

Nature's Way

Thieves in the night

By KEVIN CALLAN

As you sleep peacefully through the cold quiet nights of March our neighborhood woodlots are being tormented by the thieving great horned owl. To be better than the next guy, this bird of prey has resorted to a life of crime and cannibalism.

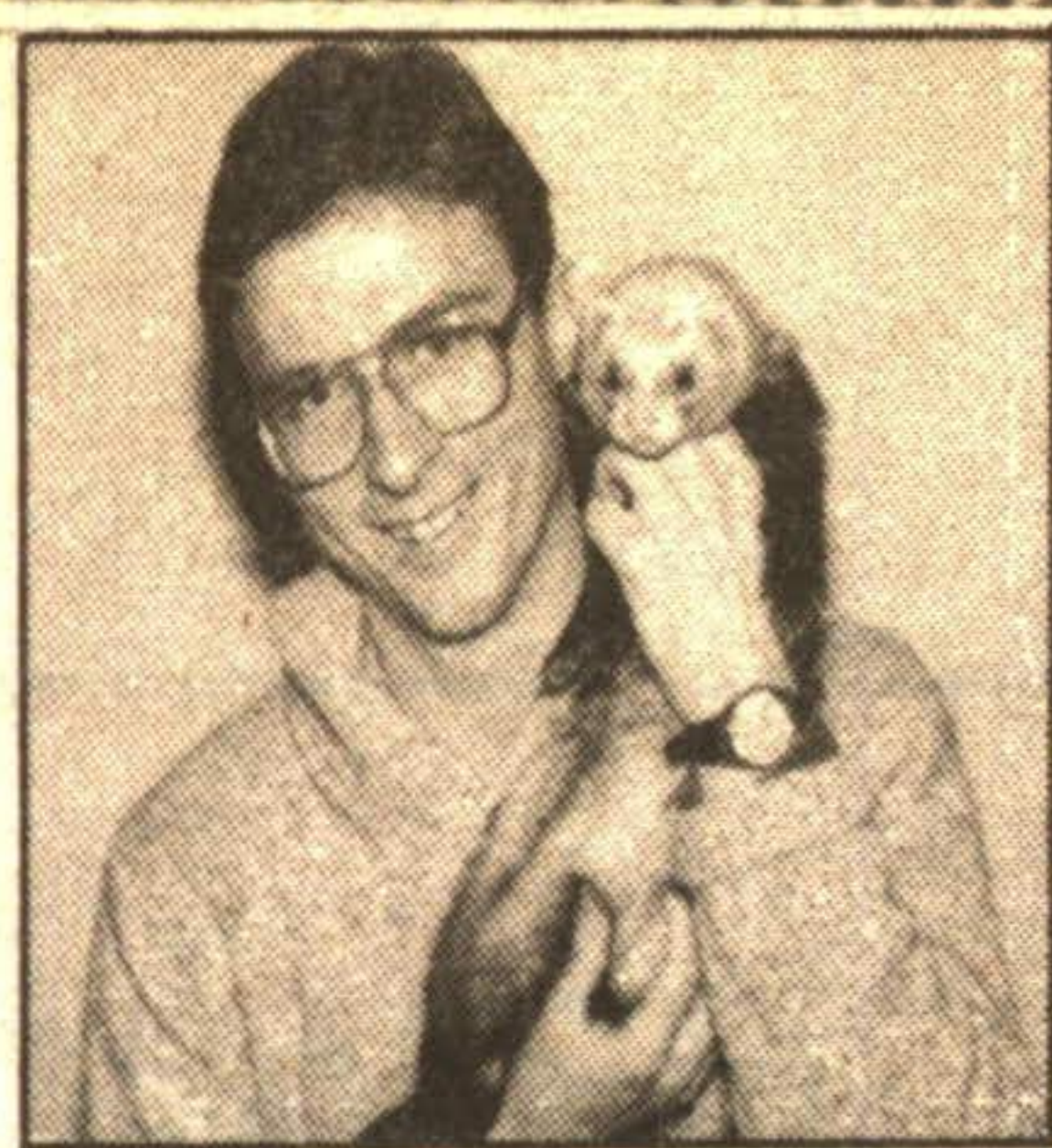
Saving time in building the perfect home for his family the great horned simply steals a nest from a red tail hawk, heron, crow, or even an innocent squirrel. As early as late February or early March this lazy bird is ready to raise a single brood.

Incubation can last from 26 to 35 days and once hatched the young owls are blind and totally helpless—a curse given to all parents. It takes almost 10 weeks before they gain their first flight feathers, and only then can the parents begin to teach them the tricks of their trade.

One interesting fact about the hatching of the young is that they are laid and hatched in intervals from two days to two weeks. This gap between brothers and sisters helps control the balance of the food chain. If the area the birds inhabit can only support a small number of predators because of the lack of prey the older babies will eat the new born to lessen the brood size—a cannibalistic but effective way of keeping a balance in the woodlot's predator and prey relationship.

The young owls learn a lot from their parents, but instinct helps along the way. Their eyes, for example, come equipped with certain basic adaptations. They focus on moving targets—set like human eyes—giving them a wide range of binocular vision and excellent depth perception. The eyes are set in deep sockets but their head can rotate almost 360 degrees aiding them in viewing the entire surrounding area.

The great horned owl's ears are also highly adapted for hunting. The long slits are asymmetrical, allowing the owl to pinpoint the origin of



very faint sounds.

Once the skilled killer has located its prey by either sight or sound it moves in silently for the slaughter with specialized wing feathers. The flight feathers are soft on the edges, so there's no sound when the air rushes through them as the owl swoops down on the victim.

The actual strike of an owl is very different than that of most hawks. By gliding over the prey they quietly manoeuvre themselves directly over, three feet or so above it, at which point they check their speed, raise the wings vertically and drop straight down onto it.

With this special tactic the horned owl has been known to hunt over water with remarkable success. The duck or muskrat is suddenly surprised by the abrupt appearance of the owl directly above. With a sudden drop the powerful owl lifts its quarry with one strong down-thrust. A great horned owl can lift a victim weighing more than itself straight up like a helicopter—something no other bird is so famous for.

Training of the young goes right through until early fall. With all necessary skills given to them by both Mother Nature and their parents the young are still apprehensive to leave home. In fact, some of the eeriest calls of the night are not made by the adults, but rather hungry spoiled little brats who would rather be fed by their parents than hunt for themselves.

The parents finally tire of these continuing demands, and with the approach of winter, they are forced to drive their young away from the territory so they may start lives of their own.

It's still a fine time to go for a night hike and listen for these thieves of the night. The great horned owl inhabits local woodlots, heavily forested pine plantations, and remote wilderness areas.

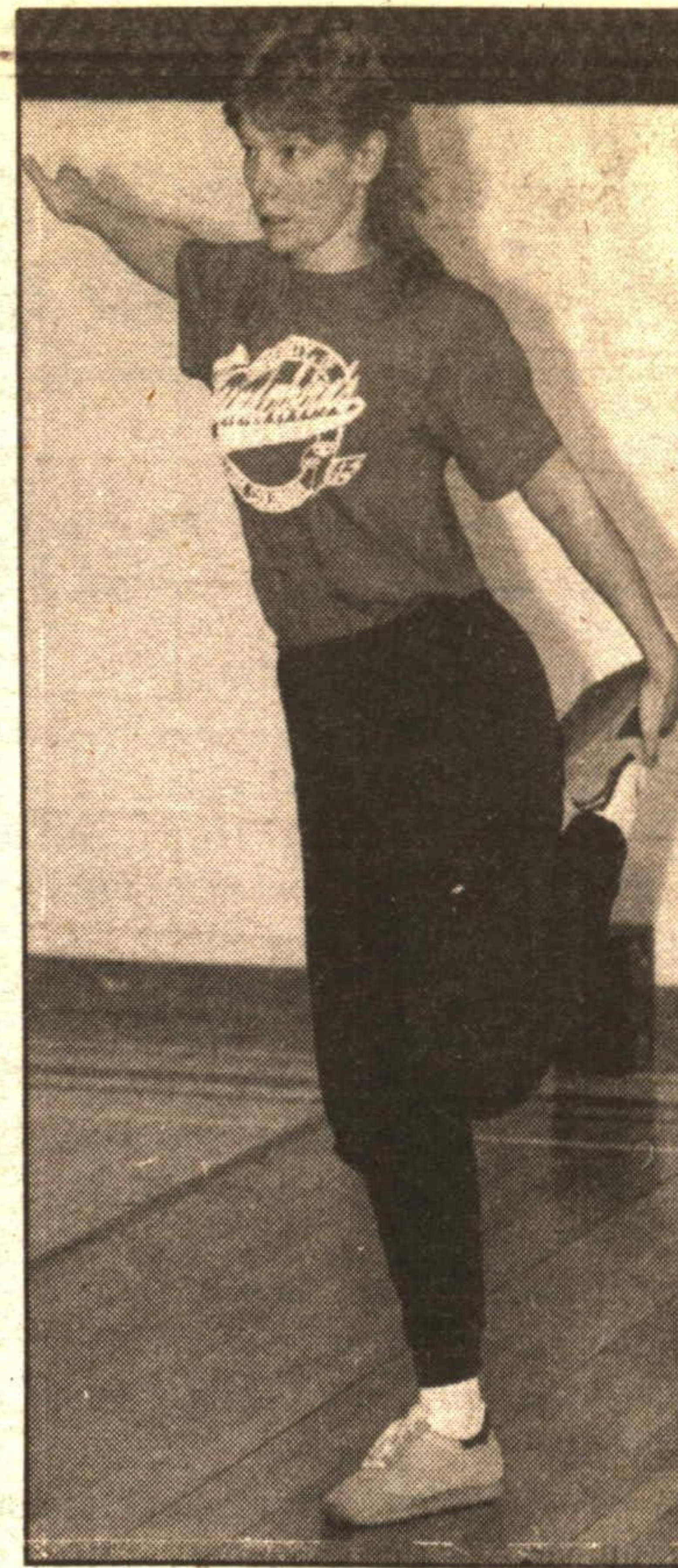
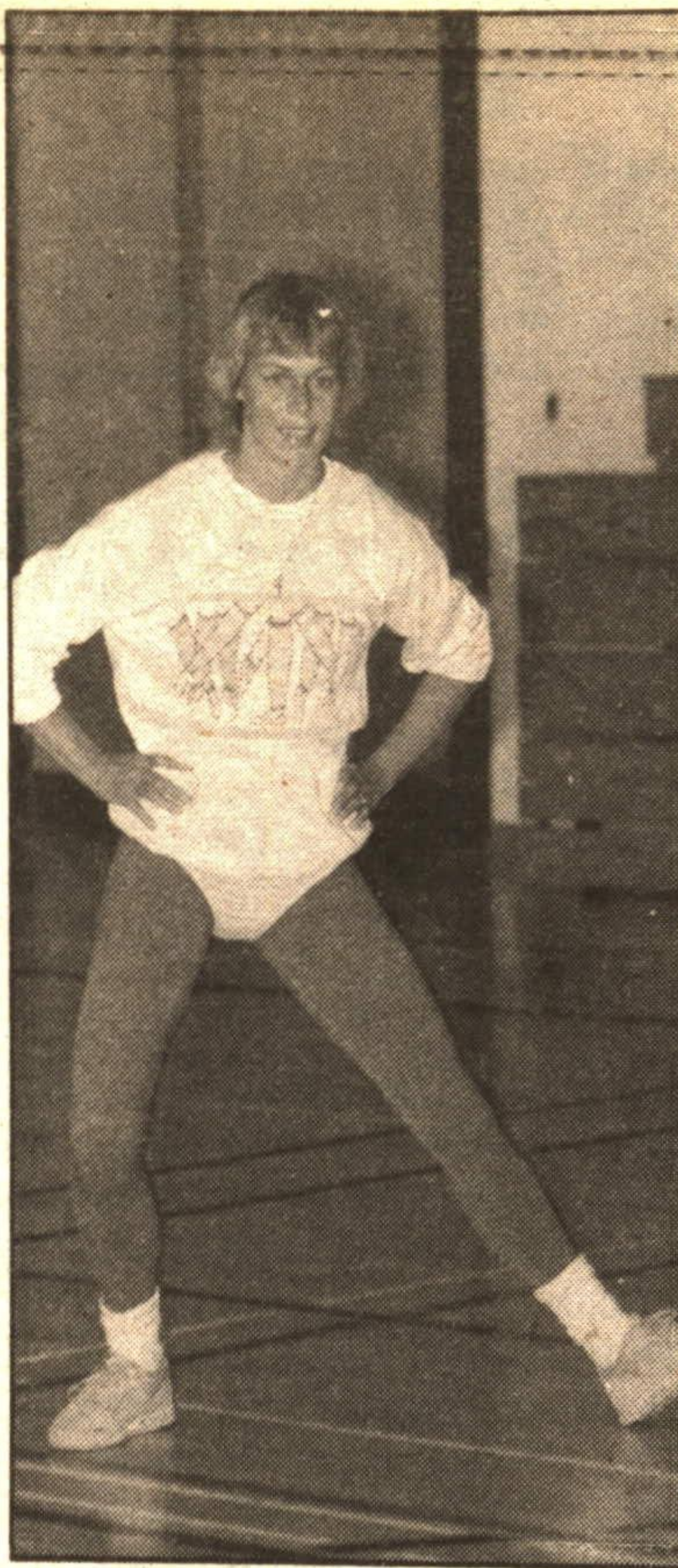
Their familiar call "who-cooks-

for-you, who-cooks-for-you" is an easy one to duplicate and hope to get a return answer. In addition, they have a wide range of other odd and sometimes unearthly squawks and cries. When approaching the nest you can hear their warning call, a hiss and snap of the beak, with their feathers all fluffed up to increase the appearance of their size. Watch out, however, that you don't approach their nests too closely for they have been known to attack humans without warning.

If you have any questions about the great horned owl or any other North American animals visit the Bronte Creek Provincial Park interpretive centre between March 11 and 19, 9.30 a.m. to 4.30 p.m. Frodo and I will be manning a display on the thief in the night and his interesting neighbors.

Mold Masters injury

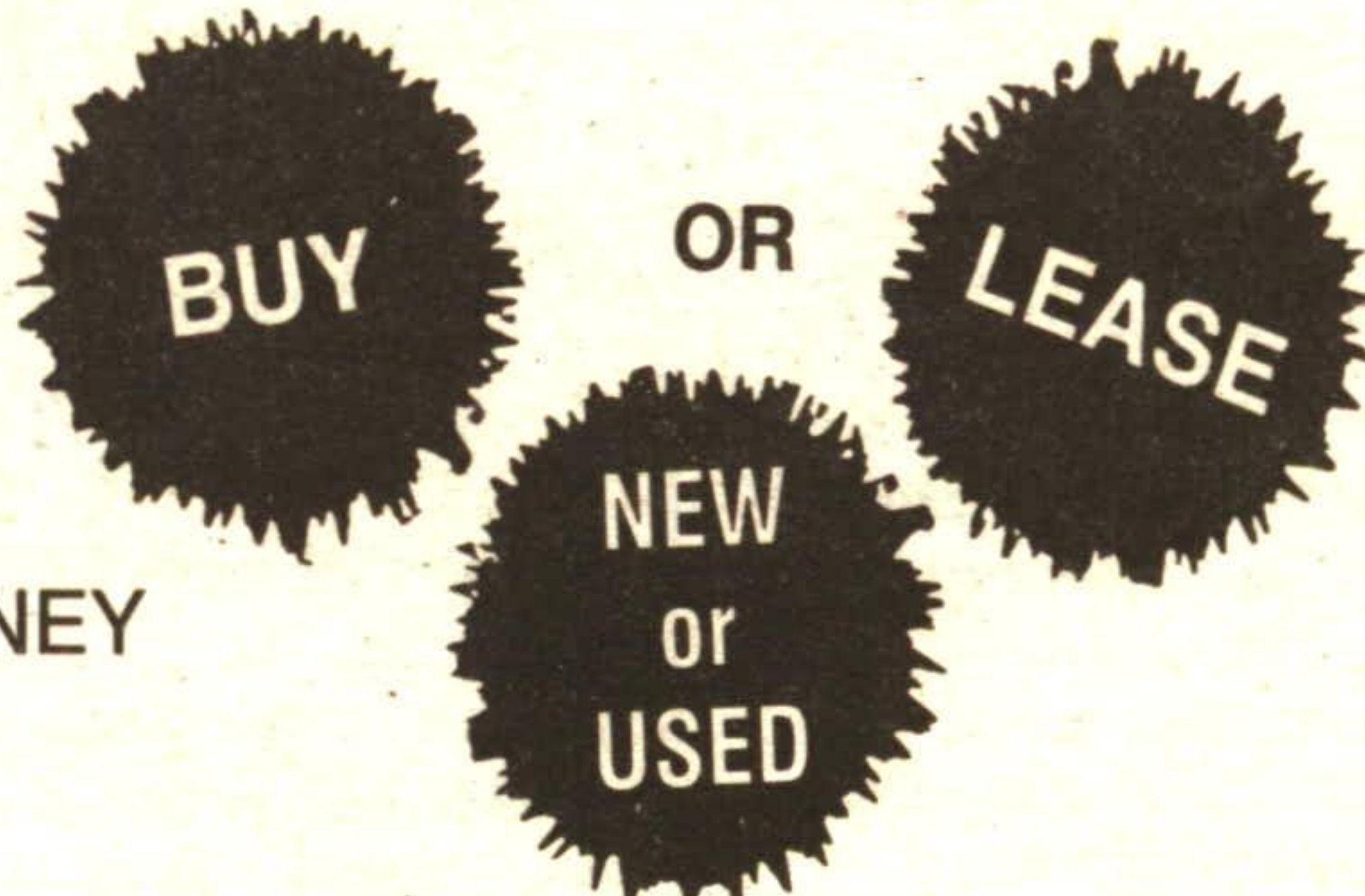
A 27-year-old Georgetown man had a hot piece of metal burn through his shoe into his foot after an explosion at Mold Masters on Armstrong Ave., Georgetown, Tuesday morning. Grant Richardson was pouring a substance into a mold when it exploded and a piece of hot metal landed on his foot. He was taken to Georgetown Memorial Hospital. The accident is being investigated by the Industrial Safety Board.



The Halton Hills Recreation and Parks Department held a workshop for aspiring fitness instructors from Toronto, Brampton and surrounding areas at Georgetown District High School recently. The course ran on two consecutive weekends and besides learning some theoretical information, those taking the course were given the chance to put into practice what they had learned.



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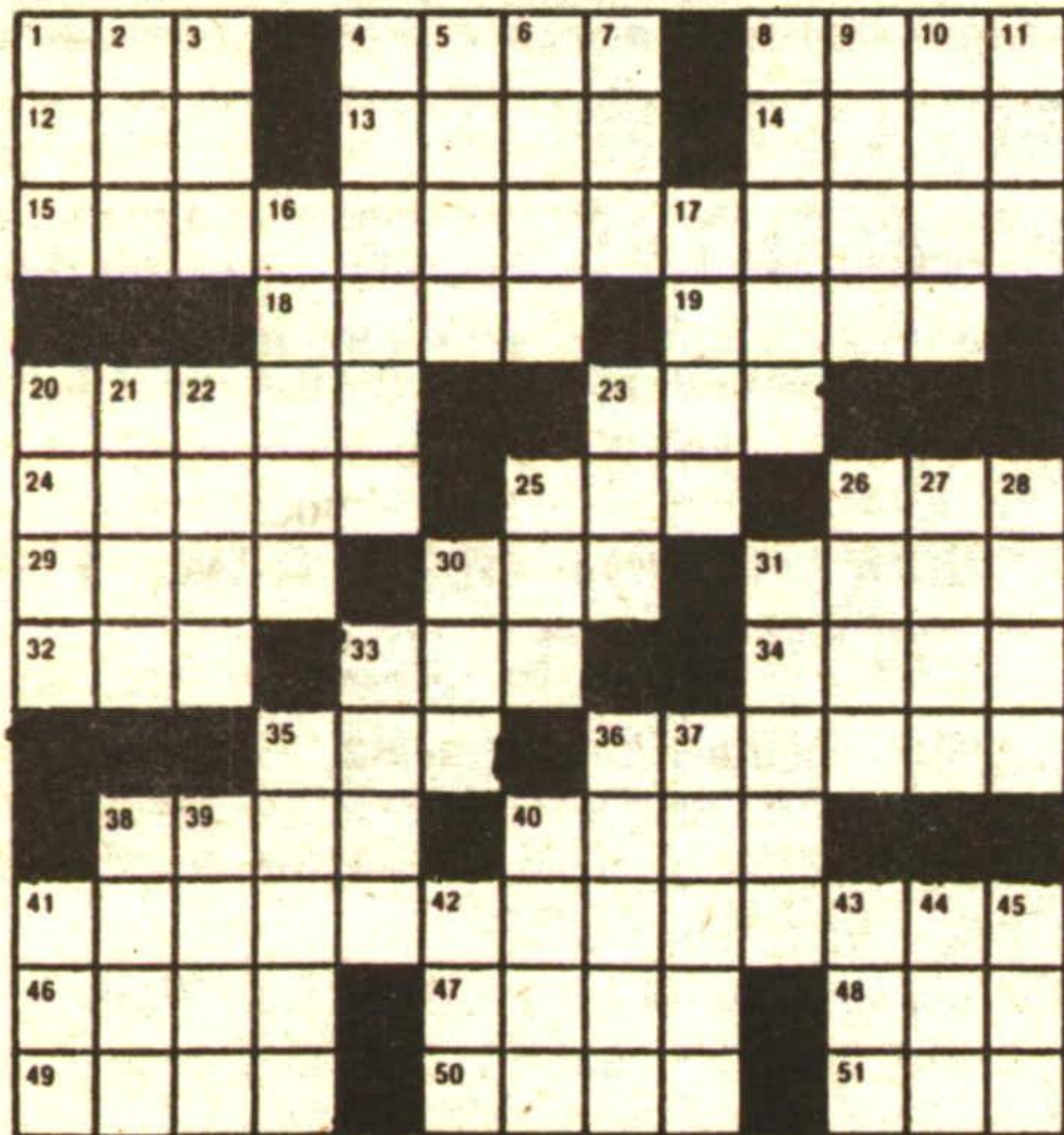
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WEEKEND
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|---------------------|---------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| ACROSS | 34 Sun disk | DOWN | 25 24 hours |
| 1 Pose | 35 Drunk | 1 Pouch | 26 Western alliance |
| 4 Pronoun | 36 Darts | 2 Worldwide | 27 Declare |
| 8 Concern | 38 Caterpillar hair | Worker's Group, | 28 Enclosures |
| 12 Eng. beer | 40 Strikebreaker | init. | 30 Rodent |
| 13 Bee's home | 41 Between nations | 3 Decade | 31 Greta |
| 14 Love, Sp. | 46 Eat | 4 Objects | 33 Fly |
| 15 Thoughtfulness | 47 Russ. city | 5 Skin | 35 Building metal |
| 18 Unique person | 48 Poem | 6 Slate | 36 Pretended |
| 19 Green | 49 Gem | 7 Three | 37 Train tracks |
| 20 Dangle | 50 Soft mass, pl. | 8 Turkish food | 38 Cut |
| 23 Neither | 51 Small child | 9 Turkish chieftan | 39 Volcano |
| 24 Motor noise, pl. | | 10 Source | 40 Frances Burnett |
| 25 Lair | | 11 Sea eagle | heroin |
| 26 Doze | | 16 Tunes | 41 Marriage vow, |
| 29 Insects | | 17 Stratford-on- | 2 wds. |
| 30 Uncooked | | 20 Bridge | 42 Present |
| 31 Presented | | 21 Drink | 43 Negative |
| 32 New | | 22 In | 44 Commotion |
| 33 Speak | | 23 Recent | 45 Permit |

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