

# The Man Who Would be King

*George Weah conquered the sport of football. Now he wants to rule a nation.*

By Guy P. Harrison

George Weah walks the dusty grounds of the Annex football field in George Town with all the grace and power of a lion prowling the African bush. An expensive blue suit hides nothing; every stride betrays who he is. Anyone can see that this is a man with gifts and grace well beyond most who have ever lived.

*"The people have confidence in me because they know that I am a true force of unification and peace."*

Most of the primary school children who swarm around him have never seen him play on television. Nevertheless, they correctly sense that they are in the presence of greatness. The visiting star shakes a hundred hands and leaves his smile deep in the memories of all who are there.

"I don't feel like a stranger," Weah said. "It's like I am home in the Cayman Islands. Cayman has beautiful people. I like it here very much. This country may be small but the minds of the people are developed and that makes it big. It is an honor for me to be in Grand Cayman for the first time."

Kind though his words are, it is difficult to imagine Weah feeling like a stranger anywhere on Earth. After all, this is man who values people above money, peace above hollow power.

George Weah has been African, European and World Player of the Year. He is Africa's greatest footballer of all time and he earned enough money to last two lifetimes. His explosive speed and physics-defying balance have given him immortality in the minds of football fans. He could have cocooned himself in European luxury and coasted out his life as a professional celebrity and autograph signer.

But he cared.

He cared too much about suffering children to look the other way. He cared too much about Africa to disconnect himself from it. He cared too much about his country, Liberia, to stay away. Weah is a UNICEF ambassador involved in efforts such as the rehabilitation of the child soldiers used and discarded in Liberia's long civil war. And now, Weah has committed to run for president of Liberia. He does not have the education, pedigree, or resume one might expect from a presidential candidate. But, given that Liberia's past leaders have not shown much of the goodness that Weah seems to have in abundance, perhaps it is



time for a good man to rise up and change the river's course.

"The future can be better for Liberia because I am a better person," Weah said. "The people have confidence in me because they know that I am a true force of unification and peace. I want to empower the people. I know that Liberia can be great."

Doing charity work, criticising leaders and running for political office is not without serious dangers in Liberia. Like many African nations, Weah's homeland has been ravaged by poverty, corruption and war. Yes, he is mobbed by adoring people every time he walks the streets of Monrovia but he is also a threat to some and they may want to slow him down a bit or perhaps even eliminate him.

"The risk of working to help your people is the greatest risk of all. Living in a luxury home, riding in a luxury car, it means nothing. These are material things. You can perish any day. But believing in the value of people and working to give them hope, that is the greatest achievement of all. I have a beautiful life, yes, but putting your life for the people you believe in is the greatest achievement. I must do it. My people deserve better so I must stand for them. It's not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country. That is what I believe in.

"Sports people can give a lot to the world," Weah continued. "People view sports people negatively but we have to break down that perception. Sports people can be very intelligent and very productive. Sports is a force of unification and even peace. Because of our [sports stars] popularity people try to emulate us. We should give back to the children who believe in us. It is something that must come from your heart. That is true patriotism. Our nation is valuable to us so we must fight for it in a positive way. There is always hope. You must believe that."

Although his focus is now on politics and humanitarian concerns, Weah will not forget the sport that made him the most popular man in Liberia. It was a great love for football that fuelled his rise to greatness. But love was not enough, he says. It took work and dedication too.

"I love the game. The game is passion, but the discipline is important too. I gave the game discipline and I gave the game the image that it deserved and that was what made me the greatest player. It is not only kicking the ball; it is so much more."

It remains to be seen if Weah can be as great a politician as he was an athlete. But one thing is certain, his mission to save children and uplift the downtrodden has already earned him greatness as something far more important—a human being. ■

George Weah holds up the Golden Ball trophy in 1995 for European Player of the Year. He also won World Player of the Year, African Player of the Century, the Arthur Ashe Courage Award and FIFA's Fair Play Award. Photo: AP