

## Inside Out – Anthony Matoto

**BAREFOOT** with a bottle for a ball – that’s how one former Butts Park Arena favourite started out in rugby.

And it certainly held Anthony Matoto in good stead as he made a huge impact on Coventry Rugby’s promotion push.

*“I loved playing for Coventry, it was an amazing experience,” he says. “To get to know the history, to be able to talk to men like Harry Walker (the Coventry stalwart who passed away, aged 103, earlier this month); and to hear about the club’s history, especially from Tony Gulliver (team manager), was amazing.*



*There was such a lot of history. A lot of pride that made me feel special.*

*Rowland Winter, (Coventry’s Director of Rugby) challenged me to see if I could keep the level of success I’d been used to in Spain. The environment was so different. It was so professional.*

*The lads were awesome and I felt at ease. I could just play rugby. I could just sit back and focus on my job within the team. And I was learning so much from everybody.”*

That ‘job’ included scoring tries, from wing and centre. He notched up 12 tries in 18 league games, and his powerful play and footballing brain quickly won him a place in the hearts of the Coventry faithful.



*“The Coventry crowd, that was the icing on the cake,” he adds. “They were great all the time. I’m a shy person. I like to get off the pitch as quickly as I can, get in and have a shower. It was different at Coventry.”*



*People would come up and talk to you. They wanted to say ‘hi’, tell you how you’d done, how important it was that we’d done well. It was lovely.*

*And to see people who had supported the club for so many years, coming out on a cold winter's day to applaud you and will the team on. That was special.*

*Win or lose, people wanted to approach you and congratulate you.”*

His best game was a bittersweet experience, a black day for Coventry, when they lost 61-29 at Blackheath in January, bringing the club's unbeaten run to an untimely end.

*“With rugby, parts of the games you forget. I had some good times, but probably my best game came against Blackheath. I scored a hat-trick, but we lost. I've never been so hyped up to win. I think it was down to the Red Bull,” he jokes. “My last try, I just picked the ball off a ruck and ran straight under the posts.*

*I still felt we could have won. It was one of the worst games we had and I scored a hat-trick.*

*Overall, I felt I played my part in getting promotion. I will forever cherish my time at Coventry.”*

When we talk on Skype, despite an off-putting crackle and then time lag, Matoto is charming, modest and obviously a student of the game that led him from his native Tonga, to New Zealand, Spain and then the English Midlands.

He namechecks heroes like famous All Blacks, Michael Jones and Zinzan Brooke, the latter who also pulled on the blue and white jersey of Coventry.

He talks of the incredible passion for rugby in Tonga and New Zealand, where he moved as a teenager, and his family links with the oval ball game.

Family is hugely important in Matoto's life and a key reason for his decision to leave Coventry.

He insists there are no regrets, except a hint or two that he would have loved to remain in Cov colours and test himself at the next level, in the Championship.

*“I've seen some of the guys coming through, and who Coventry have signed, I think the club will do well next season.”*

His partner, Ariane, is expecting their first child in July and the return brings her closer to family.

*“She had enjoyed watching me excel and better myself at the level Coventry was competing at and saw that I confronted the challenge very well despite coming from an emerging rugby nation. But after finding out she was pregnant, I had to make the hard decision to leave Coventry to provide ourselves with the family support we needed to prepare for this little bundle of joy.*

*Ariane had pushed me to take this offer in the first place, and I wouldn't have got to put on that blue and white jersey if it wasn't for her full-on support for my rugby.*

*“I'm so looking forward to being a father. It is so important to me. I realise that rugby is temporary, while family is permanent. Talking with Tony Fenner and Phil Boulton, among others, helped me to understand what it is to become a father and the sacrifices you have to be willing to make for your new little family.”*

Family was hugely important for Matoto's rugby education as a child growing up in Tonga. His grandfather was a Tongan international and his father played, too.

*“Rugby played a big part in my childhood. My grandfather played for the national team in 1963, and you got to know all the little histories. My father played for the national sevens team.*

*Rugby runs in the blood. As a kid I would join my grandpa and my dad in watching big rugby matches on the telly, watch them analyse and criticise with passion.*

*For such a small nation, rugby is very big. I would be running in barefoot on grass, with a bottle for the ball. All us kids, we'd be running as if we were Jonah Lomu. We'd all be calling his name.”*

Matoto admits that playing rugby made him feel part of 'something special' at school. *“I started playing at high school, although I didn't get a pair of boots until I was 15.*

*The language I used to communicate with my peers was my rugby.”*

While much of Tonga's focus was on the XV a side game, the advent of the World Series Sevens tournament meant that Tonga was suddenly playing on a global stage regularly.

*“We were encouraged to take part in sevens before getting into the national team,” Anthony recalls.*

By the time he was picked for the Tongan U18s, his family had moved to Auckland, New Zealand, which he recalls was a bit of a culture shock.

*“In Tonga, everything was strict, education was first and foremost. Culturally, I guess, I wasn’t used to so many things.*

*I was quiet, I liked to listen and observe what was going on. I was nervous, but at my first rugby training, everyone was talking. At the age of 18 and having recently moved to New Zealand and at my first training session at Massey High School, I was nervous, everyone was talking about me, the new guy and wanted to have a go at trying to smash me. At that point I decided I was going to go all out to prove myself.*

*I had to go all out to prove myself as a player.”*

Rugby was the common currency between the two nations and he lived across the road from one of his cousins, the bullocking All Black centre Anthony Tuitavake.

*“He played for the Auckland Blues, New Zealand Sevens and the All Blacks. I watched him lots. His influence was all around.*

*My cousin is also best mates with Sam Tuitupou, they have played together back in NZ. Knowing Sam was also part of the Coventry set up helped convince me move, also playing alongside him in a lot of games.”*

The young Matoto was a number eight by instinct. His days behind the pack were to come in Spain and then Coventry.



*“I loved running from the back of a scrum or line-out. I’m a forward at heart. We had a New Zealand coach and he suggested I could be more effective as a centre. He told me ‘no fancy stuff, just run straight’ and I did. I had more space to run in and I loved it.”*

And his decision to move abroad was borne from the frustration of shattered false hopes.

*“While I was playing rugby, I was studying computer science,” he says.*

*“It was hard balancing the two. If you gave 100 per cent to one, the other was dropping.*

*I travelled around the world with the sevens side. But in New Zealand there is so much competition. I wanted to move out of my comfort zone and that was when the move to Spain popped up. At the time I had just finished up with Tonga ‘A’ at a Pacific Rugby Cup tournament in Australia before I decided to take on Spain.*

*When I got the offer I had to ask whether it was football or rugby, because I’m no good at football.”*

It was networking that got Matoto to Southern Europe and has played a major part since then. *“Simon Hafoka, a Tongan living in Spain, was looking for a number eight. He messaged his old coach in New Zealand, asking if there was anyone who fitted the bill as a dynamic, running number eight.*

*At the time I didn’t have anything in New Zealand. All I had to do was commit. And moving to Spain kept me in the Church, which pleased my mum.”*

While Spanish rugby is not so well-known outside of the Sevens circuit, Matoto has enjoyed his time there, even if it did mean coming to terms with a different approach to rugby.

*“It was very odd, because rugby in Spain is about 15 to 20 years behind the All Blacks. Physically, the size of the players here isn’t as big as I was used to, but I admired their passion. They just enjoyed it so much.*

*I had been exposed to rugby from an early age, but it’s all football in Spain.*

*I think I learned to enjoy the game much more without it being so competitive.*

*You tend to forget to focus on yourself in New Zealand. You focus on other people and not on your own game. I wanted to develop myself personally and I felt I grew as a person and a player.”*

While he is without a club as of yet for next season, he is mulling over offers. The chance to play five games as a medical joker for Alcobendas Rugby Union after leaving Coventry gave him much needed exposure.

*“I’m glad I got that gig, because it gave me a little bit of a chance to show what talent and skill I learned from Coventry.”*

He says Spanish rugby, both domestically and nationally, is on the up despite recent controversy that meant the side missed out on qualifying for next year's Rugby World Cup in Japan.

*"The improvement in the Spanish game has been huge, too. The perfect example was the Olympics. Spain were one of the few countries to send both a men's and a women's sevens team to Rio. There has been a lot of funding. We've got a cup competition named the Heineken Cup and there's a lot more interest in rugby.*

*We've summer camps. There is a lot happening. It's exciting. And we have football fans coming to watch rugby and they're amazed how friendly it is. We're making people happy."*

And personally?

*"I think I'm better than ever after my time at Coventry. I learned so much."*