

Hounds move ahead of pack

Lille spent three years in the French Second Division before returning to the elite this season. With nine games left, it's making a strong bid to win its first First Division title since 1954.



PASCAL ROSSIGNOL/REUTERS

Lens striker Elhadji Diouf stumbles in front of Lille defender Christophe Pignol during their derby at the Bollaert Stadium, where Lille won, 1-0, to remain in first place.

OLIVIER HAMOIR in Lille

Promoted Lille's success story tops a year of miracles for the underdogs of French soccer.

Last season, the amateurs from the nearby town of Calais transfixed the nation when they reached the French Cup final, beating three professional teams — including Lille — on their way to the Stade de France.

Second Division Gueugnon also humbled top-flight teams en route to the League Cup title.

This season, French soccer's most prestigious and wealthiest clubs — Marseille and Paris St. Germain — are struggling. Auxerre, Lens and Monaco have won the First Division title since 1996 but now find themselves in the bottom half of the First Division.

By contrast, unfashionable teams such as Bastia, Sedan and Lille have held the lead at various points during the First Division race.

Lille moved into first place, on goal difference ahead of Nantes, with an impressive 4-1 over St. Etienne and held the lead for a second week with a 1-0 win at neighboring Lens.

PLENTY OF HEART. "If we keep on being serious, quiet and hardworking, we can go all the way," said Lille captain Djezon Boutoille. "With

the heart we have, anything is possible."

Lille president Luc Dayan is surprised by the quick success.

"I can hardly believe that we are leading in front of prestigious teams like Paris, Monaco, Lyon or Marseille," said Dayan, who took over the club two seasons ago. "I just cannot talk about winning the title. The word just does not make it to my mouth. Our first place just proves that there is no link between budgets and rankings."

Lille has one of the lowest budgets in the First Division: \$17 million.

It has no players in consideration for the French national team, and its five foreign players — defender Abdelilah Fahmi (Morocco), midfielders Edwin Murati (Alba-

nia) and Fernando D'Amico (Argentina), and strikers Mikkell Beck (Denmark) and Mile Sterjovski (Australia) — were overlooked or unwanted by bigger clubs.

FORMER POWER. Lille was one of the best teams of the 1940s and '50s — it won its league titles in 1946 and 1954 and the French Cup five times from 1946 to 1955 — but *les Dogues* ("the Hounds") have since been overshadowed in northern France by Lens.

The arrival of Coach Vahid Halilhodzic two seasons ago changed the picture.

The moody Halilhodzic managed to build the spirit within his squad, which dominated the Second Division from start to finish last season.

His method of motivating his troops is rather simple: Every time his team has a bad streak, he threatens to resign.

When promising defender Pascal Cygan considered trying his luck in the English Premier League, he said he would go, too.

When the Hounds lost three games in succession early this year, Halilhodzic said he would refuse to participate in the Champions League, even if Lille qualified.

"We do not deserve to play in Europe," the 48-year-old Bosnian said. "If we had that chance, we would turn it down."

The exaggeration paid off. (Reuters)

