

REGGIE BROWN lay motionless, unable to breathe. Teammates began to panic as medical help rushed to the field. Here's the story of the struggle to save him.

Reggie Brown is flat on his back on the Pontiac Silverdome carpet. Legs straight. Arms at his side. Motionless. His Lions teammates scream for him to get up, but he can't move. Kent Falb, the team's head athletic trainer, looks down at him and urges him to relax. Brown tries to tell Falb he can't breathe, but he emits only a labored, guttural sound. His lips start to turn blue. His eyelids feel like lead weights; they slide shut. As he drifts into unconsciousness, he wonders if he will ever wake up. All around him and on televisions nationwide, millions of fans are watching, stunned. For 17 weeks of the 1997 season and for years before that, we've watched these big, strong, fast warriors in hard-plastic helmets and pads crash into each other. We've seen thousands of collisions, knowing that each has the potential for disaster, yet we react with shock when it does. We should be surprised traumatic injuries don't occur more often. There's a fine line between getting up and getting injured. Between walking away and never walking again. Yes, even between living and dying. At 6:30 p.m. ET Sunday, December 21, Reggie Brown is straddling that line. What happens over the next several, critical minutes will determine on which side he falls.

The Lions are hosting the Jets on the final weekend of the regular season. NBC is televising the game nationally, and the stakes are high: The winner advances to the playoffs; the loser is left out. Plus, there's a subplot tugging at the emotions of Detroit fans: Barry Sanders is trying to become the third player in NFL history to rush for 2,000 yards in a season.

Early in the fourth quarter, Sanders runs 15 yards for a touchdown. The Lions lead, 13-10, and the Silverdome is rocking. Nearly 80,000 fans are making so much noise that Lions defensive end Robert Porcher feels the artificial turf move beneath his feet. Nose tackle Luther Elliss lines up directly across from the Jets' center, only a few feet from quarterback Neil O'Donnell, but Elliss hears only staccato sound bites as O'Donnell yells signals to his teammates. O'Donnell has to call a timeout and then ask for assistance from referee Dick Hantak--twice--before he can get the Jets' first play off after the kickoff.

On the third play, Adrian Murrell takes a handoff from O'Donnell and follows left guard Lamont Burns and left tackle Kerry Jenkins into the line on a draw play. Burns gets turned around and shoved backward by Elliss. Brown, his head lowered, moves in from his weakside linebacker position to try to tackle Murrell a couple of yards beyond the line of scrimmage. Linebacker Antonio London comes in from the other side. Massive bodies converge in a powerful collision. Elliss (291 pounds) drives Burns (300) into Brown (241), the crown of Brown's helmet smashing into Burns' lower back. The impact jams Brown's neck into his shoulders and knocks him back and down. Elliss reaches down to help Brown up, but his teammate doesn't move. Other Lions players implore him to get up. Brown's lips mouth words he can't speak. Panic. Free safety Mark Carrier signals frantically to the sideline for medical help.

Elapsed Time: 19 seconds

That's how much time passes between Brown's fall and Falb's arrival at his side. London is hysterical. "He ain't breathing! Hurry, Kent! You've got to do something!" Falb, 57, is in his 32nd season with the Lions. He joined the club as an assistant trainer in 1966, was promoted to head trainer the next year and has never missed a game--640 and counting. He treated Mike Utley, the former Lions guard, who fell awkwardly on his head and shoulders during a game in November 1991 and suffered a spinal injury that left him paralyzed from the waist down. And he was on the sideline at Tiger Stadium in October 1971 when Lions wide receiver Chuck Hughes suffered a fatal heart attack late in a game against the Bears.

As he looks at Brown, Falb's first thought is: "Dear God, don't let me lose another player." Falb puts his left hand on Brown's chest. He feels a heartbeat but realizes Brown isn't breathing. Falb asks him if he wears a mouthpiece, thinking it might be lodged in his throat, but Brown mouths a "no." Some of the Lions players confirm that. Dr. Terry Lock, an orthopedic surgeon in his second season as a consultant to the Lions, arrives seconds after Falb. His initial suspicion is one every doctor of sports medicine fears: a spinal cord injury. But now Brown's lips and tongue are turning blue and everyone--Falb, Lock and the stunned, onlooking players--are struck by a more grisly thought: Brown is going to die. "It didn't look good," says

Allen "Jocko" Hughes, the Lions' director of security who was on the field trying to keep the players from crowding Falb and Lock. "I was on the police force for 28 years, and I've seen people like that. They don't make it."

Complicating the situation is the very gear Brown is wearing to protect him from injury. He is suffocating, trapped behind the facemask of his helmet. But the doctors can't just yank the helmet off. If his neck isn't already broken, that could do it. It is a very unusual situation for a victim of possible spinal trauma. And one the medical team has little time to ponder. A person who stops breathing for four minutes is at risk of brain damage. The facemask is secured by four screws. In addition, there are two pieces of hard plastic called shock blockers (one on each side) that would have to be cut off. All of that would require time--precious seconds they can't afford to squander. "We've got to take his helmet off," Lock says. While Falb supports Brown with his left hand under his neck and his right hand under his head, Lock positions himself above Brown. He unfastens the chinstrap. Then, using both hands, he reaches into the ear holes and pries apart the helmet so that the jaw pads can slip easily over Brown's face. "At the time, I didn't feel nervous at all about taking the helmet off," Lock says. "I was more concerned with how we were going to ventilate him and keep him alive."

Lock begins giving Brown, who has been without air for about 90 seconds, mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, four breaths at a time. He has been practicing CPR for 15 years, ever since he graduated from medical school in 1983--but only on mannequins. This time, a life is in his hands. Lions coach Bobby Ross comes on the field and motions the players back, so Falb and Lock have room to work. Every time he gets a group of players to step back, another moves forward. "You wanted to watch," Lions linebacker George Jamison says, "but it was almost too much to bear at the same time." Lions safety Ron Rice walks over to London, the most shaken player, and puts a hand on his shoulder. Players from both teams shout encouragement to Brown, as if their words can will him to stave off death. "Come on, Reggie!" "You can fight it!" "Don't give up, Reggie!"

As Lions defensive tackle Marc Spindler watches Falb work on Brown, he relives the scene when Utley was paralyzed. Some of the Jets' players are remembering Dennis Byrd, who

fractured his fifth cervical vertebra in a November 1992 game against the Chiefs. Byrd was paralyzed temporarily from the waist down but gradually recovered. He now walks on his own.

Elapsed time: 2 minutes, 45 seconds

At the south end of the Silverdome, near the tunnel where an ambulance is parked during games, paramedic Bill Grubb has walked to the middle of the end zone, as he does every time there is an injury, and waits to be summoned. He sees the signal from Bill Ford, one of the Lions' assistant trainers. As Grubb retrieves his medical emergency equipment--a gurney, a spine board and a medical bag containing, among other things, an EKG machine, an artificial respiration device and oxygen--he gets unsolicited help. Two Lions, center Kevin Glover and wide receiver Johnnie Morton, come running up. "He ain't breathing! He ain't breathing!" they scream. Eyeing the defibrillator, Morton says, "Give me those paddles!" With Grubb on the right side of the gurney, Glover on the left and Morton pushing from behind, they race to the rescue. Two of the Jets' doctors, Elliot Pellman, an internist, and Elliott Hershman, an orthopedist, are assisting. Pellman inserts a catheter connected to a bag of saline solution into Brown's right arm as a precautionary measure. If Brown goes into cardiac arrest, there will be an immediate avenue to get medication into him intravenously.

Some 1,300 miles away, in Round Rock, Texas, a suburb of Austin, a mother watches her television in shock as medical personnel work furiously to save her son. At first, Elizabeth Brown thinks Reggie has suffered another "stinger"--a pinched nerve in his neck. But as time passes, she realizes the injury is much more serious. Her state of emotions evolves from denial to shock to helplessness. The Lions don't have her phone number, and she doesn't know who to call in Detroit.

The Silverdome, which moments before had shook with such loudness that it almost rattled your ribs, now is blanketed by an eerie calm. From the coaches' booth in the press box, Lions defensive coordinator Larry Peccatiello looks at Brown through binoculars, hoping to see an arm or leg move, a twitch, some movement. On the Jets' sideline, Chris Hayes, a second-year safety, watches silently, tears streaming down his face. James Farrior, a rookie, has his

arm around Hayes, trying to console him. The scene is almost surreal. Players from both teams, perhaps as many as 50, are on the field. Enemies only minutes before, they have come together now as a family. Some are screaming and standing so close to Brown that it is making the medical personnel's job more difficult. At one point, Falb rises to look for something and bumps his head on a player's shoulder pads. "Please get back!" Falb hollers.

A few feet behind the crowd surrounding Brown, four Lions players--Glover, Elliss, Ray Roberts and Hessley Hempstead--kneel in a circle, their arms around each other, their heads bowed in prayer. On the Lions' sideline, Spindler walks up to Dave Wilson, the team chaplain, and asks him to pray with him for Brown. They kneel and hold hands.

As Porcher looks at Brown, still blue and unable to breathe on his own, he reflects on the day before. After Saturday's practice, he and his father had gone to Chuck's Soul Food Restaurant, half a mile from the Silverdome, with Brown, Jamison, Larry Tharpe and Tracy Scroggins. They filled all the stools at the counter. Porcher couldn't believe how much food Brown ordered: catfish, grits, toast and a BLT sandwich. "How are you going to eat all that?" Porcher had asked Brown, who washed it down with a large glass of lemonade. They sat there eating, talking and laughing, never suspecting that a little more than 24 hours later one of them would be lying on the field, fighting for his life.

The player most oddly affected by the developments is Scott Kowalkowski. He is Brown's backup, so he will be going in at weakside linebacker when the game resumes. Although he is as upset as the rest of the Lions, Kowalkowski is on the sideline talking to linebackers coach Gary Moeller about what schemes the Jets might use. Sitting in the stands is Kowalkowski's father, who empathizes with his son. Bob Kowalkowski played for the Lions from 1966 to '76 and was on the field when Hughes suffered his heart attack.

Hantak calls up to the press box to Art McNally, the NFL's associate supervisor of officials, who is working as the NFL's assigned observer for the game. Realizing that Brown could die on the field, Hantak asks about the protocol regarding completion of the game. McNally tells him that the game will have to continue; only the NFL commissioner is empowered to stop it. Hantak knows he will have to communicate this sobering information to Ross and Bill

Parcells, the Jets' coach.

Lock continues to give Brown mouth-to-mouth. He is so focused on his mission that he has no idea how much time has elapsed. Clearly, every second is an eternity. There is discussion about intubating Brown; it would be an effective method to protect Brown's airway and guarantee he would get oxygen, while at the same time protect him from gastric aspiration (vomiting). But pushing Brown's neck back to insert a tube in his throat is too risky. It could exacerbate any spinal cord injury. An artificial respirator is safer. Grubb, the paramedic, removes a plastic bag-valve mask from his medical bag and puts it over Brown's nose and mouth. It is connected to a pliable, rubber receptacle about the size of a football that holds 2,000 cubic centimeters of air. At the other end is a clear, plastic bag through which oxygen flows, replenishing the reservoir in the rubber receptacle. Grubb gently pulls up on Brown's jaw, opening an airway but not risking further neck movement. He begins to squeeze the rubber bag, pumping air into Brown.

Elapsed time: 7 minutes, 45 seconds

An ambulance emerges from the south tunnel, its emergency lights flashing as it backs down the field. Brown remains unconscious, still unable to breathe unassisted, but the immediate danger of suffocation has passed. The doctors and medical personnel continue to monitor his vital signs and stabilize him. Despite the long delay and the fear still etched on the faces of players, there is no urgency to move Brown into the ambulance and take him to a hospital. Each step is deliberate, systematic, precise.

Elapsed time: 9 minutes

Noise starts to circulate again in the stands as the fans begin to clap and cheer. Chants of "Regggg-ie! Regggg-ie!" cascade onto the field. Brown is placed on the gurney. He is strapped to the spineboard by lateral restraints across his arms, hips and legs. Styrofoam blocks, anchored by sandbags, support his head.

Elapsed time: 12 minutes, 15 seconds

The gurney is lifted into the back of the ambulance, which will take Brown to Pontiac Osteopathic Hospital, about 10

minutes away, for preliminary tests. Just before he climbs into the ambulance, Dr. Keith Burch, another of the Lions' physicians, is handed something by cornerback Corey Raymond. "Give this to Reg," Raymond says. It is a laminated holy card, with a prayer and a picture of St. Joseph. Raymond's mother sends him holy cards, and he brings them to games. While Brown was being treated, Raymond remembered the holy card and ran off the field and up the tunnel to the locker room, where he retrieved it from his dressing stall.

As players from both teams begin to disperse and return to their sidelines, Spindler and Jets defensive lineman Hugh Douglas touch closed fists in a gesture of good will. Looking up at the scoreboard, Spindler says to Douglas: "Now we'll find out what this team is all about."

The ambulance remains on the field while doctors and paramedics clamp down the gurney and hook up an oxygen tank. Falb shakes hands with Pellman, thanking him for his assistance, and starts to walk toward the Lions' bench. He looks up and sees a sea of faces, all of them a blur except one. The face in the crowd belongs to former Lions safety Harry Colon, who, only nine weeks earlier, had suffered momentary paralysis after he was knocked unconscious during a game on the same field. Tests disclosed a congenital problem in his spine and Colon had to retire. Falb looks at Colon, standing on the sideline in street clothes, and says to himself: "I wonder what he is thinking." Falb looks away for a second. When he looks back, Colon has disappeared. He never sees him again that day.

Elapsed time: 13 minutes

Most of the Jets' players on the sideline are kneeling in prayer; some members of the offense are doing the same on the field. Ross gathers his players around him on the field, informs them that Brown no longer is in danger of dying and then gives perhaps the most difficult pep talk in his coaching career. "Listen," Ross says. "They talked to the league, and we've got to finish the game. I don't necessarily agree with that, but that's what's got to happen. In that light, we've got to be professional. There's two things we can do for Reggie now: pray for him and play for him. Let's do that."

Then the Lions' players and coaches--led by Wilson, the chaplain--say a prayer. Wilson asks God to watch over Brown and give his teammates the strength to complete the game.

Elapsed time: 16 minutes, 10 seconds

The doors are closed and the ambulance heads for the tunnel as cheers ring out throughout the stadium. The Jets' offensive players and the Lions' defensive players are back on the field.

Elapsed time: 17 minutes

Hantak signals for the clock to restart. In the ambulance, Lock holds Brown's head, even though it is stabilized by the blocks and sandbags. Brown's color gradually returns, and just when the ambulance pulls into the hospital's parking lot, he takes some breaths on his own. As the back doors are opened, he begins to regain consciousness. The Doctors ask Brown if he can move his arms or feet. He can do neither. Now, the fear is that Brown is paralyzed.

He is taken to a trauma room and immediately is administered a large dose of methylprednisolone, a powerful steroid that will reduce and prevent further swelling around the spinal cord. Brown asks about his family and his girlfriend, Kerrie Patterson, who is flying to Detroit that night. Brown remembers the flight number. Someone has to go pick her up, he pleads. Then, he begins vomiting.

X-rays and a CAT scan are inconclusive; Brown's vertebrae seem reasonably lined up. Finally, a positive sign: Brown begins to move his toes and feet. The function in his upper extremities is slower to return, and one hand is weaker than the other. After about two hours of tests, doctors prepare Brown to be transported to Henry Ford Hospital, near downtown Detroit. Later that night, he is fitted with a special device called a halo, which stabilizes his head and spine. Doctors attach a ring around Brown's head by inserting four 2-inch titanium screws into his skull, using only a local anesthetic. It is supported by four posts connected to a vest around his upper torso. He has to wear the halo 24 hours a day for the next three months.

On Monday morning, there is discouraging news. Doctors discover the top two vertebrae in Brown's spinal column, C1

and C2, are displaced. Surgery is performed to fuse them together.

As they get ready to put Brown back in the ambulance for the trip to Ford, Burch reaches into his pants pocket and feels the holy card. He looks at Lock and says, "I think it's time we gave this to him." Burch tells Brown one of his teammates gave it to him. Then he places the card on Brown's chest, under the cervical collar he is wearing.

Down in Round Rock, Elizabeth Brown has made contact with a doctor at Pontiac Osteopathic Hospital. She stays up late, waiting by her phone, as the Lions call her with updates on Reggie's condition. She is relieved to learn that he has some movement in his legs and arms. Tomorrow, she will board a plane for Detroit to be with her son. Tonight, she will sleep fitfully and say a lot of prayers.

By the time Lock returns to the Silverdome, the locker room is nearly empty. The Lions have qualified for the playoffs and Sanders has joined Eric Dickerson and O.J. Simpson as the NFL's only 2,000-yard rushers, but the postgame mood is bittersweet, tempered by the players' anxiety about their teammate. An emotionally spent Lock finds Falb in the training room. "Wow!" he says. "I can't believe what we've gone through." And then the two men most responsible for saving Reggie Brown's life hug each other. TSN

The impact of the impact

When the crown of Reggie Brown's helmet collided with the back of Jets offensive lineman Lamont Burns, the impact displaced the first and second vertebrae in Brown's cervical spine between one-fourth and one-half inch (vertebrae are the body's protective tunnel for the spinal cord). The collision resulted in a bruised spinal cord and temporary paralysis. Neurosurgeons repaired the damage by fusing the C1 and C2 vertebrae, which provide some functions for the neck, including the ability to turn the head. For Brown, that function now will have to be performed by other vertebrae. --Dennis Dillon

Miracle man

You have seen pictures of it. You think you are prepared to see it up close. Still, you almost recoil when the

apartment door opens and Reggie Brown stands there, wearing a barbaric-looking apparatus that grows out of his chest and rises to his head. It's his halo. A carbon-fiber ring surrounds Brown's head from ear to ear and is bolted to his skull with four 2-inch titanium screws. The ring is connected by four vertical posts, also made of carbon fiber, to a specially fitted vest around his upper torso. The halo stabilizes Brown's neck and spine while his first two cervical vertebrae, which were surgically fused, are healing.

Brown and the halo have been inseparable since December 21, hours after he suffered a bruised spine that ended his career as a linebacker for the Lions--and very nearly ended his life. Brown stopped breathing and had to be given mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on the field by Dr. Terry Lock, one of the team doctors. "My best friend," Brown says, smiling. The halo was put on that night and surgeons repaired the displaced cervical vertebrae the next day.

Among people who suffer this type of spinal injury, Brown, 23, is in the upper 2 percent of the recovery level, according to Dr. Russell Nockels, the director of Henry Ford Hospital's Center for Spinal Disorders in Detroit and one of the neurosurgeons who repaired Brown's vertebrae. Between 10 and 20 percent would have lost their lives. Another 30 percent would have been unable to walk. Most of the rest would have had disabilities much more severe than Brown's.

Two days after surgery, Brown was helped out of his hospital bed just to see if he could stand up--and he walked 20 yards and back. On January 7, 16 days after surgery, he rose from a wheelchair in an auditorium at Henry Ford Hospital and walked to a lecturn to make a short address to the media. A week later, he was jogging and doing other exercises at the Texas Institute for Rehabilitation and Research in Houston.

"I'm just trying to get stronger, get my body back as close as possible to normal. My strength is improving every day," says Brown, who now divides his time between Austin, Texas, where his mother lives, and College Station, where his girlfriend, Kerrie Patterson, has an off-campus apartment. Patterson

just finished her junior season as a guard on the A&M women's basketball team.

Late in the season, the Aggies are playing Kansas State in a Big 12 Conference game that draws 1,483 fans. And it seems as if Brown, sitting in his usual spot, three rows up from the floor at one end of the court, signs an autograph or shakes hands with most of them. When he isn't cheering on Patterson or watching TV game shows, Brown is in the weight room at A&M, where he starred from 1993 to '95. His progress since surgery has come in slow but steady increments. Brown, who could bench-press 390 pounds when he was the Lions' No. 1 draft pick in 1996, almost strangled himself with the bar when he first picked it up. Now, he can bench up to 160 pounds.

In the summer, Brown plans to return to classes at A&M, where he has two semesters left before he completes a degree in agricultural economics. Mike Clark, A&M's strength coach, has offered him a job as a student trainer in the weight room, and there may be some coaching options for him to consider. He has received \$ 3.3 million (including a \$ 2.4 million signing bonus) of the four-year, \$ 4.6 million contract he signed with the Lions. How much he receives from the remaining two years (\$ 600,000 this year and \$ 700,000 in '99) is undetermined.

The prognosis for Brown is encouraging. "The recovery from an injury like this in terms of the return of nervous-system functions is over a one-year period of time," Nockels says. "He's already kind of beat all of our expectations.

"He will never be 100 percent (physically) and he knows that. His nervous system--the sensation and movement in his arms and legs--will never be 100 percent of what it was, but he's getting close. ... No contact sports, but he could lead an otherwise normal life."

Although he is starting to feel the pangs of disappointment over a promising NFL career ending so quickly, Brown feels blessed--for the opportunity to play football and the opportunity he has now. "I was just so thankful to be alive and breathing," he says, recalling those first few hours after surgery. "Football wasn't a big priority. It wasn't like, 'When can I get back on the field?' It was, 'When can I get back on my feet?' ".

The halo is sometimes a source of irritation--like when Brown tried to get out of the passenger's side of a car and two of the posts got hung up on the inside of the roof, and at night when he sleeps. Brown often wakes up stiff. "I just lay in one position with my arms at my sides, more or less like I'm in a casket," he says, "and I don't move the whole night."

But freedom is near. Brown was scheduled to fly to Detroit this week. If all goes well, the halo will come off, marking another benchmark in a story that has been nothing short of a miracle.

"We don't like to use the 'm-word' in medicine," Nockels says, laughing softly. "But all I can say is, 'Amen.' "
--Dennis Dillon