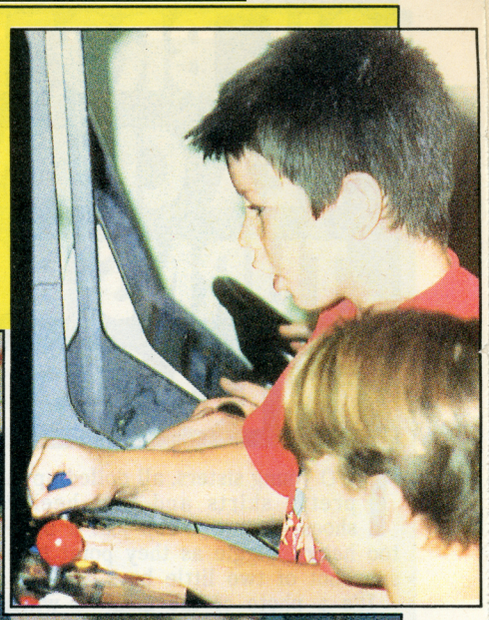
MIRACLE SURGERY SAVES BOY WHO HAD HEAD 'CUT OFF' IN TRUCK ACCIDENT





By Christopher Thomas

BY ALL rights, 10-year-old Timothy Mathias should be dead. His head was actually severed from his spine when he was struck by a pickup truck as he was bicycling to school.

But in an amazing surgical first, doctors in Phoenix, Ariz., reattached his skull using a steel clamp that will remain implanted in the boy's body for the rest of his life.

The spunky youngster, called TJ by parents Timothy, 28, and Kerry Mathias, 29, is now recovering at St. Joseph Hospital Medical Center's Barrow Neurological Institute.

"He's doing real well," his mother told STAR in an interview from her son's bedside where she spends 15 hours a day.

"Before the accident, I never believed in miracles, though I was always hoping to win the lottery. But having TJ alive is better than any lottery. I really do believe in miracles now.

"What has kept me going is prayer, patience and virtue," she adds. "He's going to make it all the way."

The brown-eyed, brown-haired Little Leaguer was on his way to the Horizon Elementary School where he's a fourth grader when he was hit. A helicopter rushed him to St. Joseph's within 12 minutes.

"By the time I got there, they were taking TJ into surgery for a ruptured spleen," Kerry recalls.

"The doctor told me it would be a 90-minute operation. He left and I waited and waited and waited.

"When he came back, he told me that TJ had a 5 percent chance of living. He told me that they wanted to try something new, that he didn't know if TJ would make it or not.

"I told him, 'Do it. Go for it. Do what you have to do.' I knew he was in serious condition but didn't realize until after the surgery what had actually happened. It hit me the next morning. I cried for hours. I was real upset."

TJ's doctors are optimistic about his recovery. "He's an absolute miracle child," says Dr. Robert Spetzler, medical director at Barrow.

"The only place where I've seen such a case before has been in the autopsy room, but he's going to walk out of this hospital.

"He was a very severely injured child and at one point appeared brain dead," adds Dr. Spetzler. "That was when we felt that there was probably no chance. There was a great deal of discusssion over whether we should do anything for the boy after we saw the massive injuries.

"But because he was a child, and because children tend to do better, we thought we'd give it a try."

Dr. Harold Rekate, chief of pediatric neurosurgery at Barrow, says: "Our first reaction was to throw up our hands with frustration. We argued for about 20 minutes while we figured out what to do for Timothy."

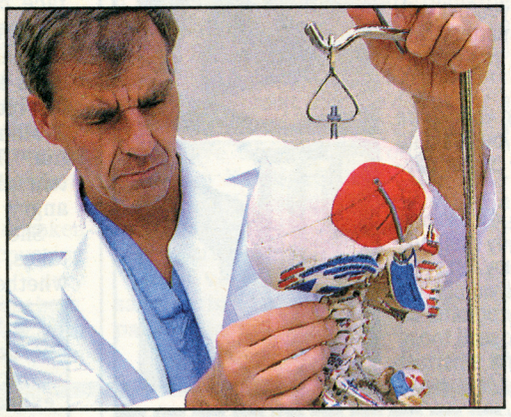
Now Dr. Rekate expects the boy to recover most of his faculties. "He's going to live and he's going to recover a lot. He will walk, probably with a brace," says the surgeon.

For the next three months, Timothy must wear a metal "halo" attached to his skull and then connected to a plastic jacket by rods so that his head is held rigidly in place. This is done so that the spine will fuse.

Mom Kerry adds: "I've been told there will be bad days and good days. So what we're doing is taking it one day at a time.

"When I'm with him, I look for any kind of movement. Right now, he is able to sit up in a chair and yawn. He wiggles his right toe, he bends his left knee, he twitches his nose and can move his arms and open and close his mouth. He also makes eye contact with me when I speak to him — he's awake, he's alert.

"The important thing is TJ's fighting back. I know he's going to pull through. I just know it." □



Kerry Mathias spends 15 hours each day at son TJ's bedside. "I really do believe in miracles now," she says. Dr. Volker Sonntag (l) points to the section of the spine where TJ's head was severed. He expects the spunky 10-year-old will be back playing games with his friends (inset above).