After Leukemia, Olympics

Two years after she was diagnosed with leukemia, champion swimmer Rikako Ikee qualified for the 2021 Summer Olympics.

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Just over two years after she was diagnosed with leukemia, which led to a 10-month hospitalization, champion swimmer Rikako Ikee qualified for the 2021 Summer Olympics. The Tokyo native hopes to compete in the 4x100-meter medley relay in July.

Ikee first competed in the Olympics in 2016, at age 16. In 2019, she was diagnosed with acute lymphocytic leukemia. After a brief trial of chemotherapy, she underwent a stem cell (bone marrow) transplant. In 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 high.

When she started training again, Ikee felt that her swimming ability had dropped to where it had been in junior high school. Her rapid progress surprised her. 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. "In the end, I went into the race thinking, I'm home. I belong here."

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