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FOOTBALL: Stones bounce back to snatch point

Itoje ready for Saracens leadership

GALLAGHER PREMIERSHIP SEASON GETS UNDERWAY AT GLOUCESTER



Maro Itoje

Image: PA

MARO Itoje has rejected Eddie Jones' negative assessment of his leadership as the "wrong diagnosis" after being entrusted with the Saracens captaincy for the new season.

Itoje has been appointed as Owen Farrell's successor at the north London club three years after former England head coach Jones was scathing of his prospects of leading the national side. Jones, in his book 'Leadership', viewed the Lions second row as "inward-looking", adding he "drives himself rather than anyone else. He doesn't usually influence people off the field". Jones' opinion has since been proved wrong as Itoje took over from Jamie George as England skipper when his Saracens team-mate left the field on the summer tour to Japan and New Zealand. "I felt that was a wrong diagnosis of who I am. Most people who know me and most people who read those comments who knew me, would say that was an inaccurate conclusion to who I am as a person," Itoje said.

"For me, reflection is a really important part of what I try to do. I like to think I have a pretty accurate assessment of how I am, what I like, what makes me tick." Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana, and Muhammad Ali are appreciated as heroic leaders by Itoje, but closer to home the Arsenal fan admires the influence Patrick Vieira had on the Gunners.

"During the 2000s, Patrick Vieira was in his prime and in his pomp. He was a big hero of mine. He was tough. Extremely tough," he said.

"He was a no-nonsense player, he was elegant. He was graceful, he had a presence about him.

"He had the respect of his team-mates and was a winner. He was captain of Arsenal during their most successful period, what's not to like?"



Wealdstone boss Matt Taylor

Image: Jon Taffel

Mixed fortunes for rivals before derby

NATIONAL League rivals Barnet and Wealdstone experienced contrasting fortunes ahead of their derby at Grosvenor Vale on Saturday (5.30pm).

The Bees ran out 3-1 winners over Braintree on Saturday, while the Stones grabbed a late equaliser to draw 2-2 at Forest Green Rovers.

Manager Matt Taylor praised his side's character to recover from two goals down and snatch a point, but the match was marred by a bad injury to goalkeeper Archie Matthews.

"We started the game and I was fearing the worst after 10 or 12 minutes we were 2-0 down," he told the club media.

"Both avoidable (goals) from our perspective. Then Archie ends up dislocating his shoulder and I'm thinking 'wow!'"

"That eight-minute break gave me

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chance to get the players in and just explain to them. We hadn't started yet and I thought from that moment on we were excellent.

"We moved the ball at such an intensity. Granted, it's on a lovely pitch, but our players took risks. They took responsibility. They were, in my opinion, better than the opposition in terms of the way they moved the ball.

"I'm pleased we got that goal and Calum (McFarlane) got his just rewards from all his hard work, and then we went in at half time and all I asked of the players was to continue believing.

"I'm coming off the pitch and the sup-

porters can sense it. They can feel that we were the team that was on top. We've come away to arguably a team with the biggest budget in the league and dominated the ball.

"This has to be the start of us really picking up points. What we got, with the goal at the end, was what we deserved. We had a goal ruled out for offside, but in that moment I didn't think it was offside. I'd have been disappointed if we didn't come away with a point, but the only reason I'd be disappointed was because of our performance."

After Dean Brennan's passionate outcry to supporters last week, the Barnet boss was under pressure to deliver a victory at the Hive, but a turgid performance on the day gave the Irishman cause for concern.

"I thought it was our worst performance of the season," he told the club's website.

"Full credit to the opposition. They made it difficult for us. They tried to press, and I thought our sloppiness around the goal in the first half was unacceptable. Just not good enough."

Despite going 1-0 down inside a minute, Barnet rallied to turn the game on its head inside 15 minutes.

"The reaction is always good. I wouldn't have it any other way," Brennan added. "The day the lads don't react is the day I get sacked. That's how it works, so my job is to keep getting a tune out of them.

"The one thing my teams have always done since I've been here is work hard, but we've just got to be a little bit cuter."