

Franz Beckenbauer, the Kaiser of German soccer, dies at 78

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Havana, January 8 (AFP) - German soccer legend Franz Beckenbauer, world champion as a player in 1974 and as coach in 1990, died Sunday at the age of 78, the German Football Federation (DFB) announced to the AFP affiliate SID news agency.

"Franz Beckenauer was definitely the greatest German footballer of all time, and on top of that he was a formidable man," DFB vice-president Hans-Joachim Watzke said in a statement.

World Cup winner as a player (1974) and then as a national coach (1990), president of Bayern and great organizer of the 2006 World Cup: for more than half a century Beckenbauer has been a protagonist in German soccer, becoming the all-round 'Kaiser' of post-World War II Germany.

It is a story Franz Beckenbauer used to tell, an anecdote that marked his destiny. At the age of 12, the boy from the working-class Obergiesing district of Munich discovered soccer at SC 1906 Munich.

In the summer of 1958, in a youth tournament, he played against the then big club of the Bavarian capital, Munich 1860, for whom he was later to sign.

He has an altercation during the match with one of the 'Löwen' players, Gerhard König, who punches him in the face.

Bayern symbol

After the game Beckenbauer is convinced: he refuses to go to the "rowdy" club and proudly supports his rivals Bayern.

This is the beginning of a long history between Bayern and the young Franz, who will become the German "Kaiser" (emperor) in a few years' time.

Born in September 1945 in the ruins of post-war Germany, the son of a post office manager, Beckenbauer joined Bayern in 1964 at the age of 19, where he would spend the bulk of his career.

The team created a position tailored to his talent: sweeper, moving in behind the defense but often coming into the midfield, which allowed him to score a number of goals.

An elegant player of pedigree, with a haughty bearing, he built up a spectacular record with Bayern: four league titles and as many German Cup titles, two Ballon d'Or awards, three consecutive victories in the European Club Cup, the predecessor of the Champions League.

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