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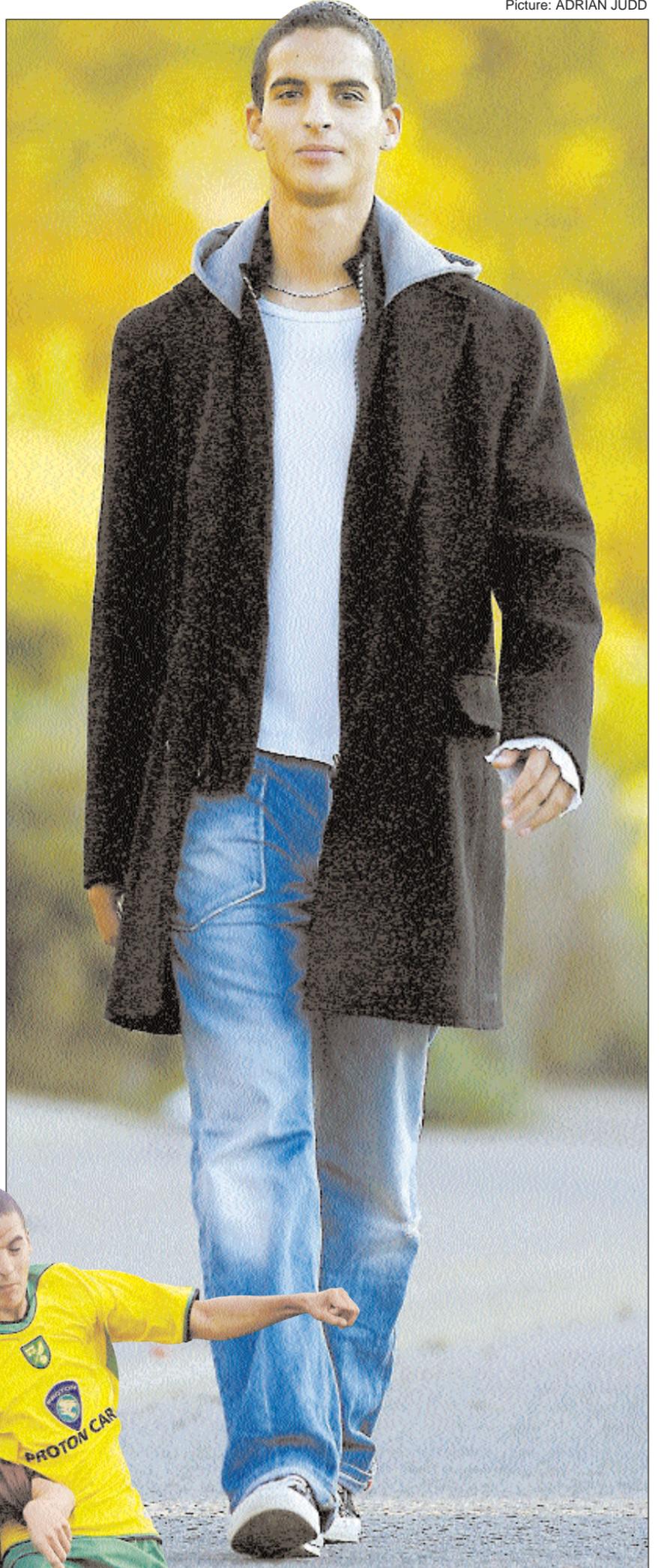
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Picture: ADRIAN JUDD



Young City star came within two millimetres of paralysis

'I OWE MY LIFE TO MIRACLE SURGEON'



By MARK NICHOLLS
Health correspondent

One of Norwich City's rising young stars came within two millimetres of being paralysed for life after breaking his neck in a car crash.

But reserve team striker Asmat El Ouargui has made a miraculous recovery and, incredibly, is back playing football, with his eye on a first-team place.

Without extreme good fortune and the skill of a Norwich-based spinal surgeon, 17-year-old Asmat would never have played again and might have spent the rest of his life in a wheelchair.

Asmat's nightmare began in March when he was on his way to the club's Colney training ground. He was a front-seat passenger in a car that hit a bank, careered out of control and rolled over.

The driver and backseat passenger escaped with minor injuries but Asmat suffered a potentially crippling - even life-threatening - neck injury.

Because he is tall - standing 6ft 1in - he thinks he hit his head on the roof of the vehicle as it rolled over.

Speaking publicly for the first time about the accident, Asmat, who is half-Danish and half-Moroccan, said: "I broke three

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WALKING TALL: Asmat El Ouargui recovering from his crash trauma and, inset, in action for the Canaries.



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Pictures: ADRIAN JUDD AND DENISE BRADLEY



X-RAY: Asmat's broken neck.

Asmat El Ouargui has made an amazing recovery from a broken neck. He told health correspondent MARK NICHOLLS how he survived his ordeal and began his road to recovery.

In his darkest hours after discovering he had broken his neck in a car crash, Norwich City reserve-team striker Asmat El Ouargui had to dig deep to find the strength to fight his way back to fitness.

Displaying a maturity beyond his years, but with the eloquence of a youth who speaks four languages, he confesses to periods of despair.

"There were moments when I sat in the bed staring at the ceiling or looking out of the window and feeling miserable."

Yet there were key figures who steered him back to recovery to help him fulfil his footballing ambitions: surgeon Am Rai, who told him he would play again; Norwich City Academy manager Ricky Martin, who helped give Asmat self-belief; his parents Fatima and Hassan and other members of his family who travelled over from Denmark immediately after the crash; his Islamic faith; the club; and the support and strength of fellow countryman and first-team star Youssef Safri.

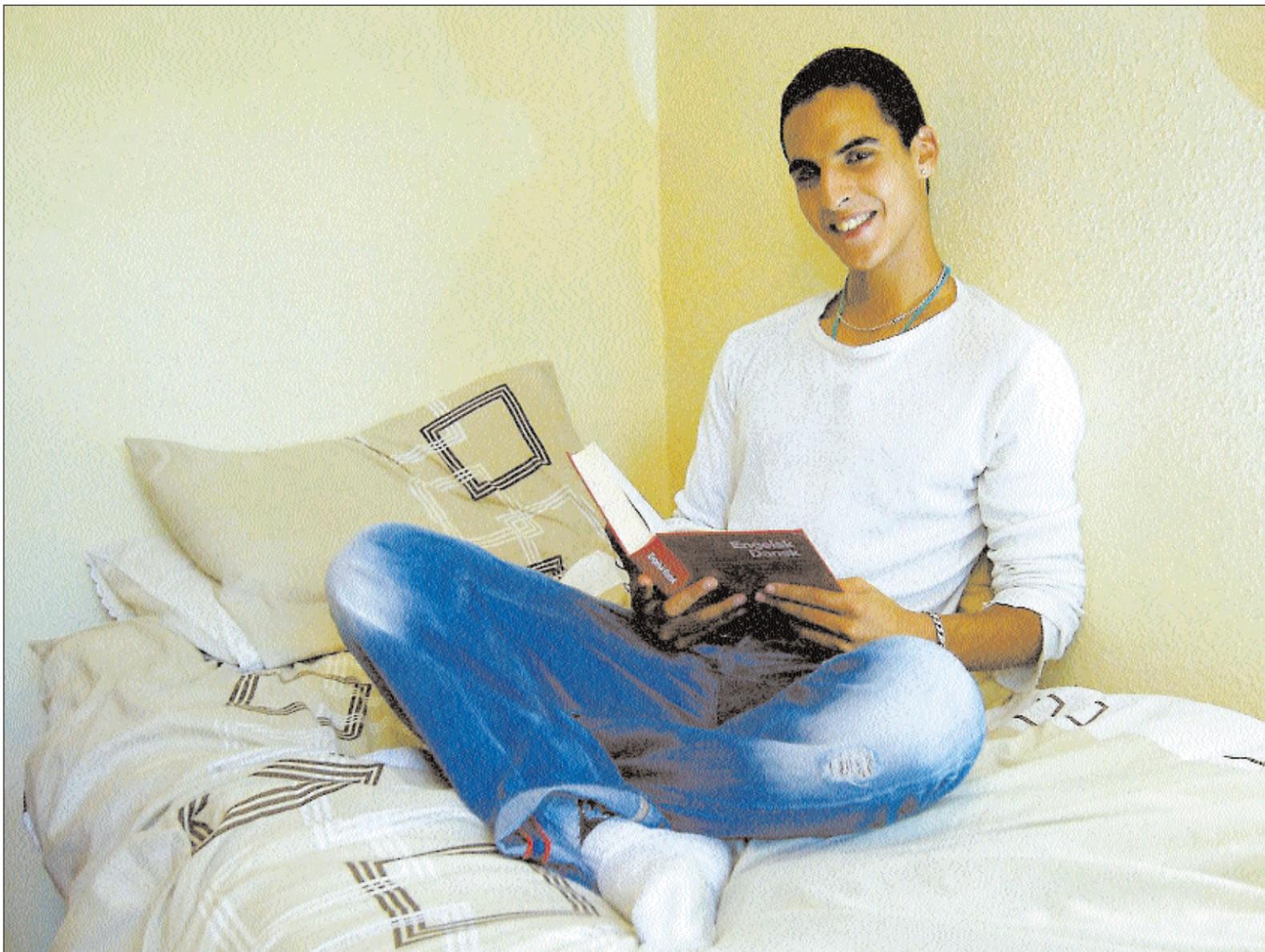
"Saf was really good, almost like a brother, to me - he was there for me," says Asmat. "We talked a lot, and when my parents came over, he looked after them and showed them around Norwich. I also used to talk to Thomas Helveg as well and they both visited me in hospital."

But there was a huge element of self-belief in Asmat's recovery.

"We are told that if you keep believing, you will make it - if you stop believing, you won't."

"Youth team manager Ricky Martin just said, 'Keep focusing, think forward'. There were moments that I was not able to do this, but my manager told me to keep believing."

Once released from hospital, Asmat went back home to Denmark for a



ON THE MEND: Asmat El Ouargui relaxes at home after his recovery.

Keeping the faith paid off for young footballer

month in the summer.

"I came back all charged up and ready to go. I did intensive work with physio and running and heading the ball. I did not expect to be back in full training until September, but by July I was already taking part, which was a big surprise for me. That was a great relief," he says.

"I had trained with the first team before the accident and was playing reserve-team football, and I'm now back playing reserve and youth-team football."

His first game back was on July 20 for City's Under-18 side against Portsmouth at Colney. He also featured in the 0-0 draw with Leicester City last week.

"Before the accident, my biggest moment came when playing for Norwich in the FA Youth Cup

against Burnley, and I scored the winning goal in extra time with two minutes to go. And my biggest moment since..."

He pauses, reflecting on the question. The answer encompasses gratitude and realism in its simplicity.

"... was just getting back to playing football."

He still suffers some stiffness in his neck from the injury but he says it eases once he runs around and gets involved in a game.

Asmat arrived in Norwich from Danish club Hvidovre, where Manchester United and Denmark goalkeeping legend Peter Schmeichel used to play.

His team visited Norwich for a youth game and won 3-0, with Asmat invited over for a three-week trial in July last year, when he also did well.

He played in the pre-season friendlies against Northampton Town and Rushden & Diamonds, finding the net in both games.

Aged 16, he signed a two-year deal and arrived at the club's Academy last November.

Academy manager Ricky Martin said Asmat and his family were offered as much support as they needed in the aftermath of the accident.

"We then saw he had started to make a speedy recovery and it then became a case of helping him refocus and look to the future and come around to a positive mindset."

"His first game back was an emotional occasion but he has now made a full recovery. It is now down to him with a lot of hard work and determination to secure a professional contract."



SURGEON: Am Rai.

I owe my life to miracle surgeon, says City youngster

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bones in my neck.

"The first week after the accident I really did not think anything because I was drugged, so I did not have the energy to think. I did not know really how serious my injuries were - I don't think people really wanted to scare me and I did not know that much before the operation. Then I found out I had a broken neck and it could have killed or paralysed me.

"Later on, it was whether I would be able to live a normal life, whether I would be able to play football and do all the things I used to do.

"When I got out of the car, I could still move - I was in pain but not paralysed. But I know now that if I moved wrong, I could have been paralysed. The operation also could have killed me or paralysed me if it had gone wrong. But now I am back playing football again."

Asmat has also revealed that at the time of the crash he had been called up to play for the Moroccan national team.

The operation was carried out three days later by consultant spinal surgeon Am Rai, who practises at the Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital and the nearby Bupa Hospital.

Mr Rai said: "He was lucky. He broke his neck but if it had moved

forward only a little more, he would have been paralysed.

"It is a credit to the ambulance crew that got him out and stabilised his neck."

"If his neck had moved forward another two or three millimetres, he would have been paralysed."

During the four-hour operation at the N&N, surgeons realigned his neck and then built a cage around the spine with bone substitute and a

plate on top of it, all held in place by screws as it fused with natural bone.

Mr Rai said an alternative treatment would have been to build a 'halo' frame around Asmat's head with screws holding his neck perfectly still as the bone mended. But that would have meant three months in the halo and three months rehabilitation after that.

Asmat was in a neck brace for six weeks and back playing by July.