

Lézignan continued to lead the Elite Championship, at the official midway point just before Christmas.

The Sangliers, with Championship ambitions and players with Super League experience in the squad, remained unbeaten at the official halfway stage of the Championship, and will remain there whatever the outcome of the few re-arranged Elite games over the holiday period. The win in December over St Esteve-XIII Catalan (formerly UTC) was especially meritorious, given that the Catalan side was reinforced by members of the Dragons squad.

But with the Super League and Championship fixtures being published, attention is turning to the Dragons and Toulouse Olympique. The Dragons are fully established as a Super League fixture and will be raring to go, with new signings Setaimata Sa, Dallas Johnson and Chris Walker. The inclusion of young prospects Tony Gigot, David Guasch and William Barthau in the named squad suggests that Dragons coach Kevin Walters might now be prepared to follow the example of his predecessor, Mick Potter, and give younger players a chance. Equally, these players could also be given extended opportunities in the Championship at Toulouse, under the dual-registration system, rather than the reserve side in the LER.

Toulouse Olympique are arguably under the greatest spotlight as they start their second season in the Co-operative Championship, and set out on the road of qualifying to apply for a Super League franchise.

This ambitious club was highly commended for the business plan it had submitted for Super League, but lost out to Celtic Crusaders, I suspect as much for the lobbying from the Welsh Rugby League "Old Boys" - many now established personalities in the media.

At the time, larger than life chairman, former international Carlos Zalduendo, said the club was "disappointed but not beaten", as he contemplated the invitation to join the Co-operative Championship.

That Toulouse accepted the invitation, despite the obvious immediate disadvantages of fortnightly cross-channel ventures on a Championship budget and status, is a matter of record. Toulouse entered the competition, and were promptly hammered away at Widnes.

The harsh reality was that a squad had to be hastily assembled, many from the French Elite who had not played since April 2008, a playing gap of almost ten months.



**TOULOUSE WELCOME:** Coach Gilles Dumas welcomes Carlos Mendes-Varela and Yoan Tisseyre - both of whom were recruited after the French LER season

## Grounds for hope



### CLIFF SPRACKLEN takes a look at the latest Treize developments in Toulouse

Worse, the club's attempt to organise pre-season fixtures floundered when the game against the Dragons fell victim to the surprisingly horrendous winter in the south of France.

A year on, I wondered how the club felt the year had gone, what lessons had been learned, how preparations were going and what targets the club had set, as I caught up with Zalduendo and his head coach, another former international stalwart, Gilles Dumas.

"Despite a slow start, due to our lack of preparation, we missed qualifying for the play-offs by a whisker," said Dumas. "We started training on 30th November with a very intense programme under conditioner Julien Lehuby. As well as analysing where we missed out,



**ROLL UP, ROLL UP:** Toulouse have wasted no time in selling season tickets for 2010

we have also strengthened the squad with the sort of combative, ambitious, hungry young players who want to succeed."

I suggested that it was a masterstroke in signing the former Avignon and Dragons player Vincent Duport, who had an outstanding end of season for the Dragons and for France.

"Vincent did not have many games early season at the Dragons, and was perhaps somewhat overlooked there. He actually signed for Toulouse as early as 15th September, when his Dragons future was still under question," said a satisfied Dumas.

"He is hungry and will want to kick-on from his end-of-season performances. He brings experience of Super League intensity, which is vital when you get to the sharp end of the season and the play-offs.

"So too does Simon Worrall, on loan from Leeds Rhinos. He has 20 appearances for the Rhinos, just missing out on Grand Final selection. Our third new signing is Romain Mencarini from the Dragons. Though on the Dragons roster, he played for the Dragons reserve side, UTC. At just 20 he is already a big lad, has a robust style and is great on defence, but the best is yet to come."

With just three close-season signings I wondered if Dumas was largely satisfied with last year's squad.

"The squad came on enormously last season. We did suffer some injuries but now we have a clean bill of health apart from Nicolas Faure, and he will restart training in January," said Dumas.

"But we did sign exciting young second row Yoan Tisseyre from Lézignan after the end of the Elite season, and Carlos Mendes-Varela from Lyon, a strong-running three-quarter. They will now have the bonus of a full pre-season with us and are raring to go."

This time last year Dumas was modest in his ambition for the season. "With the experience we have gained and the lessons learned, together with our recruitment, we are looking to qualify for the play-offs, and then the rest is up to us," he asserted.

Dumas will have, for him, the luxury of being able to see his charges in pre-season games. A match will go ahead against the Dragons, on 23rd January, in Toulouse, and another against Limoux on 30th January at Limoux's Stade de l'Aiguille. At the time of going to press, another pre-season fixture was in the discussion stages between the clubs concerned.

Off the field, livewire Zalduendo has to provide Dumas with the players and support to qualify, and at the same time continue the work necessary to ensure a strong case for Super League.

"To ensure we have the best possible team on the field, our winter recruitment will be added to through the agreement we have made with Bernard Guasch and the Dragons, under the dual-registration system", said Zalduendo.

"We have also concluded a formal partnership agreement with XIII Limouxin, on similar principles to that existing already with St Gaudens, to the mutual benefit of both clubs. Young players not selected in the Championship team will contribute to the efforts at Limoux, whilst promising young players will be able to come through into the Championship via that route."

The Stade Arnauné or Minimes had seen a good support base, with crowds averaging over 3,000 last year, but what about the future I wondered. "We always said that should it be necessary we can access other larger stadia in the city," said Zalduendo.

"But we have a project backed by the Mairie, Conseil General [the Departement] and the Conseil Regional to substantially develop

the Stade Arnauné. This will see capacity not only raised to 10,000-plus, including a brand new stand and extensions to existing stands. It will also include 18 hospitality boxes, a weights room, boutique, new changing rooms and other enhancements.

"The public bodies are committed to this subject to Toulouse being given the green light for Super League."

I pondered on the happenings in Wales, and suggestions that there may be a future bid for Super League from a Paris club.

"We felt we had a strong case last year, as clearly did Widnes and others. But that's the past. We are concentrating on showing that we have what it takes to enhance Super League.

"As for Paris there is nobody who would disagree with developing the sport to the highest level possible in Paris for the future. But it does take time to build the necessary structural underpinning for Super League so I would see Toulouse clearly as the second French Super League team," he stressed.

Surely lessons have been learned from the Crusaders situation, and without in any way detracting from the case for a Super League team in South Wales and indeed Paris, Toulouse must surely be the front runner next time round.

Of course Toulouse has to do the hard yards to even win the right to apply. There can be no doubt that the club have digested the lessons of last season, and have set out with their preparation and recruitment to win that coveted qualifying place.

As for Paris, while there are obvious media and other benefits to the French game of having a high-profile team there, it will be no easy task.

Let us not forget that the initial motivation stems from the need for the Stade Français union club to have its stadium used 12 months of the year, in order to assure the new development. An opportunity for Rugby League of course in the capital. Sensibly it looks as if the first step will be the launching of a Stade Français Rugby League team in the 2011 season, starting life in Elite One.

This is a welcome prospect, and hopefully the lessons of the PSG experience will be learned, that any new Elite team needs to work closely with all of those grassroots treizistes in the Ile de France, from Nanterre, to Corbeil and Montgeron, via Paris XIII and Chatillon.

# Q & A

Age: 21 Height: 5 feet 11 inches Weight: 15 stone 1lb.  
Position: Second-row or centre.

### Where did you start playing?

At Lézignan, in the Ecole de Rugby, when I was eleven. I come from a treiziste family. My dad Jean-Louis, known as "Dadou", played for Lézignan, when they won the Championship Final in 1978 and my grandfather played. My older brother Simon also played for Lézignan.

### How did your career develop?

I signed for the Dragons when I was 18 and made my debut in Super League at that age, playing four times in Super League, under Mick Potter, as well as for UTC. Under Kevin Walters, I made one Super League appearance, ending the season on loan at Toulouse. I then returned to my home town

Lézignan, for a new challenge in the summer, and to be nearer my family. As I am now semi-pro again getting a job was also important. There is a buzz about the club, with some great recruitment, the proof being we remained unbeaten at the half-way point of the LER Championship.

### Your best memory?

Making my Super League debut for the Dragons against Hull FC. What an atmosphere and competition. Mick Potter took a great interest in the younger players at UTC, gave advice on improvement and gave us all the opportunity to shine.

### Biggest disappointment?

Losing to England when I played for France Juniors, after we were leading at half-time. Games against England are great events at any level.

### What about your international ambitions?

I have played for France at various levels, including Juniors. It was an honour to be named captain of the France Under 25s recently against Great Britain Community Lions. I have been in senior training squads, including the 2008 World Cup, but missed the final cut for the last two years. So I feel I am in the frame and not far away from full France selection.

### What is your opinion on French clubs in the Co-operative Championship? Lézignan has expressed interest in taking part.

I have played against English teams for both the Dragons and Toulouse, and would love to do the same with Lézignan. We are in the Challenge Cup in 2010, but it would be great to see English fans in Lézignan. This is the club's ambition and I am right behind it.



**Florian Quintilla**  
FC Lézignan XIII