

Sports

Philippines presidential hopeful Pacquiao says he was 'naive' drug user

'PacMan' high-profile backer of Duterte's war on drugs

MANILA: Philippines presidential hopeful Manny Pacquiao says he was "naive" and ignorant of the law when he took crystal meth in his youth, but argues offenders today know drugs are illegal and should be punished. Pacquiao, a retired world champion boxer, has been a high-profile backer of President Rodrigo Duterte's brutal war on drugs that has killed thousands of people.

But in the lead up to the 2022 elections, Pacquiao has sought to distance himself from the outgoing Duterte, who is facing an international probe into his bloody crackdown, and now says offenders should have a "chance to defend themselves".

"We have to put in jail those who are using drugs, selling drugs — that's what the law says," he told AFP, vowing to continue the anti-narcotics campaign "in the right way". "Before, I'm naive, that's why I use drugs... I don't know the law," said Pacquiao, 42, who currently holds a seat in the Senate and previously served two terms in Congress. Nowadays, "people, they know already that the law is not allowing the illegal drugs."

Pacquiao shocked the sporting world in 2016 when he admitted using marijuana and shabu, the local name for cheap and highly addictive crystal meth, as a teenager. Known for his rags-to-riches rise from street kid to one of the greatest pound-for-pound boxers of all time, Pacquiao has made fighting drugs, corruption and poverty key themes of his campaign to succeed Duterte.

'Man of Destiny'

While victory for Pacquiao is not unrealistic in a country famed for its celebrity-obsessed politics, he faces a tough fight. A leaked survey conducted in October by respected polling outfit Social Weather Stations reportedly showed Pacquiao in fourth place with just nine percent of voter support.

Ferdinand Marcos Jr, the son and namesake of the nation's former dictator, was the top preference for president with 47 percent. He was followed by incumbent vice president and leading opposition candidate Leni Robredo (18 percent) and celebrity mayor Francisco Domagoso (13 percent). Sitting in front of a teleprompter in his luxury mansion in the capital Manila, Pacquiao dismissed his poor showing and insisted his "Man of Destiny" campaign for the top job would go on.

"I'm not thinking about backing out," he said, as a bevy of staff hovered around his home in a secured enclave of billionaires and foreign ambassadors. "The people will choose... I know that the people want change in this country, they want to stop this corruption, they want to have a prosperous country and they want jobs."

Fans in the poverty-afflicted nation see the former boxer as living proof that success is possible for anyone who works hard, no matter their origins. But as a politician and fervent evangelical Christian, Pacquiao has stirred controversy with his support for Duterte's drug war and push to restore the death penalty, as well as his admission of past drug use, and previous homophobic comments.

Critics accuse the high-school dropout of lacking intellect and barely turning up to sessions in Congress and the Senate, raising questions about his ability to run the country of 110 million people. And he risked political capital this year in a public falling out with Duterte, who rivals Pacquiao for the affections of many Filipinos.

"He might be popular with the masses, but so are some of these other candidates," said Ted Lerner, a US-born sports journalist in the Philippines, predicting a return to the ring for the boxing great. "Just look at the surveys — it doesn't bode well at all for him."

A comeback is not on the cards



MANILA: In this photo taken on November 11, 2021, Philippine Senator Manny Pacquiao looks at a chessboard after an interview at his residence in Manila. —AFP

'I'm done'

Whoever wins the presidency may have to grapple with an International Criminal Court investigation into Duterte's drug war, which rights groups estimate has killed tens of thousands of mostly poor men. Duterte, who yanked Manila out of the ICC after it launched a preliminary probe into his deadly signature policy, has insisted it has no jurisdiction in the Philippines and he would not cooperate.

Asked if he would protect Duterte from prosecution if elected president, Pacquiao said he would "obey" the law, and was adamant that the Southeast Asian nation was still a member of the ICC. A glittering decades-long career in the ring brought Pacquiao fame and fortune — as well as the vices of booze, gambling and infidelity that

nearly wrecked his marriage before he found religion.

Two months after hanging up his gloves, Pacquiao said a comeback was not on the cards — even if he lost the election. "I'm already turning 43 years old, so it's enough for me, I'm done," said the father of five. Pacquiao has served as a celebrity endorser for products ranging from appliances to pizza and cars, hosted TV shows, and even founded his own cryptocurrency, the "PAC Token".

If his presidential bid fails, he plans to add farmer to his CV, growing fruit on a 20-hectare (50-acre) property in the southern province of Sarangani. "It's also quiet (there), I like that," he said, before opening his smartphone and playing a country music ballad. —AFP

News in brief

Oceania athletes at Asian Games

HONG KONG: Athletes from Oceania — including sporting powerhouse Australia — will compete in athletics and four other sports when the region takes part at the Asian Games for the first time, the Olympic Council of Asia said. About 300 athletes from Oceania will be able to compete in triathlon, wushu, roller-skating, weightlifting and athletics at the multi-sport extravaganza next September in Hangzhou, China. "Oceania will be taking part for the first time at the Asian Games," director general Husain Al-Musallam told an OCA meeting in Dubai, according to a press release. "They will receive honorary medals (if they are in the top three) and it will not be counted in the final medals tally." Oceania — Australia, New Zealand and a swathe of Pacific islands — have not taken part in the regional Olympics before, but sporting ties with Asia have been growing. The 2022 Asian Games will see 10,000 athletes compete in 40 sports across 55 venues, with eSports making its debut as an official medal event.

Key shooting tourney underway

KUWAIT: The late Sheikh Abdullah Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah Shooting Tournament kicks off tomorrow with men's and women's competitions in 10m air pistol and rifle and Olympic archery. Secretary General Obaid Al-Osaimi said the tournament, which runs through Saturday, has a special importance for the shooting community, noting that Kuwait Shooting Sport Club "is keen on having this tournament on its annual local agenda as it enjoys large participation of shooters in Kuwait." "The tournament is a good opportunity for our national teams to prepare for international competitions, mainly the third Gulf Games" which take place in Kuwait on January 9-19, 2022, he said. Osaimi, on behalf of the board of directors and shooting community, thanked the family of Sheikh Abdullah Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah for their continued support.

Barty gets engaged

SYDNEY: Ashleigh Barty capped her third straight season as world number one yesterday by announcing she is engaged to long-term boyfriend Garry Kissick. The Australian revealed the happy news in an Instagram post, sharing a photo of the smiling couple embracing with an engagement ring on her finger. "Future husband," wrote Barty, 25, who accompanied the post with a love heart and ring emoji. Kissick, 30, is a former golf pro and the pair met on a course in Barty's home state of Queensland in 2016. The news sparked a frenzy of congratulations from fellow tennis stars, with Simona Halep posting 10 love heart emojis. Reigning Wimbledon champion Barty pulled out of the season-ending WTA Finals to remain at home and focus on preparing for the Australian summer.

Corruption blights Kenya's quest for football glory

NAIROBI: When a youthful Nick Mwendwa took over the reins of Kenyan football five years ago, he was welcomed as a new broom who would clean up the troubled sport — but now he himself stands accused of corruption.

The game was plunged into further turmoil this month when the government disbanded the Football Kenya Federation (FKF) for alleged embezzlement of public funds, and appointed a caretaker committee headed by a retired judge to run its affairs.

FKF boss Mwendwa, 42, was arrested at a Nairobi hotel and hauled into court to face allegations of financial impropriety, and has since been banned from the federation's headquarters and all football activities. Sports Minister Amina Mohamed spoke of an "extended deterioration in the state of football management in Kenya" as she accused the FKF of failing to account for millions of dollars from the government and sponsors.

Mwendwa, who is also the owner of top-flight league club the Kariobangi Sharks, has denied any wrongdoing. But former FKF secretary general Lordvick Aduda said the current state of affairs was no surprise as there has been a "systematic drain" of leadership at the football governing body.

"We are at our lowest ebb. We are lowest in respect to performance, funding and management," Aduda told AFP. World-renowned as an athletics powerhouse, Kenya has long struggled to replicate its success on the track in the most popular game on the planet.

Gold-plated trophy

Mwendwa was first elected FKF head in 2016 after campaigning on an ambitious "team change" agenda, pledging a series of swift and sweeping actions to



NAIROBI: Nick Mwendwa, President of Football Kenya Federation (FKF), reacts as he arrives at Milimani Law Courts in Nairobi on November 15, 2021. —AFP

address the challenges he inherited. His forerunner Sam Nyanweya's two-decade rule was dogged by claims of corruption and mismanagement, highlighted by an embarrassing incident in 2018 when the national team was stranded at an airport before a World Cup qualifier because of a lack of funds.

"We will make sure that everything is functioning right from the grassroots," Mwendwa said after his election, vowing to make Kenya a "great football nation". But those dreams of glory failed to materialize, leaving Kenyan football in a dismal state. Mwendwa's tenure has been marred by the same sort of allegations of malpractice that peppered his predecessor's rule, while on the pitch Kenya's national team the Harambee Stars have failed to shine.

Earlier this year, Mwendwa was put on the spot over his decision to buy a 24-carat gold-plated trophy worth more than \$50,000 for the premier league champions — while the team that won the women's league pocketed a paltry 300,000 Kenyan shillings (less than \$2,700).

Football's world governing body FIFA has now threatened to ban Kenya if it considers the government action against the FKF unwarranted third-party

meddling. Kenya has twice faced such bans in 2004 and 2006 because of government interference — coincidentally while the federation was also fighting claims of corruption.

'Good money after bad'

Aduda voiced doubt that the caretaker committee, which is in charge of the FKF until elections in about six months' time, would improve the sport's fortunes. "Nobody is going to throw good money after bad," said Aduda, who lost out to Mwendwa when he was re-elected as FKF boss in 2020.

Kenya failed to qualify for the Africa Cup of Nations finals in Cameroon in January and are also out of the running for the 2022 World Cup in Qatar — qualification was one of Mwendwa's much-vaunted pledges. The team are currently ranked a lowly 104 by FIFA — below even the Democratic Republic of Congo — and have not been in the top 100 since 2017. Poor management, cancelled sponsorship deals, ageing players and a revolving door of coaches — seven since 2016 — have been blamed for their uninspiring performances. Adding insult to injury, the Confederation of African Football last month said Kenya's two main stadiums were not up to international standards.

But problems also run deep at local level — unpaid club salaries, contract violations and poorly run championships. There are few incentives for youngsters, with a lack of structured training programs or decent pitches outside the capital, so many give up football before secondary school age.

"The state of football in Kenya is not encouraging," lamented Bob Oyugi, a former coach with Kenya's most successful club Gor Mahia. He has called for the FKF's constitution to be overhauled to enable more grassroots involvement.

Former Kenya skipper Musa Otieno blamed the poor standards on the endemic graft that has left players unpaid and drained money away from efforts to develop the game. "Once elected, the officials forget the mandate that brought them to power. They put their interests ahead of sport," Otieno told AFP. "The people who will struggle are the players." —AFP

China says Peng Shuai case 'maliciously' hyped up

BEIJING: China yesterday said the controversy surrounding Peng Shuai was being "maliciously" hyped up, after the Chinese tennis star made sexual assault claims against one of the nation's most powerful politicians.

Peng, a Wimbledon and French Open doubles champion, was not seen for more than two weeks after she made the accusations against former vice-premier Zhang Gaoli. The 35-year-old Peng reappeared in public for the first time at the weekend when she was seen attending a Beijing tennis tournament. "I think some people should stop deliberately and maliciously hyping up, let alone politicize this issue," said foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian in response to a question on whether the case affected China's international image. Beijing will host the Winter Olympics in February.

"I believe you have all seen that she recently attended some public events and had a video call with IOC president Thomas Bach," Zhao added. The



MELBOURNE: This file photo taken on January 13, 2019 shows China's Peng Shuai serving the ball during a practice session ahead of the Australian Open tennis tournament in Melbourne. —AFP

comment was the most direct response from the Chinese government to Peng's case. Until yesterday, Beijing had repeatedly brushed off questions about her whereabouts and welfare — calling them "not a diplomatic issue". Evidence of her claims have also been scrubbed from China's highly censored Internet. The Women's Tennis Association (WTA) has threatened to end lucrative contracts with China unless it gets word of Peng's safety.

IOC call & criticism

Peng appeared in a 30-minute video call with the International Olympic Committee (IOC) chief on Sunday. The organization said in a statement that during the call, "Peng Shuai thanked the IOC for its concern about her well-being."

"She explained that she is safe and well, living at her home in Beijing, but would like to have her privacy respected at this time," it said. Earlier Sunday, Peng was seen attending a Beijing tennis tournament, in official photos of the event. But human rights groups and sporting authorities overseas have continued to voice concern about Peng and whether local authorities will act on her allegations.

"This video does not change our call for a full, fair and transparent investigation, without censorship, into her allegation of sexual assault, which is the issue that gave rise to our initial concern," the WTA said, when asked about the IOC call. Human Rights Watch also slammed the IOC and called for them to explain how the video call with Peng had been organized. "The IOC has vaulted itself from silence about Beijing's abysmal human rights record to active collaboration with Chinese authorities in undermining freedom of speech and disregarding alleged sexual assault," said Yaqiu Wang, senior China researcher at Human Rights Watch. —AFP