

Frankfurt, November 26, 2019

DFL, DFB and VBG finance research project about the health status of former professionals

Together, the DFL Deutsche Fußball Liga, the DFB and the German Social Accident Insurance Institution for the administrative sector (VBG) are commissioning a research project about long-term health effects among former professional footballers. NAKO e.V., the sponsoring association of the NAKO Gesundheitsstudie (NAKO), is to survey the health status of at least 300 former professional footballers aged between 40 and 69 with the comprehensive NAKO examination programme over a period of three years from the start of 2020. All former professionals must have played in the Bundesliga, Bundesliga 2, the Frauen-Bundesliga or comparable foreign football leagues.

NAKO is a Germany-wide health study, which has over 200,000 recorded participants. The objective of this research project is to understand better how illnesses occur in order to improve prevention, early detection and treatment in Germany. The NAKO investigation programme comprises a variety of clinical diagnostics procedures, such as examinations of the cardiovascular system, metabolism and other organ systems, including the musculoskeletal system. During the comprehensive examination, which lasts several hours, various checks are made, including echocardiography (ultrasound of the heart) and magnetic resonance imaging (cross sections of the body). The lung function as well as cognitive and emotional functions are also recorded. A medical interview is carried out, in which participants are asked numerous questions about potential risk and protective factors in their lifestyle and environment.

The Research Directors for the examination of former footballers are Professor Tim Meyer (Saarland University) and Professor Klaus Berger (University of Münster). Meyer, who is also Chairman of the medical commission of the DFB explained: "Thanks to this examination being embedded in the NAKO, the values of the former footballers can be compared with an enormous pool of data – this increases the quality of the findings immensely. This approach thus goes significantly deeper than previous studies, which frequently did not allow for immediate transferability, meaning that cause and effect relationships had to stay inconclusive."

Additionally, football-related variables are recorded from the professionals. These include, for example, the number of matches played, the match positions and the match level (league with respective season number). Using this information, it is possible to produce an estimate of physical strain across the entire sport career and the potential influence on the current function and health status can be quantified.

Andreas Nagel, DFL Director of Sport & Youth Development said the following on this topic: "Associations and clubs are aware of their duty of care for the health of players; another reason why, for example, mandatory baseline screenings in matters concerning head injuries were introduced in the current season. All new findings and developments for maintaining the health of the players are being discussed in the responsible commissions – this comprehensive health study can provide us with additional well-founded findings for protecting the health of footballers effectively."

"As a partner for sports, VBG strives to support sports companies in maintaining the health of their athletes through scientifically well-founded and innovative and practicable prevention and rehabilitation offers," says Professor Bernd Petri, Member of the Board of VBG.

The NAKO (in English also referred to as German National Cohort) is financed by the Federal Ministry for Education and Research, the German states and the Helmholtz Association and is also the basis for health policy decisions. The DFB, DFL and VBG are each contributing EUR 150,000 to finance the additional examination of former footballers.

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