

CHASING A THROUGH BALL TO POWER

George Weah wants to become the first person to hold the title of Mr President as well as African footballer of the year.

By **Clair MacDougall**



Photographs by MORGANA WINGARD

George Weah, the Liberian soccer legend-turned-politician, barrels out onto the sports field dressed in an electric-blue jersey. Flanked by his entourage, tussling photographers and journalists, the towering 48 year old rolls forth with the Ballon d'Or, the trophy he claimed in 1995 while playing for AC Milan, hoisted on his broad shoulders. The crowd roars and his long-time political rival, Liberia's formidable

commander-in-chief President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, follows behind dressed in a black and white lapa suit.

Weah and Johnson Sirleaf deliver muffled messages about reconciliation and the president's column-like security guard, wearing aviator sunglasses, raises the glinting solid-gold ball into the overcast sky. Weah, the only African to win the prize, did so during the heat of Liberia's civil war that raged for 14 years and left 250,000 dead, the nation's

infrastructure in ruins and its people deeply traumatized. The soccer star hauled the prize back from his home in Florida in the United States, where he spends at least half of his time, as a symbol of peace.

Retired and current soccer celebrities from across the continent and government officials take to the field for a friendly match organized by Weah, who last December accepted his appointment by Johnson Sirleaf as peace ambassador. Weah is now the face of the

government's latest attempt to reconcile a nation that remains deeply divided a decade after the gunfire ceased and former president Charles Taylor went into exile. But among the spectators it is clear, reconciliation or not, their main purpose is to see Weah, or King George as he is known to Liberians.

After a failed attempt at the presidency in 2005 and the vice presidency in 2011, Weah is now tasked with helping drive forward the stalled process to reunite the nation. Many Liberians remain cynical about the reconciliation process after a controversial Truth and Reconciliation Commission, whose findings and recommendations were sidelined because of legal issues and the indictment of those among the political establishment. This is a major challenge that Weah has to confront.

A new 18-year reconciliation roadmap has been launched placing an emphasis on restorative, rather than retributive, justice.

The reconciliation process suffered a blow last year when peace activist Leymah Gbowee, who was also the head of a previous initiative, resigned after criticizing Johnson Sirleaf of nepotism and her failure to address present-day issues such as corruption. In a statement, Gbowee referred to "differences in opinion on the pathway for national healing and reconciliation" as her reason for stepping down.

When asked whether he is concerned about the reasons for Gbowee's resignation, Weah says: "She took a long time to notice that."

Weah's critics say that he is not capable of the role and that he was appointed to appease young Liberians who are angry with Johnson Sirleaf's government.

Critics such as Dan Saryee, a Liberian democracy and rights activist, says that Weah lacks a vision for national reconciliation. "Reconciliation is not just about having a sports jamboree. Sports do not address the reconciliation concerns of a farmer in Grand Kru, Gbarpolu or a fisherman in River Cess or Bassa."

But Weah is confident that his previous work as a UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador during the civil conflict, his role in helping encourage former fighters and child soldiers to disarm and his rapport with ordinary Liberians was the reason he was chosen by the president and why he is the best man for the job.



“I’m not going to sit aside. I think by now you should know I have character.”

“I was the right person, because of the love that people have for me, and the way I can persuade people. I accepted it because this is the country I love. I want to see the country peaceful and stable,” Weah tells FORBES AFRICA in an exclusive interview at his residence in Rehab, a suburb on the outskirts of Monrovia.

In the coming months, Weah will embark on a ‘Listening Tour’ across 16 counties to talk to Liberians about their grievances and also facilitate dialogue between tribes that

have been in conflict in the past, before forwarding his findings to the government. A similar exercise was undertaken by Gbowee during her time as head of the reconciliation initiative.

Weah is seen by many of his supporters as a man of the masses, the less-than-a-dollar-a-day Liberians who eke out an existence in a society that still remains deeply polarized economically.

Born and raised by his grandmother in a slum in Bushrod Island, and discovered and nurtured by President Samuel Doe, who was brutally executed at the beginning of the war, Weah represents an impossible dream, but nevertheless a dream for Liberians, who until the end of the conflict in 2003, had little to hope for.

“His is the only face we see to redeem us,” says Samuel Kun, a 28-year-old sociology student at the University of Liberia.

“Weah is from the ghetto so he knows what we are going through and he can [empathize] with us.

If he’s our president I’m sure things can change, it might not be constant but I’m sure he will do his best.”

Weah’s home in Monrovia is nothing like the one in which he grew up. Concertina wire

crowns the high maroon wall that surrounds his compound and is manned by guards wearing blue polo shirts and sports caps that read 'security'.

I interview Weah in a lounge room overlooking a tiled pool, and fitted with the trappings of masculine affluence—a wooden bar, a pool table, a flat-screen TV, modern black couches backed by a window that looks out onto three luxury cars. Weah wears a crème shirt with jeans and a fitted charcoal suit jacket and holds his pair of reading glasses in his hand. I ask whether his loafers are Gucci.

"That's hard work, not government money," he responds sharply.

Regardless of Weah's flamboyant lifestyle, he is seen as one of the few Liberians to have earned his riches the honest way—through hard work, success, talent and a bit of good luck—in a country where the political class and those in power are still largely viewed as a league of rogues. In 2012, Transparency International named Liberia and Mongolia as the most corrupt countries in the world in its Global Corruption Barometer.

Many of Weah's supporters are deeply suspicious of the government and its commitment to reconciliation and are concerned this could be a trap for the political leader, who is tipped to be among the leading presidential candidates in 2017. Even within Weah's party, the decision was met with many dissenting opinions.

Some opposition leaders and analysts have argued that Johnson Sirleaf is setting Weah up for failure to destroy his political future.

But Weah dismisses claims that he is being used as a political pawn and says that he will step down if he thinks the government lacks commitment to reconciliation and is attempting to silence him.

"We have to monitor their actions [...] I'm not going to sit aside because I am the peace ambassador if the government does things that aren't right. I think by now you should know I have character."

He also says the debate over the Truth and Reconciliation Commission should be reopened.

Weah says he is aware of the challenges ahead and the level of resentment and dissatisfaction among Liberians, many of



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whom who do not have an affordable life. These are challenges that are beyond the ethnic divisions and human rights abuses that characterized the brutal civil war. Less than two 2% of Liberians have access to pipe borne water, a mere 0.58% of people have access to public electricity, and 76% of the population live on less than a dollar a day.

"Peace for me is equitable distribution of the national wealth; peace for me means true justice," says Weah.

Weah is optimistic about the future of the reconciliation process but some argue his entry into the 2014 senatorial race could get in the way.

"If he does run as a senator it means that his role within the reconciliation roadmap may be diminished. Weah could use this platform to mobilize more votes," says Edward Mulbah, the senior technical advisor at the Liberia Peacebuilding Office, the body charged with organizing reconciliation activities.

But for now, Weah says there is no conflict between his political ambitions and role as peace ambassador.

The 2011 elections that Weah participated in underlined the urgent need for reconciliation. The Congress for Democratic Change (CDC) boycotted the run-off claiming they had won the first round, a claim that was reinforced by a letter by the National Elections Commission declaring them winners. That body later claimed the letter was a mistake. The day before the elections, they staged a demonstration during which police fired live rounds and killed at least one demonstrator and injured

others. Johnson Sirleaf won by 90.6% of the vote due to a low voter turnout, that the International Crisis Group (ICG) argues was due to fears of escalating violence. The Carter Center election monitoring team deemed the elections free and fair with some irregularities. This was the second time Weah had cried foul during an election.

"I still maintain that there was no transparency, there was no true democracy," claims Weah.

Analysts predict that Weah will have a landslide victory in the Montserrado senatorial race, the most populous county in Liberia and one that is his party's political stronghold.

If he succeeds in next year's race, Weah will become senator of a county that is home to over 1.5 million people, 70% of who are estimated to live in slums like the one he grew up in. Weah's childhood community of Gebelah Town underlines the challenges that lie ahead. I travel to the cramped community, along rain-slicked, potholed roads, passing people drawing filthy water from square concrete wells and drainage overflowing with waste. There I meet Philip Sayon Jr, a 20-year-old CDC supporter and university student. Sayon is optimistic that things will change if Weah becomes president.

"He loves his Liberian people; he knows the soil from which he came from; he passed a lot of difficulties. He will give the people a chance," he says.

While Weah is yet to make his real debut in the political arena, the expectations of his performance are huge. **FW**