

Pot growers burden to insurance companies

Rewiring houses creates possibility of explosions

BY ROGER VARLEY
Staff Writer

Illegal marijuana-growing operations in the GTA cost insurance companies millions of dollars.

Bob Whitman, director of the Insurance Bureau of Canada's crime ring investigative unit, said Tuesday there are hundreds of marijuana grow houses in Toronto and the surrounding regions and "there's a potential for 10,000 in the entire province".

"It's been estimated in the conservative area \$50,000 per grow house is paid in claims by insurance companies," Mr. Whitman said. "You do the math."

In York Region alone, police have raided close to 200 pot-growing operations this year.

'They are creating fire hazards for future buyers.'

Marijuana growers commonly rent or buy houses in suburban neighbourhoods and rewire them to accommodate the large amounts of electrical equipment needed. In addition, extensive damage is done to walls, floors and ceilings to run ventilation ducts from basements to roofs.

"They are creating fire hazards for future buyers," Mr. Whitman said.

"They are frying the wires. Once they are compromised, three or four years down the road, you have fire in the walls. The losses are running in the millions."

Not only are the operations costing insurance companies money, they are also causing injuries and deaths, he said.

He pointed out Markham Hydro has been shutting off power to houses suspected of stealing hydro by bypassing meters, a common practice among grow house operators.

"Some have been so bad, there's literally a fear of houses exploding," Mr. Whitman said.

"People living on each side and behind these houses are in danger."

He said so many houses have been identified that, despite stepped-up policing, including two nationwide Operation Greensweep initiatives earlier this year, "police are losing the battle".



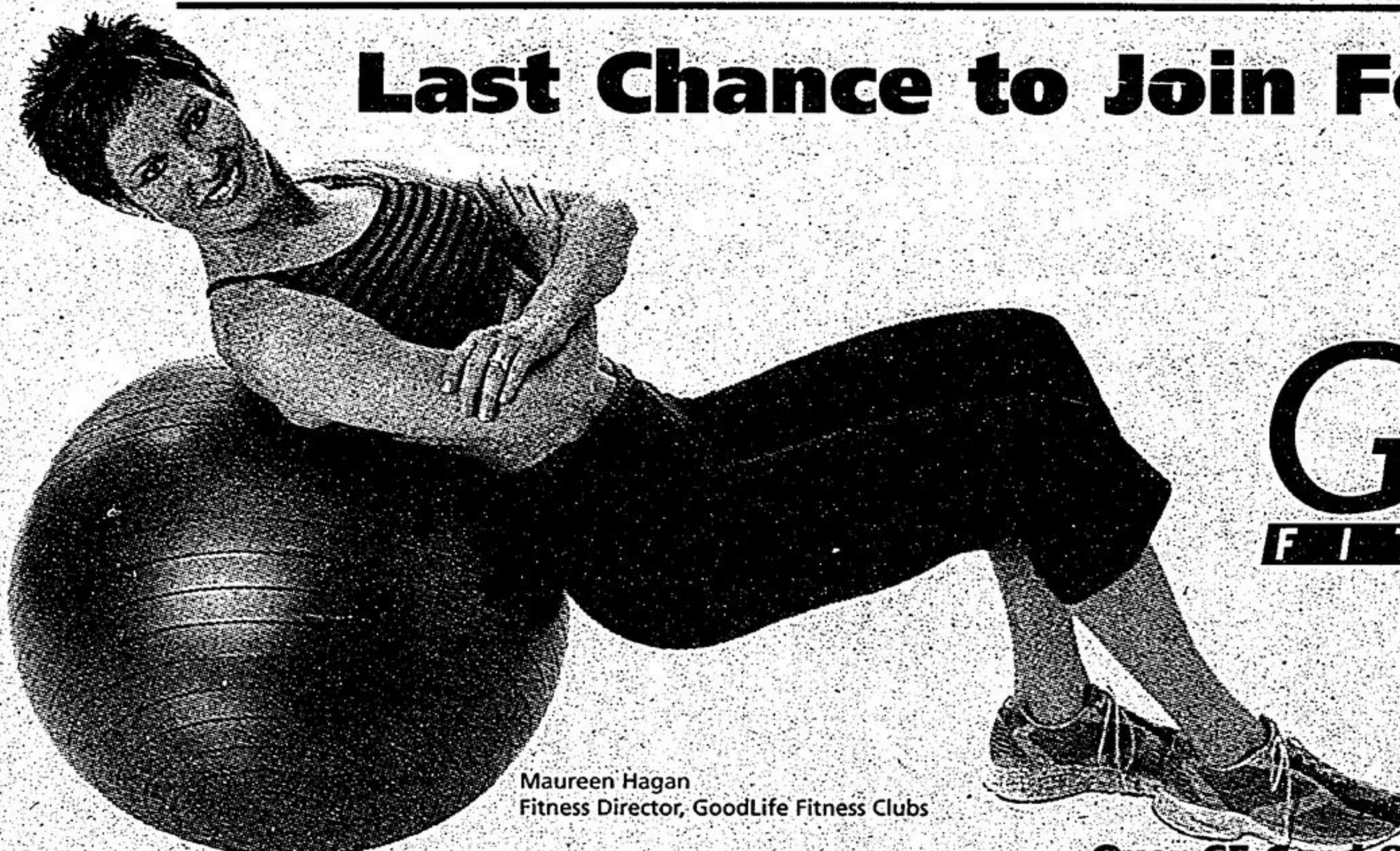
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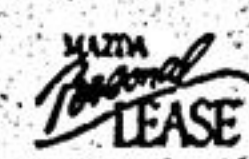
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