

RUGBY: Loose marks Walsham double milestone after fearing career was over

Surgeon's skills made big dreams come true

By MARK NICHOLLS
Health correspondent

When a painful neck injury forced top Norfolk rugby player Stuart Loose to give up the game, he thought his dreams of captaining his club and topping 250 matches for them had disappeared.

A pro-lapsed disc was putting pressure on his spinal column and severely weakening his right arm.

The injury became so bad that in March, the 29-year-old gave up playing for North Walsham. But soon after, his GP referred him for an X-ray, where he came to the attention of specialist spinal surgeon Am Rai, with the club footing the bill for private treatment and an MRI scan.

Stuart, who works as a carpenter, said: "He told me I would have to have an operation regardless of whether I wanted to play rugby or not, just to carry on working.

"I had thought it was a little niggle and thought it would go away but it would not.

"I discussed it with my wife and the rugby club and they backed me and said that if I wanted to continue playing rugby after the operation the club would fund the operation.

"I wanted to carry on playing, rugby is a big part of me and my life and has been for years or more. I did not want to give up."

The club also told Stuart, who lives at Trunch with wife Donna and children Jessie (3) and George (1), that they wanted him to be captain of the side this season.

A loose head prop with the National League Division Three South side, Stuart went ahead with the £8000 operation in May.

"Mr Rai told me that after four months I would be able to play again and I did," he said.

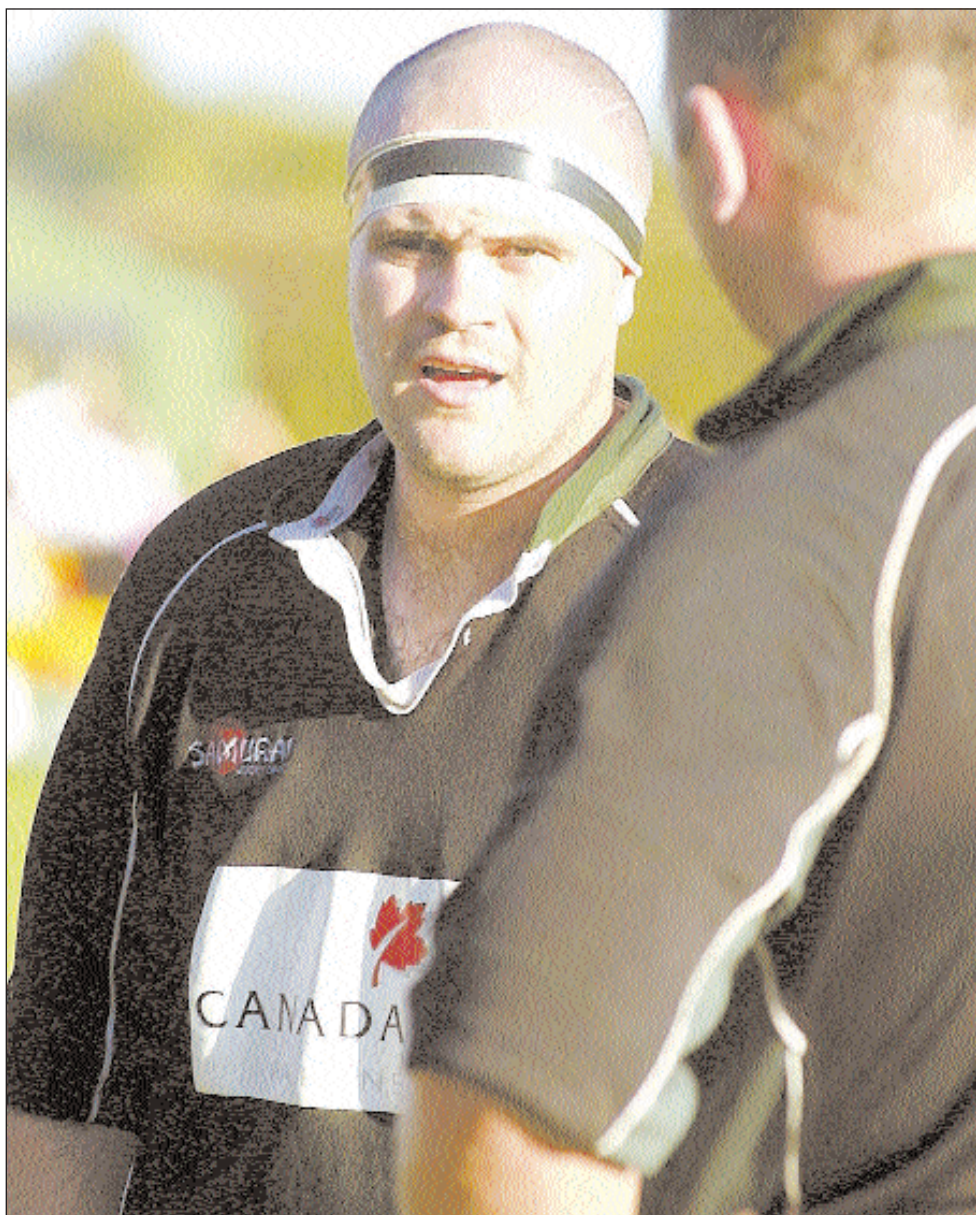
The surgery, carried out in a two-hour operation at the Bupa Hospital in Norwich, involved making an incision in Stuart's neck and removing the damaged disc.

A bone replacement was put in and screwed into place with a carbon fibre cage so the bone could fuse with the substitute bone.

Stuart said: "Up until I played the first game after the operation I did not know exactly how it was going to be until I had the first contact.

"There are always doubts in your mind and also it was a difficult decision to decide whether to go on or not, but I decided to carry on playing.

"Because it was spinal surgery



Picture:
GRAHAM CORNEY

TRUE GRIT: Stuart Loose, who, after an operation on his injured neck, has achieved his dreams of skippering North Walsham and topping 250 matches for them.

"Rugby is a big part of my life, it is what makes me who I am and without it I would not be the same person," he said.

"It gives me something to put my efforts into and it is a big part of my social life."

there was always a chance that there could be permanent damage, but Mr Rai is one of the best there is and he sorted it out for me."

A big motivation to keep playing for Stuart was the lure of being made captain of North Walsham.

"I have been at the club since I was 12 and this was something that I always wanted to do. If I gave up I would have regretted that for the rest of my life," he said.

"I still get a little pain and am concerned about it, but it is a gradual process.

"Rugby is a big part of my life, it is what makes me who I am and without it I would not be the same

person. It gives me something to put my efforts into and it is a big part of my social life."

And a fortnight ago, Stuart also passed the milestone of playing his 250th game for the club.

Of Mr Rai, he said: "I am very appreciative of what he has done and if he had not spotted it when he did there could have been more damage.

"Physically, I am as I was before and the strength has come back. Mr Rai was adamant that I would play again and if someone like that says that you tend to believe them."

Surgeon Mr Rai, who also practises at the Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital, said: "If he had

not had the operation he would have continued to be in pain, would have lost tricep function - he would not have been paralysed but his arm would have been useless.

"With advancements in anaesthesia and surgical techniques many patients who have serious and potentially paralysing injuries can be treated with great satisfaction.

"It is often difficult to treat top sportsmen as the expectations are quite high and occasionally unrealistic.

"However, with attention to detail many sportsmen can undergo spinal operations which will enable them to continue their sporting activities."