Leukemia Survivor Rikako Ikee Qualifies for Summer Olympics

Rikako Ikee, who competed in the 2016 Olympics at age 16, was diagnosed with leukemia in early 2019, prompting a yearlong hiatus.

April 19, 2021 By Caroline Tien

Just over two years after she was diagnosed with acute lymphocytic leukemia, which led to a 10-month hospitalization, champion swimmer Rikako Ikee has qualified for the 2021 Summer Olympics, in a bravura performance at Japan's Olympic trials earlier this month.

Come July, the Tokyo native, 20, will be competing in the 4x100-meter medley relay. Her odds-defying comeback surprised no one more than herself. "I've never thought I'd be able to win the 100," Ikee said in an interview after the trials, according to The Japan Times. "But I trained to win and I was saying to myself 'I'm back' as I entered this race."

In February 2019, Ikee, who competed in the 2016 Summer Olympics at age 16 (she came in fifth in the 100-meter butterfly event), sent shock waves through the international swimming community when she announced in an emotional tweet that she was about to begin treatment for leukemia, a cancer of the blood. "I can't believe it, it's a confusing situation," she wrote in part, according to CNN.

After a brief trial of chemotherapy, Ikee underwent a stem cell transplant, aka a bone marrow transplant. In what was likely a show of support for the popular young athlete, the number of people in Japan who registered as bone marrow donors in February 2019 hit a record monthly high.

Soon after she was discharged from the hospital, Ikee resumed her training, calling her survival "a miracle." But she was discouraged by her reduction in physical fitness and pessimistic about her chances of competing in the 2021 Olympics. "I think my swimming ability has returned to about the level in my first or second year of junior high school," she told Kyodo News last summer, according to NBC Sports.

Despite her initial concerns, Ikee rapidly regained muscle mass and returned to competition in August. At the trials on April 4, 2021, she swam the women's 100-meter butterfly in an impressive 57.77 seconds, winning by .41 seconds.

Overcome with emotion, she hugged the swimmer in the next lane and climbed out of the pool to speak to waiting reporters with tears in her eyes. “No matter how unconfident or tough or difficult things are, if you work hard, you get rewarded,” Ikee said, according to Olympic Channel. "In the end, I went into the race thinking, ‘I’m home. I belong here.’”

For the inspiring story of a cancer survivor who accomplished an impressive athletic feat, read “Breast Cancer Survivor Makes History Swimming English Channel.” For more on bone marrow transplants and how the treatment has progressed in the last decade, read “Big Gains in Bone Marrow Transplant Survival Since the Mid-2000s.”

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