like Etienne Capoue and Yann M'Vila who play in the French top flight these days. Take into account his leadership skills too and you'll have a future star of French football but of course, everything depends on whether he can break into this Lyon side, of which he has already appeared as a starting player against Real Madrid in the Santiago Bernabeu.

Before the end of the season Fofana will have played around 30 games for Lyon in both the league and cup, although he may have expected to appear more, it is obvious he is part of Remi Garde's plans. He also played a big part in France's fourth place in the U-20 World Cup in Mexico last summer, where he captained France in an exceptional matter and attracted even additional attention from the big clubs of Europe. Actually if we take a walk back in time to January 2011, we find that Gueïda Fofana almost signed for Premiership-side Aston Villa, but the deal fell through as the parties involved wasn't able to come to an agreement.

Fofana is now steadily building towards a great future as footballer, and should for all that he is worth remain at Olympique Lyonnais, a club that since their last Ligue 1 title back in 2008 have shown great willingness to form younger players like Alexandre Lacazette, Clément Grenier and Samuel Umtiti to mention some of the examples. Seeing that the French giants also are having troubles with their finances, a possible sale of the exciting midfield prospect Maxime Gonalons may be on the cards and then the place in midfield will stay open for young Gueïda Fofana.

EMMANUEL RIVIERE

Club: Toulouse FC DOB: 03/03/90 Position: Forward

When Emmanuel Rivière left Saint-Etienne for Toulouse last summer it came as a bit of a surprise. A Ligue 1 side with very little attacking talent selling their most talented young striker to another league rival also desperate for a goal scorer, it seemed like great business for TFC, despite an injury-hit campaign for the 21-year old. 'Manu' as he is known has only made nine starts so far this year yet has hit four goals (three of which came in an extremely fruitful February period) and leads his team's scoring chart despite playing nine games less than joint top scorer Umut Bulut. Perhaps it says more about the team's lack of depth up top than Rivière's influence but the versatile striker is nonetheless hot property in French football when on the pitch.



YAYA SANOGO

Club: AJ Auxerre DOB: 27/01/93 Position: Forward

19 year-old Auxerre striker Yaya Sanogo has been a Football Manager favourite for a few seasons – but does he have the talent to make it as a real-life star?

The 6'3" forward certainly has the raw skills to make himself a handful for defenders but has not received as much playing time as he would have liked at club level. Despite representing France at every level from Under 16s to Under 21s, he has played a total of just 11 games for Auxerre and only has a solitary goal to his name.

When called upon at various stages at youth level for his country, he has performed well but should work to ensure that he receives more playing time in order to advance his development. In a league where a number of young strikers are making their mark, some of them younger than Sanogo, he should hope that his development does not stall as a result.

It will be interesting to see what the future holds for Yaya Sanogo. Whether his future be with Auxerre or another club in France or abroad, the tall striker can cause problems in the opposing box, something which may alert interested parties.

A fast, hard working and agile attacker, he has an eye for goal being able to score both poacher's efforts and more complex, skillful finishes that require more individual ability. His achievements in a relatively short time with les Verts demonstrated his skill to a number of Europe's top sides and clubs like Liverpool and Arsenal were taking a keen interest in his services last summer before he opted to join le Téfécé. Never one to be afraid of getting stuck in, Rivière netted 17 goals in three season for ASSE before leaving despite often being deployed on the wing. It was during this spell that he also learned how to turn provider having laid on eight goals for his teammates in those same three seasons.

Currently an under-21 international, Rivière will be looking to put this season's frustrations behind him and make the most of his remaining opportunities this year before being able to focus on really making his mark next season. Assuming Alain Casanova can keep hold of the likes of Franck Tabanou, Étienne Capoue, Moussa Sissoko, Étienne Didot and Antoine Devaux, he will feel confident he can have a season to remember as between them the midfield have scored or produced the bulk of the side's goals in the absence of a predator to finish them off. With Manu ahead of them, there will be less pressure on the midfield to share the goal scoring burden and he should thrive on their healthy supply lines.

NICOLAS ISIMAT-MIRIN

Club: Valenciennes FC DOB: 15/11/91 Position: Defender

Nicolas Isimat Mirin is a player who shares a number of similarities with the aforementioned Willy Boly. Both have followed a fairly traditional route thus far for franciliens with a talent for football: from the prestigious Clairefontaine academy to one of the biggest clubs for bringing through talented youngsters - in Nicolas' case, Rennes, rated the best in the country – and also like Boly, he has spoken candidly about the strengths and weaknesses of his own game, displaying a level of maturity that one comes to expect from graduates of the French Federation's regional academies.

He was let go by Rennes after two years, but that may turn out to be the best thing that ever happened to him. It has provided him with an early disappointment that most sportspeople need in order to make it, a reminder of the hard work needed to succeed. Also, it brought him to Valenciennes, a club where he feels perfectly at home and where he has developed impressively as a player.

His game needs refining, as his relatively high foul count and collection of cards during the 2011-12 season has shown, but the game intelligence that his coaches at Valenciennes rave about will surely see him develop into a defender of great class.

JOHAN MARTIAL

Club: Brest DOB: 30/05/91 Position: Defender

After a youth career which was spent at many clubs, including PSG, it was Corsican side Bastia who finally signed him up in 2008. The central defender made his debut for the islanders in March 2009 and went on to make six appearances before the end of that season. The following year, he was given a more prominent role and played 23 times during the 2009/10 campaign which unfortunately ended in relegation for Bastia.

Brest, who had just been promoted to Ligue 1 had seen enough potential and decided to take him on loan for a season, with a further option to buy. During his first season at Brest, Martial made relatively few appearances (7 in total) although he did manage to score his first ever senior goal during a 1-1 draw with Nice. Martial showed some very encouraging signs when on the field and it was clear that Brest had a potentially very good young defender on their books.



The Bretons had no doubts about signing him up permanently and splashed out about £700,000 on the defender that summer. It wasn't expected that he would become a first team regular so quickly, but because of Brest's terrible injury situation he has become a mainstay in the first team already. Despite his young age, many already consider him a key defender for Brest, although he is more of a rough diamond with a few things still to learn.

He has a strong physique towering frame, which is vital for a centre back and this is one of his main strengths at the moment. As far as intelligence goes, he does show his inexperience sometimes and can be out of position etc. However if he continues his development and gets playing time on the field, then he could certainly become one of the better central defenders in French football.

SERGE AURIER

Club: RC Lens DOB: 24/12/92 Position: Defender

This exciting young prospect made it through the ranks of RC Lens, and can now be found playing on the right side of the defence for Toulouse FC. This 19 year old defender grew up in the capital city of Ivory Coast, Abidjan, but still holds a French passport and therefore could still represent either national team.

He graduated from the Lens football academy, and therefore also played his first matches for "Les Sang et or". Actually his first ever match came against AS Saint-Etienne, where he was opposed to a certain – now Lille forward - Dmitri Payet, and after some shaky first minutes, he eventually got a hold of the France international and started making a name for himself.

In the season that followed he played 27 games in the French top-flight which eventually led to a lot of interest from teams abroad, including Manchester City, SS Lazio and Fulham. None of these went on to engage in negotiations for the player, so he went down to Ligue 2 with RC Lens. During the transfer window in January 2012 he joined Toulouse FC after having played sixteen games in the French second division, and now is on the lookout to impress his new manager, Alain Casanova.

His playing style is a bit like what the modern fullback looks like. He is fast with the ball, delivers good crosses and knows how to dribble. And as with most modern fullbacks he attacks better than he defends, although this is a player that should receive credit for doing both very well.

In other words his future looks very bright, and knowing that France has produced some of the finest fullbacks since the start of this century, we should be expecting a talent like Serge Aurier to explode onto the international scene in some years, provided he continues his development.



ABDOULAYE DIALLO

Club: Rennes DOB: 30/03/92 Position: Goalkeeper

Rennes 2nd goalkeeper, Abdoulaye Diallo, aged 19, is considered one of the most exciting prospects in France at this position, along with Pierrick Cros, Joris Delle or Alphonse Areola. Picked out by Rennes from youth academy INF Clairefontaine, Diallo soon became Rennes reserve's regular goalkeeper.

After having been allowed to play the Gambardella Cup, he made his first appearance in Ligue 1 on the 29/11/2009, at only 17, in a game against Lyon, in which he showed great talent and a staggering maturity. A few months later, he was offered his first professional contract. This season saw him become Stade Rennais official second keeper, behind Benoît Costil. He made his second appearance in Ligue 1 on the 29/01/12 against Marseille – an honest performance despite a late mistake that cost his team a 2-1 defeat.

Mainly due to Pierrick Cros injury, he earned a spot in France's winning starting XI at the U19 European Championship, despite being one year younger than his teammates, but coach Francis Smerecki decided not to call him up for the following World Cup in Columbia. Since then, Diallo has become a full member of Les Bleus U20 (where he has to face the concurrence of Zacharie Boucher).

BAPTISTE REYNET

Club: Dijon FCO DOB: 28/10/90 Position: Goalkeeper

Before the 2011-12 season Baptiste Reynet was an anonymous young keeper, plucked from Martigues in the amateur leagues over the summer to provide some competition to Dijon's number one Jean-Daniel Padovani.

Reynet soon made such an impression on coach Patrice Carteron that he was starting games and it took no time at all for everyone else to see why. He has phenomenal reactions, making incredible saves look easy. Among those who liked what they saw was Erick Mombaerts, who drafted Reynet into France's under-21 squad.

He is not the tallest goalkeeper, but he boasts an impressive physique similar to that of Stéphane Ruffier. So not only will Reynet's explosiveness get him to the ball hurtling towards the top corner, but his strength will ensure a strong contact even at full stretch.

Dijon fans now expect a miracle or two every match and they are rarely let down. But it is easier for a goalkeeper to impress when given multiple chances every game and Dijon have one of the leakiest defences in the league. It was somewhat typical that Reynet's debut game away against Toulouse, which impressed people so much, still ended in a 2-0 defeat. His style of play in 2011 did not help matters, sticking to his goal-line and allowing chances to develop rather than attempting to cut out balls as they entered the area.

During the season he moved his starting position forward and played more proactively. This combination of his willingness to learn and regular first team football promises a healthy development over the coming seasons. He has yet to appear for the French under-21 side, confirming the consensus view that Ali Ahamada and Joris Delle are ahead of him in terms of development, but his work-ethic and talent suggest that the worst he can expect is a distinguished Ligue 1 career.

ANTHONY KNOCKAERT

Club: Guingamp DOB: 20/11/91 Position: Midfielder



The pacey forward made his debut for EA Guingamp in Ligue 2, and has since played over 25 matches in the second-tier of French football. His attributes are more or less what you would expect from a modern winger, but this guy also has a knack for scoring goals, and has so far this season scored five, along with four assists. He is a regular in French youth teams, and is currently in the U-20 squad.

When talking about him featuring for the national team, it should be mentioned that he didn't make it into the U-20 squad that travelled to Colombia last summer to compete in the FIFA U-20 World Cup, but appeared in the "Tournoi de Toulon" earlier that summer.

Another interesting fact about this hot prospect is that he is being chased by English Premier League side Newcastle United who according to reports are interested in making an offer worth €2.5 mill, with the player also confirming that there is interest from the Toon Army.

In short, he is a hot prospect for the future with loads of pace and trickery up his sleeve, which could help him in a league like the English Premier League.

JOEL CAMPBELL

Club: FC Lorient DOB: 26/06/92 Position: Forward



The Costa Rican began his career in Deportivo Saprissa before drawing attention to him from many big clubs including Arsenal, Sevilla and Fiorentina. He opted to join the Gunners and signed a 5 year deal but, unable to obtain a work permit in England, he was sent on loan to FC Lorient, along with Arsenal teammate Gilles Sunu. The year before, he had already spent a week in Lorient, but he didn't convince « les Merlus » who chose not to keep him.

He made his first appearance in L1 against Sochaux, on 17 September 2011, coming in for Gregory Bourillon and delivering a beautiful assist to Innocent Emeghara. A couple of weeks later, he scored his first goal in Ligue 1 against Valenciennes.

Yet, despite regular apparitions, Campbell has failed to become a full member of the team, Christian Gourcuff choosing Emeghara, Aliardi re or Sunu over him. The left footed forward, who can also play as a winger, struggles to find a proper place in Gourcuff's tactical system. His coach, who predicted him « a very big future » and described him as a « rigorous, well disciplined and generous » player now seems to be reluctant to give him more playing time, even as the impact substitute he had been since the beginning of the season. Instead, Gourcuff concentrates on giving their chance to Lorient's players who are not on loan, like Sunu.

Campbell's balance appears to be rather disappointing after those first 6 months in France. With 3 goals in 16 games, he never really adapted himself. Whereas everyone admits he has a great potential, it seems he can't express it properly in a championship like Ligue 1, where teams are pretty defensive and careful, leaving very little space for his creativity. But that situation could change when he's back in England.

Although Gourcuff said last October *"it would be good to have him one more season"*, it seems pretty obvious, at this stage, that his loan won't be renewed by Lorient, even if Arsenal had permitted it.

Campbell's international career, however, has been brilliant. He has already played 4 different international tournaments. At only 19, he became last U20 World Cup's top scorer and has already been called up 9 times to the Costa Rican national team, scoring 3 goals. He scored a beautiful goal against Spain and showed a large part of his talent in posing great difficulties to one of the best defenders in the world, Carles Puyol. He was nominated for the Golden Boy Award, the U21 Ballon d'Or among a shortlist of 40 young players considered to be the most exciting prospects in the world. That regularity with his national team should allow him to obtain his work permit in England next season, and we might see him quite soon with Arsenal.

YASSINE BENZIA

Club: Olympique Lyon DOB: 08/09/94 Position: Forward

Although the comparison might prove excessive in the future, Yassine Benzia reminds certain OL fans of Karim Benzema who he sees as his role model. To many observers, he has the same qualities (pace, finishing, technique) as well as the same faults (individualism) the Real Madrid striker had at the same age. His 36 goals (!) in the French U17 championship 2010/2011 led him to sign his first professional contract in October 2011, at only 17.

Yet, despite good performances with his national selection at the last FIFA U17 World Cup – five goals including a double against Argentina and a promising duo with PSG's Abdallah Yaisien, Benzia remains pretty unknown in France, even in Lyon, where other great prospects like Lacazette or Grenier are the focus the fan's attention. Very protected by Lyon's coach R mi Garde who speaks of him as "a very intelligent player in the last thirty meters" but hasn't forgotten the harmful effects of the 87 generation (Benzema, Ben Arfa, M nez, Nasri) over-exposure to the media, Benzia hasn't yet been called in les Gones' first squad. Possible crack we should hear about very soon.

VINCENT ABOUBAKAR

Club: Valenciennes FC DOB: 22/01/92 Position: Forward



During the 2010 World Cup in South Africa the name of Vincent Aboubakar was that of an unknown quantity. The 18-year old was the only member of the 23-man Cameroon squad from a domestic club. He made two brief substitute appearances, and showed glimpses of why Valenciennes had agreed to sign the forward.

His first season was a little stop and start with moments of excellence. Managing just three starts and one goal, injuries got in the way of Aboubakar really making his mark on a faltering Valenciennes side. This season has been a different story for the player. Injury to last season's top scorer Gregory Pujol gave the young African the chance to impress fans at their brand new stadium. Improvements can be seen in the goals he has scored this term, showing an ability to play with his back to goal and the speed and skill to take on defenders. This shows that he really is a threat all over the front line.

Finally finding his feet in northern France, there are all the signs to show there definitely is more to come from the 20-year old Cameroonian striker.

MAMADOU SAKHO

Club: Paris Saint-Germain DOB: 13/02/90 Position: Defender

One of the greatest potential talents in recent French football history, Mamadou Sakho is no longer just a prospect and has the attributes of a legendary central defender (not least because of the comparisons with Lilian Thuram) after making considerable strides in the past 18 months. Now captain of Paris Saint-Germain, a French international and still only 22, Sakho could be set to explode onto the world football scene if he leads the capital club to their first league title since 1994 and then enjoys a successful European Championships with France.

Last season he came of age and was an absolute rock in the heart of an unexpectedly strong PSG defence, narrowly missing out on the Young Player of the Year award to title winning Lille's Eden Hazard. His performances led to him being given the armband by then manager Antoine Kombouaré despite only being 21 at the time but his experience belies his age already having three full campaigns under his belt ahead of this season.



2011/12 has not gone smoothly for Sakho so far with injuries restricting his appearances and the club's new found wealth and consequent influx of talented central defenders meaning that when fit, he has not had a steady partner at the back. However, with Alex, Diego Lugano and Milan Biševac all able to lend their considerable experience to the youngster you feel that he will soon be the undisputed leader of the team.

Raised within the club's sometimes sieve-like youth academy since 2002, 'Kirikou' has gone on to become one of the club's best recent products and together with fellow first-teamer Clément Chantôme he is the identity of the club and embodiment of its spirit and progress on the pitch. Strong, athletic, vastly intelligent with great reading of the game, his considerable height and aerial ability makes him a formidable opponent, at times akin to a brick wall.

Despite this season not being on par with last season's superlative showing, his performances have not been disappointing by any means.

Sakho has shown incredible maturity and responsibility at times given his struggles with adapting to the added expectation on his shoulders now he is captain. His leadership of the backline is improving with each week and his communication with his teammates is starting to show further signs of assuredness.

Already with five caps to his name, Euro 2012 could be the perfect moment for Sakho to demonstrate his considerable talent on the international stage should he be chosen as one of Laurent Blanc's leading centre-backs, and after working his way through the international youth levels he has taken to les Bleus duty like a duck to water. Seen as a main component of Blanc's youthful revolution in France, big things will be expected of him should he finish the season ultimately victorious with PSG. However he will have had to have matured a little further to be able to lead his beloved club to the title come May.

NAMPALYS MENDY

Club: AS Monaco DOB: 23/06/92 Position: Midfielder

Since his debut in 2010, big things have been expected of promising defensive midfielder Nampalys Mendy, the latest French defensive midfielder to be labeled as "the new Makélélé", in this instance by Monaco chief scout Didier Christophe when he spotted Mendy playing for Toulon in 2007.

Mendy, who only turns 20 in June of 2012, demonstrates a lot of similarities to Makélélé even if their style of game is not exactly the same. He is fast, energetic, has bundles of stamina, an admirable work rate, strong tackle and a decent touch, a skill set that matches that of the original number four prototype. However, the Monégasque youngster is small and lightweight (only 168cm and 68kg) and has had to find other ways of enforcing himself upon the game without the strength that made Claude famous.

Mendy is lauded by many at youth levels for his reading of the game and intelligent use of space and is a current French under-21 international and has been a regular at every level of French youth football. However, this campaign was always bound to be one of transition for Monaco, and they have endured a difficult first few months in France's second tier where wholesale changes have disrupted the team. They need to re-group and find the desire to get themselves back to the top end of the table and there is no doubt that Mendy will be a key player if they are to achieve this.



BENJAMIN STAMBOULI

Club: Montpellier HSC DOB: 13/08/90 Position: Defender

For the past two seasons Benjamin Stambouli has slowly been becoming an important part of Rene Girard's Montpellier side. Last season the French U21 international was mainly used in a defensive role, either covering in the centre or at right-back. And when called upon Stambouli showed he was adequate cover in Montpellier's less than convincing season.

As Montpellier's fate changed this season so have the performances of Stambouli. Asked to play in the centre of midfield he has blossomed into one of the best prospects in Ligue 1. Not afraid of a challenge, his tackles are usually very well timed, then more often or not he picks himself up, breaks forward with confidence and very rarely makes a poor pass. He is an all action midfielder that game after game is showing he is very capable of becoming a star player under Rene Girard.

Benjamin has already surpassed his father Henri's career as a player. The former Marseille goalkeeper only managed two appearances for l'OM and now runs the Marseille training centre. If Stambouli jr continues his excellent progress it will not be long until rumours of Father and Son being reunited at the same club begin to surface.

LENNY NANGIS

Club: SM Caen DOB: 24/03/94 Position: Midfielder

Caen forward Lenny Nangis is a player who has caught the eye of many French football fans so far this season. At the age of just 17, the young Frenchman has already shown strong potential and clearly has the ability to continue to further develop in the future.

Nangis scored his first goal for Caen this season against Ajaccio in a 2-2 draw. This proved to be an important developmental fixture for Nangis, who not only started the match but completed 90 minutes.

On the other hand, there has been some immaturity shown as the player was sent off for a second bookable offence after just 24 minutes against Evian in the 8th week of fixtures in Ligue 1 this season. Caen did go on to win the fixture comfortably (4-2) but this will not have helped his cause.

Overall, it is fair to say that Nangis is a player who many will be looking out for in the future. At just 17 years old, he has already shown how he can fit into a young Caen squad alongside the likes of the ever-impressive M'Baye Niang. Nangis, however, should work to ensure that his confidence is not deterred by the media attention surrounding his talented colleague.

EDEN HAZARD

Club: Lille OSC DOB: 07/01/91 Position: Forward

On the 24th of November 2007 at the Stade Marcel Pichot, Nancy a young player entered the field with only 12 minutes remaining. He couldn't stop his side from losing 2-0 away from home; looking back fans of both sides will remember the first sight they had of Eden Hazard.

Hazard made his senior debut only two months before his 17th birthday and rack up 33 minutes on the pitch ending the season sat on the bench next to Patrick Kluivert. Three years later it would be the setting for one of the forwards greatest achievements.

The 2011/12 season will most likely be Hazard's last in Lille. Over the past couple of years he has been linked with moves to Spain, England, Germany and Italy but with the maturity of a player with his head firmly on his shoulders he has continued his development in northern France.



Since his first appearance it has been very clear what sort of player Lille had in their ranks, it would always be up to Hazard how good he could become. Showing grace, agility and composure on the ball, he has the desire to drive the ball forward, taking on any defender that stands in his way.

Happy to play anywhere along the frontline it is hard to pigeon hole the young Belgian into a fixed position. In any one game he will usually start on the left before drifting to the right and also centrally. To man-mark him would be a mistake as quite often he drops as deep as his own half to pick up the ball and start most of Les Dogues attacks.

It is only when you have the pleasure of witnessing Hazard's abilities first hand that you really appreciate how good a player he is. With his lightning feet only fractionally slower than his quickness of thought the combination is a tremendously lethal and gifted player whose talent could take him to the very top.

The player's next decision will undoubtedly be his most important. Lille fans will wave goodbye to their favourite son this summer. The big question remains as to whose fans will be welcoming a new hero to their club. Whoever they are, they are very lucky.

NESKEENS KEBANO

Club: Paris Saint-Germain DOB: 10/03/92 Position: Midfielder

This young Parisian may have a very bright future in front of him. Being a graduate of the Paris Saint-Germain youth academy he has already learnt a lot about the Parisian style of play, and even though the revolution at Paris Saint-Germain has changed a lot regarding the pecking order, Neeskens Kebano still remains an interesting figure in the PSG-squad.

Regarding his name, one can't help to wonder whether there may be a relation to the Dutch-legend Johan Neeskens or whether his name is chosen more randomly. Well, actually Kebano's father wanted to pay tribute to the legendary Dutch midfielder in calling his son the same name.

Back to what really matters which is the football part, and Kebano's footballing career up to now have been made at the same club, Paris Saint-Germain, and therefore it is not surprising that he also made his professional debut at the club when, last season, he made a brief appearance in the French cup against FC Martigues at the Parc des Princes. In that match he almost got on the score sheet, but his goal was ruled out for being offside, a decision that seemed incorrect. He also played in Paris Saint-Germain's away game against BATE Borisov in the same season, and made the headlines of "L'Equipe" after yet again making a good cameo-performance, showing some blistering skills.

That brings us to his playing style, which is probably not too difficult to guess as he is small and moves quickly. His technique follows the likes of Gaël Kakuta and Yacine Brahimi who both move the ball quickly and can beat players with the combination of speed and ball control. Kebano also benefits of a decent vision of the game, which helps him in making decisions like passing and shooting, and whether he should take on his man or give the ball up. These attributes makes him a valuable player for a team like Paris Saint-Germain who should be looking for players capable of beating opponents, a trait that has been neglected a bit in the French game since players like Gabriel Obertan and Hatem Ben Arfa left for the English Premiership.

Talking about the future and how Neeskens Kebano is to convince Italian coach Carlo Ancelotti about making him a more important figure in the Paris Saint-Germain-squad, one may think that a loan deal to a less competitive side should do the trick, but this does not always solve a problem, and Paris Saint-Germain should definitely be careful with their gem, and choose wisely for the next season.

MAXIME BOURGEOIS

Club: AJ Auxerre DOB: 03/02/91 Position: Forward

The Auxerre player is an interesting addition to this list as he is currently on loan at LB Châteauroux in Ligue 2, and has impressed so far. He is the club's top scorer with nine goals this season and also is the player that Châteauroux builds their attack around. Another interesting point with Bourgeois is that he already has made his debut in Ligue 1, but chose himself to drop down to the second-tier in search of more playing time. A wise decision it seems.

Bourgeois grew up in the suburbs of Paris, which makes one wonder why he didn't attend the Clairefontaine Academy in the outskirts of the Paris region, but as logic has it, they either has the possibility to take in every promising player in the area, and he eventually opted for clubs like FC Brunoy, ASPTT Villecresnes and finally Créteil-Lusitanos before he was recruited by AJ Auxerre.

In terms of attributes he resembles the modern forward. He combines good technical ability with speed and physical capacities, which makes him interesting in every way. His eye for goal though has to be said is his first and foremost quality, which could bring him glory in the years to come.

ALI AHAMADA

Club: Toulouse FC DOB: 19/08/91 Position: Goalkeeper

At the beginning of the 2010-2011 season, Ali Ahamada was nowhere near the professional squad at Toulouse FC. In fact, he wasn't even guaranteed a starting position with the reserves. However, with Yohann Pelé facing serious health issues, he was propelled to the front of the scene following injuries to Mathieu Valverde and Marc Vidal. Replacing the latter who was injured while conceding a penalty, Ali Ahamada's first act as a professional footballer was to pick the ball out of his own net.

This would not deter the youngster. Soon, Ahamada was given a full start with the professionals before playing the final seven games of the season as first choice goalkeeper. Despite the arrival of Rémy Riou last summer, he has only confirmed his status, playing every game with le Téfécé this season.

Dominant in the air, he is surprisingly agile for a man of his stature, triggering comparisons with great French goalkeepers like Hugo Lloris and Bernard Lama. Quick and superbly efficient on his line, he is also starting to gain a reputation of a penalty-killer, with two saves in three attempts this season.

Commanding his team-mates with authority, capable of world-class saves, whether it is millisecond reflexes on point-blank shots or flying saves from long-range efforts, Ahamada seems oblivious to any sort of pressure... sometimes leading to costly inattentive mistakes.

Not an unusual default for a player of his age, especially in a position as exposed as the goalkeeper. Also a first choice goalkeeper - and captain - with the French U21 national team, Ahamada will gather all the experience he can to erase these little patches of distraction.

Now firmly established with Toulouse, the French-Comorian kid from Martigues knows he can rely on everyone's patience: his manager, his team-mates and the fans are all too conscious that Ahamada's meteoric rise to Ligue 1 was only the beginning...



LORIS NÉRY

Club: Saint-Etienne DOB: 05/02/91 Position: Defender

Despite having made fewer first team appearances so far this year than he did last season, Loris Néry remains one of French football's most promising young defenders. Naturally a right-back but capable of playing all across the back line, his versatility makes him a highly valuable player.

Coming through the ranks at Saint-Etienne at a time when the youth development conveyor belt looks particularly attractive, Néry is unlucky to have seen his way to the first team blocked by more experienced players like Albin Ebono or an exceptionally talented youngster such as Kurt Zouma. Unable to profit from the long-term absence of first choice right-back and Captain Loïc Perrin this year, he has needed to be patient and wait for his opportunities.

When they have come, Néry has performed well, looking solid and composed and still at only 21 years of age he has his whole career ahead of him and should not feel discouraged by a reduced amount of playing time. One thing that may work in his favour and see him secure a regular spot in les Verts' line-up next season is their inability to hold onto big name players or promising youngsters that shine at the Stade Geoffroy-Guichard.

Like Blaise Matuidi and Dimitri Payet last year, this year's star graduates such as Faouzi Ghoulam and Zouma could be poached in the summer meaning that Néry could find himself closer to a starting berth next season.

JORDAN AYEWE

Club: Marseille DOB: 11/09/91 Position: Forward

Often overshadowed by his better known brother, Jordan Ayew is a young talent in his own right and looks set to have an extremely promising future. The Ghanaian, who is the son of former L'OM favourite Abedi Pele, joined Marseille in 2006 as a trainee and signed his first professional contract three years later. He made his debut in December 2009 away against Lorient and he sensationally scored a crucial equalising goal during the match! Since then, he has gone on to make 47 appearances for Marseille, scoring five goals in the process. He is a very versatile attacker and capable of playing anywhere the final third. Just as strong with his right foot as he is with his left, he is a real double threat. Despite being very versatile in attack, it is that versatility that could be his biggest downfall. At the moment you can sense that the player himself doesn't quite know his best position and he has been tried out all over the pitch, more often than not he has played on the right hand side or as a central striker.



He does have an eye for goal, but overall he doesn't seem like a natural striker to me. In this current season 2011/12 Marseille coach Didier Deschamps has been trying him in a more attacking midfield role and this looks like it might have potential. He does have excellent vision and a creative brain, as well as being light on his feet.

Jordan will always be compared strongly to his brother Andre, who is another youngster of exceptional talent and who also has the potential to become a world class player.

Some people have suggested though, that with the right guidance then Jordan could become even better than him, but it remains to be seen what the future holds. At times, I feel he is pressured by comparisons to his brother, and being a Ghanaian there is always a lot of expectations on his shoulders. If he can somehow channel this into positive energy then he could become one hell of a player, that's for sure.

Compared to Andre, one of the main differences in my opinion is his high work rate and determination. I just sense that Jordan has more fight in him and a willingness to never give up, which is a fine quality to have. Although he's never been sent off, there have been times when he's shown some anger and aggression too, and in the future I wouldn't be surprised to see referees show him red cards.

If Jordan Ayew can work out where his best exact position is and continue to develop, then he has a very high potential in the world of football. Football runs in his family and this is a nice advantage to have, although at the same time it can put pressure on to his shoulders as well. If he can cope with this consistently in the next few years, he has a bright future.

M'BAYE NIANG

Club: SM Caen DOB: 19/12/94 Position: Forward



M'Baye Niang pushed his way into the Caen first team last season and helped Franck Dumas' side avoid relegation; scoring three goals in the last five games, including an impressive run and finish again Marseille's Steve Mandanda. It was a very cool and collected for a striker only 16 years old. It was a barnstorming start for the youngster. Those days must feel so far away for the young striker, with only one goal to his name – although it was a stunning strike against Evian – he has struggled in a difficult second season.

The silver lining is his age; he has still got a long way to go before one should begin to worry. Very strong on the ball, pace to burst down the flanks there is no doubt in anyone's mind that this kid is very talented. Tottenham Hotspur and others were interested in the summer, this season's form proves it was too early to move. With Caen lacking a real goal-scoring threat and Niang lacking fitness and form, you really hope his progress doesn't stall in Normandy.

SEBASTIEN CORCHIA

Club: FC Sochaux DOB: 01/11/90 Position: Forward

Sochaux right-back Sébastien Corchia is definitely a player who can be regarded as a promising talent in France. The 21 year-old perhaps surprised a few people in signing for Sochaux from Le Mans with many believing he has the potential and talent to play further up the Ligue 1 table. Bundesliga giants Bayern Munich had stated interest during previous transfer windows but did not cement their interest with a bid for the young Frenchman before Sochaux were able to make their move.

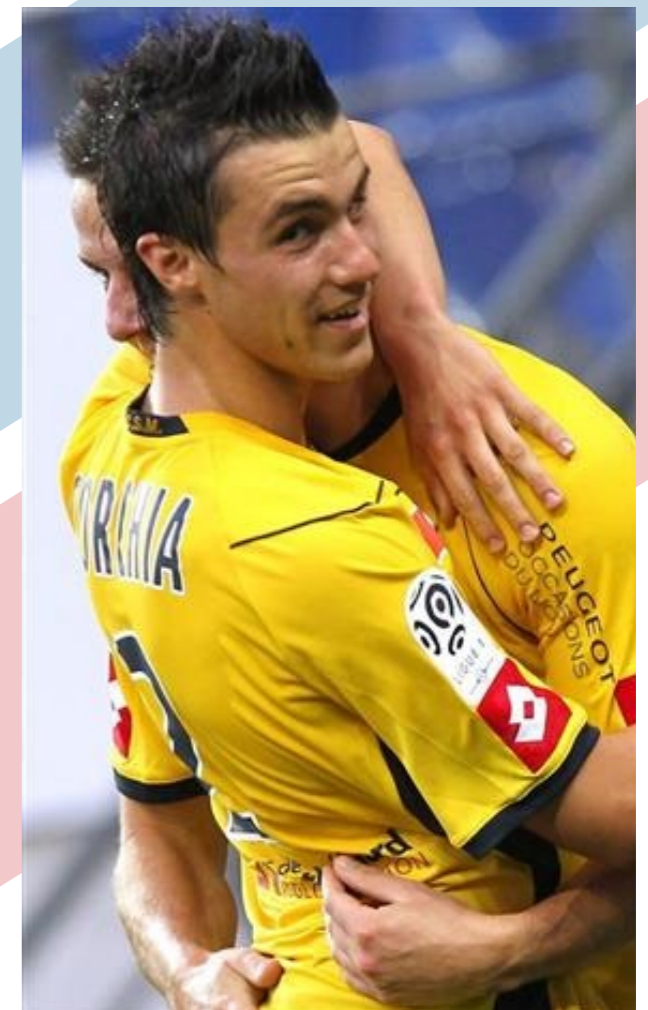
Even though the transfer fee involved in the transfer of Corchia to Sochaux was undisclosed, it was reported to be significantly, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, lower than the extortionate prices quoted in some media outlets.

Sochaux themselves may not be having the best of seasons overall but they do have a variety of talents available in their ranks. 21 year-old Sébastien Corchia is one such player. The young right-back has been used as the first-choice player in that particular position, proving that the club have faith in his ability as a player.

Corchia's sound ability whilst roaming forward is a notable strength. He also has the ability to perform from set-piece situations, though this has not been as evident with Sochaux as it was previously with Le Mans.

At international level, Corchia has represented France at all levels until Under 21. He has yet to make his breakthrough into the main France squad though still has plenty of time, and plenty of work left, to beat the likes of Anthony Reveillere and Mathieu Debuchy to Laurent Blanc's squad.

Whether or not Sochaux remain in Ligue 1 next season is up for debate though they do look set to lose some talent in the summer transfer window. With the likes of Marvin Martin and Modibo Maiga already paving their way out of the club, Sébastien Corchia may be another to find himself joining a new club, whether it be in France or abroad.



CLEMENT GRENIER

Club: Olympique Lyon DOB: 07/01/91 Position: Midfielder

Clément Grenier is part of a promising generation of OL young players such as Lacazette, Kolodziejczak, Tafer or Reale, all French internationals, with whom he won the U19 European Championship in 2010. He is a classy attacking (or central) midfielder with a very good passing, who sometimes lacks of consistence and stamina. His outstanding intelligence of play recalls Gourcuff's. He can also take good set pieces. In spite of numerous injuries which have deprived him from playing time, Grenier's progression has been impressive this season and although he hasn't made it to the starting XI yet, he has proved himself a very credible alternative to Ederson or Yoann Gourcuff as playmaker for Les Gones. At 21, he has played no less than 26 games for one of France's top clubs.

Grenier joined Lyon as he was only 11 and became soon one of OL's best prospects. He is known to have drawn very quickly the interest of major European clubs like Inter Milan, Real Madrid or Arsenal. He made his professional debuts against Toulouse on 26 September 2009. According to recent declarations from his coach Rémi Garde, Grenier should "simplify his play" and be "more lucid and relax". It seems the right footed midfielder is still looking for his right position though : even if he was originally a 10, his recent brilliant performance as an 8 against Dijon could encourage Rémi Garde to give him the second central midfielder position in Lyon's usual 4-4-2, along with a defensive midfielder like Gonalons or Källström.

He has been a French international at every level, scoring a total of 12 goals for 53 matches.



"Bafé", a former ASSE star, now playing for their biggest rival Lyon, also used to be Guilavogui's mentor, and he still calls him his brother. This has raised the eyebrows of some the hardcore ASSE fans who are questioning Guilavogui's dedication to the club. After revealing to the press his dream was to play in the Bundesliga or the Premier League some even accused him of being a "big head", but this should not be a problem; after a great start to the season, he has every reason to be ambitious.

JOSUHA GUILAVOGUI

Club: Saint-Etienne DOB: 19/09/90 Position: Midfielder

Some say Josuha Guilavogui reminds them of a former ASSE and now PSG-player Blaise Matuidi, but it could be argued that he has even more to his game. It is true that both are defensive midfielders, but Blaise is much more of a collector then Josuha. Depending on whether Christophe Galtier uses a 4-2-3-1 or 4-3-3, Guilavogui operates more like a box-to-box player who possesses great vision and passing quality. His physical presence is not to be underestimated, but sometimes he can be a bit too aggressive. This is a characteristic for young players in his position, but there are signs of a calmer player.

He has definitely gained momentum over the 2011/2012-season, even though he played some bad games when up against big guns like Montpellier and Lille. This was mainly due to nervousness and sloppy passing, and this is something the Under-21 France international has to deal with. With posters of Thierry Henry, Bafétimbi Gomis and Patrick Vieira in his locker there is no doubt who his big idols are, with the latter the most reflective of Guilavogui's current style.

YASSINE BRAHIMI

Club: Rennes DOB: 08/02/90 Position: Midfielder

Yacine Brahimi is an extremely talented young attacker who can play in any role high up the pitch but prefers the creative midfield berth just behind the strikers. 22 years of age, he is a technically gifted player with great ball skills and a fantastic turn of pace. Hailed as "the future playmaker for Stade Rennais" by current manager Frédéric Antonetti, big things are expected of the youngster in Brittany.

A great first touch, fantastic technique, raw pace, creative talent and impressive dribbling skills take away from the fact that he is slight of build and a non-physical player. He also has a cannon of a shot from long-range, as evidenced with his solitary strike this season in the Coupe de France against Evian and last year against Paris Saint-Germain during a run in the first team.

In some respects he is the perfect foil for Yann M'Vila, SRFC's current defensive midfield destroyer. Having come through the youth academy with fellow first-teamers M'Vila and Kévin Théophile-Catherine.

Brahimi already has a great understanding with current members of the starting XI and is another of the club's impressive home-grown talents.

This season has perhaps not gone the way he would have liked so far, having been restricted largely to cup games and making only a handful of appearances in Ligue 1 this season. He spent part of the 2009-2010 season on loan at Clermont where he enjoyed great success and perhaps would be well advised to repeat this next season.

WAHBI KHAZRI

Club: SC Bastia DOB: 08/02/91 Position: Midfielder

In his third full season in Bastia's first team, Corsican-born Tunisian attacker Wahbi Khazri has been an integral part of the islanders surprise ascent to the summit of Ligue 2 and le SCB look primed to return to Ligue 1 for the first time since 2005.

A player capable of playing in any position along the frontline, be it up top, out wide or behind the strikers, Khazri's natural role is this of an attacking midfielder providing ammunition for his strike partners to benefit from or going for goal himself. However, he has enjoyed great success at times this year from wide on the left where he is able to cut inside to shoot or look to lay the ball onto his teammates.



Blessed with electric pace, Khazri is a great threat when on the counter attack for Frédéric Hantz's side but is perhaps let down sometimes by his selfishness in front of the goal. Linked with moves to the Premier League and a host of other European clubs, the 21-year old is already hot property and his career-high goal tally of six so far this year suggests that his development has reached the stage where he needs to be playing top-flight football.

Ready for the big time, Khazri will be one to watch next season if Bastia can reach Ligue 1 at the term of their current campaign.

BENJAMIN MENDY

Club: Le Havre AC DOB: 17/07/94 Position: Defender

A product of the famous Le Havre youth system, Mendi impressed for France during the U17 world cup in summer 2011. He was rewarded with his first professional contract and this season, he's already become a key defender for the Normans starting 17 games so far for the club. What's more impressive is that he's still only 17 years old. For someone of his age to be thrown into the 1st team so quickly, clearly demonstrates his ability.

His primary position is left back, although naturally he can also play on the right hand side of defence. Arsenal and other big clubs have been linked with him, and barring a major injury it looks virtually set in stone that this kid is going to have a massive future. It would probably do him good to have at least one more season in Ligue 2, and being at a decent club like Le Havre can do him little harm. How soon he makes the trip up to next level or another major European league remains to be seen, but he is definitely a seriously bright star worth keeping an eye on.

THORGAN HAZARD

Club: RC Lens DOB: 29/03/93 Position: Midfielder

Among the youngest and least experienced players in this list, Thorgan Hazard is nonetheless a familiar name to football enthusiasts, part of Belgium's gifted current generation of players, a quarter of an incredibly promising bunch of footballing brothers and, along with Raphaël Varane and Geoffrey Kondogbia, a key element of an outstanding youth side at Lens.



His senior performances have not yet set the world alight yet, but there are glimpses of what he can offer, particularly his ability to manufacture space in central areas where previously there was none. Certainly he is ready to make the step up, because age-group football has nothing left to teach him. In these games you see a player clearly superior to his peers, more aware, technically ahead of the curve.

He is probably at his best in an attacking midfield role, but he is comfortable wide and much of his game time thus far has been wide in a 4-3-3. 2011-12 was the first season he started getting regular minutes but the 2012-13 season will be the big one, when, should he remains at Lens, he's likely to become a regular starter.

Aside from the pressures that will inevitably come from growing up as a player and a person in the shadow of a superstar brother, Hazard's main barrier to success will be what happens after his seemingly inevitable move from Lens, a move that will be key to his development. Eden was able to turn from promising youngster to star player at a single, upwardly mobile, club, where he was comfortable. Unless Lens get back to the upper reaches of Ligue 1, Thorgan is unlikely to be as lucky.

Given regular football at a stable club, at Lens or elsewhere, he will surely make the grade. The pressure, no doubt increased, will then move to brother number three, Kylian.

HENRI SAIVET

Club: FC Girondins Bordeaux DOB: 26/10/90 Position: Forward

Henri Saivet first played as a striker but lately, he has been used by both his club and national team as a (right) winger. He is a pure, very fast, impact player, has a superb dribbling and outstanding technical abilities. He's one of les Marine et Blanc's most promising prospect, if not the most promising. Born in Dakar (Senegal), he signed his first professional contract in Bordeaux in 2007, at 17, making him the youngest professional Bordeaux player ever. In May 2008, he made his first appearance against Lens.

Following two extensive injury layoffs, he was sent on loan to Ligue 2 SC Angers for six months, where he played 20 games, and scored 4 goals. Back in Gironde, Saivet struggled to make his way to the first team and, even when Bordeaux were badly off and needed some kind of renewing, the club seemed pretty reluctant to give him his chance, and preferred to purchase new – and sometimes second rate – players.



In the end of 2011, after good performances during the first semester of the season, he managed to become a full member of the team, as a right winger, but Ludovic Obraniak's arrival and tactical changes from Francis Gillot pushed him off the starting XI. « I expect more from him », his coach said, after pointing out he needed to « show himself more offensively ».

Regularly called up with « Les Bleuets » (France U21), Saivet has adapted very well to french youth selections, and has scored 3 goals in 8 games already. At 21, Saivet has already 4 tournaments wins to his credit (1 Ligue 1, 1 Coupe de la Ligue and 2 Trophées des Champions). He remains one of the biggest hopes of french football. But he has yet to confirm his status.

ALEXANDRE LACAZETTE

Club: Olympique Lyon DOB: 25/05/91 Position: Forward



Lyon's Alexandre Lacazette first broke onto the scene properly whilst playing for the club in the Emirates Cup of 2010 with some fine performances in the competition. The event, televised in many

countries around the world, ensured that many people sat up and took notice of some of the fine young talent available at Lyon. Since then, the 20 year-old has developed into a fine attacking option for Lyon and has received some much-needed playing time under Rémi Garde's leadership at the club, something which was not always evident during previous boss Claude Puel.

This season, Lacazette has already received more playing time than he did in the previous two years combined, showing that Garde has faith in his ability, potential and development as a player.

In failing to allow Lacazette to leave the club on loan in summer, Garde has shown that he will be looking to Lacazette in the near future as a versatile attacking option for his Lyonnais side. Lacazette's ability to play alongside another striker or out wide on the right is something which will definitely appeal to the Lyon boss as he looks to extend his attacking options in the side.

It is fair to say that Alexandre Lacazette has been developing soundly as a player over the past season in particular and is maturing in his approach to the game. This season he has scored a respectable seven goals in his 23 appearances, including a brace against Lorient in the semi final of the Coupe de la Ligue to help the side reach the final of that particular competition. This is in spite of the fact that Lacazette has only started 14 matches in all competitions this campaign and completed 90 minutes on eight of these occasions.

It is clear that Lacazette has the potential to become a solid player for Lyon in the near future. His speed and, ultimately, his versatility ensure that he will be in Rémi Garde's plans for the remainder of this season and beyond. Rémi Garde has put a lot of faith into Lacazette's ability whilst it has been shown that the player is able to perform for the club. If Lacazette's form so far this season is anything to go by, Lacazette can look forward to a solid career at Olympique Lyonnais.

RYAN MENDES

Club: Le Havre AC DOB: 08/01/90 Position: Forward

The striker, who originates from Cape Verde has been with Ligue 2 side Le Havre since 2008. His progress has been slow at times, and only really during this current season has his profile come into the spotlight much. His first breakthrough campaign into the 1st team was back in 2009/10 when he made 14 appearances, although he failed to hit the back of the net once. The following year he played 32 times and managed to score four goals.

This season he's been far more prolific and has scored nine goals in just 21 starts. He's caught the eye with some very impressive finishing and by also demonstrating a high skill level. The goal he scored against Marseille in the Coupe de France certainly didn't do him any harm, and it's the south coast giants who are the most heavily linked with him right now. It looks like he'll be heading there in the summer, or at the very least to another Ligue 1 club.

Ryan is also capable of playing on the right wing and isn't just an out and out striker. There's more to his game than just finishing and putting the ball into the back of the net. He's lightweight, has a lot of pace and can really run at defenders causing them problems. Making the step up to Ligue 1 is definitely the next step if he wants to develop. He has the raw attributes to succeed, as long as he gets enough game time out in the middle and doesn't just sit on the bench of a big team like OM.

CHRIS MAVINGA

Club: Rennes DOB: 26/05/91 Position: Defender

After a chaotic couple of years following his departure from Paris SG at 18, an unsuccessful spell at Liverpool and a Belgian champion crown with RK Genk, Chris Mavinga returned to France last summer, joining the Stade Rennais. Despite a rocky start to his professional career, the youngster is arguably one of the most promising defenders in the country, and a regular in the youth national teams since the U18 category.

A pacy full back with a clear taste for attack, Chris Mavinga is capable of powerful rushes to support his forwards supplying pinpoint crosses with his left foot. He is always quick to get back and put in some defensive work, and although his over-enthusiastic nature is sometimes criticised, he seems to have recently learnt how to combine his happy tackling, very energetic attitude with the required discipline to avoid putting his team in difficult situations.

Equally able to play at centre-back and left-back, Mavinga is now well installed at the full-back position, and although he remains a second choice, he represents a credible alternative as well as a backup to the impressive Kévin Théophile-Catherine. If he can find the patience and the composure to work hard in the shadow of "KTC", the young man from Meaux will soon have the chance to finally express the whole extent of his huge potential.

JEAN-CHRISTOPHE BAHEBECK

Club: Paris Saint-Germain DOB: 01/05/93 Position: Forward

Paris Saint-Germain's 18 year-old winger Jean-Christophe Bahebeck has proved capable of performing, even at his comparably young age. Playing for PSG and the pressures which come with it is no easy task but Bahebeck has shown himself to be capable in the 22 matches he has played for the club.

Bahebeck did begin his career as a striker before switching to the wing. It is in this position where the player hopes to make the biggest impact. The winger has already attracted reported interest from the likes of Manchester City and Chelsea over the past couple of seasons. He has also attracted attempted loan bids from a number of clubs though both PSG and the player have stated their desire for the player to continue his development at his current club.

It will be interesting to see what happens to Jean-Christophe Bahebeck given PSG's recent takeover. This has made fighting for position at the club even more of an uphill struggle and it may now be even more difficult for younger players to make their mark at the club. Surely, however, Leonardo will have one eye on Bahebeck's development with the side in the hope that he can mature into a valuable asset for the future.

YOUNES BELHANDA

Club: Montpellier HSC DOB: 25/02/90 Position: Midfielder



Montpellier is this season's big surprise package, and it is mainly due to the rise of young players like Younes Belhanda. The Moroccan starlet has been one of the revelations in the campaign, displaying his tricky style of play. Last season Montpellier's target man Oliver Giroud didn't get much support from the midfield as Marco Estrada seemed to be the only player able to give him a decent through passes.

This has changed radically this season with Rene Girard implementing Belhanda as an advanced playmaker. It is impossible not to be impressed by his intelligent passing game. Just like Lille's Eden Hazard, Younes Belhanda possesses great balance and has the technical ability to take on and beat a man or three. Montpellier president Louis Nicollin has even said Belhanda is able to become an even better player than Hazard.

Even if most people would disagree with that point of view, he is still attracting interest from big Premier League clubs, especially after his impressive performance in Montpellier's top of the table clash at PSG. Just before the break Giroud and Belhanda reversed their roles with the Moroccan nodding in the 1-0-goal; a perfectly timed run sneaking behind the back of Mamadou Sakho. And as always he celebrated with his acrobatic summersaults. It is remarkable to see how the player has improved over the last season, although he has always been reckoned a big talent. Like many other Montpellier players Belhanda rose after winning the 2008 Coupe de Gambardella, the most rated youth tournament in France.

There is no doubt Belhanda is gaining confidence, and just this season he has humiliated opponents by scoring three "panenka" penalties (two for Montpellier and one for the Morocco national team). The only thing Belhanda gets criticism for is his temper. Sometimes he gets hot headed, a weakness seen before in young talents like PSG captain Sakho or Wayne Rooney. Just like them, as part of a maturing process, he will have to grow out of it, and when he does Belhanda will show us even more what he is capable of.

BENJAMIN ANDRE

Club: AC Ajaccio DOB: 03/08/90 Position: Midfielder

Although born in Nice Benjamin Andre has been part of the Ajaccio set-up since he was 16-years old. Impressing in the Under-18 team he was quickly given his chance in the Coupe de France against Bagnols Pont. The amateur side took Ajaccio all the way to penalties and it was the 17-year old Andre that scored the decisive penalty.

Fast forward three years and now the French Under-21 international finds himself more often than not in Ajaccio's starting line-up in France's top division, not bad for a midfielder who recently turned 21. So far this season Andre has impressed as Ajaccio try and stay in Ligue 1. With three goals to his name it is already his most productive season to date, throw in two assists and manager Olivier Pantaloni will find it hard to leave the midfielder out of his team.

Playing mostly on the right of an attacking midfield three Andre has shown speed, agility and an impress technique when on the ball. Not afraid to shoot from distance too Andre looks to have the full package. If Ajaccio can stay up then the midfielder will be a huge part of their future, if not he want have to wait long for the Ligue 1 clubs to come calling.



DIMITRI FOULQUIER

Club: Rennes DOB: 23/03/93 Position: Defender

He is one of the latest jewels to have graduated from Stade Rennes' Academy. At 18, Dimitri Foulquier is still eligible to play in the Gambardella Cup and is already knocking at the door of the professional squad. After a difficult professional debut in Lille last October and a flamboyant performance against Atlético Madrid in December, the young right back has been a regular on the bench in Ligue 1 and he is looking for more...

An athletic player with solid pace and great technique, Foulquier was first trained in Rennes as a right-midfielder which remains visible in his attack-minded playing style. Gifted with abilities “out of the norm” according to Frederic Antonetti who recently praised the “incredible things” he manages in training, the Guadeloupian has worked hard to raise his defensive qualities up to the professional standards.

A true modern full-back, he could be on the verge of becoming much more than a backup option. Present in the starting eleven at Saint-Etienne last February, following a few lacklustre performances by the “Rouge et Noir” vice-captain Romain Danzé, Foulquier is ready to start making a name for himself. And it shouldn’t be too long before Ligue 1 wingers start remembering it.

MATHIAS AUTRET

Club: FC Lorient DOB: 01/03/91 Position: Midfielder



Although he may look no older than 12 the young Mathias Autret is a very talented 21-year old with a huge future in front of him. When Brest were unable to offer a promising 16-year old a contract as they lacked a training centre Lorient jumped at the chance to sign the midfielder to a professional contract.

For Brest the young Autret had already made his first team debut in Ligue 2, playing 12 games and scoring an impressive three goals. Lorient fans thought they would have to wait to see what Autret had to offer, but an injury to left-midfielder Sigmarry Diarra gave Autret the chance he need and sooner than expected he was in the Lorient first team.

Showing a combination of great vision, excellent skill on the ball and a desire to beat his man, Autret is the kind of player that gets the fans on their feet, once he gains a little more confidence and a big game mentality he is the kind of player that will keep the fans on their feet.

Mostly playing on the left he has shown he has the pace to play at this level, he seems the type of player that could easily move to a more central position as he gets older and command games from the centre of the pitch. He is now part of the France U21 squad, all the smart money is on Autret to one day make his mark on the national team.

ENZO REALE

Club: Olympique Lyon DOB: 07/10/91 Position: Midfielder

He is a product of the Lyon youth academy and has spent about two full seasons playing for the Lyon B team down in the fourth division. He made one professional appearance for Lyon before being loaned out to Ligue 2 side Boulogne for this season.

Impressing for the northern side this year he has become one of their key players. Whether or not his future lies at Lyon remains to be seen, but he has shown enough this season to suggest that he will eventually end up playing in Ligue 1 regularly.

A central midfielder by trade, he is also capable of playing in a more advanced position in the hole behind the strikers. He is known to have excellent creative vision and a decent long range shot when he decides to unleashed it. The full season in Ligue 2 playing competitive football has done him the world of good. Where his future lies after this, who knows, but he’s definitely a potential talent to look out for.

RYAD BOUDEBOUZ

Club: FC Sochaux DOB: 19/02/90 Position: Midfielder

Ryad Boudebouz is one of the most exciting young prospects in French football and has been linked with a number of moves to bigger European clubs since Sochaux’s unprecedented success last season which saw them finish fifth. The 22-year old French-born Algerian international is an attacking midfielder who can also play on the wing, and has a number of seasons of Ligue 1 experience behind him already.

Although he primarily plays behind the front two, the youngster has played out wide and up front and has experience in all attacking positions. A fast, tricky and immensely skilful player, Boudebouz struck up a strong rapport with last season’s leading assist provider Martin, serial goal scorer Brown Ideye and midfield maestro Maurice-Belay to fire Sochaux to success. However, with Ideye, Maurice-Belay and manager Francis Gillot gone and Martin and Maïga seemingly on their way out too, Sochaux plummeted to the foot of the table under new manager Mehmed Baždarević’s short-lived reign and Boudebouz might be casting a few glances towards the exit too.

Together Boudebouz and Martin helped contribute towards les Lionceaux’s exciting, flowing brand of attacking football and although he was not prolific, the Algerian scored several memorable goals last season that helped his club secure European football for the first time since 2007. This season it has been a different story.



Boudebouz is still one of the team's main contributors with five goals and three assists in 23 league appearances but when compared to last season's eight goals and seven assists in 38 league appearances, the stats tell their own story. The youngster has at times had to shoulder the entire weight of the Montbéliard outfit by himself. Whilst others like Martin and Maïga have been losing their heads, Boudebouz has kept going and tried to drag his team out of danger but despite his best efforts the poisonous atmosphere that currently engulfs the Stade Auguste-Bonal is undoing all of his hard work.



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It has been a long road putting this collection of players together, we hope that everyone has enjoyed it and possibly picked up a few names to look out for.

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We hope you all enjoy it, and maybe we'll be back next season for more.

Au revoir!



1650