

Grid star meets challenges of recovery

BY RICHARD KHAVKINE
FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

Aaron Gowans has captained the Irvington High School football team to a top seed without playing a single down this fall.

But the 6-foot-3-inch, senior tight end, defensive end and line-backer has stood tall on the sidelines, which might count as the season's greatest achievement.

During a four-team scrimmage at Union High School on Aug. 26, Gowans, playing defense, slipped away from his blocker to attempt a tackle when his head slammed awkwardly into the opposing running back.

After springing up from the ground for a few moments, he fell back to the turf, unable to move.

"I couldn't breathe. I couldn't talk," he said while seated on the Matthews Field bleachers last week. "I tried to move, but the only thing that could move was my eyes. ... I just started praying."

X-rays of his spine and neck revealed he had fractured his C4 vertebrae.

The hit had broken his neck.

Gowans underwent successful spinal-fusion surgery at University Hospital in Newark a day later.

He transferred to Children's Specialized Hospital in New Brunswick for rehabilitation on Sept. 2. Dr. Michele Fantasia, the director of the hospital's spinal cord rehabilitation team, said Gowans appeared weak and apprehensive those first few days.

"You had this super athletic, strapping guy who now is in bed and can barely move," Fantasia said. "It was shocking for Aaron, and he had his sad times."

Gowans, 18, could hardly lift his legs or move his arms, she said. "When he came in the door, he couldn't feed himself," Fantasia said. "He needed someone by his side all the time."

Before long, Gowans discarded the walker he was using. Five days a week, an occupational therapist helped him hone his fine motor skills. Soon, he was feeding and caring for himself.

He was discharged Sept. 30, five weeks after that brutal hit.

Gowans, who lives with his grandmother and a sister in Irvington, still has trouble writing and with other fine motor skills. He can hold a pen in his hand for just a few minutes before he begins to swell up. "I've got to learn to do that all over again," he said.

Gowans entered Irvington's athletic program as an eighth-grader at Union Avenue Middle School, where as a guard on the basketball team he scored at least 60 points in a game three times. His skills on the hard court were such that his coaches at Bloomfield Technical High School did not want him to risk injury playing football.

"He was a raw football player, but he had a lot of potential," said Darnell Grant, Irvington's football coach, who called him one of the best basketball players to come through Irvington. "We just knew he was going to be an outstanding talent."

Gowans, who attends Bloomfield Tech but plays on Irvington's squad because his school does not field a football team, was voted captain by his teammates this summer.

He still attends every practice,

every game, and still walks out the team as captain.

"Most people wouldn't want to come. They would get mopey and sad. That's just not me," he said.

Dr. Christopher M. Zarro, who performed the three-hour surgery on Gowans' neck, said it's too early to tell, athletically speaking, what's in Gowans' future.

"He'll play basketball again," Zarro said. "I don't know about how competitively, and I won't know for a while. ... It all depends how well he does in rehab in the next year."

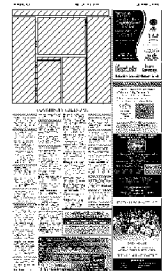
A good student, Gowans uses a tape recorder in class, and someone take notes for him. He plans to attend prep school for a year before going to college, possibly to Seton Hall or Niagara University, to study early childhood development. And, he hopes, to find his way back onto the hardcourt or even the gridiron.

"If the doctor clears me, I'm playing again," he said. "I'm not scared to play again."

Few people would doubt him, not least the football coach who helped mold him from a walk-on player into an imposing and skillful two-way leader on a team challenging for a title.

"If there was a kid that could come back from something like that," Grant said, "he'd probably be the kid."

Richard Khavkine is a reporter for New Jersey Local News Service. He may be reached at (908) 243-6231 or rkhavkine@njlns.com.





ALEXANDRA PAIS/FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

Aaron Gowans is leading the Irvington High football team from the sidelines while he recovers from a broken neck.