

Bayer 04 Leverkusen

Ralf Blume

In 2021, Ralf suffered a severe Covid infection. His situation was very critical, but he managed to come back and survive. He decided to improve his health and strengthen his lungs through sport. An acquaintance introduced him to walking football. As a former amateur player and Bayer 04 fan, the walking football programme in Leverkusen immediately caught his eye.

At first it was a challenge for him because he lacked the stamina and had to stop after a few minutes. However, he became even more motivated and trained hard for his ultimate goal - to play a walking football match for his favourite club, Bayer 04 Leverkusen. His dream came true in March 2022, when he played in two friendlies against a local club and Ferencvaros Budapest on the same day that professional teams were competing in the UEFA Europa League last-16 first leg. He even scored a goal, which was a huge achievement for him.

Since then, Ralf has been attending all sorts of training sessions that fit in with his job. Bayer 04 have rewarded Ralf's efforts by nominating him for the third edition of the European Walking Football League in Newcastle in May 2023. "Playing in this tournament is the highlight of a long and hard journey for me. I can't describe how happy I am to be playing for Bayer 04 against all these big European clubs. I am very proud at the moment," said Ralf Blume.

Werner Mayer-Klein

At 73, Werner is one of the oldest players who regularly takes part in the walking football sessions. Despite being a pensioner, his schedule was always full until the pandemic began. In addition to all his hobbies, he also looked after his wife, who needs help several times a day. The pandemic hit Werner hard. Not only was he unable to attend walking football training sessions or watch his favourite club play in the stadium, but in 2021 his doctor diagnosed a structural hip fracture that would require surgery.

The situation was particularly daunting for Werner, who feared he might never be able to play walking football again. He underwent surgery in 2022 and was sidelined for an extended period. After a few months of rest, he was allowed to start his rehabilitation in very small steps. It took more than a year, but in the summer of 2023 he took part in his first training session since the operation. "It was a very heartwarming moment because my teammates never forgot me and most of the team came to my first training session to applaud and congratulate me on my achievement," Werner said after the session.

Despite not being one of the most experienced and fit players, Werner didn't expect to be called up for the fourth edition of the European Walking Football Championship in Madrid in September 2023. However, the coaches recognised his hard work and dedication by including him in the eight-man squad. "It was like a dream come true. I couldn't be happier right now," Werner said at the final dinner in Madrid. He hasn't missed a training session since and the injury hasn't affected his footballing activities at all.