

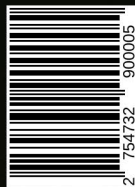


5' ELEVEN

SPRING SUMMER 2023

Nlaro Hoje
wearing AHLUWALIA

UK £22



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CHANGING THE GAME

Only one oyster in several million carries a pearl – a gemstone whose prized rarity is found in its natural beauty. Unlike diamonds and countless other precious stones, pearls don't require cutting or polishing, they're perfect as they are. If your nickname is 'The Pearl' you know you're doing something right.

words by CHARLIE NEWMAN

photography by ADAM FUSSELL

styled by BRYONY HATRICK

England rugby player and philanthropist Maro Itoje certainly lives up to his nickname. By the tender age of 16 he was training with the Gallagher Premiership 1st team Saracens, marking his senior debut aged 19. Three years later he received a call from then England rugby coach, Eddie Jones, to join the England squad for the 2016 Six Nations where he has remained as a mainstay player ever since. Playing lock and blindside flanker on the field, he is highly respected by the opposition and is known amongst teammates on the field as abrasive, intense and confrontational. However away from the game, he couldn't be more calm, thoughtful and polite. His towering 6ft 4inch frame somehow slips into the ordinary when shooting on set.

RO



*Sapphire silver pendant necklace
by BLEUE BURNHAM.
Grey flannel suit jacket and
trousers by GIORGIO ARMANI.
Black cotton vest, stylist's own.
Silver bracelet by MARIA BLACK.*



Now aged 28, with 67 caps under his belt for England and six caps for the British and Irish Lions (at the time of print), it seems that Itoje is unstoppable but there's a lot more than sport about him. Growing up in Cricklewood and then Edgware in North London, rugby didn't actually enter his life until he was 11, relatively late in the rugby world. The sport first caught his attention back in 2003 when England won the World Cup, but from day one Itoje's father reminded his son of the importance of education. His mantra was, *"If the grades drop, the rugby stops."* Fortunately they didn't as, after receiving a scholarship to Harrow, Itoje then went onto study Political Science and Government at SOAS, before completing an MBA at Warwick University.

Reflect on your own studies and it most likely felt a world away from representing your country at such a challenging sport and yet Itoje is outwardly grateful for the contrast. *"I think human beings are multi-faceted individuals and they have different interests and different things that float their boat. Yes they do require different things, they do require different emotional energy."* It seems impossible to juggle this mental energy alongside the physical exertion of rugby but Itoje explains, *"I think they're all interconnected. I like to think they feed into one another. If I was just to play rugby and not have any outlet or other thing to take my mind off the game that probably wouldn't be healthy for my rugby career."*

Growing up, Itoje was absorbing his cultural surroundings through *"osmosis"* whether it was through nineties and early noughties fashion, consisting of baggy jeans and oversized basketball jerseys, or his mother's art pieces in the house, both had a profound effect on his life. It seems as though he has a lot to thank his mother for. Growing up in a Nigerian household, Itoje reflects, *"Africans particularly are not afraid of colour, so there's always vibrancy both in terms of culture and how it was in the house, but also in terms of clothes and the things we wore. My mother particularly is probably the most fashion-minded person in the house, my dad not so much! So she was the formative person in terms of picking our clothes. I learnt a lot from her and her type of style."*

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Gold pendant necklace by ALIGHIERI.
Green cotton suit jacket and
trousers by AHLUWALIA.
Cream lace shirt by OUR LEGACY.
Gold ring by MARIA BLACK.

**"I believe your HOME,
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When it comes to fashion and sport, we're well acquainted with sportspeople having big personalities and a strong sense of style. Look at Serena Williams' head turning glamour both on and off the court, David Beckham's three-piece suits or sarongs depending on the era, or Tiger Woods' signature all-black attire. But when it comes to rugby, personality and style is lacking. Step in Itoje who turns to Dior, Louis Vuitton and Burberry for high-end staples and Cos and British African designer Labrum for everyday pieces. Added to this is a weakness for grandad shirts and his signature pearl earring. His wide net of interests has caught the attention of Jay Z's Roc Nation management (whom he is signed with), as well as featuring in British Vogue and Ralph Lauren campaigns. He can even count the Princess of Wales as one of his rugby supporters.

Itoje's mother also helped guide his appreciation for art when she suggested they visit the Lagos art market when he was struggling to decorate his first London flat with African art. It was here that he was, *"taken aback by the colour, the dynamism, the richness of the art. I guess it kind of started a little love affair since then. Since that point, my love for African art has gotten deeper and deeper."* Now Itoje has an extensive collection himself and is a committee member of Frieze 91. Last year he curated Sotheby's Signature Art Collection celebrating African art.

Whilst he doesn't get to visit as many galleries as he would like to due to time constraints, art remains close to his heart. *"I believe your home, especially the way you decorate your home, is an outward expression of yourself. I use art both in terms of its aesthetic pleasure but also as a source of comfort. Especially African and Nigerian art, it gives me a connection to Nigeria and Africa. It's really a source of comfort."* It's his passion for African art that keeps his *"mind fresh and energized for when I'm on the pitch or training. I like to think that playing rugby, doing what I love and having the opportunity to do that, gives me the energy and vitality to study and prepare for life after rugby because I'm not going to play rugby forever. There's going to be an end point at some time, nobody knows when that's actually going to be but I think it's good to be prepared."*



Earring, Maro's own.
Pearl necklace by HATTON LABS.
Sapphire silver pendant necklace and
silver ring by BLEUE BURNHAM.
Grey flannel suit jacket and trousers
by GIORGIO ARMANI.
Black cotton vest, stylist own.
Silver Bracelet by MARIA BLACK.

right page
Pearl hoop earring and
necklace by HATTON LABS.
Navy knitted vest by MARNI.
Black cotton trousers
by ACNE STUDIOS.
Black leather derby shoes
by CHURCH'S.



Every sportsperson dreads retirement, but just as he plays on the pitch, Itoje is already two steps ahead. He explains how *“retirement is something that is difficult for all athletes. Even athletes that have the best plan in the world, they find retirement difficult, let alone if you don’t have a plan. If you’re not organized, it’s going to be even more hard.”* He points out that it’s not just down to the individual to be proactive but so too should be the *“clubs, organizations, industry leaders. I think you have a responsibility to help prepare these young individuals for life after. I think you need to provide opportunities for those individuals to take advantage and to be in a position where they can thrive in whatever they choose to do hence forth. But equally so, I think athletes have a responsibility to prepare themselves for life after with whatever they do. I don’t think you can just be a sitting duck and wait for someone else to help you. You need to be proactive, you need to put your best foot forward to prepare yourself for whatever is going next. I think it’s a two throng kind of approach.”* Not many people have the strength and vision to plan for the long-term whilst being at the top of their game, this is after all coming from the man who is considered to be one of the best players in the world, and yet he’s more than ready for what’s next.

April marked his momentous launch of the aptly named Pearl Fund. Just as his father encouraged the importance of education, so too is Itoje for others. After two years of honing in *“on the direction and vision”* of his foundation, he has decided that the fund will give young Nigerian children from the most deprived social and economic backgrounds, *“access to education they otherwise wouldn’t have had.”* He wants to make a commitment to these children, *“long-term throughout their primary, secondary and hopefully university education depending on what they want to do, but commit to hopefully impact their lives and help them break that cycle of poverty.”*

After Itoje noticed a fault in his previous philanthropic work where the supported children were left to return back to their former difficult lives upon completing their programme his goal became to *“create a situation where you have a long-term fundamental impact on the lives of these individuals. It’s very much a depth rather than a breadth approach to this. I want to have a meaningful impact on every child in which this programme comes in touch with and hopefully their lives will improve. Their life trajectory will change as result of the Pearl Fund.”* When you break the numbers down, this means that the fund will be committing to each child for 10-15 years, a long-term path far beyond his rugby career.

But in the here and now, we’re talking to him after a tough Six Nations tournament. Ever the strategic thinker, he is feeling *“optimistic about where this team can go. I think sometimes you have to take your medicine and work through difficult periods and we’re going through a semi-difficult period at the moment but the team has a whole load of potential. We have a great new coach, we have a lot of potential in the squad so we just need to put it all together, work together and we’ll be good in the long run.”* A mantra he lives by.

Rugby has changed enormously since he first started playing with new rules on tackling and concussion to help safeguard the players and the future of the game. But there’s still room to diversify the game and to celebrate the players’ individual personalities. Growing up, Itoje turned to American sports stars Shaquille O’Neill and Magic Johnson, not only for their basketball talents but for their business acumen, and academic and community work. The comparison between American and British public personas is enormous although universally Itoje believes that, *“There’s something in people watching their athletes and they want to enjoy the sport. They don’t want it to be clouded by political judgements or whatever, and that’s the same both in the US and the UK. But I think what’s important to understand is that all individuals have many different strings to their bow and no one in the world is just one thing. We’re all multi-faceted human beings and I guess perhaps in America maybe they just see the business side of it more and celebrate the business angle and thus see the opportunity.”* He turns to iconic basketball player Dennis Rodman who, *“was able to express himself in ways that most people full stop let alone athletes don’t get to express themselves as freely as that. By no means I’m not comparing myself to Dennis Rodman but I think the way he could express himself and be himself is amazing.”*

So where would Itoje like to see the future of the game evolve? *“I would love to see it in a healthier financial state than it is now, particularly club rugby. I would love to see the club game thriving similar to the international level. I want rugby to continue to grow wide in its participants, an even more diverse playing group that is represented both in the community and professional game. I believe rugby is an unbelievable sport, so just for it to touch as many people as possible and not only see the diversity within the playing group but also within the executives and decision-making officials in the game.”* He hopes for the *“upper class”* and hyper *“masculine”* stereotypes surrounding rugby to break down and suggests bringing *“the game closer to those communities in which it’s trying to reach... When you compare rugby and football, football doesn’t need to do as much work as rugby because those communities are already engaged in the game, they already have a history of playing the game. Whereas for rugby, those communities don’t, so rugby has to do more to try and reach those kind of environments and communities.”*

Maro Itoje is undoubtedly redefining the merits of the modern man with ease and grace. He visibly brightens when talking about his passion for art, relaxes when discussing rugby, smiles on the topic of fashion and his eyes snap into a steely gaze over The Pearl Fund. It can’t be easy forging one’s own pioneering path but Itoje assures that he’s felt *“welcomed”* though, *“As with all of these things there’s a little bit of push back or a little bit of criticism or whatever. But that’s the nature of the beast that comes with the territory.”* Bring it on.



Earring and gold chain
necklace, Maro's own.
Pearl necklace by
SINNER IN PEARLS.
Pink striped cotton shirt
by WALES BONNER.
White cotton vest, stylist own.
Gold bracelet by MARIA BLACK.
Gold ring by ALIGHIERI.
Mid wash jeans by MANAAKI.



Earring and gold chain necklace, Maro's own.
Gold pendant necklace by ALIGHIERI.
Green cotton suit jacket and
trousers by AHLUWALIA.
Cream lace shirt by OUR LEGACY.
Black leather derby shoes by CHURCH'S.

right page
Gold chain necklace, Maro's own.
White cotton t-shirt by RALPH LAUREN.
Red crochet tank by A KIND OF GUISE.
Navy corduroy trousers by MR P.







Earring worn on left ear and
 gold chain necklace, Maro's own
 Gold ear cuff by MARIA BLACK.
 White cotton vest, stylist's own.
 Cardigan by CASABLANCA.
 Striped cotton trousers by MARRAKSHI LIFE.
 White cotton socks by FALKE.
 Brown Sherpa mules by GRENSON.

left page
 Grey flannel suit jacket and trousers
 by GIORGIO ARMANI.
 Black leather derby shoes by CHURCH'S.

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 using Tom Ford Beauty.
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 Stylist assisted by MOLLIE FRENCH.
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