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A “special friend” for the Special Games

Basketball star Dirk Nowitzki inspires spectators at the kick off of the Special Olympic World Games Berlin 2023

This year’s World Games could hardly ask for a better friend. That would certainly be a tall order. Dirk Nowitzki measures 2.13 meters. The retired professional basketball player weighs around 120 kilograms. But he was nevertheless effortlessly lifted into the air by powerlifter Danilo Pasnicki as Nowitzki made his way through the Berlin exhibition grounds to the training court of the German basketball team. Nowitzki arrived at the game in good spirits. “Dirkules” actually rested horizontally on the shoulders of Pasnicki, who was laughing happily despite the effort.

It was an impromptu training session for the heavy athlete, who will compete in his first event on Monday, and the surprising highlight of Nowitzki’s appearance at the Special Olympic World Games. He was invited as a “Friend of the Games”. He arrived two days before his 45th birthday, which he will spend with family.

From Nowitzki’s statements at the press conference to his chance encounter with the power lifter on the way to the basketball court, it was hard to decide who was more excited: the many athletes and coaches who asked Nowitzki for autographs and selfies or Nowitzki himself, who was quickly immersed in the happy atmosphere.

“I’ve met athletes who have competed in the Paralympics or even Special Olympics. I know that joy in their eyes when they talk about the events in which they can compete and meet other athletes,” Nowitzki told the World Games editorial team during a short break. Among the hustle and bustle of athletes from 176 nations, he was reminded of his own Olympic experience in Beijing in 2008. “It gives me goosebumps again when I talk about my games. And it’s the same with these athletes here. It’s such a great experience. And that’s precisely why everyone is here this week.”

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Nowitzki was the flag bearer for the German Olympic team in 2008. And he will never forget the moment when his teammates called out to him just before he entered the stadium: "We want to see the flag!" And Nowitzki then waved it high above his head.

Nowitzki noted something special about the Special Olympics World Games compared with the Olympic Games: "There's not a lot of pressure here. It's really about the cohesion, acceptance, and learning from each other as well as meeting new friends from all over the world. Everything is a bit mixed here. The supervisors stay with the athletes. And some families are here as well. And everyone takes public transportation to the events. There's a real family feeling."

Nowitzki was particularly familiar with the German basketball players. A crowd quickly formed around the NBA superstar. He patiently signed autographs on T-shirts, jackets, and accreditation badges. He then asked for a ball because he wanted to play himself. "I'm taking over the defense", he said. Almost all players of the teams dribbled towards Nowitzki. Some even managed to score a basket against the former pro. "It was just great to play against Dirk. I've seen him so many times on TV. And now he's here. It's simply incredible," said Josef Dobmeier from Bavaria to the editors of the World Games.

For Dobmeier and his teammates, the encounter with Nowitzki was enormous motivational boost. "Now we might be able to give another five percent. I think everyone is much more on fire now. There's a lot of emotion. You have to imagine: here was the best German basketball player who ever played," said head coach Laurent Oettershagen.

Nowitzki only briefly showed that he is the greatest German basketball player when he sank a few balls into the basket from beyond the three-point line. Otherwise, he was simply an athlete among athletes. He also joined in the classic Unified Team ritual in which everyone stood in a circle and raised their left hands into the center to shout: "One Team". A fitting motto for the start of the Special Olympics World Games in Berlin.

Text: Tom Mustroph

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