

Ikee to fight 2-front battle to beat leukemia, qualify for Tokyo 2020

February 13, 2019 (Mainichi Japan)



A smiling Rikako Ikee reacts after she won the women's 50-meter freestyle final to collect her sixth gold medal at the Asian Games in the Indonesian capital of Jakarta, on Aug. 24, 2018. (Mainichi/Noriko Tokuno)

TOKYO -- Japan's top swimmer Rikako Ikee, who has stunned the nation by revealing she has leukemia, will fight a two-front battle to overcome the disease and achieve her dream of "winning a gold medal with a world record in Tokyo" at the 2020 Olympics.

Ikee, who tweeted about her illness on Feb. 12, said that although she is still confused and cannot believe the diagnosis, leukemia "can be cured completely with proper treatment." She continued that she will "make effort so that I can show you a stronger Rikako Ikee as soon as possible."

The 18-year-old swimmer, who grabbed six gold medals at the Asian Games last summer, had to cut

her training in Australia short because of the blood ailment and is now hospitalized in Japan.

At a Feb. 12 press conference in Tokyo, Japan Swimming Federation Vice Chairman Koji Ueno revealed that it was Ikee's own decision to come out about her condition. "She decided to reveal the name of the illness and other information openly, out of consideration for the impact on other athletes as next year's games approach," explained Ueno.

Her coach Jiro Miki, who counseled Ikee about announcing the health issue, emphasized that the possibility of her competing in the 2020 Tokyo Olympics is "not zero." Miki said that he believes Ikee will return to competitive swimming "strong, because she made up her mind to fight the illness."

Ikee is dubbed a "water child" partly because her mother gave birth to her in the bathtub at her home. She started swimming at age 3, and was recognized as a high-ceiling athlete after she won a national championship as an elementary school sixth grader.

Following her selection to the national team when she was a third-year junior high school student, Ikee repeatedly set new Japanese records in freestyle and butterfly competitions. She managed to propel herself to fifth place in the women's 100-meter butterfly final in the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympics, making full use of her long limbs and flexible, 171-centimeter-tall physique.

Ikee intensified her training to improve muscle strength, resulting in a stunning haul of six gold medals at the Asian Games in Jakarta in August 2018. The competition came only six days after she swam in the Pan-Pacific Swimming Championships, and she had to compete in 25 heats in two events. "I many times felt like I was snapping," Ikee said at the time. Since the beginning of this year, however, the swimmer began to complain about fatigue.

Ikee is going to tackle her illness head-on with the unyielding spirit she proved in her swimming career. To compete in the 2020 Games, she needs to qualify in the national championships in April 2020, three months before the big event. "She has expressed her intent to work hard to get well and practice together," said coach Miki in a choked-up voice.

(Japanese original by Tadashi Murakami, Sports News Department)