

Members of failed health club sue owner

By Dave Varga
staff writer

More than 30 former members of the Women's Athletic Club in Birmingham are exercising their legal muscles, filing court claims to get their membership fees or parts of them returned.

These former club members are scheduled to argue their claims Dec. 13 and 20 before a magistrate at 48th District Court.

The club, on the corner of Hunter and Bowers, closed Sept. 4. Club owner James Elisman, a Birmingham attorney who recently purchased a 800-acre northeast Michigan farm for more than \$1 million cash, said in September that he closed the club because of bad management.

At the time, Elisman had said he would try to sell the all-female club. But if he didn't sell within 60 days, he said he would consider refunding unused portions of membership fees. On Monday — 89 days after the club closed — Elisman said he wasn't paying memberships back.

"THERE'S BEEN a lot of misunderstanding, I guess, because I voluntarily offered to recompense them if the club closed permanently," Elisman said.

Elisman said four partners are negotiating to buy the club from him. "We're down to a few short strokes," Elisman said.

Janita McNeal, one of the members who filed the small claims action, said members have tried to talk to Elisman, who wouldn't respond to them and hasn't attempted to reimburse them.

"We've tried to settle it out of court on several occasions. He was very uncooperative, very rude," McNeal said.

McNeal was one of four employees at Ralph Manuel Associates who purchased one-year corporate memberships on Aug. 15 at a total cost of \$600, she said. The small amounts of memberships — \$100 to \$300 — kept the members' suits in small claims court, McNeal said.

Elisman said the new buyer should have the club reopened by the start

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of the exercise season, which begins Jan. 15. Memberships will be extended so that, if the club was closed for four months, they will be given four extra months, he said.

BY OFFERING to extend memberships, he's done more than is necessary, said Elisman.

"I don't have any obligation to anybody. A business can close and people who invest in a membership fee are just screwed," Elisman said.

Meanwhile, Elisman recently paid more than \$1 million for the storied "Ed & Dollie Cole Ranch" in Atlanta, in northeastern lower Michigan, between Alpena and Gaylord. He bought it from Troy auto dealer John McMullen.

Elisman said the deal involved no bank financing and the price was "in excess of \$1 million consideration." Elisman said there is speculation northeast Michigan might be the site of a ski resort that would be closer

to the Detroit area than "Boyne Country." He's examining a joint venture to develop the property as a ski and golf resort.

"THE LEWISTON-Atlanta-Alpena area would be ideal to bring up-north skiing two hours closer to Detroit metro," he said. "Already, golf courses like Garland are drawing great attention to the long-neglected northeast of Michigan."

The Cole Ranch was famous for attracting movie stars and others to

parties held at the ranch by then-GM president Edward Cole, who died more than a decade ago in a private plane accident. The ranch includes several luxury homes, three lakes and a landing strip for small planes. It has been used primarily for deer hunting and fishing.

Elisman said he spent the first couple weeks of owning the ranch enjoying it, deer hunting with his friends and family.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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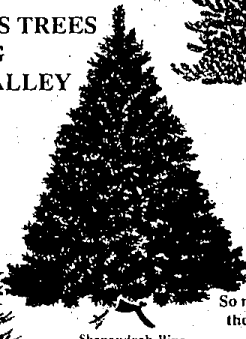
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