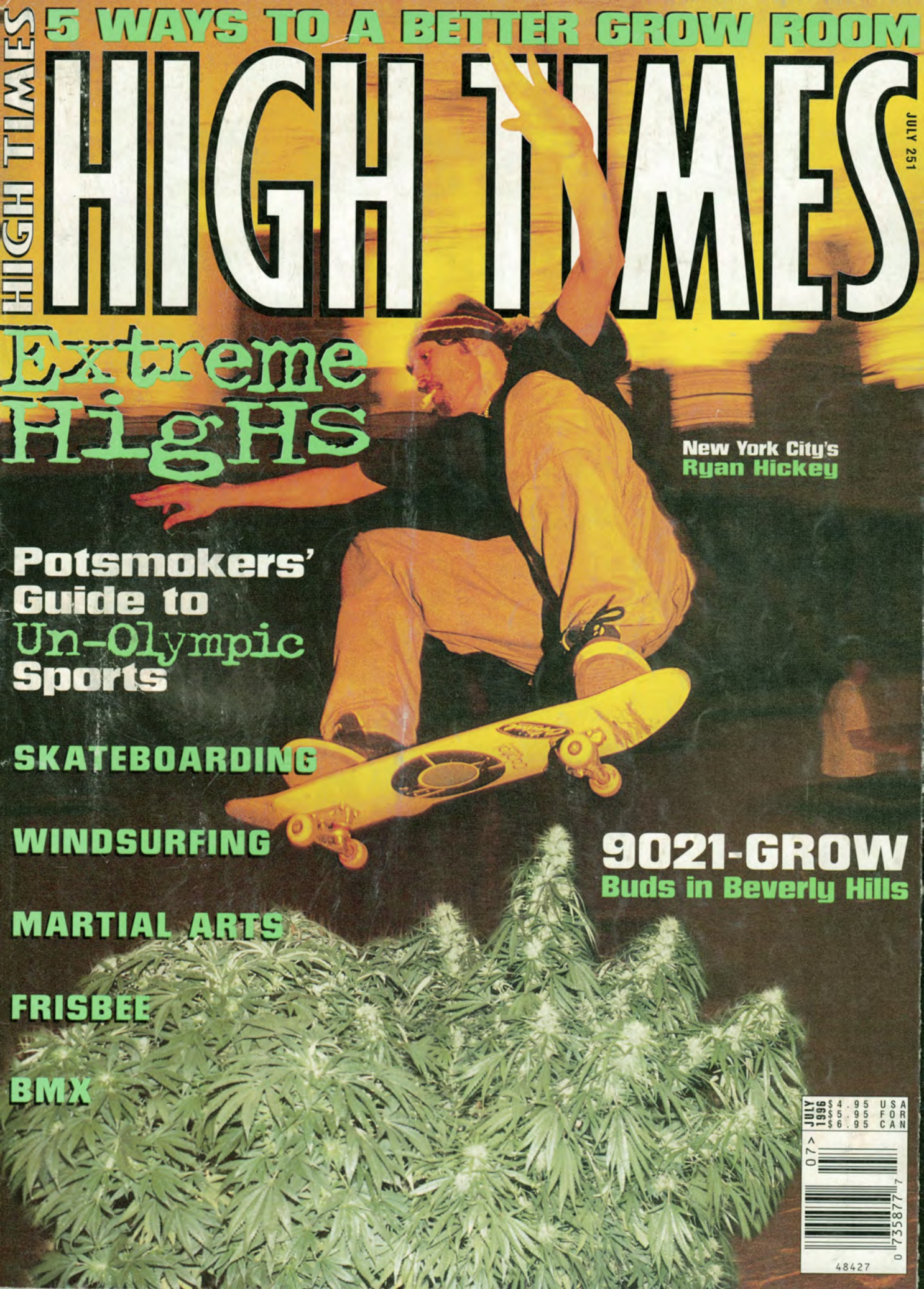
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marijuana and t

Is athletic performance enhanced by cannabis or does physical activity just feel better with a buzz?

BY BRAD PETERS

"I was in an exercise physiology class in college," recalls triathlete Kristin Benoit. "The teacher, this big fat guy, spent about half the semester talking about how bad pot was for the lungs. We were in the training room on the treadmills, so I challenged him to a race, and he was gasping in a few minutes. I just kept running. Then I said, 'Oh, by the way, I smoke pot.' It really shocked him."

"I can prove getting stoned helps me," says West Coast bicyclist Kirk Medvedeff, who wears a sophisticated device to monitor his heart rate and aerobic conditioning while he trains. The device stores cardiovascular data which the cyclist uses, in conjunction with odometer data from his bike, to track his body's performance and level of conditioning.

"My resting pulse is fifty-six beats per minute," says Medvedeff, whose weekly training regimen involves five 40-mile circuits with an average speed of 20 mph. "I'll take a water-pipe hit and it'll go up to about seventy. I do some breathing exercises that I learned in a Yoga class, do a little biofeedback, and it slows to around sixty. The great thing for riding is that I can consistently hit longer peak heart-rate periods while stoned than while I'm straight."

Steven Guthree, a Californian who spent the late '60s and early '70s rock-climbing in Yosemite National Park, claims, "Getting stoned while hanging off the face of a cliff is an incredible experience." Guthree, 47, bears the scarred knees and vise grip of a man who has conquered mountains for fun. "Sometimes it would cause me to sit there and space out on the beauty of the views and the sensation of being suspended in

he athlete

midair. Other times, it would give me the rush and incentive to get my tired, lazy ass moving again, to tackle a crack or handhold that I had previously believed was unattainable.

"Like all climbers, I fell a few times, but I can't blame that on getting loaded. I loved climbing more than anything else in the world. I sacrificed normal life, jobs and girlfriends just to be out there on a cold morning with my life on the line, with total concentration needed. When you climb, you know that every decision, every move, could be the last one you make. So if getting stoned had been bad for me, I would have given it up in a heartbeat."

Instead of being a hindrance, marijuana helped Guthree to "see deeply and clearly into the geological playing field that you're climbing on," as he describes it. "Getting stoned opened up a pattern of abstract associations that showed us climbing pathways that we might not have seen otherwise. You have to feel the mountain. You have to feel your own limitations. You have to be absolutely centered in the face of your fears, and pot helped me achieve that."

Pot also helped Guthree achieve a measure of financial security. "A lot of us got into some serious climbing and backpacking one year when a plane loaded with bricked kilos and bales crashed in a lake way, way up in the high country in Yosemite. We kept it quiet, waiting for the ice to melt. When it did, you had these nifty caravans of climbers tromping back down the mountain with packloads of Colombian Gold."

Pot can benefit an athlete physiologically as well. One commonly recognized effect of marijuana is increased heart rate, which goes up an average of 10-35% within minutes of smoking a joint. Peak cardiorespiratory effects occur between 15 to 30 minutes after smoking. Tachycardia, or heart-rate acceleration, influences blood pressure, vascular dilation, energy utilization, transport of nutrients and neurochemicals, and breathing. Some researchers speculate that marijuana smokers are able to more quickly achieve a maximized state of respiratory capacity, oxygen uptake and blood circulation than non-smoking research counterparts. This **CONTINUED ON PAGE 62**

disc-covering america

Ultimate Disc now numbers some 5,000 collegiate, high school and club teams nationwide. It's the granddaddy of alternative sports, but unlike its telegenic counterparts such as snowboarding and mountain-bike racing, Disc (formerly known as Frisbee) is still hovering at the grassroots level, in more ways than one.

Long the bastion of stoners alienated from the mainstream football scene, Ultimate Disc, and its novel offshoot Disc Golf, keep a foot planted firmly in weed culture. A sport that originated from pie-company employees tossing around pieplates on their lunch breaks, Disc started out as a cool game of catch played on grass. Embraced by stoners, it became a pre-hacky-sack pastime that went along well with sunny afternoons of bong hits, the Grateful Dead on the boom box and trips to the beach. It quickly got more competitive in the '70s and '80s, when Ultimate Frisbee took off.

The drug culture, though perhaps more rampant in the past, still prevails, as witnessed by some of the team names: Stone Henge, Black Lung, The Bud, Shake and the Ether Bunnies. Scooter Bross, a player from New York, recalls the day his dad visited a team game at Lehigh University in Pennsylvania.

"He marveled at the players' use of oxygen on the sidelines and how serious the sport must be," Bross says. "It was *actually* nitrous oxide. Whoever had the best drugs won the game."

Pot leaves often adorn customized discs, and one favorite model, Joe Pipe's "Buzzbee," has a custom bowl for smoking built into it. Many champion freestyle and Ultimate Discers play stoned. They say watching a disc float through space makes more sense while stoned on pot or 'shrooms. It's also easier to extrapolate movements on the field while in an altered state. "Marijuana is a sensual drug," says one longtime player. "Ultimate is a total-body sensory experience. Maybe it's just because getting high and throwing a disc is such a blast."

Nowadays, the hardcore players don't use Wham-O Frisbees, which were discarded years ago because their lack of flatness hurt ease of handling. The new weapon of choice, fashioned by Discraft, Inc. of Westland, MI, is a 175-gram thing of beauty that glides through the air like a UFO. Teams score by passing the disc down into the opposing endzone of a roughly football-sized field. The action is nonstop, like soccer.

While other alternative sports have flourished with corporate sponsors and TV deals, Ultimate Disc remains a people's sport. When Jose Cuervo Tequila last year negotiated with the Ultimate Players Association to introduce referees and a three-point shot , to make the sport more "TV-friendly," controversy rippled through the player community and the talks eventually dried up.

Such a change would have defied the antiauthoritarian nature of the sport, which relies on the players themselves to enforce rules and call fouls and other infractions via an honor system. This honor system often involves extended on-field arguments, which diminishes TV appeal but preserves the freedom of the game.

Despite Disc's resistance to commercialization, the sport continues to grow, supported by stoners and non-stoners alike. Freestyle Frisbee is still big, and Disc Golf, which employs various-sized discs targeted at "holes" on either a fixed or improvised course, is catching on briskly. In these budget-weary times, a sport that requires nothing more than a plastic disc and a field holds great appeal.
—Steve Gelsi

For more information, contact: Ultimate Players Association HQ, 3595 E. Fountain Boulevard, Suite J2, Colorado Springs, CO 80910.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 53 produces the exhilarating "rush" that some users report, and might be used by athletes to produce momentary bursts of intensity.

Marijuana apparently raises metabolic rates. Some researchers think this produces the characteristic craving for quick-burning carbohydrates and sweet foods which users call "the munchies." Metabolic increase might be beneficial for some athletes, but researchers speculate that stimulation of body systems can be good and bad for people engaging in exercise: good because getting high promotes an initially more rapid response to exercise's demands, but bad because the stimulation negatively affects overall endurance and stamina. Marijuana can cause baseline metabolic function to increase faster than it would under "normal" circumstances, but this premature achievement of heightened physiologic activity may result in lowered overall exercise capacity.

Marijuana and the athlete

Marijuana's ability to alter mood, sensation and cognition make it a significant player in the arena of substances which enhance or decrease athletic performance. Marijuana's effects on athletes are far less harmful than effects of many legal drugs. Merely participating in sports like football and boxing causes far more injury to athletes than toking ever could.

Former San Diego Charger Walt Sweeny recently won a lawsuit which charged that he became a drug addict because NFL players are given huge doses of drugs as part of normal training practices. Former San Francisco 49ers lineman Charlie Krueger won a $2.3 million lawsuit in 1988 which alleged that team doctors had cavalierly told him he was uninjured, even though his knees were so unstable that he could feel his bones shifting as he walked. As with many NFL players and athletes from other big-money corporate sports, Krueger is crippled for life—not because he used marijuana, but because team doctors medicated him with dangerous legal drugs.

When a few Chicago Bears players were accused last fall by a fellow player of renting a limousine one night, smoking joints and going to nightclubs, the CONTINUED ON PAGE 66

windsurfing girl

If you hang out long enough on the white sand beach of Florida's Central Gulf town of Clearwater, you're likely to hear locals and tourists alike talk about the "Windsurfer Girl" who rides the wind and waves in the warm Gulf of Mexico. Pretty soon, you might even be lucky enough to catch a glimpse of the girl herself, cavorting hundreds of yards offshore on her windsurfing board with its vivid purple and green sail. At the end of a windy day, when the air has been moving parallel to the coast across a sea of moderate swells and choppy waves, she'll reluctantly come gliding back in to shore to begin cleaning and disassembling her board.

"It was magic out there today," says Lisa Johnson, sunburnt and tired, but obviously happy. "Pure magic."

Johnson is a bit magical herself. Daughter of a successful automobile dealer across the bay in Tampa, the 24-year-old college graduate and car saleswoman has been wowing tourists and beach residents for years, and it isn't just her lean, tanned body, auburn hair and color-coordinated bikini which earns her notoriety.

"I think that I started to get a rep when I went a bit too far," Johnson confides, lugging the board and sail up to a small beach house behind a patch of sea oats near the shore. "The wind was coming from the east, and the tide was going out. I had carried a joint and lighter out in my waterproof bag, and when I got out past the boat line, I folded the sail, floated for a while, and lit up.

"It was one of those moments that you always remember. I was feeling good anyway, having just aced a test at school. Somebody had given me the joint, and it was really strong, one-with-the-universe type stuff. I just lay out there, feeling like I was part of the whole ocean, another particle of salt. I don't know how much time went by, because I drifted off. When I woke up I thought I was dreaming 'cause a whole school of porpoises were swimming around me. I put my head underwater and could hear them click-clicking to each other. That's how they talk, you know. When they started to swim away I decided to go with them."

The porpoises, the tide and the wind were moving away from shore, but Johnson was oblivious to the shrinking world she was leaving behind. "That's what's so great about windsurfing in the ocean. You are about as alone as you can ever be."

The afternoon rolled by like an aquamarine dream, and Johnson got hungry. She had brought only one Powerbar and her hunger told her it was time to head home. "I turned the sail and tried to tack back, but it was pretty obvious that I had made a serious miscalculation. Then I started to paddle back, but the moon was big and so the tide was massive. I couldn't even see the shore. The sun was going down, and I knew I was in for a long night."

Fortunately, Clearwater has a harbor which hosts a fleet of deep-sea-fishing boats, and one of them was returning to port when its captain got the surprise of his life.

"I'm sure he tripped out when he saw me. There were about twenty people on board the boat, some of them with these huge lines hanging over the side. The guy said, 'What the hell are you doing 'way out here?', and I said, 'Get those people to pull those hooks back up and get me on board, and I'll tell you.' "

A few hours later, Johnson was reunited with a family member who had alerted the Coast Guard when she failed to return home. "I was six miles off the coast, they said," Johnson recalls. "They were all worried and my mom told me that I had to swear I would never windsurf past sight of land again. I think I could have swam in once the tide shifted. Of course if the wind had changed, I'd have gotten back just fine. I've surfed at night before."

Johnson laughs when asked if marijuana contributed to whatever danger she may have been in that day. "The people who are scared of getting high are the same people who are scared of windsurfing. You need some confidence to stand up on one of those things and hold the wind for a few hours. You've got to have balance and nerve. You also have to be damned strong. I get really up while I'm surfing, and if I get high, I get even more up. I don't see what the problem is."

An objective examination affirms that Johnson's pot use hasn't visibly damaged her. She is almost six feet tall, with muscular (but not masculine) arms and shoulders. Her quadriceps and calves also appear exceptionally strong, which, she explains, comes from bracing and standing for hours on the board. Her determination and mental focus are sharply honed, which you can see in the bright light of her eyes. On days when conditions warrant, she totally absorbs herself in the rhythm of waves and wind, pausing only to take a hit of bud, drink fresh water or eat high-energy snacks.

"I think I could outrun, outsurf or even outbox most of the people on this beach. I help people and am a good member of my family business. I think people are just too uptight. They're afraid of something that makes you feel really good and puts you right out there on the edge. That's what I live for, and I will never let them stop me from smoking pot or riding the Gulf. It's natural." —*Brad Peters*