presents...

le 50

2014
Every time I go to Clairefontaine to cover the French national team for my newspaper Le Parisien-Aujourd’hui en France, it’s always the same. I make sure I get there early enough to watch the kids from the Clairefontaine Academy train on one of the complex’s pitches. The INF Clairefontaine, as it is known, is la crème de la crème in terms of formation and youth, even if the latest generations have not been as good as in the past.

Still, the selection is super tough (I failed it myself a long long time ago) and only the best aged 12 or 13 are picked. When you watch them train or play, you see excellence. Of course, they are still very young and not all the kids in each promo will turn out to be a great player. For all the Thierry Henrys, Nicolas Anelkas, Abou Diabys or Hatem Ben Arfas (who all attended the INF), you also have plenty of failures, players stuck in lower leagues or even who give up on football. But l’INF is so important because it is the prime example of what French football is about: formation. That’s our football’s DNA. We are good at it and more importantly it is at the heart of our football and of our football’s economy. We produce players, they start playing for their first team in Ligue 1 or Ligue 2 and then we sell them and we invest the money in our Academies to produce their successors.

Take Lyon for example. After years of domination, they now have entered a policy of austerity where they have to make cuts and sell their best players. For them, the solution lies in the talent of their Academy. They have always had a great “centre de formation”. They will reap the benefit of it now. Some youngsters formed at the club (Ferri, Umtiti, Lopes, Tolisso) have come in and done well already. Most importantly, they will follow in the path of some of their teammates, also trained at the club and who may be sold in the summer to balance the books (Grenier or Lacazette for example).

After Brazil, France is the nation with the second-highest number of expatriates in the top 5 leagues with 306 players. In the Top 10 clubs with the most Academy-trained players in the senior squad, there are 4 French clubs: Lyon are in 4th with 53.8% of their squad coming from their Academy, then Montpellier (5th with 48%), Sochaux (6th with 42.3%) and Rennes (7th with 40%).

And of all the 5 top leagues, Ligue 1 is the one with the most club-trained players (23.6%) compared to 21.1% for Spain, 16.6% in Germany, 13.6% in England and 8.6% in Italy.

We won the World Cup in 1998 because our youth system was the best in Europe by far. Since then, other countries like Germany or Spain caught up with us, mainly by copying what we were doing and improving on our system. We are now a bit behind but, as Le 50 demonstrates, with a great list of French (and non-French) youngsters, Ligue 1 and Ligue 2 are still a nursery of talent. It’s no surprise that week in and week out the biggest clubs in Europe send scouts all over France looking to find the next big thing.

I remember when I was a kid playing football in the suburbs of Paris, the thing you were hoping for the most was that your local club would receive a letter from a big Ligue 1 club inviting you for a trial at their Academy! Of course, some made it through without an Academy (Ribery, Valbuena, Koscielny to name a few) but, as Le 50’s list shows, it gives you such a great platform if you do go through one. It will be really interesting to see who amongst these 50 really make it to the top.

There are names that you are already familiar with, like Marco Verratti, Marquinhos, Lucas Moura at PSG, Florian Thauvin and Gianelli Imbula at Marseille, Geoffrey Kondogbia at Monaco and Kurt Zouma at Saint-Etienne (on loan from Chelsea). But there are some hidden gems as well, some kids of whom you have never heard but who, trust me, have the potential to become big players. I am a big fan of Rennes’ Abdoulaye Doucouré, for example, Divock Origi (Lille) and Serge Aurier (Toulouse). I think Anthony Martial (Monaco) will be very special, like Jordan Ferri (Lyon) and Neal Maupay (Nice). They are all 21 or under and all represent the future of Ligue 1. So enjoy the read, but most importantly remember the names...

Follow Julien @LaurensJulien
Ligue 1 correspondent for BT Sport and ESPN
All players born on or after 01/01/92
One of the breakout stars of this 2013-2014 Ligue 1 season has been FC Lorient striker Vincent Aboubakar. Nobody has enjoyed quite as extraordinary a turnaround in fortunes as the Cameroonian international, after switching Valenciennes for les Merlus on a free transfer last summer, and few would have predicted such an impressive recovery after barely scraping into last year’s list.

Having only managed nine goals in his past three seasons combined, it was little wonder that patience had worn thin with the 22-year-old at the Stade du Hainaut. In his last season in northern France he scored just twice in 28 appearances, and it was no surprise that Daniel Sanchez let his contract run down. The fact that he had reached double figures for Christian Gourcuff’s side before the end of 2013 speaks volumes about how the move was exactly what Aboubakar needed.

The physically imposing marksman’s potential ability was never in doubt; if ever there was a striker made to play in the Premier League it is Aboubakar. However, he needed to move to a club that would grant him the freedom to perform without being burdened by the constant pressure to score goals, as was the case at frequently relegation-threatened VAFC.

He is now, however, free of the shackles and at a club renowned for nurturing young talent.

FCL were the perfect match, and the results have exceeded everybody’s expectations. Consistency was always Aboubakar’s greatest weakness, as a hit-and-miss scoring record at Valenciennes attests, but he has finally found it at the Stade du Moustoir thanks to Gourcuff’s brand of entertaining football.

The wily tactician’s creative team was crying out for a striker to lead the line after last season’s star man Jérémy Aliadière picked up an injury and made it clear that he was angling for a move away last summer. ‘Le jeu à la lorientaise’ (playing the Lorient way) has turned out to be very much to Aboubakar’s liking.

Blessed with surprising pace, considering his impressive physique, he is versatile and capable of playing anywhere across the front. He finds space well and gets into good positions to score. While his preference for power over precision does lead to the occasional missed chance, he has also displayed impressive control and technical ability in his short spell in Brittany.

Almost certain to travel to Brazil as part of Volker Finke’s Cameroon FIFA World Cup squad, the chances are that Aboubakar may already be plying his trade for another side by then. Lorient are an enterprising club with ambitions of European qualification in the future, but president Loïc Féry is not one to let a good business opportunity pass him by, and he has likely seen the potential profit in the young striker already.

Considering that he arrived for nothing, Féry may be tempted to sanction Aboubakar’s sale in order to keep the rest of the current squad intact, so that Gourcuff’s eventual successor has a solid base from which to build.

However, les Merlus and their new talisman will need to rediscover their impressive form from the first half of the campaign to ensure that they receive maximum recompense. Lorient climbed as high as eighth before Christmas, but the team started to stutter and those old issues of inconsistency came back to haunt Aboubakar, who went through a six-match spell without scoring in early 2014.

Aboubakar has likely attracted interest already, but stability is needed if he wants to continue to develop. His poor record while at Valenciennes will put doubts into the minds of potential suitors and, just like this year’s strike partner Aliadière, the big Cameroonian striker needs to show consistency before Lorient can cash in on his success.
Alphonse
AREOLA

Paris Saint-Germain are a very lucky club. They have no money worries since Qatari Sports Investment took control of the club, and they have the likes of Zlatan Ibrahimovic and Edinson Cavani to push them towards league and Champions League success. They also have a blossoming group of young players just bursting to break into the first team. The next one to try and force his way into Blanc’s thoughts is Philippines-born goalkeeper Alphonse Areola.

It has been a mind-blowing 12 months for the young goalkeeper. At only 21 years old he is now a World Champion, and has enjoyed his debut year of first team football. Areola was at the top of his game as he played every game of France’s run to the Under-20 World Cup in Turkey. He made a number of crucial saves in the semi-final against Ghana, and then in the final he saved two of Uruguay’s penalties as France won the shoot-out 4-1. Along with players like Paul Pogba, Florian Thauvin and Lucas Digne, Areola was one of the standout players in the France side.

Before that tournament, Areola had been little-known as PSG’s third-choice goalkeeper, so success in Turkey was his breakout moment, and it was clear he could no longer be kept in the shadows.

When Antoine Kombouaré was named as the new coach of Ligue 2 side RC Lens, one of his first pieces of business was to recruit Areola on loan for the current season. It was a huge decision from the former PSG coach. Lens were desperate to put together a promotion campaign, so to bring in such a young goalkeeper to be the number one choice looked like a risk. So far, for Kombouaré and Lens, it’s a risk that has paid off. Lens sit second, and for most of the season have looked like serious contenders.

Areola has been superb. His huge frame makes him a commanding presence between the posts, he is very difficult to beat in the air, and the increase in confidence from his international experience has given him an excellent command of his area.

What he showed for France, and has continued to show for Lens, is his excellent shot-stopping abilities. He has very strong hands and reacts well to all types of danger. Amazing reactions from short-range shots make him one of the best all-round goalkeepers in his age group. Areola’s performances for Lens this season have led to his inclusion in the Under-21 set up and despite some excellent competition from Zacharie Boucher and Mouez Hassen, Areola has all the hallmarks to grow into a wonderfully talented goalkeeper.

The future is bright, but also completely in Areola’s hands. With Salvatore Sirigu between the posts in Paris, it may be a long time until the Paris-born goalkeeper gets his chance to be number one at the Parc des Princes. There is only so long that he can spend out on loan before he has to make a career-defining decision.

Arsenal have been linked with a move for the 21-year-old in recent months. He may not be the answer to Arsene Wenger’s problems at the moment, but if Areola continues to develop at his current rate, it won’t be long until he is considered one of Europe’s best young goalkeepers. At that stage it will be very hard to PSG to keep hold of him without giving him the number one jersey.

His next stop on the ladder is Ligue 1. If he makes that leap as well as he did to save Uruguay’s penalties, there is no limit to what he can achieve.
Players like Ramires and Arturo Vidal gain all the accolades in world football but if Aurier moves to Arsenal he will quickly begin to be mentioned in the same vein. His stamina means that he can easily cover every blade of grass and when he plays as the right wing-back it can often appear as if Toulouse are playing with two men on that side.

This in turn brings us onto his biggest weakness: such is his enthusiasm, he can be guilty of being caught out of position. It should be pointed out that he is still only 21 years old and this is an aspect of his game that he is clearly working on.

Also, his energetic nature does have its benefits: this season Aurier’s happiness to roam forward has resulted in six goals and six assists in the league. These are extremely promising figures for an attacking full-back and this is where the differences between Aurier and Arsenal’s present right-back, Bacary Sagna, start to appear.

While Aurier shares Sagna’s versatility – in fact 21-year-old is arguably far more versatile – despite his age Aurier already looks more potent offensively than Sagna and is not too far behind defensively. Aurier’s six goals mean that this season alone he has matched Sagna’s goal tally for his entire Arsenal career, and the Frenchman has never registered more than four assists in the league in a single season.

Sagna’s contract is up at the end of the season. At the time of writing it doesn’t look like being extended, and Inter Milan are waiting in the wings. This will leave a vacancy at right-back to compete with Carl Jenkinson and now is the perfect time for Arsenal to make a move for Aurier, who is already at a very high level but still has room for development. With goals, assists, energy and a sound defensive footing, he could well become one of the world’s finest.

There can’t be too much more that Serge Aurier can do to engineer a move to Arsenal. The young right-back has dropped hint after hint that he would be keen to move to London, including posting photos of himself in their kit. Take a quick glance at his Twitter timeline and it becomes embarrassingly clear that there is only one club he wants to join. It has become common knowledge that he has been an Arsenal fan since childhood, but it is more than just old loyalties that mean this man could be Arsenal-bound.

Arsene Wenger’s scouting team have been keeping tabs on Aurier since his RC Lens days and the most remarkable thing about his career is that the Arsenal manager hasn’t already signed him. Since joining Toulouse, the Ivorian has continued to confirm his status as an exceptional talent and this season has to rank as his best yet.

So far this season Aurier has been used in a variety of roles, largely dependent on what formation Alain Casanova has decided to use. Mostly this season the Toulouse boss has used a 3-5-2, and even then there is a variance in where he has been deployed, which is testimony to his ability and level of performances.

The Ivorian international has switched between playing as the third centre-back and the right wing-back and he hasn’t looked out of place in either position.

He is tall and athletic enough to cope with even the most physical strikers, while his pace means that he can also cope with quicker front men. However, without a doubt his best trait is his energetic nature; this man is the definition of an engine.

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Bakayoko can get forward but in reality it is not a priority for him, as he is best at sitting deeper. Montanier’s deployment of him as a deep-lying midfielder suggests that he sees this as the best way to use the youngster. Central midfield is one of Rennes’ strongest positions with Bakayoko up against the likes of Jean II Makoun, Anders Konradsen and fellow prodigy Abdoulaye Doucouré, but his appearances have still topped the 25-game mark.

He has already established himself as a firm favourite amongst the Rennes fans who love seeing a home-grown talent make it, and he has been capped for France at youth level. Despite only bursting onto the scene this season, Bakayoko has already begun to gain a reputation as one of the league’s best tacklers, and watching him execute his interventions is a real joy. Montanier’s preferred formation is a 4-3-3 but there is no reason why Bakayoko could not flourish as the more defensive player in a midfield duo.

Having made such a terrific start to the season it came as no surprise to see Bakayoko awarded a new three-year contract in November. Rennes clearly want to keep hold of their young star, and not lose him as they have done with other talents. Because of the position he plays, allied to his great form, it has come as no surprise to see comparisons made between Bakayoko and former Rennes man Yann M’Vila. When at Rennes, M’Vila was a supremely gifted talent, who looked capable of playing for the best sides in the world. Bakayoko is yet to prove he can reach that level; both are excellent defensive players, but Bakayoko needs to work on his passing in order to match M’Vila’s high standards. However, Bakayoko definitely has the potential to succeed where M’Vila did not, and if he keeps his head down and focuses on his football, there is no reason he can’t reach the very top.

Despite his excellent form it was surprising to see Bakayoko’s name mentioned in connection with Manchester United in December. While it is true that some of the biggest clubs in France and the rest of Europe have sent scouts to watch Bakayoko, a move seems unlikely. Bakayoko is still just in his first full season in Ligue 1 and moving now would be risky both for him and the buying club. The best thing for all parties is for him to gain another season’s football with Rennes - depending on their survival in Ligue 1 - in order to allow his development to continue.
Lyon’s exciting young forward Yassine Benzia doesn’t turn 20 for another five months but, in true French style, it seems his potential has been talked about for years. It is now coming to the stage when something needs to happen to justify all the attention. He has reached something of a crossroads in his career, and despite his immense promise, his time could be up at the Stade Gerland.

For now, Benzia remains at Lyon, but he can justifiably feel frustrated. When OL were publicly trying to force Bafétimbi Gomis and Jimmy Briand out of the club last summer, it appeared that Benzia was next in line to step up and fill the void they would leave.

However, the French international pair have remained at the club, and once again become key players for Garde, while Alexandre Lacazette has excelled, leaving Benzia with few chances to impress.

Dubbed ‘the new Benzema’ - as most attacking players of Algerian heritage are - after scoring 36 goals in 27 games for Lyon’s under-17 team, the teenager has been under intense scrutiny since the start of last season.

His performance at the 2011 Under-17 World Cup also heightened expectations as he finished with the Bronze Boot, the tournament’s third-best scorer with five goals. The 2012-2013 campaign turned out to be a disappointment, however, as he started just three of his 16 league appearances, and failed to find the back of the net.

Off the pitch some things have been working in his favour this time, including the departure of Lisandro López.

However, it has not been enough to see the teenager seal a regular starting berth. He was in good form prior to the start of 2014, scoring twice and bagging two assists in nine appearances, but has barely featured since the turn of the year.

Benzia possesses decent pace and good finishing skills, but his ability is more noticeable when he gets the ball at his feet and can show off his technical side. Away at Sochaux in the second game of the season, Benzia scored one and laid on two in perhaps the strongest indication to date that the player is ready to make the step up at senior level. The under-21 international is an exciting player to watch, combining flair and sublime technique to entertaining effect, yet he can also sometimes be guilty of putting his head down and forgetting he has 10 teammates on the pitch.

At just 19, Benzia has time on his side. However, with his future chances in question, a move, whether on loan or permanent, might be the best option at this point. Like Ishak Belfodil before him, a few substitute appearances are not enough anymore for one of the great hopes of French football.

Making a move elsewhere on loan next season could be the best option for both parties considering that, given Lyon’s current financial plight, he will likely be needed as a starting player at some point if president Jean-Michel Aulas keeps slashing the Stade Gerland wage bill.

The likes of Bordeaux, Montpellier, Nantes and Rennes have all been linked with moves since the start of the year. Any of those sides would be good for him to continue his development, and he could be a great fit for Bordeaux, who are crying out for a prolific attacker.

With the next generation of Lyon stars starting to gain playing time off the bench, it is important for Benzia to show what makes him special. If he doesn’t, there is every chance that he could fade into the background. The next 12 months are crucial if he wants to live up to the hype that has surrounded his career so far.
Paris Saint-Germain have become one of the most famous outfits in world football. They now draw massive crowds all around the world and last summer they kicked off their season in Libreville, Gabon, where they played Bordeaux, current Coupe de France holders, in the Trophée des Champions.

The match was especially important for one Bordeaux midfielder, André Biyogo Poko, who was returning to his homeland and determined to put in a memorable performance. Though the match kicked off in the capital city, some 500 kilometres from his native Bitam, a sizeable André Biyogo Poko fan club was present, cheering the midfielder’s every move. Initially, it seemed that his return would be a triumphant one. Poko was at the heart of every action, the stifling climate having no apparent effect on his mobility. The Stade d’Angondjé exploded when Henri Saivet opened the scoring for Bordeaux at the end of the first half.

Then, in the 58th minute, Poko embarked on a dream run, intercepting the ball in the middle of the park and bursting through a gaping hole in the Parisian defence. He sprinted past Thiago Motta, Alex and Thiago Silva before attempting a dummy shot that did not fool Salvatore Sirigu.

Eventually, the Gabonese midfielder ran out of steam and Sirigu collected his lame chip without trouble. It was a moment of collective ecstasy where the 35,000 present unanimously rose out of their seats. However, it was not to be for Biyogo Poko as Paris Saint-Germain ran out eventual winners, claiming the Trophée des Champions.

However, Poko’s performance was not forgotten, and it only cemented his status as a starter for both club and country. For the Panthers of Gabon, Poko is a pillar at just 21 years of age.

As the likes of Daniel Cousin and Eric Mouloungui edge towards the end of their careers, they have handed the mantle to the next generation in which André Biyogo Poko, Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang, and Bruno Ecuele Manga feature. At Bordeaux, things are more complicated as Poko currently contends for a midfield spot with Gregory Sertic, Abdou Traoré and Landry N’Guemo. Francis Gillot likes to play the more technical Sertic alongside one of N’Guemo or Poko as they fulfil similar roles. Neither of them are very large, but both cover large areas of the pitch, recycling possession.

In his first full campaign in the first team, Biyogo-Poko featured in 14 games last season, appearing on the score sheet once. Recovering from injury this season he has beaten that number by one, and with games still to come, it is clear to see his place in Francis Gillot’s first-team is being cemented more with each passing month. Standing at a around the 5’8” mark, Poko makes up for his small stature with his truly boundless energy. He fits the mad-dog mould of midfielder who can put in a tackle at one end of the pitch and finish an attacking action at the other. His wiry frame is slight, but deceptively strong, and allows for lung-bursting runs for the entirety of the match.

Poko missed the first half of the season with a complicated ankle sprain; having never previously contracted an injury of such magnitude, he had trouble dealing with the physical therapy at first. To exacerbate matters, there were several setbacks with ligaments that refused to heal. Learning to deal with the time off the pitch has forced the youthful midfielder to grow in patience and maturity.

The way Biyogo Poko has progressed this season has so encouraged Francis Gillot and Bordeaux that they have offered him a new contract. The Gabonese midfielder has accepted a long-term extension with a much deserved increase in salary, and that is only a small sign of things to come.
In 2012, just before his nineteenth birthday, Alexy Bosetti was photographed for a L’Equipe feature on the Coupe Gambardella. The picture is a tight shot of the shirtless Bosetti looking off to the left, chin jutting proudly over the eagle tattooed on his chest, the “Mentalita Nissarda” under the eagle making clear his allegiance to Les Aiglons, his hometown club. Bosetti was born in Nice and essentially grew up as a member of the Brigade Sud Nice (BSN) ultra group, a fact of which the striker has always been intensely proud, as evidenced by his pose in the L’Equipe photo. In addition to posing for that picture, Bosetti’s other contributions to the Coupe Gambardella that year included scoring twice in the quarter-final, the only goal in the semi-final, and once in the 2-1 victory over Saint-Etienne in the final.

His impressive consistency in that unexpected run to the Gambardella title proved Bosetti has talent. Because of the way he presents himself, however, he has until recently been known as an ultra first and a footballer second, a perception he’s done little to change. With more tattoos every day - a BSN logo here, a Nice bank robber there - he’s easy to label as a novelty and, since his footballing at the senior level has in the past been limited, the press naturally focus instead on how Bosetti looks and how he presents himself.

Similarly, when he can’t talk about his football, he inevitably defaults to his other passion - his home and his fierce loyalty to everything for which it stands.

That, however, is starting to change. Now nearly 21, the diminutive Bosetti has been playing much more regularly for Nice this season, including a series of performances that earned him the club’s Player of the Month award for February and resulted in a run as a regular starter, usually deployed on the outside of a supporting trio behind Dario Cvitanich or Neal Maupay. Despite the fact that he is almost always asked to play out of position, Bosetti has begun to grow up on the pitch, gradually transforming himself from a passionate kid driven by often aimless effort into a professional footballer who moves with focus and purpose.

When he plays with that focus, Bosetti is a different player. He has remarkable vision, and some of his failures come from that strength: he sees options others wouldn’t see, and fails to complete passes others would never attempt. Against Bordeaux earlier this season, for example, he received a pass in his own half, near the sideline. He look one touch and, with his back still half-turned, launched a long, diagonal ball that seemed to be going nowhere until Maupay appeared directly under it on the opposite touchline. As soon as the ball left his foot, Bosetti was hurtling into the box to receive Maupay’s cross, the quality of which, unfortunately, failed to match that of the initial ball. Bosetti’s was a glorious pass, the kind of thing for which Andrea Pirlo is so rightly lauded and, by the same token, something most people wouldn’t consider a novelty act like Bosetti capable of executing.

If Bosetti’s development as a player continues, however, the footballing part of his life will become increasingly relevant, both to the media and to Nice, and he should easily shake the ‘novelty’ label.

Sadly we will have to wait a little longer to see the next stage of Bosetti’s career, as an injury he picked up, ironically, while getting the chance to lead the line away at Saint-Etienne, has ended any chance of seeing him play again this campaign. Hopefully, with time to rehabilitate over the summer, it won’t be long until Puel is able to team up his home-grown strike force of Bosetti and Maupay to the envy of most of Ligue 1.
Goalkeeper Zacharie Boucher joined Le Havre’s youth academy just after his fifteenth birthday and, a few months later, made his first appearance as a French international. Since then, he’s started at every level of the French youth system and is currently holding down a place with the U21s. At club level, Boucher made his senior debut as a 16-year-old, signed his first professional contract two years later, and found himself on top of Le Havre’s goalkeeping depth chart by the time he was 20. He was named Ligue 2’s goalkeeper of the year for the 2012-2013 season, and earned the best goalkeeper award at last summer’s Toulon Tournament where France finished third, a ranking secured when Boucher saved a penalty.

Given how much he achieved before he turned 22, it’s perhaps no surprise that Boucher arrived at Toulouse this January and immediately took over as first choice, making his Ligue 1 debut against Marseille and fellow Le Havre alumnus Steve Mandanda. Within the first 10 minutes of that match, Boucher had given up his first Ligue 1 goal and engaged in an animated ‘discussion’ with teammate Serge Aurier. He bounced back easily from both, showing the poise and confidence that had made him a target for Toulouse coach Alain Casanova, himself a former Le Havre goalkeeper.

At only 5’10”, Boucher is small for a keeper, but he makes up for his lack of height with an astonishing strength and athleticism. There are currently two prevailing body types among keepers: tall and thin (Hugo Lloris, David De Gea) or tall and not thin (Cédric Carrasso, Tim Krul). Boucher is neither.

He’s medium-sized and a remarkable physical specimen who can throw the ball past midfield on the fly, leap impossibly high, and launch lightning counter-attacks with his powerful right foot. Not only does his athleticism enable him to get to balls usually out of reach for keepers of his size, but it also gives him the ability to regain his feet with impressive speed, making him hard to beat from deflections.

In addition to being physically impressive, Boucher is also mentally strong, displaying serenity under pressure and easily moving on from errors, both his own and those committed by his team. He’s an aggressive keeper who likes to use the penalty spot as his starting point, preferring a retreat under pressure to starting deeper and trying to race a striker to a through-ball. While for some this approach might be risky, Boucher is so athletic and so active in the box that it’s natural for him. His feet are always moving when his team is defending, either bringing him closer to his line or, often, bouncing slightly like a coiled spring, ready to explode when the ball is struck.

Given Boucher’s natural aggressiveness and significant physical gifts, it’s perhaps surprising that his greatest weakness at this point in his career is a tendency to hesitate in traffic. He has excellent hands and great jumping ability, yet when a cross comes into a crowded box, too often Boucher stutters, seeming to doubt himself before attacking the ball. And, almost inevitably, he’s punished for the hesitation by a goal, a corner, or a chance that could have been avoided had he obeyed his instincts and come for the ball immediately.

This weakness, however, is one which will be corrected by experience. In Boucher, Toulouse have secured a keeper for the present and the future, one who could easily grow into one of the best in France, if not beyond. In addition, he’s already a fixture in the youth international set-up; if he keeps developing at his current rate, it’s only a matter of time before Boucher is sniffing around a reserve spot for Les Bleus.
Digne is always adjusting, alert to a half-formed danger and shifting his positioning in response to the most likely path of a possible future attack. It’s mesmerising at times, and is as sure a sign as any that Deschamps isn’t actually taking any risk at all when he puts the 20-year-old on the pitch.

There are obviously still holes in Digne’s game, but they’re holes shared by many others, some of whom have built long, successful careers without ever fixing them. Again like Maxwell, Digne is freer and more confident in attack than he is defensively, and it’s at his own end that most of his mistakes occur. That said, one could argue that Digne is already a more consistent defender than Maxwell. He does dive in — memorably, in a group game in the U20 World Cup last year, he was taken apart by Jesé in the buildup to Spain’s first goal — and there are times when he looks uncomfortable in possession in defence. But, for someone seen primarily as an attacking asset, he is also a very sophisticated reader of the game, and his defensive errors are becoming increasingly rare. Digne’s attentiveness away from the ball, too, is an asset to his defensive effectiveness, because it gives him time to consider both his options and those of his opponents. And, with remarkable consistency for one so young, he reads what’s coming and snuffs out the danger before it truly takes shape.

Many young players in France succeed at first on physicality and instinct; it is when they are asked to do more that the special ones are separated from the ordinary. In Digne, PSG have an unusually cerebral player, a youngster who is using his mental gifts to augment and enhance his physical ones and, quietly, proving himself the equal of every challenge that appears before him. Watching him correct Blaise Matuidi’s defensive positioning as the opponent shifts into attack, it’s hard to bet against Digne making a trip to Brazil with his older teammate for Les Bleus.
Limiting Abdoulaye Doucouré’s abilities to his outstanding natural fitness would be hugely unfair. The U21 international, who has represented France in all age categories from U16, also shows a rare ability to understand and anticipate every phase of the game. Every run, every key movement seems timed to perfection, allowing him to be in the right place, at exactly the right time, whether it is at the beginning, the heart or the conclusion of his team’s move. His quick, precise passing also allows him to unsettle the opposition’s balance, and although there is still scope for improvement in that area, his eyes and feet are certainly key assets.

Having scored six goals and made three assists in just over twenty professional appearances, Doucouré has revealed himself as the missing link in Philippe Montanier’s tactics since returning from a long injury last winter. His addition to the team has brought not only stability but also an ability to accelerate the play from midfield, which Rennes were cruelly missing since Yann M’Vila’s departure. With a contract running until June 2015 and a contract extension expected to be signed in the next few months, Doucouré certainly looks like the club’s future in midfield.

The future could get brighter and brighter for the young midfielder, considering he still has huge room for improvement. The most important addition that he could bring to his game would be the ability to control his natural strength. A better management of his efforts on the pitch should allow him to avoid overusing his physical ability, to keep a clearer head under pressure, and hopefully to prevent further injuries: at only 21, he has already suffered two knee injuries.

If he can keep his calm and stay fit, there is little doubt that, sooner rather than later, Abdoulaye Doucouré will join Wiltord, M’Vila, Gourcuff or Briand on Stade Rennais’ wall of International fame.
Valentin Evyseric

The last 12 months have been a turbulent and difficult time for Valentin Eysseric. After all the praise and great reports for his performances for the majority of last term, his season’s abrupt ending it put his progress into a tailspin, and it is only now, a year after making last year’s list, that the 21-year-old is finally getting back on his feet. Manager Claude Puel has a huge project ahead of him at OGC Nice, and the development of this former Monaco midfielder is going to be critical to how well the project develops in the next couple of years.

Eysseric’s progress stalled when he charged in to tackle Saint-Etienne midfielder Jeremy Clément. It was early in the game and the tackle didn’t look dangerous at first glance, but as Clément received lengthy treatment on the pitch, it became obvious that the former Rangers player had been badly hurt. Before that tackle, Eysseric had only received two yellow cards all season. That was his first red, and it would later see him banned for 11 games, causing him to miss the rest of the 2012/13 season.

The phrase, “he’s not that sort of player,” is bandied around too often in football, but it truly applies to Eysseric, who is as far from “that type of player” as you can imagine.

He seemed genuinely distraught, apologised profusely, and served his ban without a peep of discontent. Unfortunately, his performances once he returned to the pitch showed just how much it had affected him.

It’s fair to say the shadow of the ban has been hanging over him for most of this season. For the first few months he looked off the pace. Nice started really well once they moved to their new home, but the Allianz Riviera was less than a happy home for Eysseric.

His first goal of the season came in the final game at the Stade du Ray, a 2-2 draw against Montpellier, as he was given the Man of the Match award. It’s almost as if, in moving home, Eysseric left a little of himself at the old ground.

Also, although Nice managed to qualify for the Europa League qualifying rounds without his guile and creativity at the end of last season, they failed to make it to the group stage, so Eysseric has not had the opportunity to show a wider audience of what he is capable. It wasn’t until the middle of December that he began to look more like his old vibrant self. It’s hard to say whether Eysseric’s good play led to Nice’s resurgence from that point, or whether the team’s resurgence reinvigorated Eysseric.

Since the turn of the year he has looked at times as bright as he did last season. He scored the only goal as Nice beat Marseille 1-0 in the Stade Vélodrome, with a wonderful free-kick, a beautiful strike that showed in one curling, dipping move of what his right foot is capable. In open play his passing is as deadly as his striking - he followed up the free-kick with an assist against Bastia.

When Eysseric is on the ball, you can see the excellent balance that he possesses; he can turn and twist with the ball, he can dance past defenders, and he can cut them open with a flick of his right boot. He is deceptively fast, and his ability to change direction at speed makes him a constant threat.

It is wonderful to see all the positives of Valentin’s game returning. Eysseric, Puel and Nice will be happy to brush off this season and look forward to an excellent future together.
However, Fabinho’s performances suggest that he is a better choice than his more experienced rival; the Brazilian is adept both going forward and defending, although it is the latter in which he excels. In the recent victory at Lyon, Fabinho coped with Lyon’s rampaging left-back Henri Bedimo about as well as any right-back has so far this season. Plenty of Lyon’s attacks this season have come from Bedimo’s attacking movement but Fabinho kept him in check brilliantly.

That is not to downplay his offensive ability, as he is more than capable of getting forward and posing problems. Although he hasn’t registered an assist or goal this season (although he won the penalty that sealed Monaco’s 3-1 home victory over Nantes), he has shown capabilities to get forward on more than one occasion, such as the ‘pre-assist’ for the crucial injury-time winner over Reims at the Stade Louis II.

Another great example of this was during the home clash with Paris Saint-Germain when Fabinho regularly got forward and it was his cross that led to the own-goal that brought his team level. This match also showed his tactical awareness as he showed great maturity in recognising that second-half substitute Jeremy Menez was not tracking back, and therefore the opportunity arose for the Brazilian to get forward more and double up on Maxwell.

Of course, as with most modern full-backs, the attacking intent can leave a team’s centre-backs exposed and given that Monaco’s central defenders are ageing duo Eric Abidal and Ricardo Carvalho, that can be extremely risky, especially against quicker forwards. However Fabinho is still only 20, is learning every week, and his judgement is getting better and better. Next season Monaco will look to freshen up the choices they have at centre-back; they already have the option to keep Tunisian international, Aymen Abdennour, for €15 million from Toulouse and if they add one more top-class defender it could have a huge bearing on Fabinho’s development if he stays.

He has already expressed his desire to remain with Monaco beyond the end of his loan deal, but it is up to the club to take up the option to sign him permanently. Unsurprisingly, with Bacary Sagna’s contract expiring, Arsenal have been linked with a host of right-backs, including Fabinho, but the player’s preference seems to be with Claudio Ranieri’s side. Given his performances this season and the value he represents, it would be an immense surprise if Monaco were to let him go.
Third, Ferreira Carrasco’s relationship with his club seems to have taken a turn for the worse, allegedly over issues of money. According to figures cited in the French press, he currently earns a mere €32,000 a month (less than anyone else in the senior squad beside Kurzawa) and reportedly wants more - a lot more.

The combination of these three issues has found the young Belgian very much on the outside of things at Monaco in 2014 - at times, even when fit, he’s left out of the squad entirely and spends his weekends playing with the CFA rather than in Ligue 1. No matter where he plays, however, Ferreira Carrasco’s talent is evident. Against Nice in the CFA last month, he scored a tremendous individual goal, cutting in from the left on his preferred right foot and splitting two defenders before taking an extra touch to freeze the goalkeeper and finishing across his own body into the corner of the goal. Also in that match, he narrowly missed scoring with a free kick, and assisted on Monaco’s second goal with a perfectly taken corner to Quentin N’gakoutou. As against Lyon in Ligue 1 or Tours in Ligue 2, against Nice in the CFA Ferreira Carrasco showed his strengths: pace, tricky skills, immense composure on the ball, and a willingness to shoot and cross with both feet. His ability is undeniable, but so are his weaknesses, which include a lack of consistent focus and passes that are sometimes shockingly bad; flagrant errors one suspects might be linked to the issues of focus and concentration.

It will be fascinating to see what role Ferreira Carrasco plays at Monaco for the rest of the season and, perhaps even more importantly, how he handles the role he is assigned. He has talent to burn, but this is the point at which he needs to prove that he has the mental strength to go along with his skills - both on and off the pitch.

At the ripe old age of 16, Yannick Ferreira Carrasco signed with Monaco, agreeing to leave his home in Belgium the following year for the posh, sun-dappled shores of the French Riviera. He spent the 2010-2011 season playing in Monaco’s U19s alongside Valentin Eyseric, Nampalys Mendy and Layvin Kurzawa, winning the Coupe Gambardella with that impressive group. Two seasons later, the midfielder was integrated into the senior team, scoring with a sumptuous free kick on his debut and finishing the season with 24 starts in all competitions and a total of eight goals as Monaco secured promotion to Ligue 1. His Belgian nationality, silky skills and impressive right foot prompted comparisons to countryman Eden Hazard and, last spring, Ferreira Carrasco capped an impressive first three years in French football by being named Eurosport’s best young player in Ligue 2.

When this season started, the flashy winger looked set to continue his rise: he was a regular starter on the left side of Claudio Ranieri’s 4-2-3-1, playing in support of Radamel Falcao but allowed the freedom to roam the pitch, popping up through the middle and on the right over the course of 90 minutes. He registered an assist in Monaco’s week two win over Montpellier, and followed up his first goal of the season in week nine with a brace inside 10 minutes against Sochaux the following week.
Control is a common feature in Ferri’s game and one that he showcases on a regular basis. His first touch may not always be the best, but for a player of limited experience who is still learning the game, Ferri displays remarkable poise, consistently reading the play, assessing the best option and picking the right pass.

However, there is much more to Ferri than pure ball retention. He is a player who appears to possess the excellent football understanding and outstanding eye for a pass that all players require if they are to make it at the top level in the European game. Add to that a supreme energy and drive and you have a player who has the raw ability and versatility to be deployed as a deep-lying playmaker or a classic box-to-box midfielder.

Lyon’s plethora of talent in the midfield has been something of a blow to Ferri’s hopes of establishing himself as a regular starter. The presence of the likes Clement Grenier, Yoann Gourcuff and captain Maxime Gonalons has made it difficult for Ferri consistently to earn a place in Rémi Garde’s first team. However, one if not all of those players could leave Lyon in the summer transfer window, with skipper Gonalons likely the favourite to move to pastures new. Any prospective depletion of Lyon’s resources in midfield would effectively hand Ferri an opening to nail down a starting berth and deliver on the early promise that he has shown.

The early signs are good, and there can be little doubt that the tests he has faced this season against the likes of Paris Saint-Germain – where he scored the winner, Monaco and Juventus will have whetted Ferri’s appetite to compete at the top level on a regular basis.

Lyon’s nickname of ‘Les Gônes’ (the kids) has proved ironically apt over the last few years due to the player sales and financial constraints that have forced them to turn to youth. In Ferri they have a player who is ready to shake off the tag of ‘promising young player’ and take the next step in his career.

Another developing product of Lyon’s magnificent youth set-up, Jordan Ferri potentially has the ability to become a mainstay with the seven-time Ligue 1 champions for years to come.

Lyon’s spending power has been severely reduced in recent times, with a number of star assets such as Lisandro López, Dejan Lovren and Kim Kählström all departing the Stade de Gerland without being replaced in the past two seasons. That has opened the door to academy players such as Ferri, giving him an opportunity to shine at the highest level of the French game.

It is a chance that the Côte d’Azur-born midfielder has grasped with both hands, the 22-year-old displaying the kind of quality that should be able to keep him in the plans of manager Rémi Garde for the foreseeable future.

Ferri announced himself fully on the Ligue 1 stage at Evian at the end of August, finding the top corner of the net with a swerving effort from 35 yards out in a game that would ultimately end in a disappointing 2-1 defeat for Lyon.

The France Under-21 international is hardly a prolific goalscorer, but his penchant for the spectacular surfaced again in April, this time in happier circumstances as Lyon claimed a 2-1 win at Valenciennes. Ferri collected a ball from Arnold Mvuemba around 30 yards from goal, controlling it with one touch before unleashing a vicious half-volley that looped over the despairing dive of Magno Novaes and hit the roof of the net.

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Antoine Kombouaré, who has worked with his fair share of prodigies, has shown great faith in Gbamin this year, using him in approximately 90% of the team’s fixtures. Gbamin has rewarded his coach with solid performances and a couple of goals. Questions remain about Gbamin’s attitude, however, as he got himself into a little trouble in December. After a tough loss at Nancy, the youngster got into an official’s face and unleashed a stream of expletives that saw him sent off after the final whistle. Lens did a good job of internally dealing with the issue as they suspended him one match without pay. It has remained an isolated incident to date.

Another issue is that although Gbamin’s versatility is a valuable asset, he has not yet found a position in which he excels. He has played most of his matches at right-back and that’s where he has put in his best performances. In the centre of the park, he has shown his competency (as against Auxerre), but has also shown a degree of inconsistency. It remains to be seen if this is because Lens lack chemistry, if he a better defender than midfielder, or if the utility man is merely going through some growing pains.

Kombouaré addressed the issue in pre-season, responding to rumours that the young ace would not sign a professional contract at Lens if he was to be played out of position: “It’s not up to him. He is young and should therefore come willing to learn and listen. He will play where he is told. Even if we put him in goal, he should be happy to play!”

Gbamin’s attitude has been commendable thus far and at 18 years of age, he will look to repeat his successful inaugural season next year with a Lens side that look set for promotion. If he is able to repeat his early success while in Ligue 1, it will be hard to stop more and more clubs from showing interest in Lens’ next bright star.

To many people, ‘scouting’ and ‘Racing Club de Lens’ are synonymous terms. Les Sang et Or have a long history of producing top-notch talent: Seydou Keita, Geoffrey Kondogbia, Mohamed Diamé, Raphael Varane, and Adel Taarabt are but a few graduates who hail from their famed academy.

Jean-Philippe Gbamin follows in the same mould of powerful, defensive-minded players as Keita, Diamé and Kondogbia. What sets him apart from most, including his predecessors, is his positional versatility. Gbamin can play virtually all midfield and defensive roles. This season, the Franco-Ivorian has played most of his matches as right-back, but learned his trade at centre-half.

A good example of Gbamin’s versatility was against Auxerre in January. He started as a ‘box-to-box’ central midfielder, before deputising for the injured Jérôme Le Moigne in the holding position. In the second half Marcel Tisserand was substituted, and Gbamin finished the match as a full-back, never once looking out of place.

Though he is only 18 years old, and is guaranteed to continue to develop, Gbamin is already physically impressive, and very little gets past him in the air.
The rise of Raphaël Guerreiro to Ligue 1 stardom has been nearly as quick as the player himself; it is amazing to think that the 20-year-old left-back is only completing his first season in the top-flight, and only made his first-team debut in French football last season. Playing at a club like FC Lorient, under the coaching of Christian Gourcuff and a president with the business nous of Loïc Féry, it is dangerous to put any limits on his career right now.

Born in the small Normandy town of Blanc-Mesnil to a French mother and a Portuguese father, Guerreiro’s footballing career began to take off when he was snapped up by the famous INF Clairefontaine academy; considering that Blanc-Mesnil is close to the coastal town of Le Havre, the famous HAC academy will be disappointed that the 12-year-old failed to register on their radar.

By the age of 15 he was spotted by SM Caen, another side famed for bringing through young talent, and his rise through the SMC ranks was nothing but incredible. Spending just one season in the Under-17s and Under-19s, he was quickly moved up into the second team, playing in France’s fourth division.

Impressing as a left-back who was just as comfortable in left-midfield, his attacking instincts and wonderful left foot helped establish him as a starter and he made 34 appearances for the CFA side during the 2011-12 season. Aged just 17 when the campaign began, his next stop would be the Caen first team.

As with most of his career, once in the first team there was no holding him back, and he played every game of the 2012-13 season.

This was a player who had never played a minute of professional football before, and now he was an established Ligue 2 player; to top things off he was named in the Ligue 2 Team of the Season. The vultures began to circle.

His one and only assist that season came against Le Havre before the turn of the year; Caen won the game and it was the start of an interesting few months. Before he turned 19 he rejected international call-ups from both France and Portugal, but by the start of 2013 he had made his decision and accepted a call to the Portuguese Under-21 side. What they had seen was an impressive player with a strong desire to attack down the channels, very much in the mould of the modern full-back. His pace continues to impress and for Lorient he has shown a blistering acceleration that can dispatch some of the league’s fastest players.

Guerreiro’s excellent season at Caen had alerted the likes of Marseille and Lille, but it was the Breton side that sealed the €3 million move, and they look like they are going to get their money’s worth out of the left-back.

When he signed for Lorient, experienced coach Christian Gourcuff was full of praise for the youngster, calling him technically gifted with intelligence and a dynamic spark. This was high praise from a coach who has seen the likes of Laurent Koscielny, André-Pierre Gignac and Kevin Gameiro come through at Lorient.

Only three players have made more appearances for Lorient than Guerreiro this season as he has continued to show consistency in a sea of indifference. He continues to impress with his pace, ability on the ball, and beautiful left foot. He can look a little lightweight at times, but that should develop as he continues to grow.

Only time will tell if he has what it takes to reach the next rung on the ladder, but he is definitely at the right club to progress. He has dreams of playing in the World Cup with Portugal this summer, and while 2014 may be too soon for the 20-year-old, he could be reaching his peak come 2018.
Although it was a difficult game for him, Montanier kept faith with the youngster and until the recent return from injury of John Boye, he has been first choice as back-up whenever Armand or Kana-Biyik have been injured or suspended. His height means that he is also a significant threat at set-pieces, and he has been rewarded with goals against Nancy in the Coupe de la Ligue, and then his first Ligue 1 goal in the victory over Lyon back in early February.

It seems that the only person surprised by his meteoric rise is Hountondji himself, as he has previously said: “a young player wants to show what he has in his belly. Early in the season, I stood ready to help in case of trouble, but personally I did not expect to play so quickly”. Montanier has also looked to work on Hountondji’s perceived self-imposed frailty; as he commented: “he can still have a little lack of confidence in him. For him, nothing is taken for granted and he does tend to question himself”.

Montanier has been a big fan of the natural ability Hountondji has for reading the game for one so young. This has also been spotted by others as he was called up to the French under-21 squad in October 2013 before making his debut for the team against the Netherlands in November 2013. While he has previously said that he wouldn’t rule out representing Benin at international level, the progress he has made at Rennes, as well as the amount of exposure to first team football that he has already received, means that France would be silly not to do everything in their power to persuade him to commit to les Bleus.

For now though, Hountondji will continue to knuckle down and give it his all, be it for the reserves away to Saint-Lô or for the senior side against Lyon. He has a sensible, well-rounded attitude lacking in a lot of young footballers today and you can be sure, as he himself identifies, that he won’t ever take anything for granted.
The summer of 2013 saw Hunou push himself even further into the public consciousness as he starred for France in the Under-19 European Championships. He started all five matches, scoring twice, as France progressed to the final before losing to Serbia (he has since moved up to the Under-20 squad).

Hunou's seamless progression has continued this season. Newly-arrived Rennes coach Philippe Montanier gave the youngster his first team debut in August 2013, as he came on as a substitute against Evian. In early October, he made his first start for the Rouges et Noirs, against local rivals Guingamp. Later that same month he scored his first professional goal, getting the opener as Rennes defeated Nancy in the Coupe de la Ligue. His early performances were rewarded as he signed his first professional contract in December. To date, Hunou has made 16 Ligue 1 appearances and four in the cups. Although he has not played since January, as other players slightly further ahead in their development have been preferred, his breakthrough to the first team in just his first professional season is nevertheless encouraging.

Relatively slight in frame, Hunou is an exciting brand of attacking midfielder, able to play across the line – and even fill in at full-back if required – but preferably placed at the head of a midfield three in the fashionable 4-3-3 formation. Comfortable on the ball, he has excellent technique, as well as great vision and a good ability to bring his team-mates into the action. He has also shown that he is not overawed by the big occasion, as goals on his CFA2 and France Under-18 debuts testify – not to mention a fantastically taken penalty, hit hard into the top corner, very late into sudden-death in a shoot-out against Valenciennes in the Coupe de France.

Rennes and France have lots of reasons to be optimistic for the future, with the talented youth who are working their way into their club and international first teams. Hunou, with the same sense of positioning and timing that he demonstrates on the pitch, is well-placed to become a prominent feature for both.

Rennes's youth academy is widely renowned as the finest in France, winning the award for best development centre for six consecutive years between 2006 and 2011 – and it is still churning out crops of young prospects. Therefore, when one of those developing players wins the award for the academy's player of the year, there is a good chance that player is well set for a stellar career.

The recipient of that accolade in 2012 was midfielder Adrien Hunou who, as Centre de Formation director Patrick Rampillon noted, embodied everything that the club looks for in choosing the trophy winner: not only a footballing ability, but also a good academic level, and, above all, demonstrating good values in attitude, behaviour, reliability and respect.

Hunou has been bred for success from a very early age, graduating from France’s famous Clairefontaine youth academy, which has produced so many stars, before joining Rennes in 2010, aged 16. A couple of years’ hard work in the Rennes youth teams followed, before Hunou received his first recognition in the 2011-12 season, winning a French Under-18 call-up, as well as making his debut for the Rennes reserve team in CFA2.

2012-13 saw Hunou begin to confirm the high hopes that the Rennes backroom staff held for him. He played in all but three of the reserve team’s matches throughout the season, scoring six goals, as the team finished a respectable fourth in their CFA2 group. He also earned his first call-up to the first team in late May against Valenciennes, although he did not feature on the pitch.

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On the downside, he probably ‘gambles’ too much, which can leave him and his team vulnerable. Sometimes when it would be better to take the safety-first option, Imbula inexplicably makes a ridiculous decision and tries something fancy when it would be much better just to keep things simple.

So, he’s shown his inexperience, but this can’t be classed as a surprise. He’s still only 21 years old and before this season had never played higher than Ligue 2. Within weeks of joining Marseille he was starting in Champions League matches against the likes of Dortmund and Arsenal - and there has been criticism that too much was expected of him too soon. Should they have been more patient with him, rather than expose him so early on in his career at the Vélodrome?

Marseille have had a poor season. They’ve sacked a manager, performed way below expectations and taken a lot of criticism from the fans at various stages during the campaign. Imbula himself has been caught up in the bad atmosphere, with rumours of a changing room fight with Thauvin (which came a month after Imbula was dropped from the French Under-21 squad for having a bad attitude). This hasn’t helped Imbula to settle at the club, although in the long run he’ll learn a lot from this difficult first season and probably be mentally tougher as a result.

He certainly has the potential to become a very good player in his position. As his mental attributes improve and his experience increases, he could even perhaps become world class. Even despite this average campaign, a number of big clubs are rumoured to have him on their radar for the future - notably Chelsea. What Imbula needs now is to build on this campaign and hopefully establish himself as a guaranteed first-choice starter for Marseille every week. It would help if the Mediterranean outfit improved both on and off the field, but perhaps he could be one of the sparks which help turn their fortunes around. He is definitely one to watch, and if things fall into place his future has no limits.

Marseille splashed the cash on plenty of domestic players during the summer of 2013. Gianelli Imbula was one of those high profile signings, costing around £6.5m. Considered by many to be more of a ‘project’ and player for the future, Imbula was surprisingly thrust into the Marseille first team much earlier than expected, starting in 10 of OM’s first 12 competitive games. Despite producing a few promising performances, from November onwards he’s been warming the bench and having to make do with substitute appearances. Marseille’s relatively woeful season hasn’t exactly helped his cause; it hasn’t been a particularly happy club this season, and all the turmoil and off-the-field issues have hardly helped matters.

So, what qualities does Imbula possess that persuaded Marseille to spend such a big fee on him? He’s a good all-round defensive midfielder. Many have dubbed him the ‘new Claude Makelele’ and in some ways you can see a direct comparison. However, Imbula appears to have more attacking potential than the France legend, and could ultimately develop into a deep-lying playmaker, or even a box-to-box midfielder. He’s physically strong but not over-reliant on muscle and framework, unlike some ‘bulldog’ defensive midfielders. There’s an element of grace and style in how he plays, and on a technical level there’s definitely more talent than your typical anchorman.

A key strength is his ability to read the play and make good interceptions. He has impressed already this season with his ability to break up other teams’ moves and he’s a player who seems to have a lot of intelligence. Another trait that he possesses is a good range of passing, and his vision is good too: although far from the finished article, he has shown glimpses of being able to provide killer balls which can lead to eventual goals.

On the downside, he probably ‘gambles’ too much, which can leave him and his team vulnerable. Sometimes when it would be better to take the safety-first option, Imbula inexplicably makes a ridiculous decision and tries something fancy when it would be much better just to keep things simple.

So, he’s shown his inexperience, but this can’t be classed as a surprise. He’s still only 21 years old and before this season had never played higher than Ligue 2. Within weeks of joining Marseille he was starting in Champions League matches against the likes of Dortmund and Arsenal - and there has been criticism that too much was expected of him too soon. Should they have been more patient with him, rather than expose him so early on in his career at the Vélodrome?

Marseille have had a poor season. They’ve sacked a manager, performed way below expectations and taken a lot of criticism from the fans at various stages during the campaign. Imbula himself has been caught up in the bad atmosphere, with rumours of a changing room fight with Thauvin (which came a month after Imbula was dropped from the French Under-21 squad for having a bad attitude). This hasn’t helped Imbula to settle at the club, although in the long run he’ll learn a lot from this difficult first season and probably be mentally tougher as a result.

He certainly has the potential to become a very good player in his position. As his mental attributes improve and his experience increases, he could even perhaps become world class. Even despite this average campaign, a number of big clubs are rumoured to have him on their radar for the future - notably Chelsea. What Imbula needs now is to build on this campaign and hopefully establish himself as a guaranteed first-choice starter for Marseille every week. It would help if the Mediterranean outfit improved both on and off the field, but perhaps he could be one of the sparks which help turn their fortunes around. He is definitely one to watch, and if things fall into place his future has no limits.
Ranieri felt that he was the perfect addition to his team. The physically imposing midfielder compliments the more creative talent of Joao Moutinho, while also slotting in nicely next to the reassuring Jeremy Toulalan in the middle of the park. Held back occasionally by a lack of quick-thinking and clear decision-making, he is also not particularly strong when it comes to the delivery of his crosses, although this is less important for a central midfielder. Kondogbia has no obvious weaknesses in his game, and he could arguably become one of France’s most complete players in that position, along with the likes of Juventus’ Paul Pogba and Paris Saint-Germain’s Blaise Matuidi.

It is easy to see why Sevilla were loath to let him go but due to a third-party ownership issue, similar to that of Radamel Falcao, Monaco were able to acquire his services for approximately €20 million and it looks to have been an intelligent purchase.

An uncompromising talent in the middle of the park, the man dubbed a potential ‘new Makelele’ - as promising defensive midfielders always are in the post-Claude era - he can also contribute going forward. He has laid on a couple of goals since the start of the season, although scoring them is not exactly his forte.

All in all, it is an encouraging start to Ligue 1 life for young Geoffrey and since the turn of the year he has shown that he is very capable of becoming an important part of this new-look Monaco side. Champions League football beckons for Monaco and Kondogbia after an impressive season, and that is exactly what is needed to continue the player’s development. If his influence in the Monégasque side continues to grow, Kondogbia’s is a name you will hear a lot in the coming years.

It has been an interesting debut season at AS Monaco for Under-20 World Champion, Geoffrey Kondogbia. Following a €20 million move from Spanish side Sevilla to the nouveau riche club from the French Riviera, the 21-year-old initially struggled to nail down a regular starting role in Claudio Ranieri’s star-studded side. However, after some shaky early showings, by early 2014 the former RC Lens man was featuring regularly for les Monégasques.

A lot was expected of Kondogbia following the French FIFA Under-20 World Cup victory in Turkey, allied to the fact that he was coming off the back of a stellar season in La Liga with Sevilla. Kondogbia’s good form in Spain was even rewarded with a call-up to the senior international side for the friendly with Belgium in August.

That rapid rise was tempered somewhat by a slow start to his career with Monaco, with the man from Nemours losing his way over the first half of the season.

Considering the progress made since he departed the Stade Bollaert-Delelis in 2012, however, it is easy to forget that this has actually been Kondogbia’s debut season in le Championnat.

An energetic and powerful box-to-box midfielder, he was a perfect match for the principality outfit on paper, but it took the 21-year-old more time to settle than many predicted, and that could ultimately end up costing him a place in Didier Deschamps’ final France squad for the World Cup.

However, having now firmly established himself at the Stade Louis II, greater things can be expected of the player who is predicted to be one of les Bleus’ key stars by the time the 2016 UEFA European Championship rolls around.

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adjusting his behaviour and lifestyle, kurzawa got his break at the start of 2013-14 and is now an essential figure in the side’s defence alongside eric abidal, his biggest inspiration on and off the pitch. “now layvin focuses exclusively on football,” says ranieri, underlining both past excesses and current progress. increasingly daring going forward, he has started to pile up the goals; his first of the season came in december against guingamp and he has since added another four, including a last-minute winner against reims in february.

coupled with a great athleticism is a desire to keep things simple. he only takes a couple of touches on the ball and always keeps in mind the need for his side to drive forward. able to take on opponents, he intuitively connects with whoever is in front of him on the left wing, be it yannick ferreira carrasco or lucas ocampos at the start of the season, or james rodriguez more recently. his crossing has steadily improved, although he still prefers to dart forward until he reaches the opposition area and release a forward with a short pass.

his performances mirrored that of fabinho at the start of the season, literally appearing to give wings to asm. the width provided by the two of them made for great entertainment, although offset by a lot of space left behind them on the counter. this is where kurzawa needs to bulk up - his defensive duties have seldom been put to test in a side which tends to dominate opponents. however, he has been erratic in his defensive positioning when facing well-organised opposition.

his consistency over a full season has also been questioned, as his output has appeared gradually to diminish. however, with patrice evra and gael clichy struggling to make an impact with their clubs and lucas digne barely getting involved in proceedings with psg, the path could still be open for the asm left-back to be deschamps’ special inclusion at the world cup.
His impressive performances earned him a France Under-20 call-up in June, and a month later he was a world champion, having appeared in four matches as France went on to win the tournament.

An archetypal modern defensive midfielder, strong in the tackle, able to shield his defence, but equally comfortable on the ball, Lemina also has the vision and passing ability to begin counter-attacks – and not a little skill and confidence too, as a Zidanesque pirouette on his U20 debut demonstrated. The only area that needs drastic improvement is in the support that he could offer his attackers: one shot on target in his whole pro career is not the greatest stat.

As Lemina started this season’s first four matches, it seemed that Gourcuff now considered him a regular around whom to build the team. Then came the Marseille move. A dream come true for the player, even if it meant a period back on the bench: “I came to progress. I am here as cover, I’ll develop in the shadow of others”.

The past six months have not been so positive. Lemina’s match time under Elie Baup was so limited that Willy Sagnol, who had promoted him to his France Under-21 squad, phoned Baup to check there were no issues for concern. Although there were none, Lemina has recently admitted that he was close to cracking and ready to pack his bags. Instead, Baup left, and Mario has since featured in the majority of OM’s matches.

Although developing all the time, he is not yet established as one of Marseilles’ cadres. However, he has already shown, at club and international level, that he is dedicated, quick to learn, and rarely overawed by obstacles placed in front of him. Marseille need a drastic reconstruction this summer, and Mario Lemina is a player who can provide the foundations upon which to build.

When the transfer of a player causes such a terminal rift between selling chairman and long-serving coach that it prompts said coach to quit the club at the end of the season, the chances are that the player in question is a little bit special.

In late August it became clear that Lorient starlet Mario Lemina was about to be sold to Marseille, and coach Christian Gourcuff felt compelled to make public his opposition, declaring himself sickened by the deal. It seems that his relationship with chairman Loïc Féry never recovered.

The controversy is all the more marked when one considers that Mario Lemina had, at the time, only been a professional for eight months. He made his debut in late January 2013, in a Coupe de France Round of 32 tie at Sedan. A tough away match in which to make one’s bow, but Lemina played the full 90 minutes, contributing fully to Lorient’s win, and demonstrating his strong resolve and positive temperament.

This strength of character helped the youngster, who was born in the Gabonese capital of Libreville, early in his development: “I went to the Clairefontaine trials, but didn’t fit the profile they were looking for – I was too small and slow.

But I really wanted to progress, to reach this level, so I never gave up and, when I left my family to join Lorient, that was an extra motivation for me to make a success of my chosen career”.

From that January debut until the Marseille transfer, Lemina must have thought that his chosen career was going to be a stroll. He featured for les Merlus in ten Ligue 1 matches during the rest of the season, and started another three Coupe de France matches, as Lorient reached the semi-finals.

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When talking about the stand-out performers in Ligue 2 this season, Jeff Louis is a name often mentioned first. The Haiti international has been in scintillating form in the last few months, virtually carrying the Nancy attack and producing some amazing individual performances. A playmaker operating in the attacking midfield slot, in only 19 starts this season he’s scored 11 times, most of those coming after the winter break. He’s arguably been the best player in Ligue 2 since its resumption in January.

Louis first appeared on the radar at the end of the 2010-11 season for Le Mans, playing their last five fixtures and notching up a couple of assists and a goal. The following season he started over 20 games during Le Mans’ (relegation) campaign. His statistics weren’t as impressive but he caught the eye with some solid performances, demonstrating his technical ability. He showed enough to convince Nancy to pay close to one million euros for his services.

This might sound like a small fee, but for a club like Nancy, splashing that sort of cash on a Ligue 2 player would be considered a gamble. Unfortunately, he was a complete flop in his first season with the Lorraine outfit, starting just two games and making only sporadic appearances from the bench.

The club had all sorts of problems, both on and off the pitch, which wouldn’t have helped his cause. Despite still being very young, many people already considered him a transfer bust. Even in the early stages of this season, he didn’t show much sign of improvement. So what changed? The answer seems quite simple. Nancy changed their coach in October 2013 and since Pablo Correa took charge, Louis has gone from strength to strength.

Renowned for his tactical and defensive coaching, it might be a surprise that Correa has had such an influence on an attack-minded player, but given a starting spot in the first match of the new regime, Louis rewarded his manager by scoring twice and producing a man of the match performance.

A further goal and a couple of assists came before the winter break; a niggling injury in January affected his form, but from February onwards his displays have been sensational. He kicked things off with an awesome hat-trick against Le Havre, followed by a brace against Tours the week after. A number of great performances have followed and he’s single-handedly powered the offence of his team.

Nancy have been completely toothless without him in the side. Fans must take a deep breath every time he goes down following a knock, because he’s such a key player for them now. Louis has superb technical qualities; he can make the ball talk and his control is excellent. With pace to burn as well, he strikes fear into opposing defences. Recently, he’s been given a virtual free licence to roam anywhere as a playmaker, and this has made him even more deadly.

Because he’s the only good offensive player that Nancy have, Louis has started to encounter one or two problems, mostly that teams are starting to employ double-marking, attempting to take him out of the game. He would be even more lethal in a side that contained some more decent offensive talent.

There’s already talk about him being a transfer target for many clubs in the summer. Nancy would love to build their offensive unit around him in the future, but even if the Lorraine outfit are promoted, there is a high chance that he could leave. Louis has shown remarkable development in the last six months, and if he continues to improve at this sort of rate then he has the potential to become a serious talent.
That is not to say that he has been catastrophic, but he has made a few errors of concentration. Against Saint-Etienne, for instance, he was at fault for both goals. In the 18th minute he fluffed a clearance that eventually fell to the excellent Benjamin Corgnet who made no mistake. The second goal came when Marquinhos attempted to pass the ball out of a complex situation. Romain Hamouma pounced on the blunder and put the hosts up 2-0. He was also at fault against Olympiakos when he struggled to keep tabs on Vladimir Weiss - although that was his debut, and he also scored. Nevertheless the Parisian faithful remain optimistic for Marquinhos’ future, and rightly so, judging by the raw physical and technical capacities that he possesses. The right role models also surround him. He cites Thiago Silva as an inspiration and friend and uses him for personal support: “I only have one word (to describe him): admiration. When I arrived in Paris, he was always by my side, especially when I was injured”. Reflecting on his time out, the defender remarks that it was important for him, as a young player, to have felt the support of the club and staff, which he duly received.

Ligue 1, for Marquinhos, is even more closed and restricted than Serie A: “It’s not unusual to see seven or eight defensive players in the opposition box. There is less space and the man-to-man marking is tougher”. Because Paris Saint-Germain are so often in an attacking phase, Marquinhos and his teammates do not spend so much time defending. Playing a high line suits the Brazilian as he has the speed to catch up with strikers who slip the offside trap.

The jury is still out as to whether Marquinhos has quite justified his price tag, especially considering the sale of club talisman Mamadou Sakho in the summer, but PSG are a top-dollar club, and whatever they paid for him, have acquired a high-end defender for their quest for domination.
His main weakness is that he can be too individualistic at times and is often lacking in terms of his work ethic. He does not boast impressive stamina for someone with such great speed and is likely to need substituting before the end of 90 minutes through exhaustion. His positioning could also be improved, but that should not take away from the fact that he is a precocious talent and can impact games already, despite his young age.

More comfortable when he is playing centrally, Martial is also capable of playing on either flank, although his final ball from the wide area needs a lot of work. Instead, he is better as a second striker, playing off a physical attacking partner with good aerial ability.

Unfortunately for Martial, he plays for a club where potential talent will only be given the briefest of opportunities before a more established name is brought in. The millions available to the principality outfit thanks to owner Dimitri Rybolovlev could mean that the Frenchman may be better off going on loan next season to ensure that his development is not stunted. Ranieri will be tasked with assembling a squad capable of challenging for domestic and European glory and it could see Martial’s time on the pitch fairly limited. Better to go out on loan than stay rooted to the Monaco bench.

Martial is definitely a part of ASM’s thinking in the future, as evidenced by the fact that made him one of French football’s hottest properties ever since he arrived at OL’s Centre Tola Vologe. Now 18 and still very raw, Martial has already demonstrated that he is ready to play an important role for les Monégasques sooner rather than later.

Claudio Ranieri used him to replace star striker Radamel Falcao at the Stade Louis II when the Colombian international first developed a mysterious “thigh problem” towards the end of 2013, before el Tigre then suffered his season- and possibly World Cup-ending anterior cruciate ligament injury in January. The teenager stepped up in the superstar’s absence, scoring twice and assisting one goal in a productive four-game spell in which he started every game. It is a taste of what is to come and, what’s more, he only turned 18 during that four-game run.

Martial has immense talent and is immediately eye-catching because of his searing pace. Composed, with an impressive first touch and good finishing ability on his favoured right foot, he is already a formidable threat for opponents.

Little wonder that Italian giants Juventus were said to be keen on taking the French under-21 international on loan in January.

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Martial is definitely a part of ASM’s thinking in the future, as evidenced by the fact that they stepped up so much for one so inexperienced, but the fact that many considered his price to be a bargain at the time illustrates how highly rated he is. In order to realise his immense potential and become one of Monaco's star turns, a tougher apprenticeship at another Ligue 1 club next season might be in order.
2013 - Where are they now?

THE LIST

Adrien RABIOT - PSG
Adrien REGATTIN - TOULOUSE
Aissa MANDI - REIMS
Alexandre COEFF - UDINESE
Alexandre LACAZETTE - LYON
Ali AHAMADA - TOULOUSE
Areola - PSG
Benjamin MENDY - MARSEILLE
Cedric BAKAMBU - SOCHAUX
Chris MAVINGA - RUBIN KAZAN
Clement GRENIER - LYON
Corentin JEAN - TROYES
Dimitri FOULQUIER - RENNES
Djibril SIDIBE - LILLE
Faouzi GHOULAM - NAPOLI
Florian THAUVIN - MARSEILLE
Gianelli IMBULA - MARSEILLE
Gilles SUNU - LORIENT
Gueida FOFA - LYON
Jean-Christophe BANEBECK - PSG
Jean-Daniel AKPA-AKPRO - TOULOUSE
Jerome ROUSSILLON - SOCHAUX
Johan MARTIAL - BREST
Jordan AYEW - MARSEILLE
Jordan VERETOUT - NANTES

Kurt ZOUA - CHELSEA
Loris NERY - VALENCIENNES
Lucas DIGNE - PSG
Lucas MOURA - PSG
Lucas OCAMPOS - MONACO
Marco VERRATTI - PSG
Maxime COLIN - BOULOGNE
Mohamed YATARRA - LYON
Nampalys MENDY - OGC NICE
Neal MAUPAY - OGC NICE
Neeskens KEIBANO - CHARLEROI
Nicolas ISIMAT-MIRIN - MONACO
Pierrick CROS - SOCHAUX
Rachid GHEZZAL - LYON
Radene ABDULLAH - FC LORIENT
Samuel UMTITI - LYON
Serge AURIER - TOULOUSE
Steeve YAGO - TOULOUSE
Timothée KOLODZIEJCZAK - OGC NICE
Valentin EYSSERIC - OGC NICE
Vincent ABOUBAKAR - FC LORIENT
Wahbi KHAZRI - SC BASTIA
Yannick FERREIRA CARRASCO - MONACO
Yassine BENZIA - LYON
Yaya SANOGO - ARSENAL
We asked French Football experts Andy Brassell, Matt Spiro, Julien Laurens and Didier Roustan to pick their best XI from the members of this year’s Le50 list.
Puel is a manager who is an expert at bringing through youth and helping them to develop. Puel was the man who gave Eden Hazard his debut, and he certainly operates the policy that if you’re good enough you’re old enough. Puel gave Maupay his debut at the same age as Hazard and there are suggestions that he could reach the same dizzying heights as the Belgian. Like Hazard he has dual nationality but unlike Puel’s former protégé, Maupay’s decision isn’t obvious at all. Hazard was only ever going to play for Belgium but Maupay could conceivably play for either Argentina or France and has already been compared with Sergio Aguero and Carlos Tevez.

Maupay isn’t easily shrugged off the ball, which is a remarkable asset in one so young, and while he isn’t particularly large, he shields the ball very well. His low centre of gravity means that he keep control of the ball when on the move and his confidence with the ball at his feet is already impressive. He is more than aware of the time that he has on the ball and is prepared to pick a pass (which normally finds its target) if a shot is not on.

He is very tricky to pick up and often floats into space in the box, resulting in a chance. The main area of his game that needs work is his aerial ability but that can be developed.

After starting two Coupe de France games, in March he also twice played for the full 90 minutes in the league, and that is incredibly important for a young player. For younger players, the great thing about OGC Nice is that Claude Puel is a manager who is an expert at bringing through youth and helping them to develop. Puel was the man who gave Eden Hazard his debut, and he certainly operates the policy that if you’re good enough you’re old enough.

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He is capable of finishing with both feet and while he still misses chances, which striker does not? He has five Ligue 1 goals already in two seasons, and if he stays in France there is no reason he couldn’t have a good shot at breaking Delio Onnis’ 28-year-old record of 299 goals in Ligue 1. For now, the best thing for him to do is to focus on getting a full season under his belt with Nice. A move away from the south of France looks inevitable but it is critical he doesn’t make it too early in his career. This kid is really special and we are all eager to see what rewards a full season will bring.

When compiling this list there are always going to be players who are recovering from injury and only just returning, so their inclusion is debatable. With Neal Maupay, however, our only concern was whether he would return in time to have actually played before the list was finalised.

When a 16-year-old makes 15 appearances in his debut season in Ligue 1 you know that you are witnessing something special, even if the majority of those appearances were from the bench. That figure could have been a lot higher had Maupay not suffered a season-ending injury in mid-April 2013 that dragged into this campaign, meaning that he has only started to feature regularly again after the winter break.

Luckily, the second-youngest scorer in Ligue 1’s history has time on his side and he already looks to have picked up where he left off. Since his return in January Maupay has scored twice in the league, against Valenciennes and Bastia, and against Marseille in the Coupe de France. The league goals demonstrated Maupay’s biggest strength: his movement. When one watches Maupay on the pitch, one notes that he moves with all the instincts of a natural goalscorer, is intelligent and a nightmare for defenders.
Having been earmarked for quite some time now as a player with the talent to make the step up from Ligue 2 side Le Havre, it is pleasing to see Benjamin Mendy now in the top flight with Marseille. He joined Les Phocéens in the 2013 summer transfer window for a fee of €3.5 million and has made a solid start to life in Ligue 1.

The tall, powerfully built 19-year-old started his professional career at Le Havre, where he made a total of 65 appearances over two seasons. He made the left-back position his own, due mainly to his significant presence and the speed at which he can tear up and down the left flank. He therefore possesses the key attributes for the modern-day full-back as he is more than capable of joining with attacks, as well as defending any threats down his wing.

At Marseille he has been in competition with Jeremy Morel for the left-back position and from week one it seemed a battle he had already won. Morel had a torrid pre-season and so Mendy made his Ligue 1 debut in the easy opening weekend victory away to Guingamp. He scored his first goal for the club in week seven against Saint-Etienne, with a finish which highlighted his willingness to join the attack, as he galloped forward to meet a Mathieu Valbuena cross on the counter-attack.

So far in his first Ligue 1 season he has made 20 league and cup starts for Marseille, and while he has only very recently lost his place in the starting XI to Morel, it seems a sure thing that he will be an integral part of the Marseille team which looks to make progress from this disappointing campaign.

To highlight the progress Mendy has made and the ranks through which he has risen so rapidly, it is worth noting that when he made his Champions League debut against the previous season’s runners-up Borussia Dortmund, it was only 12 months on from when he playing for Le Havre away to Chateauroux. He’s gone from playing in front of just over 5,000 to over 65,000 in one season, which is a clear indication of the sheer talent he has - and there is still so much more to see.

He has continued to make appearances for the French under-19 team and he would have surely pushed on to have made appearances for the under-21 team had he not been part of such a talented group of young French left-backs which also includes Lucas Digne and Layvin Kurzawa. Unfortunately, out of the three, Mendy is the one who needs to improve his defensive side if he wants to keep pace with the other two.

It is important to remember that he is only 19 and still has much to learn. There have been times this season when his inexperience has shown as he has been caught out of position, or committed to the tackle too early, but these things are understandable. As he plays more games in Ligue 1, these weaknesses will be ironed out and with the kind of manager rumoured to be joining Marseille in the summer, Mendy can only continue to get better and better.

One thing that remains to be seen is whether he carries through on his wish to play in Ligue 1 for a couple of seasons before moving on to Barcelona. Whilst the Catalan giants may seem far off, who knows what Mendy can achieve if he continues to make the progress we have seen this season.
Standing barely 5'6" but possessing a tenacity and toughness that belie his size, 18-year-old Nampalys Mendy started 14 league matches for Monaco in 2010-2011 and became a regular in Ligue 2 the following season. In 2012-2013, he was ever-present for the Ligue 2 winners, and so reliable that Claudio Ranieri referred to him as "our Makelele." Even before that triumphant campaign ended, however, Mendy had made it known that he would not sign an extension and instead planned to join rivals Nice on a free transfer. Despite rumors that Manchester United would sneak in and claim Mendy for themselves, he did, in fact, turn up in Nice last summer, loaded with cheeky grins, merry confidence and the talent to back up his attitude.

The best thing about Mendy is his eager tenacity. Churning his way around the Nice midfield, Mendy never looks tired. Instead, he's restless, waiting for an opportunity to pounce, to expend the energy coursing through his veins. He's too smart to dive into fruitless challenges or take needless defensive chances that might leave him out of position, but when the opportunity comes he explodes, displaying an uncommon acceleration and an unexpected physicality when he attacks. With his low centre of gravity, he's almost impossible to knock off the ball, and he reads the game so well that, when he makes a challenge, he almost always wins it.

As good as he is in open play, Mendy might be even better when defending set pieces, an area of the game not much discussed. Because of his size, when Nice take corners he is one of those tasked with either dumping clearances back in or, on occasion, shutting down counters. Those who have watched Nice over the past several years know they sometimes struggle terribly when opponents transition, and have been cut apart far too often thanks to defensive hesitation followed by poor choices and bad tackles.

Under Mendy’s leadership, however, things have changed. He has the ability to assess a situation instantly, so when the ball comes out at the feet of an opponent, there’s no hesitation; instead, there’s a tackle, a rapid retreat, a clever containment, giving his teammates time to recover and set the situation right. Mendy’s patience - a quality which seems to go against his nature - is vital in these moments, allowing him to recognize a disadvantage and simply survive it, rather than rashly try to reverse it.

Offensively, Mendy is best when he’s efficient, taking one or two touches before switching play, often with a clever ball out into the channel, provoking his teammates into attack. Although right-footed, he’s effective with either, be it in building attack or simply working to keep possession. That said, it’s on the attacking side of the game that Mendy’s one real weakness is exposed - his touch is surprisingly unrefined on occasion, and he sometimes looks like the kid he is, scrambling frantically after a control goes wrong. This, one suspects, is a result of the player’s roaring engine, an eagerness to play, that he will learn to contain as he continues to grow and mature.

At this point in the season, Mendy is arguably the second name on Claude Puel’s teamsheet, behind fellow defensive rock David Ospina. The little midfielder has missed only two league matches for his club and, tellingly, Nice gave up five goals without him. Despite his youth and his short tenure at the club, the respect his older teammates have for Mendy is clear and he has quietly, comfortably become a leader, both on and off the pitch. He is the sort of player any team would dream of building around, and it is crucial to the ambition Nice are showing under new president Jean-Pierre Rivère that they don’t let Mendy slip through their fingers.
Moura’s astonishing solo run against Olympique de Marseille endeared him to PSG fans and showed an acceleration that few players in Europe can boast. Collecting the ball before the halfway line, he kick-started his scooter and rode past five opponents before clipping the ball over Mandanda, only for Rod Fanni to clear just before it crossed the line.

Rumours of a petition emerged, as some PSG and neutral fans reportedly looked to get the Marseille right-back prosecuted for crimes against humanity in the wake of his anti-climactic clearance, crushing the excitement of 48,000 spectators whose expectations had increased at the same rate as Moura’s adrenaline as he went past one, two, three, four, five opponents. It was easily the most spectacular run in the famed Classique since Ronaldinho’s famous goal at the Stade Vélodrome in 2003.

Moura’s pace on the ball and ability to go past any player in one-on-one situations are second to none in the PSG squad. It sometimes looks as if his brain is too fast, the ball too big and the pitch too slow for standard football practice, and likely he would provide the same entertainment with an orange on a sandy beach in his home country.

His weaknesses are the other side of the coin for a player of his qualities: he does lack a sense of positioning and tactical awareness, as if he would dribble his way past the opposition only to make a loop and come back to where he collected the ball. Normally deployed on the right wing, he sometimes loses his bearings and wanders aimlessly in the centre of the pitch or off to the other wing. This generally leads Laurent Blanc to raise an eyebrow and shout at him to come back to his post on the right touchline.

The embodiment of a raw diamond, Moura has decided that he will stay at the Parc des Princes and “contribute to the rich history of Brazilians at PSG”; there is little doubt he will explode sooner rather than later and use the experience of dealing with the pressure after his high-profile move to Europe to make a decent contribution to Brazil’s World Cup performance.
While many thought he would go on to become a fixture in the Rennes team, Montanier had different plans and so Ngando joined Auxerre for a season in the second tier. This looks to have been a masterstroke as Ngando has secured significant game-time, making over 25 starting appearances in the league and cup. His best position is at the central attacking point of a midfield three, which makes best use of his vision and range of passing, while also allowing him to make the late runs into the box which have produced five goals so far this season. In the first half of the season, he formed an excellent on-field relationship with Paul-Georges Ntep, himself now at Rennes.

By playing on a consistent basis and having made a name for himself in the under-20 team, Ngando has managed this season to break through into the under-21s. If he can finish the season strongly with Auxerre before establishing himself with his parent club Rennes, we could yet see a lot more of Ngando, and the potential is there for him to continue his development all the way to the very top. He is also eligible for Cameroon (his uncle is the great Patrick Mboma), and so the French senior national team may have to act fast if they are to secure Ngando in the famous blue jersey.

If you are going to claim to model your game on Ronaldinho, you are setting a very high bar for yourself; luckily for Ngando, he has a cool, calm and collected attitude along with a very wise head on young shoulders, which means he certainly could go on to match his idol in Ligue 1.

Part of the seemingly never-ending conveyor belt of young talent emerging from Rennes, Axel Ngando represents a slightly different kind of midfielder from the recently preferred tall, powerful types such as Yann M’Vila and Abdoulaye Doucouré. Ngando is slightly built, standing at 5’10” and weighing only 66kg, so he relies very much on his ability to read the game and pick out the most efficient pass. In terms of comparisons, he is not too dissimilar from an on-form Samir Nasri; Ngando has said he tries to model himself on the great Ronaldinho.

Although a Rennes-owned player, he has spent the 2013-2014 season on loan with Ligue 2’s Auxerre, which is a sensible move for all parties involved. Recognising that he was not part of his immediate plans, Rennes coach Philippe Montanier saw that Ngando needed game-time to continue his development, and a season playing first team football in Ligue 2 was the perfect solution.

Ngando did actually make four appearances for les Rouges et Noirs in the 2012-2013 season and became an instant hit with the Rennes fans by coolly slotting home a last-gasp equaliser against Brittany rivals Lorient only a couple of minutes after coming on for his debut.

Although he only made a further three appearances that season, it was enough to persuade French under-20 coach Pierre Mankowski to include him in the World Cup squad for that summer’s tournament in Turkey. Although not a starter in that tournament, Ngando made a name for himself by again showing calmness beyond his years as he converted his penalty in the shoot-out as France became Under-20 World Champions.

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Inevitably, with the step up from a semi-professional to a fully-professional division, N’Gbakoto has encountered tougher opposition this year and his statistics and performances have not been quite as eye-catching. However, eleven goals and three assists to date are still an impressive return. Blessed with speed, dribbling ability and technique on the ball which is well above the average player, he also has a great reading of the game and an eye for the killer pass.

Although charged with taking the majority of Metz’s corners and set-pieces, his delivery is often wasteful and this is an area which needs work. It is not the only one. N’Gbakoto, who does a similar line in ‘zany’ hairstyles to Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang, has not always had the best of attitudes. His early success went to his head and his progression was not as quick as was hoped. He has settled now, become a father, and is knuckling down to ensure that his talent is not wasted, as he has acknowledged: “my attitude wasn’t great. I made lots of mistakes when I was young and I regret that. I am trying to reinvent myself and to perform as well as possible”.

Although this year has inevitably been harder than the last, he is learning and adapting all the time, and is likely not to fall too far short of his objective of ten goals and around ten assists.

N’Gbakoto, who has represented France up to Under-18 level, has recently signed a contract extension to the end of the 2014-2015 season. He has spoken of Metz being his family and is not in a hurry to leave just yet. His highs and lows over the last four years have mirrored those of FC Metz, and he will be looking to do all he can in the next year to help him and his team to achieve all their goals.

The Ballon d’Or, the Golden Boot... ask Cristiano Ronaldo and Franck Ribery how much these individual awards are cherished. But these trophies are mere trinkets in comparison with the Echarpe d’Or — the Golden Scarf. And the current holder of this distinction is Yeni N’Gbakoto, voted the best player of last season’s Championnat National, as he helped FC Metz to return to Ligue 2 at the first attempt.

Les Grenats’ relegation to the third tier at the end of the 2011-2012 season turned into something of a blessing in disguise, as it gave the club the chance to bring many of their talented 2010 Coupe Gambardella winners into the first team, and it is arguably N’Gbakoto who has flourished the most.

In fact, N’Gbakoto had already been part of the first team set-up for a couple of seasons. Having made his debut in January 2010, the week after his 18th birthday, he made fifty appearances for les Grenats over the proceeding two years, the majority as substitute. However, it was during the 2012-2013 season that he became a first team regular, with eye-catching performances that had scouts from all over Europe coming to the Stade Saint-Symphorien.

N’Gbakoto was an ever-present in Metz’s National season, scoring 15 and providing five assists in all competitions, and highlighting his ability with spectacular finishes such as his first-time 30-yard pass into the top corner against Quevilly, or his impudent back-heeled overhead volley against Nice in the Coupe de France.

Although also able to play as a central striker, Yeni plays predominantly on the right wing, where his combinations with right-back Romain Métanire and his affinity with centre-forward Diafra Sakho have been a large factor in Metz’s renaissance.

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In March 2011, a rangy 16-year-old striker was promoted to Caen’s first team. In seven appearances he scored three goals, all in draws, and Caen stayed up by two points. Attention was duly paid to M’Baye Niang. The following season was hampered by injury, causing Niang to miss almost three months, but he collected another two goals and three assists, and by this stage he’d been called up to, and scored for, the France Under-21s. As Caen went down, they took the opportunity to cash in, for a rumoured €3m from AC Milan. He was still only 17.

The move to Serie A was a difficult one. Niang was an infrequent starter, and in eighteen months in Italy scored only once, in a cup win over Serie B’s Reggina. There were also some off-pitch worries – shortly after arriving, he was caught driving without a licence; not long after, there was the infamous cab-ride to Paris with U21 teammates between the two legs of their Euro 2013 qualifying play-off. He received a 14-month ban from national selection, and manager Massimiliano Allegri was not impressed.

Struggling for first-team football in Milan, who had now fired Allegri, Niang arrived back in Ligue 1 in January 2014 on loan at Montpellier, who were desperately in need of striking options. He made an immediate impact, scoring a penalty in his first game, against Rodez in the Coupe de France, and grabbing three more in the league, against Monaco, Nice and Reims. He added much-needed zip – and height – to a forward line having conversion problems; things were looking good.

Then, another car-based off-pitch problem – he crashed his Ferrari, in a much more serious incident than his previous transgressions. Fortunately, nobody was seriously hurt, but Niang received a suspended sentence, fines, a three-year driving ban and community service. His zip dried up, as did the goals, although he continued to make chances.

Hopefully the seriousness of this latest incident has been a wake-up call for him, and will provoke a positive reaction on the pitch – and some restraint off it. Niang’s strengths are in dribbling and crossing, and stationing him on the (left) wing can make the most of this, as defenders are never sure whether he will cut inside or cross. Playing him centrally bears fruit when he can stay forward, hovering in the box to pounce, as against Nice and Reims. The one slight concern, maybe a combination of his head-drop after the crash and Montpellier’s attacking issues more generally, is that if he drops back or to the left to help out, he cannot be on the end of his own balls into the box. As sole striker, he needs more support, and the confidence to stay forward.

Having declined a call-up for Senegal, his FFF ban has now expired, and it should be remembered that Niang is still eligible for the U21s, currently in qualifying for Euro 2015. Although there will be heavy competition for places there, as many of the U20 World Cup winners have moved up, he has speed, power, and potential. His club future is also uncertain – MHSC President Louis Nicollin saying “he’s not the player for us”, whereas Niang has expressed a desire to stay, saying the rest of the season is like a trial. If he can stay out of trouble and return to scoring ways, he could become a star; his chances of doing that seem higher at Montpellier than Milan.
Paul-Georges Ntep continued to set Ligue 2 alight with Auxerre. He even helped knock Ligue 1 side Lille out of the Coupe de la Ligue in October. Ntep showed glimpses of magic but he did find it difficult to enjoy the same amount of success that he had against weaker opposition. This, in part, led to indications that he wanted to move on in January. QPR, Roma Arsenal and Borussia Moenchengladbach were keeping tabs on the winger-cum-forward. The transfer market immediately scrambled into action, but Ntep eventually chose Rennes.

The move is indicative of his maturity. Six months prior, the Qatar Stars League’s most successful club, Al-Sadd, offered Ntep a villa, a luxury sports car, and a 1.5 million euro tax-free salary, but he turned down the grandiose offer. It was a sober and mature decision on his part, especially when you consider he was making a fifth of that with his youth contract at Auxerre.

In the international arena, Ntep has shone with France U21s. In his eight matches with them, Ntep has scored six goals, perhaps his way of hitting back at the selectors who left him at home for France’s U20 World Cup win last summer (he went to the Toulon tournament instead, where he scored two).

So far, Ntep’s move to Rennes has been generally positive, and he has managed to start in the majority of matches when he has been fit. Injury has punched a small hole in the optimism, with a muscle injury keeping him out for most of March and April, so his outside chance of a World Cup call-up is gone. But if his previous career decisions are anything to go by, Ntep will not be too bothered about the here and now. He is more about making the right decision at the right time.

As spectators, a first touch is sometimes all that is needed to pick out a special talent. Paul-Georges Ntep is one of those conspicuously precocious youngsters who dazzle on-lookers from the very beginning.

Ntep is quick – really, really quick. His thighs are like tree trunks and they provide the power and pace he employs when bounding past defenders. He has remarkable energy levels, and is the kind of player who will relentlessly come at defences until he eventually wears them down. Though his speed may be his greatest asset, he is more than just a pace merchant. Moreover, fans will say that there is already an ‘X-factor’ about him, referring to his ability to fashion goalscoring opportunities from out of nothing.

For example, Ntep left viewers amazed early in the year against Caen. He collected the ball on the left side of the pitch, as is his preference. After sidestepping one defender, he executed a lightning quick double stepover, and again quickly shifted to his right before unleashing an absolute missile goalwards. Damien Perquis never stood a chance. The goal made all the weekly football shows, but surprised no one in the know, for Ntep was already a known quantity in France and rightly so.
However, neither formation allowed star signing James Rodriguez to shine. Ranieri therefore changed to a 4-4-2 with a midfield diamond, sacrificing the wingers and relying on his full-backs to provide the width. Ocampos paid the price, and became Plan B.

For Claudio Ranieri, Ocampos now seems to be limited to his role as a secondary option. Unless the formation or game plan changes next season, then his role as substitute looks set to continue. He is set to beat last year’s personal stats, with three goals and one assist to date – but all have come in substitute appearances. He remains the type of player who, with his speed and skill, can appear late on in matches to terrorise and punish a tiring opposition defence.

Although he could do with his manager playing a formation that suits him, if he wants more playing time, he could also do himself a favour by showing more consistency; only last month Ranieri gave him the chance to impress with a starting place in the Coupe de France quarter-final against Lens. He scored twice in a 6-0 win, to convince the manager to revert to 4-3-3, giving him a starting place in the following weekend’s Ligue 1 match at Evian. Ocampos was practically anonymous and was substituted at half time.

There is no doubting the potential that Ocampos has – top European teams do not fight over a 17-year old who has established himself at a club like River Plate for nothing. He can leave his defender for dead with speed of movement and footwork; he is strong in the air; he can score spectacular goals, like his scissor-kick goal against Toulouse; or split a defence open with a pinpoint pass, like his assist for Kurzawa against Lorient. The problem is that these examples are all too rare. Once Ocampos starts showing his ability week in, week out, Monaco will have a very special player on their hands.

Any article describing the last 12 months of Lucas Ocampos’ career could easily be confused with those written about his first year in France. It’s hard to pick out areas in which the Monaco youngster has improved since moving from Ligue 2 to Ligue 1. The bottom line is that the Argentinian starlet remains a frustratingly talented winger, whose potential is yet to be converted into kinetic end-product.

Ocampos had a steady enough 2012-13 as Monaco won the Ligue 2 title, featuring in 29 of 38 matches. Although almost half of those appearances came as a substitute, Ocampos began 11 of the final 12 matches, suggesting that he had established himself as a first-teamer. Only four goals and two assists was perhaps a slightly disappointing return, but it appeared that Claudio Ranieri had seen enough of the tricky 18-year old to consider him a crucial part of the team. This seemed to be confirmed when, despite the Monégasques’ summer spending spree, Ocampos began the season in the first team. However, that positive start has abated somewhat; although he has featured in 28 of Monaco’s 31 Ligue 1 matches to date, only 11 have come as a starter, and eight of those were the first eight matches of the season.

In his defence, the formation that Monaco have finally settled on has not helped him.

Ocampos, now 19, is an old-school winger, able to play on either flank (although his performances are markedly better on the right), hugging the touchline, duelling with opposing full-backs and cutting inside to shoot or look to play through one of his strikers. Ranieri started the season using either a 4-3-3 formation, with Yannick Ferreira Carrasco and Ocampos flanking Falcao, or a classic 4-4-2 with the same two wide players supporting el Tigre and early-season star Emmanuel Rivière.

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Everything accelerated from then on, and he scored his first official goal in the Trophée des Champions against Bordeaux in August (with a Zlatan Ibrahimovic assist) before making his Ligue 1 debut a few days later against Montpellier. His later outings have demonstrated his ability, but he is struggling to retain his spot in the highly competitive French capital side. In March, he signed a contract extension that will see him remain at PSG until 2017. PSG's refusal to loan him to Montpellier in January was in hindsight perhaps a questionable choice, as the youngster has failed to make an impact in the first team in the second part of the season.

Having featured at a variety of youth levels for France, he was called up to les Espoirs for a European Championships qualifying match back in October, but has not featured in the four matches since; given the competition for places as the team is also filled with the now-promoted U20 World Cup winners, his lack of playing time in Paris could also be hampering his nascent international career.

For Ongenda to make the next step towards the PSG first-team, it looks like he will have to take the usual step that most Parisian youngsters eventually take and seek a loan move this summer. For the move to be a success it would need to be at a club willing to give the 18-year-old forward enough playing time to keep him motivated; away from the appeal of Paris, his attitude may come under question if he was to spend more time on the bench.

Hopefully, for now, young Ongenda can heed the words from his teammate Zlatan Ibrahimovic, buckle down and try harder in training. Rumours of a lazy approach in reserve matches can lead to a reputation. Only when one reaches the heights of Ibrahimovic can one start to pick and choose when to give 100%. Ongenda is a long way from that privilege. If he doesn’t take Zlatan’s advice he might never get there.

With a small height (5’7”) but a huge talent, the Paris-born Paris Saint-Germain forward elected to stay with his boyhood side in the summer, despite reported interest from Chelsea, Arsenal and Manchester United.

Brought up in a football-mad family (his younger brother Jonathan plays in the FC Nantes youth team), he took his first steps towards football stardom at Paris FC and was noticed aged 12 by neighbours PSG. Fast-tracked to the academy side, he scored 18 of the club’s 25 goals in a youth tournament in Spain in 2007.

Ongenda is blessed with an exceptional vision that has led him to be deployed as an attacking midfielder rather than a striker in the latter stages of his football development. Few prospects combine the ability to make a physical impact on the wing and a technical difference through the middle, as he does.

Ongenda’s impressive footballing brain is demonstrated by how easily he linked up with Zlatan Ibrahimovic when PSG hosted Bastia in November. However, his superiority at youth level and rapid involvement with the senior squad before turning 18 seem to have made him nonchalant, and curbed his determination to cement his spot in the first team.

With an ability both to initiate moves and conclude them, he is set to become a very useful weapon in PSG’s arsenal, able to play anywhere in midfield, as testified by his appearance on the left wing against Bordeaux, and central midfield against Bastia. With the reserves, he is generally a right winger, the position in which he feels least comfortable.

His excellent vision and technique led Carlo Ancelotti to hand him his debut in January 2013 in the Coupe de France.

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Divock ORIGI

It is the moment you dream about as a kid: your team goes behind at home while you sit on the bench watching the play develop. Then the coach calls you and says you are about to make your first-team debut. You have 20 minutes to make an impact and become the hero. For 17-year-old Lille striker Divock Origi, that dream became a reality last season against Troyes when he took only six minutes to head home his first ever senior goal, ghosting in at the back post to head in Dimitri Payet’s cross.

Origi had been pushing for first-team football for most of the 2012-13 season but Rudi Garcia had seemed reluctant to give the young Belgian his chance, a risk that nearly saw Origi follow in the footsteps of VfL Wolfsburg midfielder Junior Malanda, and leave northern France for a chance at first-team football.

When one looks at Origi’s performances this season it seems ridiculous that Lille would have even given the youngster a chance to leave without making his mark on the club. Opening the season with a home match against FC Lorient, it was Origi who got the winning campaign underway, latching onto Marvin Martin’s well-weighted pass as he calmly slotted the ball past Fabien Audard. It promised to be a breakout season for the son of Kenyan international Mike Origi, but new Lille boss, René Girard has treated Origi Junior with kid gloves, giving him enough games to keep him happy and let him develop, but not too much to burn out the now 18-year-old.

Before becoming part of the first-team the young Belgian was a stand-out member of the Lille Under-19 side, many saying he was head and shoulders above everyone else in his age group. He found it hard to shine on the bumpy pitches that the CFA side played on most weeks, especially at the Stade Annexe next door to the ground in which Lille won the 2011 title.

Origi is an impressive physical specimen. He is tall with a very rangy stride, but his height and strong lanky legs don’t affect his pace. When he opens up, his speed and strength are difficult to match, going past defenders almost at will. The stronger full-backs he beats with pace, the smaller quicker players he uses his size to get past. He is blessed with all the raw attributes of a very promising striker.

On the ball he possesses a thunderous right foot, and when you watch in training you can see how devastating his shooting ability could be; we are yet to see the full extent of the damage he is capable of on the pitch. You can see that Origi knows what he wants to do, but sometimes he can be Bambi-esque in his execution. He still needs to improve his decision-making throughout his game. Once he learns when to make the right pass, and where and when to make the right run, he will become a vital part of the Lille attack.

Sometimes he gets caught taking up the same position as one of him teammates, be it Salomon Kalou when he drifts wide or Nolan Roux when he makes his runs in behind. The positive is that he does have the sense to make the runs in the first place; the timing will come with experience.

While Rudi Garcia was reluctant to let Origi shine in the first-team, now René Girard has given the striker his chance, the Lille fans have a new Belgian forward on whom to pin their hopes and dreams.

He has the opportunity, he has the ability, and he has a club willing to nurture his excellent potential. It is now up to Origi whether he wants to follow in the footsteps of Eden Hazard, or follow his friend Malanda and jump ship before he can fully blossom.
That lack of composure has been evident when Poundjé has played for Bordeaux this term, with the former France Under-19 international regularly drawing the ire of referees. He has been shown a straight red card three times in 2013-14, receiving his marching orders against Evian, Lille and Garonne derby rivals Toulouse.

Poundjé’s inexperience and ill-discipline has also cost Bordeaux in the past, with his tendency to make the wrong choice often proving crucial.

His poor decision-making was displayed in Bordeaux’s 3-3 draw at Lorient last September, a game that saw Gillot’s men left to settle for a point after throwing away a two-goal lead. It was Poundjé who effectively started the fightback for Lorient, handing them a goal on a plate as his ill-advised and weak back-pass fell straight into the path of Kevin Monnet-Paquet, who slotted home to reduce Bordeaux’s lead to 3-2 before Sadio Diallo completed the comeback.

With errors like that it is no surprise that Gillot has opted to stick with the more experienced Orban, but there can be no doubt that Poundjé fits into his preferred system. Attacking full-backs have been a prominent part of the Bordeaux line-up, the talented Mariano providing an excellent and dynamic threat going forward, similar to that of Benoît Trémoulinas, who left the club before the start of the season.

Orban has effectively replaced Trémoulinas, however, and by not using Poundjé consistently, Bordeaux are neglecting a talent who brings an eye-catching acceleration capable of frightening opposing defences - something that Gillot’s team are guilty of not doing enough. Bordeaux are not a team blessed with a plethora of outstanding attacking players, although the likes of Henri Saivet and Cheick Diabaté are capable of providing excitement.

So Poundjé, despite his inexperience and evident faults, has the ability to add another dimension to an attack that lacks versatility. He only needs to be given a regular opportunity to do so. That opportunity may not be forthcoming at Bordeaux. However, if he can harness the raw talent that has been obvious for much of his early career, he could easily prove to be a success at any number of Ligue 1 clubs.
Puel's strengths certainly seem more appropriate for a forward player. He has good pace and is also very speedy in terms of footwork and thought. He can function well in small spaces, can wriggle his way out of tight corners and likes one-touch flicks to team-mates. He also has a good crossing ability. Heading and tackling, however, are weaknesses. These plus and minus points surely add up to someone who could be seen as a liability in defence, but a provider of real spark in attack.

Nice’s troubles this season, including one run of seven straight defeats, have shone the spotlight on several players. The misfiring Cvitanich has drawn most of the focus, but the defence has come in for lots of criticism too and Puel has borne the brunt of much of it. Although only 20, having made his debut in February 2013, and playing in a role not yet familiar to him, Puel has played more than 20 matches for a very unsettled defence, often at the expense of the more experienced Romain Genevois and Lloyd Palun. Because of his father, Puel’s place is always likely to be subject to more scrutiny than others, and it is hard to avoid the feeling that Claude is not doing his son many favours, firstly in his insistence on playing him in defence, and secondly in not protecting him a little more from the media’s criticism.

There is no doubt that Grégoire is a player of great potential, in terms of ability, versatility and strength of character. A successful career lies ahead of him, but one feels that he must move away from his dad in order to give himself a fighting chance to achieve his goals.
Rabiot wasted little time in impressing in his substitute appearances, notching his first senior goal against EA Guingamp in only his third appearance. Since then he has started more than just a handful of games and, prior to a knee injury in early 2014, was one of the most regularly used players this season.

A quiet, well-mannered character off the pitch, on it Rabiot possesses impressive technical ability for a player so young. His waif-like physique does not pose a problem to him, unlike under-performing €42million playmaker Javier Pastore; instead it adds to the elegant quality that this precocious talent exudes when on the ball.

The teenager’s height makes him an aerial threat, but he shies away from physical confrontation as often as he can, using his positioning and excellent control of the ball to keep him out of danger and away from conflict. Although he does occasionally lack the quick-thinking needed to shine among the galaxy of stars at the Parc des Princes, Rabiot has more than enough quality to play his way out of danger. That decision-making will come with time and his mature style belies a player who is still yet to turn 20.

The biggest obstacle standing in the way of the former Manchester City youth academy star is arguably his mother, Véronique, who also doubles as his advisor. Rabiot is developing a reputation for arrogance, which appears to stem more from the questionable guidance he receives off the field, than his actual character on it.

Rabiot imposed himself on the team over the first half of the season, becoming more than just a token youth academy graduate. The Frenchman is now an under-21 international, having advanced from the under-19 ranks at impressive speed.

One of the most exciting Under-21 talents currently playing in Ligue 1 is Paris Saint-Germain’s Adrien Rabiot. Having added to his reputation last year on the back of a handful of encouraging early season cameo appearances in the French capital, followed by an impressive start to what turned out to be a productive loan spell with Toulouse, the prodigiously gifted 19-year-old’s claims for inclusion are more substantial this time around.

Returning to the Parc des Princes after spending the second half of last season on loan with le Téfécé, Rabiot perhaps expected to be loaned out once again this campaign. With so many top-quality midfielders ahead of him in the pecking order, continuing his development away from the French champions looked likely. However, Laurent Blanc replaced Carlo Ancelotti (one of Rabiot’s greatest admirers) and les Bleus’ former coach convinced the youngster to stay by promising him a fair opportunity to continue his rapid progress with the club. So far, le President has been true to his word.

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The club are reluctant to discuss his future with his overprotective mother in the picture, so the player will need to make a big decision at some point. His ability to separate himself from strong and understandable family ties could be the difference between him realising his talent at PSG or becoming just another Parisian youngster who fails to make the grade.
Rose by name, Lindsay has imitated the delicate flower by nature for most of this campaign. Due to a knee injury sustained in October, Valenciennes have missed the thorny dangerous side of the 22-year-old defender’s game, and the Northern team’s Ligue 1 status is wilting as a result.

It has not been the best of seasons for Valenciennes, who have been mired in a relegation battle since they slipped into the bottom three in early September. The club’s predicament has not been aided by the fact that Rose has not even played for the northern club since new coach Ariël Jacobs took over from predecessor Daniel Sanchez.

A product of the fruitful Stade Rennais youth academy, Rose was let go by the Breton club in 2008 after eight years at the Stade de la Route de Lorient. He found a new home with second-tier side Stade Lavallois and quickly became a key player there after making his senior debut in 2010. Valenciennes took note of the Ligue 2 talent and, in January 2013, made the move to bring him to the Stade du Hainaut.

The Frenchman of Mauritian descent quickly became a first team regular under Sanchez, despite the mid-season switch of clubs, contributing a goal in a 4-1 mauling of his former side Rennes as VAFC avoided any relegation fears, spending the majority of the campaign safely ensconced in mid-table. It was also against Rennes, in this season’s away encounter, that the central defender suffered the ligament damage which is likely to have put an end to his season before it really had time to get started.

Strong and athletic, Rose is extremely fast for a defender, boasts good aerial ability and shows impressive dedication to his task. He is also versatile, capable of playing on either side at the back or in defensive midfield, although he is predominantly right-footed.

The uncompromising defender has stated his desire to play for the French national team in the future, and, prior to his absence, Rose had represented France’s under-21 side three times and even bagged himself a goal. But given his untimely injury and the strong level of competition that he faces at youth and senior level with les Bleus at present, opting to play for Mauritius instead is a genuine possibility.

In terms of weaknesses, Rose could work at becoming more vigilant when marking. He also has a tendency to let his concentration wander in games and will need to improve this. However, he possesses all the necessary attributes to become a good Ligue 1 defender in the future, and will be a huge boost for Valenciennes once he returns.

In terms of what the future holds for Rose, he first needs to get back to full fitness and return to action as soon as possible. Valenciennes’ survival will likely be decided by the finest of margins, but a season of Ligue 2 football next term could actually benefit him while he recovers from a long lay-off. That said, it would be a shame to see the 22-year-old consigned to Ligue 2 football once again, after having made such a bright start to the 2013-2014 season.

Although it may take a while longer, and more time than was expected, this Rose will eventually bloom, whether it is in the top or the second tier.
Evian Thonon Gaillard’s Youssouf Sabaly, currently on loan from Paris Saint-Germain, is enjoying an impressive debut season in Ligue 1. With his parent club continually on the search to sign another high-profile target as cover for the injury-prone Gregory van der Wiel and Christophe Jallet, it is unlikely that he will be making a return to the capital any time soon. However, his performances for les Roses should help him to continue his career in Ligue 1, albeit not under the lights of the Eiffel Tower.

The fact that he is unlikely to feature for the club from the capital anytime soon says much more about the club’s priorities than it does the right-back’s ability. Sabaly has performed well for Pascal Dupraz’s Savoyard side, despite their intermittent battle against relegation, and he can be considered one of their best performers this season. Indeed, the 21-year-old full-back’s emergence has been so marked that the club felt able to allow Marseille to sign Brice Dja Djédjé, despite the fact that he had begun the season as first choice right-back following Daniel Wass’s move forward to a more advanced right midfield role.

Sabaly is a versatile player, capable of playing on the right or the left of the back four, as well as further forward on both sides.

Blessed with impressive pace, bags of stamina and good crossing ability, the ingredients are there to make the PSG youth academy product a top talent in le Championnat.

He also possesses good technique and a solid work ethic, both of which were evident this season as he put in excellent performances in home wins against AS Monaco and the Parisians.

As impressive as he has been this season, it will likely help him win another loan move rather than a place in Laurent Blanc’s side.

Defensively, Evian’s opponents may have picked Sabaly out as a potential weakness due to his inexperience coming into this season, but the full-back has met every challenge head on. He has made more successful tackles than any other defender at the club. When put under pressure he has shown that he can also rely on his reading of the game to recognise dangerous situations, often cutting out passes or getting in the right position to make a vital clearance.

Sabaly’s play doesn’t come without any weaknesses; for all of the impressive moments in defence he can lose concentration when asked to man-mark his opponents, and often looks more comfortable away from one-on-one situations. Returning to Evian might not be the worst thing for his development at this stage; at just 21 he still has time to iron out a few creases in what is otherwise a solid repertoire at this period of his career.

A French international at youth level, he was a member of the victorious FIFA Under-20 World Cup squad in Turkey last summer and has built on that success by becoming one of just two ever-present players in Evian’s side this season.

The biggest debate, for now at least, is what move would benefit Sabaly most going into next season after making such good progress this campaign. Laurent Blanc is unlikely to let the youngster leave the club at this stage of his career, but he risks not even making it onto the PSG bench. Game-time should be the right-back’s priority going into next season, but not at the expense of becoming a journeyman footballer at only 21, moving from club to club simply to play.

With Evian looking increasingly likely to be playing their football in Ligue 1 again next season, remaining with Dupraz’s side might be the best option for now. The bright lights of Paris may be hard to resist, but it looks like the serene and picturesque surroundings of Annecy is the perfect place for Sabaly to continue his career.
For someone who is playing his first season in Ligue 1, Sanson has not shown himself to be overawed by the occasion or some of the names he is up against; he has just concentrated on playing his own game. He regularly makes the right decision, whether he is deciding on where to pass, when to tackle, or when to get forward, and this part of his game will only get better with age.

He may have only recorded one goal (against Marseille) and two assists so far this season but that doesn’t tell the whole story of Sanson’s game. In January Montpellier won 2-0 away at Sochaux and it was one of Sanson’s best games, as he completely controlled the midfield from start to finish, constantly involved both in helping Montpellier to attack and in keeping Sochaux out. He is best at providing the pass before the assist rather than the final ball itself, because he does not get as far forward as the likes of Cabella.

This makes suggestions that he could be the man to replace Cabella should the number ten move to England slightly inaccurate. Cabella thrives in the role behind the striker and he doesn’t do nearly as much defensive work as Sanson, while the youngster is not as good as Cabella going forward. If Montpellier move Sanson into that role they could actually see his development falter.

It would be too easy to classify Sanson as a box-to-box midfielder, since he does not play in the same way as someone like Blaise Matuidi. He breaks up attacks and then gets Montpellier moving quickly on the counter by feeding either Cabella or one of the wide men.

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Belgrade is home to some of Europe’s most fertile football academies. It has two particularly great clubs which ceaselessly produce elite players: Red Star and Partizan. Uros Spajic hails from Red Star, who won the Champions League just two seasons before Marseille became France’s first club to do so in 1993.

Of course, Toulouse did not sign him on the mere reputation of his club. Head scout Jerome Fougeron monitored Spajic carefully, then invited coach Alain Casanova to the Belgrade derby in May 2013. The match was especially intense as it would prove to be a title decider, which provides the opportunity to scout a player under pressure. Spajic was up against Aleksandr Mitrovic, who now plies his trade at Anderlecht and spearheads the attack for the Serbian national team. Spajic kept Mitrovic and Partizan’s other stars at bay, winning the confidence of the delegation from Toulouse.

Téfécé fans were right to be excited by Spajic’s arrival last summer even if Casanova had enough squad depth in defence. Captain Jonathan Zebina rarely disappointed in his first season at the club. Aymen Abdennour was one of Ligue 1’s most reliable central defenders, and there was no way that 20-year-old Spajic was going to dislodge the Tunisian international.

Also, Casanova could call on the young Steeve Yago, who was making encouraging progress of his own. It is, then, to Spajic’s credit that he’s managed to become a consistent contributor in southwest France amongst such talent.

The way in which Spajic has adapted is a credit to Toulouse. He was immediately in contact with fellow Serbian Pavle Ninkov, who helped him settle in.

The club took care of his accommodation and helped with the administrative formalities (he did not possess a valid driver’s license upon arrival), asked him which car he would like to purchase, and picked him up at the airport. The familial air pleased Spajic and shortened his adaption period, and he was able to contribute immediately.

Spajic is 6’2” which, coupled with an impressive leap, allows him to win most aerial duels. He plays as a centre-half, but is versatile enough to deputise on either flank as is needed in Casanova’s 3-5-2. On the ball, Spajic is serene, completing a high percentage of his passes. Off of the ball, he demonstrates impeccable positioning and placement. Admittedly, playing with three central defenders does minimise the chance of a defensive mistake, but it also develops a tactical awareness by the central defenders, as they have to cover for marauding full-backs who leave gaping holes in their wake.

In January, Abdennour left on-loan to Monaco, the club having an option to sign the centre-back for €15 million this summer, which has opened even more room for Spajic to come into his own. He is now being considered for international duty by Serbia’s interim coach, Ljubinko Drulinovic.

The future does seem bright for Spajic. At the age of 21, he is not rushed to make a rash career decision. He has the trust of his club, he is making progress on and off the pitch, and now has international recognition to boot. Another year of steady and healthy incremental progress for Spajic will see him further improve.
It was a special moment for the midfielder who, born and raised in Istres, was making his home debut. He scored in front of family and friends who may very well have comprised the majority of that evening’s home support.

But scoring sublime free-kicks is not Tardieu’s forte. The young midfielder, who, curiously, has not been capped by the French national team at any level, has been quoted as saying that Andres Iniesta is the perfect footballer, but it is more Sergio Busquets that he looks to as a role-model. Like the Catalan midfielder, Tardieu much prefers the thankless aspect of the game. “I think it’s [defensive midfield] the position that best corresponds to my qualities. I like to play simple and to play for others.”

His generosity is not limited to passing statistics, as he is indefatigable on the pitch. Chasing, harrying, and dispossessing the opposition, Tardieu is often the player who wins back possession and kick-starts an attack.

Tardieu was so instrumental in 2012-13 that local paper Mlactu.fr described him as the chief actor in Istres’ great escape at the end of the season. Were it not for Tardieu and Pasqualetti’s heroics, the club could very well have toiled in the Championnat National this year.

This year Tardieu has played behind Cyril Jeunechamp and Jerome Leroy. Jeunechamp is 38 years old and Leroy is a year older. Together they have played for a combined 16 different clubs in their respective careers. Tardieu points to both of their respective experience and longevity as something he admires. One imagines that as he continues to learn at a nurturing club like Istres, Florian Tardieu will outgrow his alma mater and soon grace the pitches of Ligue 1.

Tardieu’s favourite film is Liam Neeson’s Taken. Beware if you are an opposition player in possession, because Tardieu will look for you, he will find you and he will dispossess you!
At the age of 16, before his move to Bastia, when he was still at Grenoble’s academy, club doctors found an injury to Thauvin’s spinal cord that nearly ended his football career before it had even begun. The Orléans native often keeps the injury in mind and uses it as motivation when feeling down.

Arsène Wenger brought up his mentality when speaking to TF1. For the Arsenal boss, Thauvin is either a driven individual or an unprofessional one: “He has a strong mentality. He resisted enormous pressure with the Lille affair, but we might also ask questions because of how he dealt with Lille. So it’s up to him to show us (what kind of a player he is) now”.

When returning to Lille, he faced physical threats and intimidation. The Marseille delegation were caught in a fracas at Lille-Lesquin airport where opposing fans were chanting “Thauvin, fils de pute”. On the pitch, the youngster was singled out and booed every time he touched the ball. Yet in the face of an abusive onslaught, Thauvin quietly went about his business, as Marseille eventually went down to defeat.

And though Marseille have become a parody of themselves at times this campaign, Florian Thauvin has shown moments of magic, enough to convince that he has a very bright future at OM. For a number of games in late 2013, he single-handedly carried les Marseillais, scoring, assisting and leading attacks. He especially grew into his own when Mathieu Valbuena fractured his collarbone in early December. The attacking burden fell on Thauvin’s shoulders and he carried the load unflinchingly.

In his first season at Marseille, Thauvin has quite obviously shown that off-field issues will not interfere with his on-field performances. His form in 2014 has failed to match his early season performances and this has let his small chance of a place in Didier Deschamps’ World Cup squad slip away, but come 2016, Thauvin will likely be one of the first names included as France once again try to win a trophy on home soil.

Florian Thauvin has had an up and down season. While helping keep SC Bastia to avoid relegation last season, he signed a pre-contract with Champions League pretenders Lille, staying in Corsica on loan. It seemed a logical move as Thauvin was not risking the unknown of a foreign league and he would not be shouldering too much pressure at Lille. But right when he was ready to begin life at his new club, Marseille stepped in, offering to whisk him away before he had played a single match for Les Dogues.

For Thauvin, playing for Marseille was a dream come true, but the timing of the transfer was awkward, and the decision to go on strike from training was unprofessional, the behaviour of a young kid who does not quite know what he wants. Nevertheless, the move was finally pushed through and Thauvin made his desired move to the south of France.

From the beginning there were rumours of trouble. Thauvin apparently did not get along with Valbuena because both players saw themselves playing in the role behind Andre-Pierre Gignac. In reality, Thauvin has the weapons to be more dangerous on the flank.

The France U21 international is extremely explosive and has the pace and skill to beat multiple defenders. His greatest strength is his lethal dribbling. He tries to model himself after Ronaldinho in the sense that his first instinct is to eliminate a defender and only then get his head up to spot a pass. What makes Thauvin a complete player is that he does not lack end product. During the first half of 2013, Florian Thauvin was the highest goalscoring Frenchman in Europe.

At the age of 16, before his move to Bastia, when he was still at Grenoble’s academy, club doctors found an injury to Thauvin’s spinal cord that nearly ended his football career before it had even begun. The Orléans native often keeps the injury in mind and uses it as motivation when feeling down.

Arsène Wenger brought up his mentality when speaking to TF1. For the Arsenal boss, Thauvin is either a driven individual or an unprofessional one: “He has a strong mentality. He resisted enormous pressure with the Lille affair, but we might also ask questions because of how he dealt with Lille. So it’s up to him to show us (what kind of a player he is) now”.

When returning to Lille, he faced physical threats and intimidation. The Marseille delegation were caught in a fracas at Lille-Lesquin airport where opposing fans were chanting “Thauvin, fils de pute”. On the pitch, the youngster was singled out and booed every time he touched the ball. Yet in the face of an abusive onslaught, Thauvin quietly went about his business, as Marseille eventually went down to defeat.

And though Marseille have become a parody of themselves at times this campaign, Florian Thauvin has shown moments of magic, enough to convince that he has a very bright future at OM. For a number of games in late 2013, he single-handedly carried les Marseillais, scoring, assisting and leading attacks. He especially grew into his own when Mathieu Valbuena fractured his collarbone in early December. The attacking burden fell on Thauvin’s shoulders and he carried the load unflinchingly.

In his first season at Marseille, Thauvin has quite obviously shown that off-field issues will not interfere with his on-field performances. His form in 2014 has failed to match his early season performances and this has let his small chance of a place in Didier Deschamps’ World Cup squad slip away, but come 2016, Thauvin will likely be one of the first names included as France once again try to win a trophy on home soil.
Touré is the kind of player you don’t fully appreciate until you see him in the flesh. Unless you are given the chance to actually watch his movement, his true value can be underestimated. It’s what he does off the ball that is the most impressive part of his game. For someone so young, and for a player with so little experience at the highest level, he reads the game extremely well.

His biggest strengths are his anticipation and his ability to break up dangerous situations before the opposition gets the chance to trouble the defence. Be it with a well-timed tackle or a clinical clearance, Touré is there more often than not.

Where Veretout and Deaux have lacked consistency, Touré has continued to impress despite les Canaris’ slip down the Ligue 1 table. His superb form this season has led to his first call-up to the Mali national team. Touré was the youngest member of the squad as they drew 1-1 with Senegal, and as the likes of Seydou Keita slow down, Touré will be one of the leading midfielders in a new youthful Malian side.

With the aid of international football, Touré has all the attributes, as well as the raw physicality, to grow into a top Ligue 1 player. Not only does he possess the intelligent defensive side of the game, but he is also a very accomplished passer. Usually he takes the simple and smart option and leaves the more attacking passes to the likes of Veretout and Bedoya, but on the rare occasions he tries to pick out a through-ball, he has the ability to pull it off.

As his game grows, the defensive side will improve further, and this will give him more confidence to develop his attacking side, and take more responsibility in the midfield. He is still only 21 years old, and he has plenty of time to become a leader in this Nantes side. They can obviously see the potential he possesses, and this is why he signed a new contract until 2017.

If Nantes can stay in Ligue 1 for the next three years, it will be interesting to see how far Touré’s game develops before talks to renew come around again. It might be sooner rather than later that the big clubs begin to show a bigger interest.

Just two years ago, Malian midfielder Birama Touré was playing in France’s third division for AS Beauvais and, in a season to forget, the club finished just outside the relegation zone. Fast-forward to the present day and Touré’s rise has been meteoric. He won a move to FC Nantes that summer, and after starting in their reserves, after only two appearances he was whisked into the first team as Nantes charged towards promotion from Ligue 2.

He made 19 starts last season in Ligue 2 and has made the defensive midfield position his own this year in the top flight. Touré is one of the lesser-known members of the impressive Nantes midfield; Jordan Veretout, Adrien Trebel and Lucas Deaux have received more of the plaudits, but it is Touré who does the hard work in the centre of the park.

Nantes’ excellent start to the season was based on a solid defence, an active midfield, and the goals of Filip Djordjevic. Deaux was praised for his energy and drive, while Veretout settled into Ligue 1 life well and his passing and intelligent play were a great feature of the Nantes side. However, it was Touré who provided the steel and defensive stability that allowed Nantes to blossom.
By the end of the season, Umtiti had amassed 26 Ligue 1 appearances, and six Europa League matches, hitting the headlines with that goal against Tottenham Hotspur. Having already represented France at U17, U18 and U19 level, his performances earned him a place in the Under-20 World Cup squad, and he played in five matches on the way to the trophy. He has since been promoted to Willy Sagnol’s Under-21 team.

Umtiti, who already has 39 appearances to his name this season, has more or less everything one could wish for in a centre-back. Standing just under six feet tall, strong in the air, quick and tidy in the tackle (although he received a red card for a very nasty foul against Rennes, only eight bookings in his whole domestic career to date is a good return), he is also calm and able to distribute from the back. Rémi Garde noted of his defender “he has particularly progressed in his self-control. He has also improved in his efficiency, even if it is sometimes at the expense of the aesthetic”. However, “he still has room for improvement.” Umtiti would be the first to agree with the last point, and he seems keen to learn.

He recently commented that “I can do better. Offensively I could add a lot more”. Only two career goals suggest as much, and Umtiti has commented that, although he is less keen on playing at left-back, the need to fill in at left back on occasion. Such was the confidence that he inspired in the Lyon staff that he was one of the reasons they were happy for Fabián Monzón and then Dejan Lovren to leave the club.

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France is blessed with several great young centre-backs at present, but don’t be surprised if Umtiti is soon mentioned in the same breath as Varane, Sakho and Mangala.
made his Ligue 1 debut in August 2013 as Nantes welcomed Bastia. In what has become an infamous match, he was sent off, receiving his second yellow for a rare show of petulance, kicking the ball away in a fit of pique. He has recovered well from this early setback however, to date making 23 appearances, scoring one goal, and continuing his development.

It's fair to say that he is still a work in progress. A classic modern midfielder with all the necessary attributes, he mixes a great engine with an excellent technique. He is not the biggest-built of midfielders – one reason why he is poor in the air – but he makes up for his relatively slight frame with an intelligence in reading the game that means that he can act a split-second quicker than others, thus avoiding too many physical clashes. Arguably, he has one major problem before he can really push on, and that is one of confidence. He does the tidy stuff excellently, rarely losing the ball, and is very accurate with his short passing game. However, he needs to work on his longer passing and also develop the confidence to shoot more. He must decide where he wants to establish himself: as a number 8, sitting back and controlling the game from deep, or a number 10, taking the game by scruff of the neck and assuming responsibility for assists and, why not, scoring goals.

Time is on his side, however, and his well-paced progression means that he is being allowed to develop under less of a spotlight than some of his world champion Bleuet colleagues, whose every move, good or bad, is analysed to pieces. Continue at the rate he is currently going, and it is likely that Jordan Veretout will be wearing the Bleu of the senior national team before too long.

As seems to be de rigueur with all young French hopes nowadays, his short career has not been totally without controversy, the reason for slightly fewer appearances in this promotion year being due to what was at first thought to be a “domestic injury” but turned out to be one sustained trying to jump over a tramway barrier on a drunken night out.

Fresh from becoming a world champion, Veretout made his Ligue 1 debut in August 2013 as Nantes welcomed Bastia.

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It’s the final of the Under-20 World Cup against Uruguay. The match has gone to penalties after a goalless 120 minutes. Captain Paul Pogba has taken France’s first, shimmying during his run-up and cupping his hands to his ears after scoring. French fans wait to see who will be brave enough to take their second. Up steps Nantes’ 20-year old midfielder Jordan Veretout. Steely-eyed, no nonsense, he licks his lips, waits for the referee’s whistle, takes three steps and slots home, low to his left. He punches the air once and strolls back to the centre circle.

That penalty was Veretout’s career so far in a microcosm – heart, strength of character, technique under pressure and a willingness to go quietly about his business for the team, leaving the limelight to others.

Just turned 21, the precocious Veretout is already a fixture in the Canaris’ midfield. Having made his debut late in the 2010-11 season, Jordan became a regular the following year, making 35 Ligue 2 appearances and scoring six goals from midfield – a superb return for a young midfielder playing in an uncompromisingly physical league. Although he failed to find the back of the net last season, Veretout nevertheless appeared in 31 matches, playing a major role in helping les Canaris to third place and promotion to Ligue 1.
Veratti has a tendency to hold on to the ball too long when under pressure, a trait which was evident in PSG’s Champions League clash with Chelsea in April. His tempestuousness also sometimes undermines his abilities: he has received 10 bookings this season, the most among any player in the PSG squad. Despite his faults, Verratti has continued to grow and develop under the huge spotlight focused on the Parisian side. In two years he has progressed from a Serie B player constantly compared to Italian hero, Andrea Pirlo, to a mainstay in one of Europe’s top clubs.

The trio of Verratti, Thiago Motta and Blaise Matuidi have become established as Blanc’s preferred combination in midfield. That triumvirate is the envy of many teams in continental football. When PSG signed French international Yohan Cabaye in January, many believed the former Lille midfielder would force his way into the side at Verratti’s expense, and the fact that Verratti is keeping an admired midfield maestro like Cabaye among the substitutes is arguably the biggest tribute that can be paid to him.

One European club has reportedly made overtures for Verratti’s services, with Juventus said to be keen to lure him back to Italy. The possibility of an exchange deal for Paul Pogba - believed to be a target of the PSG hierarchy - had been mooted. However, any speculation that Verratti would be leaving Blanc’s side was ended back in August, when PSG signed him to a one-year contract extension. It is a deal that ties Verratti to Paris until 2018, although that is unlikely to stop the biggest continental clubs from attempting to tempt him away from the Parc des Princes.

However, while Verratti looks to have proven himself in European club football, international recognition is still to be fully received. Verratti has earned just four caps for Italy’s senior team, although his consistently strong performances against elite teams from France and abroad will surely have caught the attention of Italy coach Cesare Prandelli, and could only have boosted his hopes of making his World Cup bow at this summer’s tournament in Brazil.

An appearance and strong showing at the World Cup will unquestionably further Verratti’s already substantial standing in world football. Yet PSG appear understandably determined to keep hold of him and, as long as he remains in Ligue 1, the Italian will have the opportunity to become one of the greats of French football.
On a technical level, Zouma is far from the finished article. He’s obviously very accomplished considering his age, but still has weaknesses. Positioning has often been a question mark and this is definitely an area he could improve upon. Fortunately, his pace often gets him out of trouble, but to become a truly world-class defender he will need to work on the mental side of his game.

The good thing about moving to somewhere like Chelsea is that he will receive state of the art coaching in an exceptional environment. That is not to disrespect Saint-Etienne’s own set-up, but going to one of the biggest clubs in the Premier League should certainly help Zouma fulfill his true potential. Quite how soon he will become a first-team contender in West London remains to be seen. It may well be that Chelsea initially loan him out somewhere again - perhaps even back to Saint-Etienne for a season - as the Blues will be mindful not to push Zouma too hard too soon, particularly as he does have a history of being susceptible to injuries.

Overall, you’re looking at a fine young defender with amazing potential. It might sound far-fetched, but there’s no doubt that Zouma could genuinely become world class. In five or ten years’ time people could easily be talking about him as one of the best at his position. Of course, he is going to have to work on his game and listen to the right guidance if he is to develop into an exceptional talent. Some luck along the way would be welcome too, especially in terms of staying fit, but the odds are certainly in his favour to become an elite player in the footballing world.

The word ‘beast’ can be an overused description of players in the footballing world, but it is hard to argue against it being applied to Kurt Zouma. His physique is so imposing that it is difficult to believe he is only 19 years old, and when writing about him, his physical attributes are a natural place to start. He weighs in close to the 87kg mark, has a commanding height of 6’2” and a superb overall drive engine coupled with great stamina. Don’t be fooled that this immense unit lacks pace either, as he is one of the quickest defenders out there.

The 2013-14 season is Zouma’s third as a regular first team starter. The current campaign was meant to be one in which he’d become a mainstay of the team. However, he suffered a setback in early November; facing Sochaux away, he was sent off for a hard challenge which broke Thomas Guerbert’s leg. As a result, the French disciplinary committee banned him for a whopping 10 games. This might seem harsh, but it’s fairly commonplace in France for the offender to be severely dealt with.

Zouma would surely have been frustrated to have missed so many games in a season in which he really wanted to continue his development, but his absence from the field didn’t stop Chelsea buying him for £11m in the January transfer window, and loaning him back to Saint-Etienne until the end of the season.

The robust physical environment of English football should suit Zouma perfectly, which is probably one of the main reasons Chelsea decided to fork out so much cash for him. It is well known that players need to have strong physical attributes to survive the Premier League, but what else are Chelsea getting for their money?

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C'est fini

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