

Finishing the 2012/2013 season just two points clear of the Ligue 1's infamous *lanterne rouge*, Ajaccio's fortunes haven't seen any drastic changes. The Corsican side has had a rough start to this season, and find themselves sitting rock bottom. Having chosen to replace head coach Fabrizio Ravanelli in an effort to change the tides, Ajaccio seem to be hanging off the edge of an abyss and finished the year with just one win to their name. With Mutu not living up to expectations in the latter part of 2013, Ajaccio's winter transfer window will be crucial in determining whether they will still be in top-flight come next season.

## **Top - Ronald Zubar**

In an otherwise dormant team, Ronald Zubar has been one of the few names whose efforts made a difference. Signing for free from Wolverhampton in January, the defender was tasked with bolstering Ajaccio's backline. Despite Ajaccio's false start to this Ligue 1 season, which included a terrible October, conceding 7 goals in 4 matches, his determination and courage on the pitch saw him named Ajaccio's best player of that very month ahead of Ochoa. Zubar's consistent performances could well make the difference between relegation and salvation.

## **Flop - Adrian Mutu**

The Romanian's arrival in Corsica more than a year ago was the promise of ambition and high expectations for Ajaccio. His first season was a modest success which saw him scoring 11 goals, probably saving Ajaccio from relegation in the process. This season, however, Mutu's turbulent career took another twist. Ajaccio have scored just 13 goals so far this season, and the man whose ambition it was to score more than Ibrahimovic in Ligue 1 is yet to find the net. Adrian Mutu has actually called in quits, returning to his country on a loan deal to Petrolul Ploiesti in search of better luck.

## **Verdict – F Grade**

Ajaccio are expected to focus on the team's youth academy products in a bid to reduce the wage bill. However, in order to get scoring once more and hope to lift the Corsicans out of the relegation zone, Ajaccio's president Alain Orsoni will have to play all the right cards this January in the transfer window.

Ligue 1's other Corsican team are faring quite better than their neighbours Ajaccio. After finishing last season in the 12<sup>th</sup> position, thanks to a string of wise signings, Bastia have continued upon their fine form and have put distance between them and the relegation zone. The signings of Bruno, Krsic and Boudebouz have ensured strength upfront, while the likes of Squillaci and Modesto reinforced the defensive line. While recent results leave much to be desired, the club's overall form so far is reason for optimism.

## **Top - Sébastien Squillaci**

Sébastien Squillaci was one of Bastia's numerous signings last summer. Joining on a free transfer from Arsenal after a largely unsuccessful 3-year spell in England, Squillaci is enjoying a solid start to his second spell in France. His strength both on the ground and in the air have cemented his place as one of the most important players in this Bastia side. His experience across Europe, having played with teams like Monaco, Lyon, Sevilla and Arsenal, is also proving to be vital for Bastia's goals this season.

## **Flop - Claudiu Keserü**

After a stellar season with Angers in Ligue 2 where he scored 17 goals, Keserü faced the prospect of top-flight football with Bastia. However, adapting to Ligue 1 football seems like too huge a task for the Romanian. After 16 appearances, the striker has only found the net once. Nowhere near last season's form, Keserü seems to be losing favour with current head coach Frédéric Hantz and is being afforded less playing time whenever he is called up.

## **Verdict – B Grade**

Building on last season's performances, Bastia continued battling on despite numerous, key departures. Their measured dabbles during last summer's transfer window ensured consistency for the team. As this season's performances have demonstrated, there is little keeping them from achieving a well-deserved top-half finish.

‘Tighten the belt’ is the order of the day at Bordeaux. However, despite a problematic start to this campaign, head coach Francis Gillot turned things around and now *les Girondins* find themselves fighting for continental football yet again. Their fine form didn’t come without its expenses though. As Gillot himself admitted, the team at his disposal is too restrained to battle on the two fronts, and results in Europa League speak for themselves. While their premature exit will surely harm France’s coefficient standings, it does give Bordeaux the opportunity to focus solely on the Ligue 1.

## **Top - Nicolas Maurice-Belay**

A little bit on the slow side at the beginning of the season, Maurice-Belay has since picked up the pace. The midfielder’s direct running style is a constant thorn in his opponents’ sides, and Gillot’s faith in him is finally paying off. After having gone more than a year without scoring, December proved to be a prolific month for Maurice-Belay, firing home for his first 3 goals of the season.

## **Flop - Marc Planus**

One of Bordeaux’s undisputed rocks from last season, Marc Planus is struggling in this campaign. With Sané and Henrique in form, the French defender is falling out of favour with Gillot and has featured in just 9 Ligue 1 matches, getting sent off in one of them. The center back’s dwindling form has forced Bordeaux to go for a different defensive couplet. This may well be the beginning of the end of Marc Planus.

## **Verdict – B Grade**

In due course, Gillot’s decision to focus on the Ligue 1 will probably pay dividends, even though their European performances were a let down. With their recent resurgence in Ligue 1 and a defence, which is regaining confidence, *les Girondins* know that they can now mount a real challenge for European places. If Chairman Triaud can keep this squad in tact, expect Bordeaux to go from strength to strength in the second half of the season.

Escaping relegation from France's top flight by a whisker in 2012/2013, Evian were always going to be up against it this season, and they haven't been proving pundits wrong. After selling a number of important players last summer, such as Yannick Sagbo and Saber Khalifa, ETG are paying the price. Ever since the start of the season, and in spite of high-profile wins against Lyon and Paris Saint-Germain, Pascal Dupraz's side has been lingering unhealthily close to the drop zone.

## **Top - Daniel Wass**

The Danish international was a Ligue 1 revelation last season, and his current form doesn't seem likely to quiet the hype surrounding him. The defender-turned-winger has been on fire this season for Evian, and apart from his defensive contribution, he has also scored three and assisted in another three goals in Ligue 1. Playing almost every minute so far this season, Evian's fortunes in the second half of the season will undoubtedly be influenced by Wass' form.

## **Flop - Bertrand Laquait**

Evian's veteran goalkeeper, uncontested last season between Evian's goalposts, is having a tougher time this time round. Conceding 17 times in just 9 appearances, the 36-year-old lost his place to Jansen for a prolonged period of matches, and it's fair to say that Evian's fortunes started to turn around as a result (if ever so slightly). With Laquait facing the permanent prospect of being Les Roses' backup goalkeeper, he'll have to up his level, and quickly, if he is to end his career on a high note.

## **Verdict – D Grade**

Led on by Daniel Wass and Kévin Berigaud, Evian will have to approach the January window intelligently. Coy signings and the retention of key players will determine whether or not their place in Ligue 1 is cemented early on in the new year, or whether their fight for survival will go down right to the wire. Dupraz is full aware of the task that lies ahead, ameliorating the performances of a porous defence and a moody striking force will not be easy.

One of Ligue 1's newly-promoted sides, En Avant De Guingamp are managing their return to top-flight football well. Sitting comfortably in 12<sup>th</sup> position, Guingamp have been coping with the pressure and putting up a valiant fight against each and every opponent that comes their way. Boasting a tight defence and an efficient attack, Guingamp know that the job is not yet over and will be trying to amass 40 points as quickly as possible to ensure top flight status for the following season. Jocelyn Gourvennec's team will be without significant January reinforcements, the club without the financial means at present.

## **Top - Fatih Atik**

Following suit from last season's performances, the Turk is Guingamp's talisman. Scoring once and providing three times, Atik has been playing a pivotal role on the wings. His dangerous passes and confident nature has made defenders' job a real chore. With Yatabaré and Mandanne at the forefront, Guingamp's goalscoring secret boils down to the volatile Turk. Largely considered as a second-division player, this could well be Fatih Atik's breakthrough season.

## **Flop - Thibault Giresse**

If Atik is Guingamp's spark down the flanks, Giresse has been the opposite. Largely influential last season, when his contribution pushed Guingamp through to Ligue 1 promotion, Giresse's career seems to be on the decline. And if playing time is anything to go by, then the Frenchman is also losing Gourvennec's support... which would be perfectly understandable. Halfway through the 2013/2014 season, Giresse has contributed just 2 goals, down from 7 at the same stage last season. Thankfully enough for Guingamp, their Ligue 1 status does not hinge upon Giresse's performances like it may have done in another year.

## **Verdict - B+ Grade**

Despite being considered as having one of the weakest Ligue 1 teams on paper, Guingamp have started their top-flight return with aplomb. Guingamp are far from having the squad to aim higher up the table, but some more brave performances should see them seal their Ligue 1 survival ticket.

Regardless of the summer sales at Lille, which saw them lose a number of important first team players, René Girard's inspired start to his spell with Les Dogues has got fans thinking back to 2011's title-winning year. Sitting ahead of the likes of Marseille, Lyon and Bordeaux; Lille are firmly a member this season's three-horse race for the Hexagoal. Boasting the league's best defence, conceding just 8 goals in 19 matches, the team who didn't even qualify for European competitions last season are this year's surprise package in the title race. If Lille do not crack before the season's end, then the remainder of the season promises to be as rosy as any LOSC fan could have hoped.

## **Top - Vincent Enyeama**

A rock between the posts, Enyeama has been Lille's trump card for the season. A vital instrument in Girard's hands, Enyeama has been nothing short of revelation. A miracle worker in goal, Enyeama's only disappointment would be his failure to match Gaëtan Huard's record without conceding, ending a mere 114 minutes away from achieving the feat. Having kept 14 clean sheets, Enyeama has been carrying Lille almost single-handedly, with the side generally struggling to score goals.

## **Flop - Marvin Martin**

Once Sochaux's prized asset, Marvin Martin's second season at Lille does not seem to be going much better than the first. In his 12 matches, Martin's contribution stops at 2 assists. His playmaking inefficiency could well be the reason why Lille remain the team with least goals to their name out of any of Ligue 1's top ten teams before the winter break. Joining Lille for €10M, Martin has so far failed to pay that substantial sum off and *Les Dogues'* fans will undoubtedly be hoping for the playmaker to up the tempo in the near future.

## **Verdict – A Grade**

Lille are currently outperforming all expectations and sit pretty alongside billionaire clubs AS Monaco and PSG. With Michel Seydoux, Lille OSC's President, recently facing the DNCG with a deficit of €46M; fans shouldn't expect any high-profile signings this winter, although departures are a possibility. If Girard can find a solution to Lille's inability to score goals, then there is no reason why Les Dogues cannot fight with the big boys for the Ligue 1 title in the coming months.

Undeterred by the rife tension between Loïc Fery and head coach Christian Gourcuff after the sale of Mario Lemina, Lorient sit comfortably mid-table. Constrained to selling, Lorient's situation is comparable to the majority of other Ligue 1 teams. In spite of some heavy-defeats, Lorient's offensive force and its efficiency has put Lorient at the high-end of the Ligue 1 table. What set Lorient apart in this first half of the season is their ability to capitalize on the situations and opportunities presented to them.

## **Top - Vincent Aboubakar**

Without any shred of doubt, Aboubakar will go down as one of the season's revelations come the end of the season. The 21-year-old has been Lorient's pioneer, and after 19 games finds himself as Lorient's top scorer with no less than 11 goals scored. Aboubakar is somewhat of a coup for Lorient, having joined the Brittany club on a free transfer from Valenciennes. A creative dribbler and an adventurous striker in front of goal, Lorient have been relying on the Cameroonian to find the net and haul points... much like Alain Traoré did in the first half of 2012/2013 campaign.

## **Flop - Fabien Audard**

Prior to being sidelined in December with injury, Fabien Audard's performances were weak at best. Conceding a mound of goals in his appearances, Audard is this season's headache for Lorient. The statistics tell the same story. Lorient kept 2 clean sheets in his 11 appearances, whilst in the other 8 matches Lorient played without Audard they kept 4.

## **Verdict - B- Grade**

Spurred on by an impressive offensive force in the form of Aboubakar and Yann Jouffre and boasting a sturdy midfield and defence comprising the likes of Ecuele Manga and Lautoa, Lorient are enjoying a probably retainable 9<sup>th</sup> position as 2013 closes. If Lorient are to continue on their recent fine form, they must keep hold of the talent they have at their disposal.

Few teams in Ligue 1 have offered their fans such a roller-coaster ride as this Lyon side since August. Starting the season on the right foot, nailing down Nice and Sochaux, Lyon then went on a bleak run of games, going 9 matches with a solitary win and arguably prematurely crashing out of the Champions League in the process. With the year coming to an end, Lyon showed signs of improvement, finishing first in the Europa League group stage and picking up a few wins in Ligue 1. Les Gones' inexperience has shown and with the youngest average age out of all Ligue 1 squads, Lyon's side was always going to have a hard time competing with the best. With half of the season gone, Lyon find themselves in a mid-table position, and tight on cash, it will take something special for them to repeat last season's heroics and grab a European place.

## **Top - Henri Bedimo**

One of Lyon's best signings in the past few years, Bedimo has made an inspiring start to his spell at Lyon. Strong and fast, Bedimo's contribution goes beyond his defensive skills. Providing assists for target man Bafétimbi Gomis on no fewer than 4 occasions in 2013/2014, Bedimo has made the €2M spent on him seem insignificant. Playing with an otherwise poor defence, Bedimo was Lyon's breath of fresh air. If they are to improve on their position this season, Bedimo will be one of the catalysts.

## **Flop - Gaël Danic**

Having enjoyed a great 2012/2013 season with Valenciennes, Danic impressed Lyon head coach Rémi Garde. Unfortunately for the Frenchman, his performances for Lyon, in pre-season and in competitive matches, have led to him being shunted as merely a squad player. Hindered by injuries, Danic's start to his career in the Rhône is one he will want to put behind and move on from.

## **Verdict – C Grade**

In spite of some impressive performances early on in the season and in European ties, Lyon will be disappointed that they couldn't keep up the pace in the Ligue 1. With half of the season to go, Garde and Aulas know that the winter transfer window will be crucial in determining just how much ground they can make up on Ligue 1's elite. With arrivals seeming unlikely, departures will have to be scarce if Lyon are to pick up anything from this season.

The other *Olympique*, Marseille have had a bumpy road too. Replacing head coach Elie Baup in December, it's now up to José Anigo to improve Marseille for the second half of the season. Calamitous in Europe, after being sent crashing out of the Champions League without a single point, Marseille can now focus solely on domestic competitions. With numerous summer arrivals, which saw Marseille spend more than €30M, OM will hope that their new recruits have had sufficient time to gel to achieve a higher position by the end of the season.

## **Top - Mathieu Valbuena**

One of the most consistent players in this Marseille side, Valbuena is continuing with his traditional playmaking excellence. The attacking midfielder has already assisted 3 goals so far this season, and the precision of his passing and dangerous dribbles make Valbuena the one-to-watch in this presently despairing side.

## **Flop - Dimitri Payet**

Having signed for around €10M from Ligue 1 rivals Lille, it was expected that Payet would contribute more than he has done thus far. Despite starting the season on high, scoring 3 goals in the first couple of matches; the subsequent performances and the hefty transfer fee Marseille paid to buy the Frenchman left much to be desired, especially when one considers that at the same stage last season, Payet had his goal tally standing at 6 and assisted in 7 other goals.

## **Verdict – C Grade**

Marseille's controversial appointment, Anigo, will have a tough job climbing the ladder to fight for continental football. However, it's a task he'll be pressured to accomplish. Boasting an experienced side, and having one less competition to focus on, Marseille have nothing to lose in their quest for a European place. Battling against the likes of Saint-Etienne, Bordeaux and Lyon, Marseille will have to consistently triumph in order to retain their reputation as one of France's present greatest teams

One of Ligue 1's financial giants thanks to Dmitry Rybolovlev, Monaco are making sure that Paris Saint-Germain aren't unrivalled. Having lavished millions on signing high-profile players such as Falcao, Toulalan and Rodríguez, no one expected any less from Monaco. With Claudio Ranieri at the helm, last season's Ligue 2 winners have left few in doubt - the 2004 Champions League finalists are back once more. Rybolovlev's fortune means that Monaco can still delve in the transfer market, which may signal the arrival of more high-profile players in France.

## **Top - James Rodríguez**

Arriving in the shadow of star striker Falcao, James Rodríguez joined from Porto along with Moutinho. The hefty sum of €45M paid for the attacking midfielder has arguably already been justified. The player leads Ligue 1's assist charts with 7. Apart from the playmaking contribution, Rodríguez has also netted three times for Monaco. With his defence-splitting passes and dangerous shots, the flamboyant Colombian has already proved worthy of the praises he received whilst at Porto.

## **Flop - Lucas Ocampos**

Few influenced Monaco's destiny last season in Ligue 2 as Ocampos. Signed for a transfer fee close to €11M, the young Argentine lived up to the expectations. This season, however, the volatile midfielder seems to be losing pace, compared to last season. While Ocampos is still 19, some Monaco fans may feel aggrieved that their star prospect isn't justifying the capital Monaco spent on him.

## **Verdict – A Grade**

This Monaco side isn't just strong on paper, but shows it on the pitch. Unlike the trouble Ancelotti encountered in his first season in charge at Paris, Monaco's coaching consistency meant that the municipality club hit the ground running in their first campaign since returning to top-flight football. With more superstar recruits undoubtedly on the way in the near future, Monaco can only hope to build on what they have and aspire to climb even higher up the table and become the Ligue 1 force to be reckoned with in years to come.

Things change fast in football, but Montpellier are unlikely to have expected such a sudden shift. Sitting precariously on the edge of the relegation zone, Montpellier have already ended 11 different matches in a stalemate. December saw the ex-Ligue 1 champions sack Jean Fernandez, with Rolland Courbis taking the reins. The sale of Belhanda, Estrada and Bedimo seems to have been a step too far for Montpellier, who now lie just 3 points away from the first relegation spot.

## **Top - Rémy Cabella**

Few players have impressed in this Montpellier side this season, but Cabella is still turning heads. Already the author of 6 goals and 3 assists, the Frenchman's eye for goal and incisive runs at the opposition defence are as terrifying as ever. If the attacking midfielder keeps up his form, Cabella could well end up being the deciding factor in Montpellier's likely relegation battle.

## **Flop - Vitorino Hilton**

Montpellier can certainly boast of an experienced captain. 36-year-old Hilton started the season in a great manner, perhaps a remnant of past seasons' form. However, the last few matches of this calendar year have been anything but spectacular. His dwindling performances could be a sign that the defender is on the decline. Reports indicate that Montpellier won't hold onto their captain for too long, with his contract expiring next June.

## **Verdict – F Grade**

With time running out, it will take more than draws for Montpellier to turn over a new leaf. Too many departures and signings who have hardly hit the ground running are the reason behind Montpellier's mediocre Ligue 1 position. It could well be time for Nicollin to dip his toes in the transfer market for new players. In the meantime, Courbis will be under pressure to start getting results, and fast.

Each time, Ligue 1 reserves a surprise package, and this season's is newly promoted Nantes. Sitting 7<sup>th</sup> and teasing for a European spot, Nantes' team are working wonders in their first season back in Ligue 1 and can boast wins against the likes of Bordeaux and Marseille. Far from fighting for survival, Michel Der Zakarian's side is upsetting the apple cart. Still far from the majesty of the Nantes squads that won 8 Ligue 1 titles, Les Cabaris are back on the right track for a new era.

## **Top - Filip Djordjevic**

Key in last season's successful battle for promotion, Djordjevic hasn't let up. Once more, he tops Nantes' scoring charts with 8 goals. The Serb's form has solicited interest from a number of clubs, including Lazio, Marseille and Lyon. Cautious and selfless, Djordjevic is becoming somewhat of a star for Nantes. With his contract expiring next June and reports linking him to Lazio, Nantes could be set to lose one of their most important players for nothing.

## **Flop - Jordan Veretout**

Veretout too was key last season for Nantes, yet unlike Djordjevic, his form has faltered. Also an integral part of the French national team which won last Summer's U-20 World Cup, the 20-year-old defensive midfielder isn't playing up to expectations. Often lacking in his defensive contributions and aerial duels, Veretout's current form is but a shadow of his full potential.

## **Verdict - A+ Grade**

Their triumphant return season could hardly be going any better. Halfway through the 2013/2014 season and les Canaris are fighting at the higher end of the Ligue 1 table. With their place in the Ligue 1's next edition seemingly secure, Nantes are slowly but surely moving forward. One question remains - for how long can they keep this up?

If the Canaries are flying high, the Eaglets are facing turbulent winds. Claude Puel's side, which secured a European spot last season, started the season in pitiable form with a 4-0 loss to Lyon. From then on, it was a downward spiral for Nice, exiting the Europa League before having made the Group Stage. A disastrous November saw Nice tussle with the relegation places. In the mid-season break Nice are 14th with some distance separating them from that ghastly drop zone, but Puel knows his side will have to start performing up to standard.

## **Top - Nemanja Pejcinovic**

Hailed as a warrior who never gives up, Pejcinovic deserves no less. Strong and agile on the pitch, the Serbian international was not just Nice's best defender this season, but also one of the best throughout Ligue 1. His timely interceptions and strong tackles make the 23-year-old one of the few good elements that Puel can take away from the first 4 months of the season.

## **Flop - Éric Bautheac**

It's fair to say that the squad has been collectively underperforming since the start of the season. However, Bautheac's form has slowed down more than most. Achieving 9 goals and 7 assists in 2012/2013, he spark that Bautheac so often gave Les Aiglons last season has been extinguished. Prior to the last match of the year against Evian, in which he scored 2, Bautheac had just scored twice in an unremarkable period.

## **Verdict - D- Grade**

Puel's side will have to step up in the upcoming months if they don't want this season to go down as a fiasco. With the likes of Eysseric, Cvitanich and Bodmer, Nice have the means to return to where they were last season, but time is running out.

If there's a team whose proving pundits right, it's Paris Saint-Germain. After another expensive summer for the capital club, PSG are taking Ligue 1 by storm. Champions League or Ligue 1, PSG are faring just the same - proving that their money was well spent, and that nothing separates them from the best of the best. Money will remain no problem for the Parisians, and with the recent sponsorship deal signed with the QTA there are few obstacles that may trouble PSG.

## **Top - Zlatan Ibrahimovic**

Time and time again, the robust Swede shows why he's recognized as one of the best strikers around the world. Leading the Ligue 1 scoring charts with 15 goals, and having provided for 6 others, Ibrahimovic is one of the main reasons why PSG were crowned winter champions for the third time running. Coupled with Edinson Cavani, Ibrahimovic is at the forefront of most of PSG's attacks and is a constant threat to Ligue 1's defences.

## **Flop - Ezequiel Lavezzi**

Bought for €30M, Lavezzi had a decent first season with PSG. This time around however, Lavezzi is falling out of favour with Laurent Blanc and is running into difficulty in cementing a starting XI place. Sometimes invisible and often inconsistent in his performances, Lavezzi is doing very little to justify the cash spent on him. With just two 2013/2014 Ligue 1 goals to his name, the Argentine is far from the form he enjoyed during his time in Naples.

## **Verdict - A+ Grade**

The winter champions have suffered a single defeat and Laurent Blanc's side are once more the favourites to lift the Hexagoal. With the star-studded side battling viciously for the Champions League and the Ligue 1, there's little stopping Blanc from going all the way in France's main competition. With some gutsy performances and fortunate knockout draws, who knows what's reserved for the reigning champions on the continental stage?

Champagne is readied for celebrations in Reims, and it is richly deserved. One of last season's relegation contenders, Reims picked up pace in the first half of the 2013/2014 season and find themselves in a very respectable 8<sup>th</sup> position, a couple of points away from 4<sup>th</sup> place. Hubert Fournier's side can be proud of what they have achieved in 2013, but with 19 matches still to be played, Reims will have to guard against complacency.

## **Top - Floyd Ayité**

Like many of Reims' players, Ayité has put behind last's season poor performances. Instead, a new visage has emerged from the Togolese international. Already the provider of 3 goals and 4 assists, Ayité has been in fiery form for Reims this season. Often decisive, Ayité is helping fans forget Charbonnier's woes in front of goal this season. The ex-Bordeaux player took his time to start shining, but will be hoping that his injury problems are a thing of the past if he is to continue on his hot streak.

## **Flop - Gaëtan Charbonnier**

Gaëtan Charbonnier didn't have the best of times last term with Montpellier. Unfortunately for the Frenchman, luck isn't smiling upon him at Reims either. Fournier doesn't seem impressed with the striker, in spite of his 3 goals, and Charbonnier has spent the vast majority of this season's campaign watching from the bench. It's extremely unlikely that Reims' fans will be satisfied by the mediocre performances he has provided the team with, and time is of the essence if the Frenchman is to change that.

## **Verdict - A+ Grade**

Possessing talent and motivation, Reims can justly brag about their achievements so far this season. Few coaches could have accomplished what Fournier has with this Reims side, and with recent results there's reason for hope and ambition. If Stade de Reims keep up the performances for the rest of the season, it could well be a sign of great things to come.

There was reshuffling in Rennes last summer, with ex-Real Sociedad head coach Philippe Montanier taking over at Stade de la Route de Lorient. However it's highly unlikely that the French coach, who worked wonders in Spain, will be satisfied of his achievements so far this season. 15th in the Ligue 1 table, there's a feeling lingering in Rennes that the team boasting players of calibre in Costil, Makoun and Alessandrini should be doing much better.

## **Top - Jean II Makoun**

Makoun is no stranger to French football, maybe best known for the shot, which trumped Casillas and helped Lyon sink Real Madrid back in 2010. The Cameroonian defensive midfielder was signed for €3M from Aston Villa, and has been enjoying a great start with Rennes. His consistency is a breath of relief in a Rennes side, which has gone through a patchy first half of a season. A strong tackler with an eye for timely interceptions, Makoun has been an integral part of Montanier's plans this season.

## **Flop - Jonathan Pitroipa**

Having enjoyed a prolific 2012/2013 season, hopes were high for Pitroipa. Yet to Rennes' disappointment, the Burkinabe's season is yet to kick off. Enforcer of 7 goals and 4 assists last season, Pitroipa is yet to find the net this time round, and only has 2 assists to his name. If the winger doesn't pick up pace, Rennes' bad scoring run could go on.

## **Verdict - C- Grade**

Montanier will have to spend the winter break meditating on the problems his team is facing if Rennes are to finish higher up the table. Rennes will have to get the attacking players firing if they are to aspire to amount to something in 2013/2014. At the same stage last season, Rennes had scored 29 goals - 7 more than this year. As football often demonstrates, if you can't score, you can't win!

*Les Verts*, like OGC Nice, started their European campaign on the wrong foot, getting knocked out at the playoff stage by Esbjerg. Unlike their compatriots, they recovered quickly from this downfall and Galtier's side now lie 5<sup>th</sup> in Ligue 1. Untarnished by the sales of important team members Guilavogui and Aubameyang, Saint-Etienne continued their rise through the ranks with some impressive displays. The harmony in Galtier's dressing room seems to be emanating and helping the Rhône club put behind the early disappointment in Europe.

## **Top - Moustapha Sall**

Sainté have conceded just 20 times this season, no part down to Moustapha Bayal Sall and Kurt Zouma. In the heart of defence, Sall is deservedly enjoying Galtier's confidence. His impeccable interceptions and strength in aerial duels ensured that Ruffier was not left with selection difficulties at the heart of the defence. Often preferring to clear the ball, the ambitious Senegalese is now rightfully considered one of Saint-Etienne's most important assets.

## **Flop - Brandão**

Previously considered as one of Saint-Etienne's best strikers, Brandão's 2013-2014 performances have been lacklustre. The Brazilian has only found the net once so far this season, contrasting with the 11-goal figure he boasted of last season. Seldom imaginative, age could well be showing its first signs on 33-year-old Brandão. One wonders where Saint-Etienne could be had Brandão got firing again this season. Until it happens, Saint-Etienne's fans can only hope that their Brazilian rediscovers his form as soon as possible; although he appears lost without Aubameyang alongside him.

## **Verdict - B+ Grade**

Saint-Etienne's superior league position compared to archrivals Lyon should be enough for *les Verts*' fans to forget their last-gasp defeat in the *Derby du Rhône* and their disappointing journey in the Europa League. Having been improving on their position year after year, Saint-Etienne will want to follow suit and continue troubling the big guns.

Few expected *les Lionceaux* to cause any upsets in this season, but the team which just squeezed out of the relegation zone at the death last time around, is still underperforming. The replacement of head coach Eric Hély with Hervé Renard has done little to alter the course that Sochaux has been on since August. In an otherwise quiet transfer window, the loss of Ryad Boudebouz to Bastia has seen Sochaux plunge into even deeper trouble, lacking creativity and scoring just 15 times thus far. Only a small ray of hope is shining on Sochaux - the winter transfer window - and if they don't snatch at it, then FCSM will be playing second tier football come next season.

## **Top - Sébastien Corchia**

Agonizingly close to moving to Lyon last summer, Corchia stayed put. If any player has been playing consistently well at Sochaux this season, Corchia is the man. The French right back who was instrumental last season, is one of the few Sochaux players who managed to keep up his level of play. With a number of teams reportedly ready to pounce for him, Sochaux are in for a fight if they are to retain him this January.

## **Flop - Cédric Kanté**

Turning from hero to zero, Kanté's season has been split with game time and minutes spent on the bench. At the heart of defence, Kanté is miles off last season's heroic form, which explains why Renard seems to be losing patience with a player considered vital last season. Sochaux has the most porous defence in the whole of Ligue 1, and Kanté should be doing much more to help secure the fort.

## **Verdict - E- Grade**

Sochaux's woes in Ligue 1 aren't a surprise, but if Sochaux are to escape the drop zone unscathed, a small miracle is needed. Renard, the mastermind behind Zambia's Africa Cup of Nations 2012 conquest, will have to conjure up some more magic to spur on his attack and fortify the backline if Sochaux are to turn make it 67 seasons in Ligue 1.

Toulouse recruited intelligently last summer coping with the departures of Capoue and Tabanou. The signings of Chantôme, Braithwaite and Aguilar ensured that *le Téfécé* didn't end up with a slim squad. It did take, Alain Casanova's side several matchdays to get the ball rolling after a bad start saw Toulouse drop temporarily into the relegation zone. Since then, this relatively inexperienced side has been playing quite well. In spite of recent results, certain individuals' lack of composure in front of goal thus far has cost TFC points.

## **Top - Serge Aurier**

Few youngsters have impressed as much this season as 20-year-old Serge Aurier. The Ivorian defender, who came through the ranks of Lens before joining Toulouse, has provided no less than 4 assists so far this season. A strong tackler and a fighter on the pitch, Aurier has already picked up 7 yellow cards. However, with his high level of dedication and frequent important interceptions, Casanova will surely overlook that. Aurier's contribution in attack as well in defence has ensured that Toulouse remained competitive regardless of their difficult start to the campaign.

## **Flop - Eden Ben Basat**

One of the most efficient strikers last season, Ben Basat is finding it tough to adapt at Toulouse. The Israelite winger and striker has yet to find the form which prompted Toulouse to recruit him from Stade Brestois. With just one goal to his name, he is slowly being etched out of the club's core squad.

## **Verdict - C+ Grade**

Toulouse managed to cope well with the pressure of being in the relegation zone, and some good results saw them lift off. With the likes of Chantôme and Braithwaite finally finding their footing, the only problem that remains to be solved is the offensive sector. Once Casanova finds a solution, who knows? Maybe Toulouse will start troubling bigger sides once again after a difficult 2013 which saw them lose Sissoko and Capoue to the Premier League.

Finishing in a modest 11<sup>th</sup> place in the 2012/2013 season, Valenciennes are now paying the price for their transfer gambles in summer. The departures of Bong, Gomis, Isimat-Mirin, Danic and Aboubakar without bringing in adequate replacements has seen Valenciennes performing inadequately in both the offensive and defensive parts of the game. Halfway through October, Daniel Sanchez was fired with the Belgian head coach Ariël Jacobs arriving at the Stade du Hainaut instead. Since then, Jacobs has been able to garner just two wins, and Valenciennes have yet to markedly improve.

## **Top - Gary Kagelmacher**

On loan from Monaco, the Uruguayan defender has been one of the better performers. A rock in defence, Kagelmacher's ability to rob opponents of the ball has been one of the highlights of an otherwise damning season for Valenciennes. Thanks to Kagelmacher's contribution in defence, Valenciennes managed to minimize the number of goals conceded, and Valenciennes can still hope of lifting themselves out of the red zone.

## **Flop - Eloge Enza Yamissi**

ESTAC Troyes didn't have the best of times last season in Ligue 1, and constrained to selling some of their talents, Yamissi joined Valenciennes. Unfortunately for the Central African Republic native, his first months at Valenciennes haven't had the impact he would have wished for. With generally inconsistent performance and rare notable contributions in attack as well as penalty misses, Yamissi has experienced a slow start at VA.

## **Verdict – F Grade**

Jacobs has a lot of work ahead of him in 2014. There are issues of capability, organisation and desire that all have to be solved in VA can hope to hold on to their top flight status. As Kagelmacher admitted to [Get French Football News](#), Valenciennes need a proper striker if they are to start scoring. Yamissi too has resonated this thought recently, yet with Valenciennes' financial condition as fragile as most other teams', it might only be wishful thinking for Valenciennes' president Jean-Raymond Legrand. Regardless of this transfer window, Valenciennes will want to forget about the football produced in a year that saw them celebrate their centenary anniversary.

Nicolas Mamo, Get French Football News

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