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After breaking his neck, Irvington player makes strides toward return

By **Tom Meagher**

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IRVINGTON -- 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 linebacker has stood tall on the sidelines, which might count as the season's greatest achievement.



Alexandra Pais/New Jersey Local News Service

Aaron Gowans continues to lead the Irvington High School football team as captain, even though he's confined to the sidelines after breaking his neck during a summer scrimmage.

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 in 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 sporting consciousness 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 Tech 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."

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