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JAELYN TWING/U.S. Marines

U.S. Marines fire an M777 Howitzer during an exercise at Marine Corps Air-Ground Combat Center, Twentynine Palms, Calif., in 2023. Senators, this week, said the Pentagon must collect better data on troop exposure to blast overpressure.

Turning up the pressure

Senators say Pentagon must move faster to mitigate blast exposure

By SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Senators on Wednesday said the Pentagon must collect better data on troop exposure to blast overpressure and identify those most at risk for traumatic brain injury at a much faster pace to protect the health of service members.

Lawmakers on the Senate Armed Services Committee's personnel subpanel as well as experts on brain injury said the Pentagon has been too passive in addressing and preventing damage caused by shock waves that emanate

"We need to do better for our troops, and we need to do it right now."

Sen. Elizabeth Warren
D-Mass.

from exploding weapons, known as overpressure.

The cumulative effect of repeated low-level blast exposure can cause headaches, seizures, hallucinations and increase risks of depression and suicide.

"I want to be a partner but a partner that urges you to move faster and deliver more for our service members as quickly as possible," Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., told Pentagon officials during a hearing on the issue. "We need to

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Wormuth: Army using \$500M to train Ukrainian troops for war

By MATTHEW ADAMS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Army has used approximately \$500 million in funding for units in Europe and Africa to continue training Ukrainian forces to fight off invading Russian troops, service Secretary Christine Wormuth said.

The Army also could look to make spending cuts to various programs such as training exercises and new barracks projects as Congress faces a government shutdown and struggles to approve more aid for Ukraine and pass a defense budget for fiscal 2024, she said.

"By ... late spring, early summer, we would have to make some difficult choices about other exercises," Wormuth told reporters Tuesday at a meeting of the Defense Writers Group. "There's a whole host of NATO exercises, for example, that our forces participate in."

She said the Army's budget has remained stagnant for at least a couple of years. If the service can't get an approved budget for roughly \$185 billion for 2024 or supplemental aid for Ukraine, they are "going to probably have to cancel some things."

The U.S. has provided more than \$44 billion in aid to Ukraine since the Russian invasion in February 2022, which has entered its third year.

The Pentagon announced its

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WAR IN UKRAINE
Putin says Western troops in Ukraine would be 'tragic'
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MILITARY

Poland stint lengthened for air defense unit

Troops dispatched to bolster defenses on NATO's eastern flank will have deployment extended 3 months

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — A Texas-based Patriot missile air defense unit dispatched to Poland to bolster defenses on NATO's eastern flank will have its deployment extended three months, the Army said this week.

The 1st Battalion, 62nd Air Defense Artillery Regiment's mission will now last until around June. Its deployment to Poland began in October as part of efforts to enhance European defenses in the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

"Being away from family is hard, but I have really grown to my platoon being my family,"

Staff Sgt. Zachary Nanninga, a platoon sergeant in the unit based at Fort Cavazos, said in a statement Wednesday from the 10th Army Air and Missile Defense Command.

A turbulent security environment in Europe and beyond has led to unexpected mission extensions for U.S. troops.

Concerns about the Israel-Hamas war expanding forced thousands of sailors aboard the USS Gerald R. Ford aircraft carrier to remain at sea several months past their expected return date. Ford returned in January to its homeport in Norfolk, Va.

Similar situations have played out for some soldiers operating in

the U.S. European Command area.

"Our mission along the eastern flank is demanding, but this is an unprecedented time in EUCOM," said Capt. Leara Shumate, a spokeswoman for the 52nd Air Defense Artillery Brigade, which oversees the 1st Battalion, 62nd Air Defense Artillery Regiment during its time in Europe.

Since the Russia-Ukraine war started, the military has sent an array of units to Europe on a rotational basis, typically on six or nine-month deployments.

Overall, that has added up to force levels in the range of 100,000 U.S. troops on the Continent, up from the 80,000 in place

ahead of Moscow's invasion in February 2022.

The Army has been the main provider of the additional troops in Europe. And during the course of the expanded operations, the Army has been forced to extend some missions to meet demands.

For example, the 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division, based out of Fort Riley, Kan., saw its nine-month rotation in 2022 to Europe extended.

U.S. Army air defense units based in Germany also have been in high demand on NATO's eastern flank. On Monday, the Ansbach-based Alpha Battery, 5th Battalion, 4th Air Defense Artil-

lery Regiment, returned to Germany after a deployment that saw its soldiers fanned out across the eastern flank.

U.S. Army Patriot air defense units in Germany, which carried out the Patriot mission in Poland before the arrival of 1-62, also experienced long stints away from home because of events in Ukraine.

The 1st Battalion, 62nd Air Defense Artillery Regiment is now "at the center of a multinational initiative to bolster the region's security infrastructure," the Army statement said.

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Jolly Green helo makes first flight

Stars and Stripes

A new Air Force combat rescue helicopter, dubbed the Jolly Green II in homage to its Vietnam War-era predecessors, made its first Indo-Pacific flight this week, according to Pacific Air Forces.

The HH-60W Jolly Green II lifted off Tuesday from Kadena Air Base, Okinawa, PACAF announced in a news release Wednesday. The release did not provide flight details.

An undisclosed number of new-era Jolly Green IIs arrived at Kadena in January to replace HH-60G Pave Hawks that have been in service there 21 years with the 33rd Rescue Squadron.

"I've been flying this HH-60W for three years and I was fortunate enough to return to Kadena for a second assignment," Lt. Col. Brian Rhoades, the squadron's combat rescue helicopter team lead, said in the release.

The 33rd flies combat rescue missions in all manner of weather, behind the lines and around the clock, according to the release.

"This is the first sortie this aircraft has flown since arriving at Kadena, and this is the first active-duty Air Force crew to fly this helicopter," Rhoades said. "It flew exactly like how I expected it to and met all our expectations."

All the squadron's G-model Pave Hawks will be gone by August and more Jolly Green IIs will arrive before mid-2025, squadron commander Lt. Col. Louis Nolting said in the release.

"The HH-60W gives us a modern, combat capable helicopter with improved power avionics, defensive systems, weapon sys-



PHOTOS BY LUIS E. RIOS CALDERON/U.S. Air Force

An Air Force HH-60W Jolly Green II assigned to the 33rd Rescue Squadron lifts off for the first time at Kadena Air Base, Okinawa, on Tuesday.

tems, survivability and personnel recovery," he said.

The Air Force cut short its procurement plan for Jolly Green IIs last year after purchasing 75 ships, two-thirds of the 113 it planned to buy, according to a March 28 report on the Breaking Defense news website.

Air Force Secretary Frank Kendall said a changing threat environment led to the decision, which would leave the service 25 combat rescue helicopters short of the number they're meant to replace, the report said.

The next-generation Jolly Green II, based on the HH-60M Black Hawk frame, also comes with a larger fuel capacity for longer range and better threat detection and countermeasures, according to the Air Force.

It can carry two pilots, two gunners, two paramedics and two litters; the fuselage can be mounted on either side with .50-caliber and 7.62 mm machine guns, according to a September 2021 report on the Air Force Technology website.

The service announced the



Tech. Sgt. Shelby "Scar" Duncan, a 33rd Rescue Squadron special missions aviator, performs pre-flight checks on an HH-60W Jolly Green II at Kadena Air Base, Okinawa, on Tuesday.

Pave Hawk's retirement in 2010 and began development of the Jolly Green II in June 2014 with a \$1.2 billion contract to Sikorsky and Lockheed Martin, according to Air Force Technology.

The Air Force began phasing out the Pave Hawks in 2022, and the Jolly Green II made its first operational flight that September

when one flew a patient from Valdosta, Ga., to Tampa, Fla., according to the Air Force website.

The name Jolly Green II pays homage to the Sikorsky HH-3E, nicknamed the "Jolly Green Giant" due to its size and color, which set the precedent for current Air Force combat rescue crews, according to the service.

2 Marines charged in hate-crime incident

By GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

Two Marines assigned to the service's oldest and most high-profile installation have been charged with scrawling antisemitic symbols and racial slurs in a University of Maryland dormitory, the service confirmed Wednesday.

Lance Cpl. Sergio Delgado and Lance Cpl. Hayden Pritchard, who are stationed at Marine Barracks, Washington, D.C., were charged by university police, according to Capt. Kayla Haas, public affairs officer for the barracks.

The D.C. barracks has been the symbolic home of the Marine Corps since 1801 and is home to its elite ceremonial units, as well as the residence of the Marine commandant.

Haas said the two Marines were charged Feb. 8 in connection with an April 29, 2023, incident at La Plata Hall at the University of Maryland in College Park, Md. The residence hall for 600 students is located on the university campus, about 12 miles northeast of the Marine Barracks.

Security video showed the writing of antisemitic symbols and anti-Black slurs inside at least two floors of the dormitory, university police said.

Pritchard, 22, from Chula Vista, Calif., is charged with racial or religious property damage and trespassing. Delgado, 21, from Baldwin Park, Calif., is charged with trespassing, police said.

MILITARY

Austin testifies about recent hospitalization

By SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin on Thursday took responsibility for the secrecy surrounding his recent hospitalization but pushed back against accusations from House Republicans that there were gaps in command authorities during his absence.

Austin said there was never a lapse in command and control during his treatment for complications from prostate cancer surgery while also acknowledging a breakdown in communication to top government leaders.

“I should have promptly informed the president, my team, Congress and the American people about my cancer diagnosis and subsequent treatment,” he said in testimony to the House Armed Services Committee. “We did not handle this right and I did not handle this right.”

Austin said he did not instruct his staff to withhold information about his hospitalization but appeared to blame his underlings for the notification delays.

“I was the patient and so I expect that my organization would do the right thing,” he said.

Austin was called to appear before the House panel after failing to notify the White House, Congress and senior Pentagon officials of his hospitalization at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Md., for several days in early January.

His prostate cancer diagnosis in December and the surgery for it later that month were also not disclosed to the White House until last month.

The initial silence about Austin’s hospitalization caused an uproar on Capitol Hill, with several Republicans and at least one Democrat calling for Austin’s resignation.

An unclassified summary of an internal Pentagon review released Monday blamed privacy restrictions and staff hesitancy for



CARLOS BONGIOANNI/Stars and Stripes

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin testifies Thursday during a House Armed Services Committee hearing on Capitol Hill in Washington.

the lack of transparency but did not find “any indication of ill intent or an attempt to obfuscate.”

Sen. Jack Reed, D-R.I., the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, said the review’s recommendations to improve communication served as a “starting point for ensuring this lapse never occurs again.”

But Republicans largely dismissed the legitimacy of the review, noting it was conducted by Austin’s subordinates and subject to his approval.

“It includes no explanation of why the president and his staff were left in the dark. It makes no recommendations to improve communication with the White House. And unsurprisingly, it holds nobody accountable,” said Rep. Mike Rogers, R-Ala., the chairman of the House Armed Services

Committee.

A separate investigation by the Pentagon’s inspector general to examine the “the roles, processes, procedures, responsibilities and actions” related to Austin’s hospitalization is ongoing.

Austin repeatedly came under fire from Republicans on Thursday who said they wanted to see accountability for the incident. They grilled Austin about why no one has faced disciplinary action.

“Who will be held accountable for this, this embarrassment?” asked Rep. Jim Banks, R-Ind.

Rep. Mike Waltz, R-Fla., said Austin showed poor judgment, drawing a comparison to the swift notification of the public last year after Marine Corps Commandant Gen. Eric Smith was hospitalized for cardiac ar-

rest.

“My teenage daughter knows to tell her supervisor if she’s not going to work. The American people — truck drivers, bartenders — know they have to tell their boss or they get fired,” said Waltz, a former Green Beret. “But you’ve held yourself to a different standard and that’s unacceptable.”

Several Republicans noted a service member would have faced consequences if they had gone to a hospital without notifying their chain of command.

Democrats on the committee bristled at the Republican attacks and attempted to steer the conversation to the failure of the Republican-led House to approve national security legislation and fund the Pentagon.

A supplemental funding package that would provide billions of dollars in aid for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan has been held up by Republicans for months while Congress has yet to pass a full-year 2024 budget for the Defense Department.

“Mr. Secretary, it is not you who is the problem. It’s not what happened in your health emergency that’s the problem,” said Rep. John Garamendi, D-Calif. “When will this committee actually stand up for the defense of this nation? When will my colleagues on the Republican side of this committee find the courage to get the job done?”

Rep. Elissa Slotkin, D-Mich., said Austin was taking accountability for his actions by simply appearing before the committee and subjecting himself to the intrusive questioning of lawmakers.

“Accountability is having to come and sit in front of people and their outrage and their drama in public about your health issues and the mistakes you’ve admitted you made when the entire world is wondering what the hell is going on with the United States of America,” she said.

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Pressure: Traumatic brain injury affects thousands of troops

FROM PAGE 1

do better for our troops, and we need to do it right now.”

Frank Larkin, a former Navy SEAL who worked for a Pentagon organization focused on improvised explosive devices, said the health risks of blast exposure were a concern 15 years ago, when the U.S. was at war in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Those worries led to the creation of new armored vehicles to survive blasts but the service members inside them were not spared from the invisible pressure waves that rocked their bodies and brains, Larkin said.

“A lot of these folks came out of these vehicles and they looked fairly normal and it wasn’t until time evolved that we started to see behavioral changes, cognitive dysfunction and so forth,” he said.

Larkin said his Navy SEAL son, Ryan Larkin, became a different person after serving as a combat medic, sniper and explosives

breacher in four combat tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. He stopped smiling, had trouble sleeping, complained of headaches and became convinced there was something wrong with his head.

Ryan Larkin was prescribed more than 40 medications for his ailments but in 2017, at 29-years-old, he died by suicide. A postmortem examination showed he had microscopic-level brain injury that was uniquely related to blast exposure, his father said.

“My son died from his injuries suffered both in training for combat and combat operations,” Larkin said. “He just didn’t die right away.”

Traumatic brain injury became known as the “signature wound” of the U.S. war on terror and continues to affect thousands of service members who train on weapons such as artillery and rocket launchers.

The Defense Department provided treatment for such injuries

nearly 50,000 times during three months in 2023, according to Warren. More than 20,000 military personnel were diagnosed with traumatic brain injury in 2022, said Sen. Rick Scott, R-Fla.

“The more we learn, the more we come to understand that blast exposure is an ongoing threat to the health of individual service members and to the wellbeing, the morale and the readiness of our entire force,” Warren said.

Lawmakers have for years urged the Pentagon to be more proactive in protecting troop brain health, ramping up pressure on officials last year after a New York Times investigation revealed the military’s mitigation policies were having little to no effect on the ground.

Pentagon officials on Wednesday said they are taking steps to improve data collection and blast exposure records, which experts said is key for tracking exposure in high-risk occupational specialties

and developing strategies to limit exposure in training environments.

The Defense Department only has blast exposure data for 500 service members, Warren said. Some of the highest rates of exposure are seen among training instructors and members of the artillery community.

Dr. Carlos Williams, director of the National Intrepid Center of Excellence at the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, said cognitive assessments will be performed on all new troops this year before they participate in training.

“One of the most important things we can do is baseline our members from the moment they come into the military,” he said. “And so that means before they start the military training, and that allows us to follow them over time.”

Lester Martinez-Lopez, the assistant secretary of defense for

health affairs, said the Pentagon is looking into how often subsequent testing should be done. Special Operations Command has determined its members should be tested every three years while the Pentagon is planning on every five years.

Martinez-Lopez said the Defense Department needed to sort through more “data and science” to determine if testing should be more frequent.

Kathy Lee, director of the Pentagon’s warfighter brain health policy, said more research was also required before establishing safety thresholds for firing explosive weapons.

Warren and other senators said the Pentagon needed to act now.

“We know enough to start moving in the right direction,” she said. “I urge you: better to make your best estimate and get started.”

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WAR IN UKRAINE



ALEX BABENKO/AP

Medics of the volunteer battalion "Hospitaliers" move injured Ukrainian serviceman Mykola, 25, from an ambulance to a medical bus during an evacuation in Dnipropetrovsk region, Ukraine, on Wednesday.

Russian onslaught targets more Ukrainian towns and villages

By ILLIA NOVIKOV
Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Russian forces are pushing hard against more Ukrainian towns and villages in eastern and southeastern Ukraine as Moscow tries to press its current advantage in weapons and troops, Kyiv officials said Thursday.

Despite Russia's apparent offensive momentum on the ground, Ukraine said it shot down 13 Russian warplanes in February, including three on Thursday, as the Kremlin's forces pushed forward.

With the full-scale war now into its third year, Russian forces have been bludgeoning some Ukrainian defensive positions into submission, deploying overwhelming amounts of artillery and troop numbers in an effort to punch through defensive lines at targeted points.

Though Russia's gains have been small, slow and costly, Ukraine doesn't have enough reservists and has a severe shortage of artillery shells as the supply of military aid from Western partners

has waned.

The Russian army is trying to seize the towns and villages of Tonenke, Orlivka, Semenivka, Berdychi and Krasnohorivka in the eastern Donetsk region, Ukraine's army chief, Col. Gen Oleksandr Syrskyi, said on social media.

Those are places where Ukrainian military officials had said they would form a new line of defense after Ukrainian troops pulled out of Avdiivka on Feb. 17.

In the southeastern Zaporizhzhia region, Russian forces are focusing on retaking Verbove and Robotyne, towns that Ukraine won back in last summer's counteroffensive in 2023, Syrskyi said.

Syrskyi, who was appointed by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to lead the country's military on Feb. 8, accused some of his commanders of making "miscalculations" in assessing the enemy and taking countermeasures.

Meanwhile, Ukraine's Defense Ministry said that its forces shot down three Russian Su-34 jets overnight.

That made a total of 11 war-

planes, including an early warning and control A-50 plane, that Ukraine claims to have downed since Feb. 17, and 13 in February — the highest monthly tally, it said, since October 2022.

"The enemy has increased its air presence in the east. Our top military leadership reacted accordingly," air force spokesman Yurii Ihnat said on national television.

A major question for Kyiv officials is how they can unlock further military help from their partners. Emergency U.S. national security funds for Ukraine are still on hold amid a political dispute in Washington.

Ukrainian parliamentary Speaker Ruslan Stefanchuk addressed an open letter to U.S. House Speaker Mike Johnson, asking him to put to a vote the Biden administration's proposal to send \$60 billion of aid to Ukraine.

The letter Stefanchuk posted on X, formerly Twitter, on Wednesday was also signed by 23 speakers and heads of parliament in European countries.

Putin: Western troops in Ukraine would be 'tragic'

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV
Associated Press

MOSCOW — Russian President Vladimir Putin vowed Thursday to fulfill Moscow's goals in Ukraine and sternly warned the West against deeper involvement in the fighting, saying that such a move is fraught with the risk of a global nuclear conflict.

Putin's blunt warning came in a state-of-the-nation address ahead of a March election he's all but certain to win, underlining his readiness to raise the stakes in the tug-of-war with the West to protect the Russian gains in Ukraine.

In an apparent reference to French President Emmanuel Macron's statement earlier this week that the future deployment of Western ground troops to Ukraine should not be "ruled out", Putin warned that it would lead to "tragic" consequences for the countries who decide to do that.

Putin noted that while accusing Russia of plans to attack NATO allies in Europe, Western allies were "selecting targets for striking our territory" and "talking about the possibility of sending a NATO contingent to Ukraine."

"We remember the fate of those who sent their troop contingents to the territory of our country," the Russian leader said in an apparent allusion to the failed invasions by Napoleon and Hitler. "Now the consequences for the potential invaders will be far more tragic."

In a two-hour speech before an audience of lawmakers and top officials, Putin cast Western leaders as reckless and irresponsible and declared that the West should keep in mind that "we also have the weapons that can strike targets on their territory, and what they are now suggesting and scar-

ing the world with, all that raises the real threat of a nuclear conflict that will mean the destruction of our civilization."

The strong statement followed earlier warnings from Putin, who has issued frequent reminders of Russia's nuclear might since he sent troops into Ukraine in February 2022 as he sought to discourage the West from expanding its military support for Kyiv.

Putin emphasized that Russia's nuclear forces are in "full readiness," saying that the military has deployed potent new weapons, some of them tested on the battlefield in Ukraine.



Putin

The Kremlin leader said they include the new Sarmat heavy intercontinental ballistic missile that has entered service with

Russian nuclear forces, along with the Burevestnik atomic-powered cruise missile and the Poseidon atomic-powered, nuclear-armed drone, which are completing their tests.

At the same time, he rejected Western leaders' statements about the threat of a Russian attack on NATO allies in Europe as "ravings" and again dismissed Washington's claim that Moscow was pondering the deployment of space-based nuclear weapons.

Putin charged that the U.S. allegations were part of a ploy to draw Russia into talks on nuclear arms control on American terms even as Washington continues its efforts to deliver a "strategic defeat" to Moscow in Ukraine.

"Ahead of the U.S. election, they just want to show their citizens, as well as others, that they continue to rule the world," he said. "It won't work."

Train: Request for more Ukraine funding remains stalled on Capitol Hill

FROM PAGE 1

last military aid package for Ukraine — worth \$250 million — on Dec. 27. The U.S. has participated in two Ukraine Contact Defense Group meetings so far in 2024 but it has not been able to contribute any additional aid.

The White House's request for \$110 in supplemental funding, including about \$60 billion for Ukraine to keep its troops supplied with enough weapons and munitions to beat back invading Rus-

sian forces, remains stalled on Capitol Hill.

The Democrat-controlled Senate managed to pass a \$95 billion foreign aid package a few weeks ago, including \$60 billion for Ukraine. In the House, where Republicans hold the majority, funding for more aid is at an impasse.

A group of eight House lawmakers, led by Rep. Brian Fitzpatrick, R-Pa., on Feb. 16 unveiled an alternative bill to the Senate's foreign aid legislation. It includes

more than \$66 billion in defense-only funding for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan with provisions to address the U.S. southern border. The bill designates almost \$48 billion for Ukraine aid.

The federal government has been operating on a temporary stopgap funding measure, known as a continuing resolution, since Oct. 1, the start of the fiscal year. It is unclear when Congress will pass a budget for fiscal 2024. A vote on extending the continuing

resolution is needed before midnight Friday to avoid a partial government shutdown while the Defense Department funding is set to lapse on March 8.

However, congressional leaders on Wednesday reached a tentative deal to extend funding temporarily for one set of federal agencies through March 8 and for another set through March 22, according to The Associated Press.

Wormuth underscored that without funding the service can-

not invest in the development of weapons or build new barracks, such as new living quarters planned for Joint Base Lewis-McChord in Washington state.

"We won't be able to build that barracks under a CR and we'll probably have to build it at a higher price tag when we do get to build it because construction costs are going up," the secretary said.

MILITARY

German ship mistakenly targets US drone

BY ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

A German navy ship mistakenly targeted a U.S. Reaper drone in the Red Sea earlier this week while operating as part of the European Union's Aspides mission to protect shipping in the vital waterway, a Defense Department official said Thursday.

The MQ-9 drone wasn't damaged in the Tuesday incident and continued its mission, the official told Stars and Stripes on condition of anonymity because they weren't authorized to provide their name.

The targeting of a drone by an ally demonstrates the challenges the U.S. and its partners face in attempting to stem attacks by Iranian-backed Houthi militants, analysts say.

Although the U.S. and other countries operating in the Red

Sea are cooperating with each other, the lack of a unified command means information can be incomplete, overabundant or ambiguous, said James Holmes, chair of the maritime strategy program at the Naval War College in Newport, R.I.

"Mistakes are going to happen when a loose naval confederation with no central command takes to the sea to wage war in a high-pressure environment," Holmes said.

The department was in close communication with the EU and Aspides "to investigate the circumstances that led to this event and to ensure safe deconfliction of airspace," the defense official said.

The Aspides mission also includes France, Greece and Italy, among other EU countries, and is working in coordination with the U.S.-led Operation Prosper-

ity Guardian.

German Defense Ministry officials identified the ship as the frigate Hessen.

The warship shot at the drone when it appeared that the aircraft was not from an allied nation, ministry spokesman Michael Stempfle told the German tabloid Bild on Wednesday.

Hessen later realized the mistake, Stempfle said.

Citing operational security concerns, the ministry did not identify the drone as American or say why Hessen was unable to accurately identify it.

It also wasn't clear whether the warship's shots missed the target or self-destructed when Hessen realized that the drone wasn't from an enemy.

"The statements made by ... spokesman Mr. Stempfle stand for themselves and will not be commented on further," the min-

istry said in an email response to Stars and Stripes.

Holmes likened the current international strategy in the Red Sea to that used in the Gulf of Aden to combat piracy off the coast of Somalia, where participants coordinated among themselves.

"They could get away with loose cooperation because counterpiracy is a slow-moving affair compared to combat operations, when ship crews often have to decide whether or not to take the shot against an air target within seconds rather than minutes or hours," Holmes said.

While German and American naval forces operate on the same tactical standards, there is still potential for miscommunication, especially if the operations happen outside a NATO context or mission, said Sebastian Bruns, a German maritime security ex-

pert and senior researcher for the Institute for Security Policy at Kiel University.

There are other ways to communicate, but the classified and clandestine nature of military missions preempts them, he noted.

"While these major assets that nations operate in the area are certainly programmed accordingly to avoid blue-on-blue attacks, the potential for miscalculation and misunderstandings is real," said Bruns, referring to the potential for friendly-fire incidents. "Allies will work to sort these out soon."

Hessen entered the Red Sea on Friday.

Days later, the frigate shot down two Houthi attack drones in what is believed to be the first known use of live weapons in combat by the German navy since World War II.

3rd Cavalry for first time takes its place with 2nd ID in S. Korea

BY DAVID CHOI
Stars and Stripes

CAMP CASEY, South Korea — A Texas-based cavalry regiment took over as the 2nd Infantry Division's rotational force in South Korea during a ceremony roughly 15 miles from the Demilitarized Zone that divides the Korean Peninsula.

The 3rd Cavalry Regiment, of Fort Cavazos, Texas, assumed its new role from 2nd Stryker Brigade Combat Team in front of about 350 troops gathered Thursday at Hanson Field House on Camp Casey.

The Stryker team returns to Fort Carson, Colo., having completed its nine-month deployment.

The rotational force supports 2nd ID, headquartered at Camp Humphreys, about 40 miles south

of Seoul and the largest U.S. military base overseas. Roughly 28,500 U.S. troops are stationed in the country, most of them at Humphreys.

The 3rd Cavalry consists of about 3,500 troops and 1,500 vehicles, roughly the same size as its predecessor, and is headquartered at Casey.

Known as the Brave Rifles, 3rd Cavalry traces its roots to its creation in 1846, followed by service in the Mexican-American War in 1847, according to the regiment's homepage. It rode with Gen. William T. Sherman in the Civil War and fought in the Spanish-American War and World Wars I and II.

In the modern era, 3rd Cavalry served in the Persian Gulf and Iraq wars and in Afghanistan.

Since 2011, it too rides to the fight in Stryker combat vehicles.

During the ceremony, 2nd ID commander Maj. Gen. William Taylor congratulated the outgoing Stryker team for its "tough and high tempo training" during its tour.

The team took part in numerous exercises with South Korean troops and on Sept. 26 participated in South Korea's first military parade in a decade on the streets of Seoul.

The Stryker commander, Col. Keith Benedict, described the U.S.-South Korea partnership as "one of the world's premier alliances" and said his soldiers "unquestionably return to Fort Carson as better warfighters."

"Thanks to a litany of joint, com-



LUIS GARCIA/Stars and Stripes

Commander of 2nd Stryker Brigade Combat Team, Col. Keith Benedict, left, helps case the colors during transfer ceremony at Hanson Field House on Camp Casey, South Korea, on Thursday.

bined and interagency civilian and military partners, we discovered ... a host of training and experiential opportunities that only service on the peninsula can deliver," he told the audience.

Thursday's ceremony marks the 3rd Cavalry Regiment's first deployment to South Korea, said Col. Jeffrey Barta, the incoming regimental commander.

"We're excited today to start

writing this next chapter in our history ... with our [South Korean] army teammates and serve as an incredible part of the 2nd Infantry Division," he said.

The Army replaced its rotational armored brigade combat teams with Stryker teams beginning in 2022 to "maintain capabilities on the Korean Peninsula to respond to any acts of aggression," according to a service news release.

Suit: 2 Fla. schools bilked VA through yearslong GI Bill scheme

BY J.P. LAWRENCE
Stars and Stripes

Two for-profit schools in Florida are accused in a civil lawsuit filed this week by the U.S. of overcharging for GI Bill funds in a scheme that the government says aggressively courted veterans.

The New Horizons schools in Tampa and Orlando, which provide weekly training sessions in coding and information technology, face allegations of violating the False Claims Act and unduly enriching themselves.

In the lawsuit, prosecutors did not submit an estimate of how much was overcharged.

From 2015 to 2022, the schools

offered scholarships to veterans who enrolled and then billed the Department of Veterans Affairs for the full price of tuition, prosecutors said in the complaint, which was filed Tuesday in U.S. district court in Orlando.

The Post-9/11 GI Bill pays tuition and fees as well as stipends for books and housing to veterans and troops based on a sliding scale of active-duty service. The scale ranges from 40% of tuition up to 100%.

The two schools in Florida would recruit veterans who were less than 100% eligible for tuition assistance, provide them a scholarship to cover the difference and

then charge the government for the full price, the complaint said.

To encourage aggressive recruiting of GI Bill students, the schools also paid unlawful incentive compensation to admission staff in violation of Title 38, a federal code which covers veterans benefits, the complaint said.

Schools are prohibited from offering commissions, bonuses or other incentive payments based on student enrollment.

The intent is to prevent schools from recruiting as many students as possible without regard for their ability to complete their coursework.

Emails from management and

veterans career advisers at the schools included phrases such as "Let's all CASH in!!!!" and "Let's have a BIG DAY!!!! CASH IN!!!!," the lawsuit states.

The complaint names Robert J. Remington, the owner of the companies LTJ Group V and Innovak of Florida. The companies did business as New Horizons Computer Learning Centers, according to the complaint.

The two schools received a memo in 2015 recommending that they look at their recruiting practices to ensure compliance with the law, the government said.

In 2020, a few months after the U.S. subpoenaed New Horizons

for information related to GI Bill compliance, Remington renamed the admissions contests while attempting to reassure staff that nothing was really changing, prosecutors say.

The school's chief operating officer, who was unnamed in the complaint, acknowledged that New Horizons still held contests for admissions representatives enrolling GI Bill students, but "we just don't call it that," according to an email included in the complaint.

New Horizons in Tampa and Orlando did not immediately respond Thursday to requests for comment.

NATION



J. SCOTT APPLEWHITE/AP

Hunter Biden, son of President Joe Biden, with attorney Abbe Lowell, left, leaves after a closed-door deposition in the Republican-led investigation into the Biden family, in Washington on Wednesday.

Hunter Biden blasts Republican impeachment probe in deposition

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Hunter Biden was defiant Wednesday in a closed-door deposition on Capitol Hill, blasting a Republican impeachment inquiry into his father and the family's business affairs as a "house of cards" built on "lies" as he faced a battery of probing questions from lawmakers.

"For more than a year, your Committees have hunted me in your partisan political pursuit of my dad," Hunter Biden said in an opening statement obtained by The Associated Press. He accused Republicans of trafficking in "innuendo, distortion, and sensationalism" and insisted, "I did not involve my father in my business."

After the nearly seven-hour deposition wrapped, an attorney for the president's son told reporters that during the testimony Republicans "produced no evidence that would do anything to support the notion that there was any financial transactions that involved

Hunter with his father. Period."

He added, "It seems to me that the Republican members wanted to spend more time talking about my client's addiction than they could ask any question that had anything to do with what they call their impeachment inquiry." The White House echoed their sentiments, with press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre saying the probe is a "stunt" that has "dragged on for months and months."

But GOP lawmakers remained undeterred by Hunter Biden and his counsel's repudiation of their investigation.

Rep. James Comer, one of the GOP chairmen leading the inquiry, came out late Wednesday to declare that it was a "great deposition," and said it helped back several pieces of evidence they've gathered thus far.

"But there are also some contradictory statements that I think need further review," the Kentucky Republican said, adding that the next forum for that will be

a public hearing with Hunter Biden at a future date.

The deposition of President Joe Biden's son marked a decisive point for the 14-month Republican investigation into the Biden family. The probe has centered on Hunter Biden and his overseas work for clients in Ukraine, China, Romania and other countries. Republicans have long questioned whether those business dealings involved corruption and influence peddling by President Biden, particularly when he was vice president.

Yet after conducting dozens of interviews and obtaining more than 100,000 pages of documents, Republicans have yet to produce direct evidence of misconduct by the president. Meanwhile, an FBI informant who alleged a bribery scheme involving the Bidens — a claim Republicans had cited repeatedly to justify their probe — is facing charges from federal prosecutors who accuse him of fabricating the story.

Congress reaches tentative deal to avoid a shutdown

By LISA MASCARO
AND KEVIN FREKING
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Congressional leaders announced Wednesday they have reached a tentative agreement to prevent a government shutdown for now, days before an end-of-the-week deadline that risked shuttering some federal operations.

Under the new plan, Congress would temporarily fund one set of federal agencies through March 8 and another set through March 22. In the meantime, Congress will try to pass packages of legislation to fund the government for the remainder of the budget year.

But there was no immediate plan to approve the \$95 billion emergency national security funds for Ukraine, Israel and other allies.

The House and Senate will now need to vote and approve the deal with its temporary funds ahead of Friday's deadline, when some federal monies run out.

"We are in agreement that Congress must work in a bipartisan manner to fund our government," said the joint statement from House Speaker Mike Johnson, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell and House Democratic Leader Hakeem Jeffries, along with the Appropriation Committee leaders.

The deal comes together as negotiators in Congress have been working furiously to finish up a federal spending plan and Washington joined Ukraine and other American allies around the world in watching and waiting for Johnson's next move.

The new Republican leader is facing the test of his career trying to keep the U.S. government open by Friday's midnight deadline for

several federal departments. At the same time, emergency funding for Ukraine, Israel and Indo-Pacific allies remains stubbornly stalled. President Joe Biden convened leaders Tuesday in hopes of pushing them toward a deal.

"As the President and Congressional Leaders made clear at yesterday's meeting, we cannot allow a government shutdown," White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said in a statement. She said the agreement reached would help prevent a "needless" federal shutdown.

Congress is in what has become a familiar cycle of threatened shutdowns and disruptions as hard-right Republicans in Johnson's majority strive for steeper spending reductions than Democrats and even some other Republicans are willing to accept. This would be the fourth short-term funding extension in about a five-month span.

While Johnson, R-La., inherited a difficult dynamic, it will only be compounded when his majority shrinks further Wednesday when Democrat Tom Suozzi of New York is sworn in after the special election to replace ousted GOP Rep. George Santos. The House is split 213-219, leaving Johnson no room for dissent.

Congressional leaders said they reached an agreement on six bills that will adhere to spending levels previously agreed to last year.

Those bills involve Veterans Affairs and departments of Agriculture, Transportation, Interior and others and will be voted on and enacted before March 8.

The remaining six bills for the Pentagon, Homeland Security, Health and Human Services and the State Department still need to be finalized, voted on and enacted before March 22.

After annual physical, doctor says Biden 'continues to be fit for duty'

Associated Press

BETHESDA, Md. — President Joe Biden "continues to be fit for duty," his doctor wrote Wednesday after conducting an annual physical that is being closely watched as the 81-year-old seeks reelection in November.

Dr. Kevin O'Connor, Biden's physician, wrote that the president is adjusting well to a new device that helps control his sleep apnea and has experienced some hip discomfort but also works out five times per week.

"President Biden is a healthy, active, robust, 81-year-old male who remains fit to successfully execute the duties of the presidency," O'Connor said in a six-page memo on the president's health, following a physical that took Biden to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center for more than 2½ hours.

His memo added that Biden "feels well and this year's physical identifies no new concerns."

The oldest president in U.S. history, Biden would be 86 by the end

of a second term, should he win one. His latest physical mirrored one he had in February last year when O'Connor described Biden as "healthy, vigorous" and "fit" to handle his White House duties.

Still, voters are approaching this year's election with misgivings about Biden's age, having scrutinized his gaffes, his coughing, his slow walking and even a tumble off his bicycle.

After he returned to the White House on Wednesday, Biden attended an event on combating

crime and suggested that when it came to his health "everything is squared away" and "there is nothing different than last year."

He also joked about his age and people thinking "I look too young."

Former President Donald Trump, 77, is the favorite to lock up the Republican nomination later this month, which would bring him closer to a November rematch against Biden. Trump was 70 when he took office in 2017, which made him the oldest Amer-

ican president to be inaugurated — until Biden broke his record by being inaugurated at 78 in 2021.

O'Connor's report said that Biden's stiff walking was no worse than last year and was the result of arthritic changes in his spine. He said the president also noted "some increased left hip discomfort." There were no signs of stroke, multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's or other similar conditions in what the report called an "extremely detailed neurologic exam."

NATION

Wildfire grows to largest in Texas history

BY SEAN MURPHY
AND JIM VERTUNO
Associated Press

CANADIAN, Texas — A wildfire spreading across the Texas Panhandle became the largest in state history Thursday, growing to nearly 1,700 square miles of scorched rural ranchlands and destroyed homes.

The Smokehouse Creek Fire has merged with another blaze and is 3% contained, according to the Texas A&M Forest Service.

The fire's explosive growth slowed as snow fell and winds and temperatures dipped, but it was still untamed and threatening more death and destruction. It is the largest of several major fires burning in the rural Panhandle section of the state. It has also crossed into Oklahoma.

Firefighters have made little progress corralling it, but Thursday's forecast of snow, rain and temperatures in the 40s offered a window to make progress before temperatures and winds increase this weekend. Authorities have not said what ignited the fires, but strong winds, dry grass and unseasonably warm temperatures fed the blazes.

Less than an inch of snow is expected, but moisture is not the only benefit, said National Weather Service meteorologist Samuel Scoleri.

"It will help keep relative humidity down for the day, and that will definitely help firefighters,"



JULIO CORTEZ/AP

Charred vehicles sit at an auto body shop after the property was burned by the Smokehouse Creek Fire, on Wednesday, in Canadian, Texas.

Scoleri said.

Snow and rainfall were expected to end Thursday afternoon, with dry, windy conditions returning Friday and critical fire conditions possible again Saturday and Sunday.

An 83-year-old woman is the only confirmed death so far, but with flames still menacing a wide area, authorities have yet to conduct a thorough search for victims or tally the numerous homes and other structures damaged or destroyed.

Nim Kidd, chief of the Texas Division of Emergency Management, said the weekend forecast and "sheer size and scope" of the blaze are the biggest challenges for firefighters.

"I don't want the community there to feel a false sense of security that all these fires will not grow anymore," Kidd said. "This is still a very dynamic situation."

The largest fire recorded in state history was the 2006 East Amarillo Complex fire, which

burned about 1,400 square miles and resulted in 13 deaths.

This week, walls of flames were pushed by powerful winds while huge plumes of smoke billowed hundreds of feet in the air across the sparsely populated region. The smoke delayed aerial surveillance of the damage in some areas.

"There was one point where we couldn't see anything," said Greg Downey, 57, describing his escape as flames bore down on his neighborhood. "I didn't think we'd get

out of it."

The woman who died was identified by family members as Joyce Blankenship, a former substitute teacher. Her grandson, Lee Quesada, said he had posted in a community forum asking if anyone could try and locate her. Quesada said deputies told his uncle on Wednesday that they had found Blankenship's remains in her burned home.

Republican Gov. Greg Abbott issued a disaster declaration for 60 counties. The encroaching flames caused the main facility that disassembles America's nuclear arsenal to pause operations Tuesday night, but it was open for normal work Wednesday.

Hemphill County Emergency Management Coordinator Bill Kendall described the charred terrain as being "like a moonscape. ... It's just all gone."

Kendall said about 40 homes were burned around the perimeter of the town of Canadian, but no buildings were lost inside the community. Kendall also said he saw "hundreds of cattle just dead, laying in the fields."

Tresea Rankin videotaped her own home in Canadian as it burned.

"Thirty-eight years of memories, that's what you were thinking," Rankin said of watching the flames destroy her house. "Two of my kids were married there ... But you know, it's OK, the memories won't go away."

Texas senator to run for GOP leader in scramble to succeed McConnell

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Texas Sen. John Cornyn has informed his colleagues that he intends to run for Senate Republican leader, becoming the first senator to announce a campaign after Sen. Mitch McConnell said he will step down from the post in November.

Cornyn, who served as McConnell's No. 2 in leadership before he was term-limited out of the job five years ago, is citing his experience in that role in a statement Thursday to fellow senators announcing his run. But he also is trying to distinguish himself from McConnell, saying, "I believe the Senate is broken — that is not news to anyone."

"From experience, I have learned what works in the Senate and what does not," Cornyn said. "And I am confident Senate Republicans can restore our institution to the essential role it serves in our constitutional republic."

There has long been speculation

that Cornyn, South Dakota Sen. John Thune and Wyoming Sen. John Barrasso — the "three Johns" — would vie to replace McConnell, R-Ky., if and when McConnell were to step down. But the longtime leader's surprise announcement on Wednesday that he won't run again for Republican leader after the November elections has jump-started the campaign earlier than expected, almost nine months before GOP senators are expected to gather and choose a new leader behind closed doors.

Cornyn, a former Texas attorney general who was first elected to the Senate in 2002, is a prominent member of the Senate Judiciary Committee and a popular member of the GOP conference who is seen as a steady hand. He has managed to bridge some of the caucus' deep divides in recent years while also occasionally negotiating with Democrats, as he did on bipartisan gun legislation in



J. SCOTT APPLEWHITE/AP

Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas

2022.

He is also a prolific fundraiser for the party, having raised a total of \$13 million for incumbents, the party's Senate campaign arm, and Senate Republican nominees already in the 2024 cycle.

In his statement, Cornyn said he believes he has "built a track record of listening to colleagues and seeking consensus, while leading the fight to stop bad policies that are harmful to our nation and the conservative cause."

Both Thune, the current No. 2 Republican, and Barrasso, the chairman of the Senate GOP conference, have left the door open to runs after McConnell's announcement. Neither has officially announced a campaign for the job.

Blizzard warning of up to 10 feet of snow in Sierra may heavily impact travel

Associated Press

A Pacific storm packing powerful winds and heavy snow is shaping up to be the strongest of the season, forecasters say, as it pushes toward California with potential blizzard conditions in the Sierra and up to 10 feet of snow in the mountains around Lake Tahoe by the weekend.

The National Weather Service in Reno issued a blizzard warning Wednesday for a 300-mile stretch of the Sierra from north of Lake Tahoe to south of Yosemite National Park effective from early Thursday to 10 a.m. Sunday.

Widespread blowing snow will create blizzard conditions with white-out conditions and near-zero visibility, making travel "dangerous to impossible" Friday into Saturday morning, when the heaviest snow is expected, the weather service said.

Between 2 and 4 feet is expected in towns along Tahoe's shore and 5 to 10 feet at the highest elevations

with winds gusting in excess of 100 mph over Sierra ridgetops, the weather service said. Road closures and power outages are likely.

"Do not take this storm lightly," the weather service in Reno warned.

Potential snow totals vary under different scenarios, but the National Weather Service's Weather Prediction Center in College Park, Md., said there's little doubt "March will be coming in like a lion for the West Coast states."

An "impressive winter storm will hammer the Cascades to the Sierra with blizzard conditions to end the week," the center said Wednesday. Heavy but lesser snow is on its way to the Rocky Mountains, and "heavy rain is expected for the coastal areas between San Francisco and the Olympic Peninsula of Washington where a few inches are likely over the next 3 days."

NATION



ALEX BRANDON/AP

Republican presidential candidate former President Donald Trump pumps his fist as he departs after speaking during the Conservative Political Action Conference, CPAC 2024, in Oxon Hill, Md., on Saturday.

Judge refuses to halt Trump's \$454M fraud penalty amid appeal

Associated Press

NEW YORK — A New York appellate judge on Wednesday refused to halt collection of Donald Trump's \$454 million civil fraud penalty while he appeals, leaving the former president less than a month to pay the staggering sum or secure a bond covering the full amount he owes.

Judge Anil Singh of the state's midlevel appeals court rejected Trump's offer of a \$100 million bond, though he did give Trump leeway that could help him secure the necessary bond before New York Attorney General Letitia James seeks to enforce the judgment starting March 25.

Singh granted a stay pausing part of Judge Arthur Engoron's Feb. 16 verdict that barred Trump, his company and co-defendants from borrowing money from New York financial institutions.

The Republican presidential front-runner's lawyers had told the appellate court earlier Wednesday that the lending ban had made it impossible for him

to secure a bond for the full amount.

Trump's lawyers warned he may need to sell some properties to cover the penalty and would have no way of getting them back if he is successful in his appeal. State lawyers said those disclosures suggested Trump — who has more than a half-billion dollars in pending court debt — was having trouble coming up with enough cash to foot the bill. The penalty is increasing by nearly \$112,000 each day because of interest and will eclipse \$455 million on Saturday.

Trump's lawyers proposed their smaller bond amount in court papers asking the appellate court for an order preventing James' office from enforcing the judgment while his appeal plays out. Singh, sitting in the Appellate Division of the state's trial court, ruled after an emergency hearing Wednesday.

Singh's decision is temporary. A five-judge appellate panel will consider Trump's request on an expedited basis, with a ruling ex-

pected in a few weeks. State lawyers must submit paperwork by March 11. Trump's lawyers have until March 18 to respond.

In all, Trump and his co-defendants owe more than \$465 million to the state. They have until March 25 to secure a stay — a legal mechanism pausing collection while he appeals the underlying verdict — before they are forced to pay the penalty or risk having assets seized. Posting a bond in the full amount would trigger an automatic stay.

"The exorbitant and punitive amount of the judgment coupled with an unlawful and unconstitutional blanket prohibition on lending transactions would make it impossible to secure and post a complete bond," Trump lawyers Clifford Robert, Alina Habba and Michael Farina wrote in court papers detailing the \$100 million bond offer.

James' office opposed Trump's plan, saying his lawyers have all but conceded he has "insufficient liquid assets to satisfy the judgment."

Supreme Court to hear case on election conflict

By MARK SHERMAN
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Supreme Court on Wednesday agreed to decide whether former President Donald Trump can be prosecuted on charges he interfered with the 2020 election, calling into question whether his case could go to trial before the November election.

While the court set a course for a quick resolution, it maintained a hold on preparations for a trial focused on Trump's efforts to overturn his election loss. The court will hear arguments in late April, with a decision likely no later than the end of June.

That timetable is much faster than usual, but assuming the justices deny Trump's immunity bid, it's not clear whether a trial can be scheduled and concluded before the November election. Early voting in some states will begin in September.

The court's decision to intervene in a second major Trump case this term, along with the dispute over whether he is barred from being president again because of his actions following the 2020 election, underscores the direct role the justices will have in the outcome of the election.

Trump's lawyers have sought to put off a trial until after the election.

In the end, the timing of a possible trial could come down to how quickly the justices rule. They have shown they can act fast, issuing a decision in the Watergate tapes case in 1974 just 16 days after hearing arguments. The decision in *Bush v. Gore* came the day after arguments in December 2000.

By taking up the legally untested question now, the justices have created a scenario of uncertainty

that special counsel Jack Smith had sought to avoid when he first asked the high court in December to immediately intervene. In his latest court filing, Smith had suggested arguments a full month earlier than the late April timeframe.

Trump wrote on Truth Social that legal scholars "are extremely thankful" the court stepped in to decide on immunity. "Presidents will always be concerned, and even paralyzed, by the prospect of wrongful prosecution and retaliation after they leave office," he wrote.

A Smith spokesperson declined to comment.

The trial date, already postponed once by Trump's immunity appeal, is of paramount importance to both sides. Prosecutors are looking to bring Trump to trial this year while defense lawyers have been seeking delays in his criminal cases. If Trump were to be elected with the case pending, he could presumably use his authority as head of the executive branch to order the Justice Department to dismiss it or could potentially seek to pardon himself.

Though their Supreme Court filing did not explicitly mention the upcoming November election or Trump's status as the Republican primary front-runner, prosecutors described the case as having "unique national importance" and said that "delay in the resolution of these charges threatens to frustrate the public interest in a speedy and fair verdict."

Trump's lawyers have cast the prosecution in partisan terms, telling the justices that "a months-long criminal trial of President Trump at the height of election season will radically disrupt President Trump's ability to campaign against President Joe Biden.

Judge orders Trump off Ill. ballot but puts ruling on hold

Associated Press

CHICAGO — A Cook County judge ruled Wednesday the Illinois State Board of Elections must take former President Donald Trump's name off the state's March 19 primary ballot. But she placed her order on hold until Friday to allow an appeal.

Judge Tracie Porter issued her decision after a group of voters trying to remove Trump's name from the primary ballot over the

Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol sued to counter the election board's unanimous rejection of its effort. The five voters argued Trump is ineligible to hold office because he encouraged and did little to stop the Capitol riot.

The case is one of dozens of lawsuits filed to remove Trump from the ballot, arguing he is ineligible due to a rarely used clause in the 14th Amendment prohibiting those who "engaged in insurrec-

tion" from holding office. The U.S. Supreme Court last month signaled that it is likely to reject this strategy when it heard an appeal of a Colorado ruling removing Trump from the ballot there. Like the Illinois decision, that Colorado ruling is on hold until the appeal is finished.

Porter, in her 38-page ruling, wrote the petition by the group of voters should have been granted because they had met their bur-

den and the Election Board's decision was "clearly erroneous."

"This is a historic victory," said Ron Fein, Legal Director of Free Speech For People, co-lead counsel in the case. "Every court or official that has addressed the merits of Trump's constitutional eligibility has found that he engaged in insurrection after taking the oath of office and is therefore disqualified from the presidency."

Trump campaign spokesman

Steven Cheung issued a statement saying "an activist Democrat overruled the state's board of elections and contradicted earlier decisions from dozens of other state and federal jurisdictions. This is an unconstitutional ruling that we will quickly appeal."

Porter said her order would be put on hold if the Supreme Court's ruling is ultimately "inconsistent" with hers.

NATION

Biden acts to protect Americans' personal data

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden is signing an executive order aimed at better protecting Americans' personal data on everything from biometrics and health records to finances and geolocation from foreign adversaries like China and Russia.

The move allows the Department of Justice and other federal agencies to take steps to prevent the large-scale transfer of Americans' personal data to what the White House calls "countries of concern." The goal is to do so without limiting legitimate commerce around data, senior Biden administration officials said on a call with reporters.

Biden's move targets commercial data brokers, the sometimes shadowy companies that traffic in personal data and that officials say may sell information to foreign adversaries or U.S. entities controlled by those countries.

Most eventual enforcement mechanisms still have to clear complicated and often monthslong rule-making processes. Still, the administration hopes eventually to limit foreign entities, as well as foreign-controlled companies operating in the U.S., that might otherwise improperly collect sensitive data, the senior officials said.

Data brokers are legal in the U.S. and collect and categorize personal information, usually to build profiles on millions of Americans that the brokers then rent or sell.

The officials said activities like computer hacking are already prohibited in the U.S., but that buying potentially sensitive data through brokers is legal. That can represent a key gap in the nation's national security protections when data is sold to a broker knowing it could end up in the hands of an adversary.

"Bad actors can use this data to track Americans, including military

service members, pry into their personal lives, and pass that data on to other data brokers and foreign intelligence services," the White House wrote in a fact sheet announcing the move. "This data can enable intrusive surveillance, scams, blackmail, and other violations of privacy."

The order directs the Department of Justice to issue regulations that establish protections for Americans' sensitive personal data, as well as sensitive government-related data — including geolocation information on sensitive government sites and members of the military.

Justice officials also plan to work with Homeland Security officials to build safety standards to prevent foreign adversaries from collecting data. It will further attempt better checks to ensure that federal grants going to various other agencies, including the departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs, aren't used to facilitate Americans' sensitive data

flowing to foreign adversaries or to U.S. companies aligned with them.

The senior administration officials said they were concerned about China, Russia, North Korea, Iran, Cuba and Venezuela. But it is China — and TikTok, which has over 150 million American users and is a wholly owned subsidiary of Chinese technology firm ByteDance Ltd. — that U.S. leaders have been most vocal about.

Asked on Wednesday if the Biden administration is worried about TikTok when it comes to trafficking sensitive data, White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre responded, "We do have concerns — that's why we put out" the executive order. But she also added that it "does not cover any one company."

Rep. Mike Gallagher, a Wisconsin Republican who chairs the House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party, recently noted, "There's no such thing as a

private business in China."

The senior administration officials stressed that the executive action was designed to work in conjunction with legislative action. So far, however, bills seeking to establish federal privacy protections have failed to advance in Congress.

Albert Fox Cahn, a Harvard fellow and executive director of the nonprofit Surveillance Technology Oversight Project, said the order doesn't address the core issue of Americans' exposure to rampant data collection by industry and government — and the absence of a federal privacy law.

"For most Americans, the country of greatest concern on surveillance is the U.S. Americans are tracked every day by an increasingly invasive array of private data brokers and government agencies, transforming nearly every aspect of our digital lives into a marketing and policing tools," he said.

US to probe risks posed by Chinese-made 'smart cars'

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Citing potential national security risks, the Biden administration says it will investigate Chinese-made "smart cars" that can gather sensitive information about Americans driving them.

The probe could lead to new regulations aimed at preventing China from using sophisticated technology in electric cars and other so-called connected vehicles to track drivers and their personal information. Officials are concerned that features such as driver assistance technology could be used to effectively spy on Americans.

While the action stops short of a ban on Chinese imports, President Joe Biden said he is taking unprecedented steps to safeguard Americans' data.

"China is determined to dominate the future of the auto market, including by using unfair practices," Biden said in a statement Thursday. "China's policies could flood our market with its vehicles, posing risks to our national security. I'm not going to let that happen on my watch."



MARICEU ERTHAL/Bloomberg

BYD Co. electric vehicles are seen at the company's showroom in Mexico City, Mexico, in October. The Biden administration says it will investigate Chinese-made "smart cars" that can gather sensitive information about Americans driving them.

Biden and other officials noted that China has imposed wide-ranging restrictions on American autos and other foreign vehicles.

Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo said connected cars "are like smart phones on wheels" and pose a serious national security risk.

"These vehicles are connected to the internet. They collect huge amounts of sensitive data on the drivers — personal information, biometric information, where the car goes," she told reporters late Wednesday. "So it doesn't take a lot of imagination to figure out how a

foreign adversary like China, with access to this sort of information at scale, could pose a serious risk to our national security and the privacy of U.S. citizens."

Data collection is not the only concern, she and other officials said. Connected vehicles could also be remotely enabled or manipulated by bad actors.

"Imagine if there were thousands or hundreds of thousands of Chinese-connected vehicles on American roads that could be immediately and simultaneously disabled by somebody in Beijing," Raimondo said. "So it's scary to contemplate the cyber risks, espionage risks that these pose."

Few Chinese cars are currently imported to the United States, in part because of steep tariffs the U.S. imposes on vehicles imported from China. Still, officials are concerned tariffs are not sufficient to address the problem. Some Chinese companies seek to avoid U.S. tariffs by setting up assembly plants in nearby countries such as Mexico.

Under a plan announced Thursday, the Commerce Department is

issuing an advanced notice of proposed rulemaking that will launch an investigation into national security risks posed by "connected vehicles" from China and other countries considered hostile to the United States.

Commerce will seek information from the auto industry and the public on the nature of the risks and potential steps to mitigate them, the White House said. Officials will then develop potential regulations to govern the use of technology in vehicles from China and other "countries of concern," including Russia and Iran.

High tariffs imposed by the Trump administration and continued by Biden have effectively deterred Chinese automakers from entering the U.S. market, but U.S. officials and industry leaders worry that Chinese companies might choose to absorb the additional costs as China leans more heavily on exports. Chinese car makers are looking to build more vehicles overseas, with EV giant BYD announcing plans last year for its first European plant.

Idaho halts execution after 8 failed attempts to insert IV line

Associated Press

KUNA, Idaho — Idaho halted the execution of serial killer Thomas Eugene Creech on Wednesday after medical team members repeatedly failed to find a vein where they could establish an intravenous line to carry out the lethal injection.

Creech, 73, has been in prison half a century, convicted of five murders in three states and suspected of several more. He was al-

ready serving a life term when he beat a fellow inmate, 22-year-old David Dale Jensen, to death in 1981 — the crime for which he was to be executed.

Creech, one of the longest-serving death row inmates in the U.S., was wheeled into the execution chamber at the Idaho Maximum Security Institution on a gurney at 10 a.m.

Three medical team members tried eight times to establish an IV,

Department of Correction Director Josh Tewalt told a news conference afterward. In some cases, they couldn't access the vein, and in others they could but had concerns about vein quality. They attempted sites in his arms, legs, hands and feet. At one point, a medical team member left to gather more supplies.

The warden announced he was halting the execution at 10:58 a.m. The corrections department



Creech

low for the execution, the state is mindful of the 8th Amendment's ban on cruel and unusual punishment, Tewalt said.

said its death warrant for Creech would expire, and that it was considering next steps. While other medical procedures might al-

Creech's attorneys immediately filed a new motion for a stay in U.S. District Court, saying "the badly botched execution attempt" proves the department's "inability to carry out a humane and constitutional execution." The court granted the stay after Idaho confirmed it would not try again to execute him before the death warrant expired; the state will have to obtain another warrant if it wants to carry out the execution.

MIDEAST

Witnesses: Israeli troops fire on Gaza aid-seekers

Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip — Israeli troops fired on a large crowd of Palestinians racing to pull food off an aid convoy in Gaza City on Thursday, witnesses said. More than 100 people were killed.

Israeli officials acknowledged that troops opened fire, saying they did so after the crowd approached in a threatening way. The officials insisted on anonymity to give details about what happened, after the military said in a statement that “dozens were killed and injured from pushing, trampling and being run over by the trucks.”

President Joe Biden said the United States was still trying to determine what happened in Gaza City. When asked if the loss of life would complicate efforts to broker a cease-fire, he said, “I know it will.”

Thursday’s deaths bring the death toll since the start of the Israel-Hamas war to more than 30,000, according to Palestinian health officials.

Gaza City and the surrounding areas in the enclave’s north were the first targets of Israel’s air, sea and ground offensive, launched in response to Hamas’ Oct. 7 attack.

While many Palestinians fled the Israeli invasion in the north, a few hundred thousand are believed to remain in the area, which has suffered widespread devastation and has been largely isolated during the conflict. Trucks carrying food reached northern Gaza this week, the first major aid delivery to the area in a month, officials said Wednesday.

Aid groups say it has become nearly impossible to deliver humanitarian assistance in most of Gaza because of the difficulty of coordinating with the Israeli military, ongoing hostilities and the breakdown of public order, with crowds of desperate people overwhelming aid convoys. The U.N. says a quarter of Gaza’s 2.3 million Palestinians face starvation; around 80% have fled their homes.

Kamel Abu Nahel, who was being treated for a gunshot wound at Shifa Hospital, said he and others went to the distribution point in the middle of the night because they heard there would be a delivery of food. “We’ve been eating animal feed for two months,” he said.

He said Israeli troops opened

fire on the crowd as people pulled boxes of flour and canned goods off the trucks, causing them to scatter, with some hiding under cars. After the shooting stopped, people went back to the trucks, and the soldiers opened fire again. He was shot in the leg and fell over, and then a truck ran over his leg as it sped off, he said.

Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan accused Israel of targeting civilians in the incident. In separate

statements, they called for increased safe passages for humanitarian aid and for the international community to take decisive action to pressure Israel to abide by international law and to reach an agreement for an immediate cease-fire.

Alaa Abu Daiya, a witness to the violence, said Israeli troops opened fire and also that a tank fired a shell.

Medics arriving at the scene on Thursday found “dozens or hun-

dreds” lying on the ground, according to Fares Afana, the head of the ambulance service at Kamal Adwan Hospital. He said there were not enough ambulances to collect all the dead and wounded and that some were being brought to hospitals in donkey carts.

Dr. Mohammed Salha, the acting director of the Al-Awda Hospital, said the facility received 161 wounded patients, most of whom appeared to have been shot. He

said the hospital can perform only the most essential surgeries because it is running out of fuel to power emergency generators.

In addition to at least 112 people killed, around 760 were wounded, Health Ministry spokesman Ashraf al-Qidra said. The Health Ministry described it as a “massacre.”

Separately, the Health Ministry said the Palestinian death toll from the war has climbed to 30,035, with another 70,457 wounded.



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WORLD

'Iron Man' pilots race in jet suits on Dubai waters

BY JON GAMBRELL
Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — Pilots lined up on a runway in Dubai on Wednesday and fired up their seven jet engines with an ear-splitting roar. But they weren't preparing to fly an airplane — they were the aircraft.

This city-state in the United Arab Emirates, known for being home to the world's tallest building and other wonders, hosted what it called its first-ever jet suit race. Racers zipped along a route with the skyscrapers of Dubai Marina looming behind them, controlling the jet engines on their hands and their backs.

And if it sounds like Iron Man, the Marvel comic book character made internationally known by actor Robert Downey Jr., the pilots say it is exactly like that.

"The closest analogy would be that dream of flying ... and then go wherever your mind is taking you," said Richard Browning, the founder and chief test pilot for Gravity Industries, the firm that put on the race with Dubai. "And yes, the world of Marvel superheroes and DC Comics, they have created that dream book with CGI, and we've got the closest I think anybody's ever got to delivering that for real."

Gravity previously drew worldwide attention when it equipped one of its jet suits on a U.K. Royal Marine, who landed on a ship at sea several years ago. In the time since, they've traveled widely with the suits and pursued other military applications for them before coming up with the idea of a competition with the Dubai Sports

Council.

The races on Wednesday saw pilots wear 1,500-horsepower jet suits, more powerful than most luxury sports cars and using the same kind of fuel used by Dubai-based long-haul carrier Emirates' Airbus A380s and Boeing 777 aircraft.

Pilots lined up on a runway used at the Dubai Marina by Skydive Dubai, the thrill-seeking firm associated with the sheikhdom's Crown Prince Hamdan bin Mohammed Al Maktoum, with some parachutists coming down as they prepared their jet packs.

Then came what pilot Issa Kalfon referred to as "the moment of truth." The engines roared and pilots jumped and leaned forward. And like a helicopter takes off, so too did the pilots as they sped around obstacles in a water channel near the site. Organizers said they picked the water site to allow for higher speeds and for safety as the pilots skimmed a short distance above the water.

The jet suit currently can reach speeds of 80 mp, Gravity says. The pilots did pick up speed during their heats, with two actually bumping into each other but remaining in the air as a crowd watched in wonder.

Kalfon, who ended up winning the race and hoisting a golden jet turbine, acknowledged getting nervous before his flights, but described the jet suit as safe and easy to handle.

"Everything's hot, it's running, the engines are screaming at you," Kalfon said. "And the flag drops, and it's just — you absolutely go for it."



JON GAMBRELL/AP

Jet suit pilots race in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, on Wednesday.

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WEEKEND



Final Fantasy VII
Rebirth a joy to play
Video games, Page 26



Sand and salvation

'Dune: Part Two' brings more active chapter of sci-fi saga to a movie industry desperate for a box-office smash

Movies, Pages 15-17

Timothée Chalamet stars in "Dune: Part Two."

Warner Bros. Pictures

WEEKEND: GADGETS & TECHNOLOGY

Bringing subtitles to the theater stage

Smart caption glasses assist hard-of-hearing audiences, no head swiveling required

BY ROSA CARTAGENA
The Philadelphia Inquirer

One quiet afternoon in February, I put on futuristic eyewear to see a matinee show of “Ladysitting” in Philadelphia. The wide-frame gear earned some curious looks, but this special pair isn’t meant to be fashionable — it’s designed to be worn in the dark for theatergoers who need captions for plays and musicals.

Smart caption glasses represent new technology that precious few audiences can access. Dialogue and stage directions float in the frame so users can see the action onstage without looking away to read. Philadelphia’s Arden Theatre is the second theater in the country offering them, following People’s Light in Malvern, Pa., where the artificial intelligence-assisted accessibility tool has successfully attracted deaf and hard-of-hearing communities after launching in 2019.

Theaters typically offer closed captions at select performances, with a screen on the side of the stage and a staffer behind the scenes ensuring the text matches up with the action; others offer smartphone apps or other devices that require users to look down. Caption glasses prevent the need for frequent head swiveling between stage and screen, and allow theaters to offer captions for most performances.

It’s a personalized experience where the user can adjust the placement, size and color of the text with the hand-held device that hangs from a lanyard. The dozen glasses now available at Arden are the latest version made by Epson, upgraded with a sleek black design, more comfortable distribution of weight on the wearer’s face and a touchscreen.



TOM GRALISH, THE PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER/TNS

Tanner Richardett, audience services manager at the Arden Theatre in Philadelphia, demonstrates the smart caption glasses offered to deaf and hard-of-hearing audiences.

Smart caption glasses were first offered at London’s Royal National Theatre in 2018. Lisa Sonneborn, director of media arts and culture at Temple University’s Institute on Disabilities, was instrumental in bringing the technology to the United States.

“One of the main barriers to being able to attend the theater is the availability of captioning,” said Sonneborn. “It’s really an always-on solution.”

The key is timing: Other caption devices often lag behind the action onstage, leading to delayed reactions. Sonneborn once attended a show with a glasses user at People’s Light and after a punchline, the woman laughed along with the audience. It was a pleasant surprise.

“She said, ‘I just laughed at the same time everyone else laughed — I never thought that could happen to me,’” Sonneborn recalled. “That’s the magic of the glasses, that people can really have the same experience as their friends and family members.”

The process of setting up glasses for each production takes about a week. For the first few performances, a staffer tracks the timing of each line delivery as well as lighting and audio cues. During the show, the glasses respond to those cues and pick up dialogue from a microphone placed above the middle of the stage.

The script feeds into a software called Sveltext, which then pairs with an app called WatchWord that matches the text

and the glasses captions. After that, the captions essentially run by themselves.

As the technology continues to develop, Sonneborn hopes one day captions can be available in different languages. She is planning to bring the glasses to more theaters.

Temple and Arden Theatre received a grant of \$30,000 from the Virginia Brown Martin Fund to cover the cost of the glasses (each pair costs about \$1,000) and software licenses. For theatergoers, though, they are free to use with admission. Arden says they’re available on a first-come, first-served basis and attendees can request them when they arrive.

“The biggest challenge for us is going to be introducing our audiences to it, getting them comfortable, and convincing them that this is a useful tool for them,” said Arden general manager Clayton Tejada.

Tejada called “Ladysitting,” a play about a 101-year-old woman and her caregiving family, a “perfect production” for the rollout, due to the small cast and static set. Setting up glasses for larger shows and musicals will be more complex.

In the dark of the theater during the matinee, I fiddled with the settings throughout the show, seemingly without disrupting the experience for my neighbors.

The tech was easy to navigate, but the gear was clunky and awkward to wear — it’s certainly not recommended to use anywhere but your seat.

I experimented with where I wanted to see the captions: above the stage, to the right, or on the head of the person seated in front of me. Like with any caption experience, there were slight differences between what was written and what was said, but that’s what happens with live theater — improvisation.

The only lingering question I had as I got teary during this emotional play about love, loss and family: Are these things waterproof?

Strap pockets set the Augustnoa Classic backpack above the rest

BY GREGG ELLMAN
Tribune News Service

Unless you need a specific pocket to hold something specific, any ordinary backpack will do for most of us. But if you need to carry something that you might want quick access to, the Augustnoa Classic Noa backpack is for you.

The Classic Noa backpack is ideal for everyday use: work, play, travel or trips to the gym. It’s built with several compartments, all with YKK zippers and self-locking puller technology, making them simple to open or close. The YKK zippers also stay in place, not allowing the compartments to open even the slightest bit on their own.

The strap pockets make the Augustnoa Classic Noa backpack

stand out to me. You might not think they are a big deal, but after you use the backpack, you’ll see how functional they are. Simple things like keys, earbuds, work IDs and other small items can be stored in the pockets. It’s easy to put the items in, and you don’t have to take the backpack off to dig around and find them.

The water-resistant Classic Noa is made with eco-friendly packaging. A single backpack is made from 30 recycled plastic bottles.

The main compartment has a padded slot for up to a 16-inch laptop, a tablet and accompanying accessories. Other compartments have room for shoes and clothes, and a front attachment can hold keys securely.

There are stretchable elastic

pockets on each side of the outside for water bottles. If you’re traveling with a rolling suitcase, the back has a luggage sleeve for attaching it to the suitcase handle. A matching drawstring bag is included for storing items such as shoes or dirty laundry.

There are 10 total pockets and compartments in the Augustnoa Classic Noa backpack. The shoulder straps and the back are padded for maximum comfort.

One review on the Augustnoa site caught my attention, calling the Classic Noa the Mary Poppins backpack.

It added, “The amount of things I can fit in this thing! Stylish, easy to clean, and a classic look. Love the strap zip pockets to hold my AirPods!!”

Besides the Classic Noa back-



AUGUSTNOA/TNS photos

The Classic Noa backpack has pockets built into its straps.

pack, Augustnoa makes many more useful portable storage solutions, including the newly released Dopp Kit and a Fanny Pack.

The Classic Noa is \$148 in olive green, cream and black. The Dopp kit is \$68 and comes in navy and olive green. Fanny Pack color choices are olive



The Augustnoa Dopp Kit



The Augustnoa Fanny Pack

green, blue, black and cream; it goes for \$58.

Online: augustnoa.com

WEEKEND: MOVIES

Joy and pain

'Dune' director felt mixed emotions realizing early dream of translating Frank Herbert's novel to the screen

By LINDSEY BAHR
Associated Press

Denis Villeneuve doesn't feel like he came back to Arrakis for "Dune: Part Two." In his mind, he never left.

The sequel is the culmination of a six-year filmmaking journey, preceded by 40 years of dreaming about it. And it's one that Christopher Nolan has already compared to "The Empire Strikes Back."

Realizing Frank Herbert's novel for the big screen is a feat that has bested and befuddled some of the greats, including David Lean, Alejandro Jodorowsky and David Lynch, the only one who actually got to make a film. But his 1984 film was such a flop that its two sequels were quickly abandoned.

Villeneuve finally got his chance during one of the more turbulent times in Hollywood history, facing two delayed releases (one because of the pandemic, the other because of the Hollywood strikes), a historic shift to streaming and zero guarantee that he would get a "Part Two" at all.

"The conditions could not have been worse to release ['Dune']," Villeneuve said in a recent interview with the Associated Press. "And still the movie did a decent box office."

Even in that limbo time, he never stopped working on the script for "Part Two" knowing that if they got the green light, he wanted to be ready to go. By the time his cinematographer Greig Fraser was picking up the best cinematography Oscar for "Dune," they were deep into pre-production for the second. And everyone was soon back in Budapest, with cameras rolling by July. But though they'd conquered the desert in the first chapter, new challenges awaited.

"We all walked at the beginning into this project feeling confident," Villeneuve said. "And that confidence quickly eroded."

"Dune: Part Two" would be much more technically challenging, with at least seven major action sequences compared to two in the first. It picks up with Timothée Chalamet's Paul Atreides in the aftermath of the calculated and devastating attack by a rival house on his family and followers who had just established control of the mineral-rich desert planet Arrakis. With his father dead, Paul and his mother Jessica (Rebecca Ferguson) retreat to the desert where they establish a tenuous alliance with Arrakis natives known as the Fremen (including Zendaya). Paul trains to fight alongside them against the Harkonnen invaders.

Among the challenges: filming Chalamet "surfing" on a sandworm in a way that is thrilling and transportive and not at all silly — something that Villeneuve had to figure out how to translate from what he'd imagined into words that would make sense to all the craftspeople working to make it happen in the brutally hot sun.

But none of those stresses seemed to transfer to the atmosphere on location in Wadi Rum, Budapest and Abu Dhabi. In fact, Chalamet said, it was the opposite. Villeneuve appeared to be having fun while making it.

"Denis is so playful. It's like the greatest evidence of self-confidence to me," Chalamet said. "It's ultimately a playful, creative exercise to get to direct any movie. The man who takes himself too seriously is more focused on the people around him, the audience, than the actual product, reeks of a movie that's pretentious."

Josh Brolin, who has now worked with Villeneuve on three films, including "Sicario" and both "Dunes," where he plays Atreides warrior Gurney Halleck, said it takes a unique personality to be a great filmmaker, but that Villeneuve is right up there with the Coen brothers in his ability to do it well.

"Great filmmakers that I've had the gift of being able to work with are misfits. They're true misfits. They're not



PHOTOS BY WARNER BROS. PICTURES/AP

Director Denis Villeneuve, left, with actor Rebecca Ferguson on the set of "Dune: Part Two." Though they'd conquered the desert in the first chapter, new challenges awaited. "We all walked at the beginning into this project feeling confident," Villeneuve said. "And that confidence quickly eroded."

"There's part of the movie that when I look at it, it's closed the dream. Other parts are new because it's an adaptation and I have to make choices and distort really the reality of the book in order to make it fit into a film format."

Denis Villeneuve
director, "Dune" and "Dune: Part Two"

cool people. They're socially totally inept," Brolin said. "And they found this medium to be able to work through, (where) they can express themselves wildly and specifically. And what's going on in their head that we never were privy to? Now we get to experience it."

Villeneuve has almost gotten used to delayed releases — and both times his films have benefited from the cushion. The first was held almost a year because of the pandemic, which allowed him to tweak and perfect. This time, he got to do something different: make a film transfer so that it could be projected on IMAX 70mm and 70mm, even though it was shot on digital.

"It's the ultimate viewing experience and the ultimate format," Villeneuve said.

"Dune: Part Two" cost a reported \$122 million to produce and arrives in theaters not a moment too soon. The marketplace is a little emptier than usual because of the residual effects of the labor standoff in Hollywood last year, and it's also a landscape where superheroes are no longer the trusty tentpoles that they once were.

But "Dune" is a different kind of franchise. The first "Dune" made just over \$400 million even though it was also released day-and-date on Max (then HBOMax). And Villeneuve is more hopeful this time around. Audience appetite for theatrical is stronger than it was in late 2021, after all. He also believes "Part Two" is both more broadly entertaining and can be enjoyed without having seen the first.

"Part One was more meditative," he said. "We were following a boy discovering a culture. Now we are with the boy avenging his father, falling in love. And it's more of an action movie."

He knows that "Part Two" "has a soul" as well, but he's



Villeneuve, right, with actor Timothée Chalamet on set. Chalamet said the stresses of filming didn't affect the atmosphere on location. "Denis is so playful. It's like the greatest evidence of self-confidence to me," he said.

not quite ready to step back and enjoy it as the 13-year-old boy who started him on this path in the first place. It's one of those paradoxes of adapting something you love, that in order to do so, you have to sacrifice some or all of that, and it will no longer mean what it once did to you.

Before they started on the first, composer Hans Zimmer, also a lifetime fan of "Dune," asked him a question to this effect.

"He said to me, 'Is it a good idea to try to live a dream that we had when we were kids? Is it meant to fail?'" Villeneuve said. "There's part of the movie that when I look at it, it's closed the dream. Other parts are new because it's an adaptation and I have to make choices and distort really the reality of the book in order to make it fit into a film format."

"It's mixed emotions," he said. "It's joy and pain."

But even if he can't yet experience it as a fan, his peers can. When Nolan compared it to "The Empire Strikes Back," Villeneuve demurred, but the internet went wild.

"There's a tremendous amount of visual imagination and world building on a scale that I have not seen before in a very long time," Nolan said. "It's somebody using all of the advantages of cinema in a way that doesn't often happen."

Villeneuve has left the door open for more, too. Herbert kept writing books, after all. But for now, he's going to step back and let "Dune" breathe a little. He's looking at his movies in the macro, in a way that might ensure the future of the medium he loves so much.

"What I tried to do with my last three movies is to push forward this idea of event and the grand scale," Villeneuve said. "I think that's the way movies will survive."

WEEKEND: MOVIES



PHOTOS BY WARNER BROS. PICTURES/AP

Timothée Chalamet, foreground left, and Austin Butler in “Dune: Part Two.” The two actors trained with a Kali instructor to prepare for their characters’ climactic showdown.

‘You want to just leave it all on the field’

Butler, Chalamet and entire cast rise to the challenge of making 2nd chapter in ambitious and visionary ‘Dune’ series

BY LINDSEY BAHR
Associated Press

Timothée Chalamet and Austin Butler were really looking forward to their fight.

The actors had been training, separately, with a Kali instructor in Los Angeles to prepare for the climactic showdown between Paul Atreides and Feyd-Rautha in Denis Villeneuve’s “Dune: Part Two.” When they finally met in Budapest, they weren’t even technically supposed to do a run-through. But they couldn’t hide their excitement.

“We got after it right away,” Chalamet said.

Everyone in the ensemble gets a little starry-eyed talking about that fight. It was a spectacle watching Butler and Chalamet do it all themselves, a few times in near continuous takes for the wide shots.

“It felt like standing in the wings before you walk out onstage or something, that incredible intensity that you feel. And then ‘Action!’ is called. And we just got to work,” Butler said. “That’s the moment of truth where you want to just leave it all on the field.”

But it was also the rare occasion in which most of the cast, including Zendaya, Florence Pugh, Josh Brolin, Stellan Skarsgård, Christopher Walken, Charlotte Rampling, Rebecca Ferguson and Javier Bardem, were in the same room together.

Pugh, a newcomer to the world of “Dune” as the Emperor’s daughter, Princess Irulan, described the atmosphere in the room as a “fizzing energy that can only be at that point, you hope, create greatness.”

Leaving it on the field wasn’t just Butler’s goal in the fight. It seemed to be the guiding principle for everyone who got the chance to return to Arrakis for “Part



Franchise newcomer Florence Pugh plays the Emperor’s daughter, Princess Irulan, in “Dune: Part Two.”



Rebecca Ferguson returns as Lady Jessica, the mother of Paul Atreides (Chalamet), in “Dune: Part Two.”



Dave Bautista returns as Harkonnen thug Beast Rabban in “Dune: Part Two.” Bautista said his payoff for the character was not in the first film, but the second.



To become Baron Harkonnen in the “Dune” films, Stellan Skarsgård had to wear a cooling vest and more than 80 pounds of rubber suiting.

Two.” The sequel had not been a given and was dependent on the success of the first chapter, which had its own handicap being released simultaneously on Max (formerly HBOMax) and in theaters.

Chalamet worried that they’d end on an incomplete arc. Other actors, like Zendaya as a Freman fighter (and object of Paul’s affections) Chani and Bautista as Harkonnen thug Beast Rabban, had barely even scratched the surface of their characters in the earlier film.

“That uncertainty was uncomfortable,” Bautista said. “My payoff for the character was in the second film.”

The time in between gave Zendaya and Chalamet breathing room to establish a real friendship with one another, before their characters would have to fall in love in “Part Two” — in the midst of all the heightened stakes.

“What I appreciate about the love story is that it is earned,” Zendaya said. “A real wall has to be broken down.”

But it was a relief to get the official go, even if they knew a lot of sweat and discomfort awaited in order to bring this ambitious and visionary science fiction world to life, with the action upped three-fold.

“It’s grueling, but it’s a grueling that I like, personally,” said Brolin, returning as Gurney Halleck. “I like challenging my idea of comfort often.”

Some were more daunted by the return, like Skarsgård, knowing that he’d once again have to endure eight hours of sitting completely still to become Baron Harkonnen. The look would include a cooling vest and more than 80 pounds of rubber suiting that made moving difficult and bathroom breaks impossible.

“I wasn’t that thrilled by it because I thought about those hours in makeup,” Skarsgård said. “But on the other hand, I really love the character, not because he’s psychologically portrayed very elegantly, but because we managed to create a presence ... he is used in very few scenes, but he will still hover over the entire film as a dangerous, dangerous thing.”

One thing he wasn’t prepared for was Butler as his character’s “psychotic” nephew, Feyd-Rautha. Butler came in with the idea to model his voice off Skarsgård’s.

“That’s sort of a funny detail,” Skarsgård said. “But then, God, he was razor-sharp. It’s like a snake. It was fantastic to see.”

Butler also transformed to play a character that Villeneuve described as “a cross between a sword master and Mick Jagger.” That took about three hours in hair and makeup, and one hour at the end of the day to cut him out of the cap.

SEE DUNE ON PAGE 17

WEEKEND: MOVIES

Stunning feat of filmmaking

‘Dune: Part Two’ a masterly told, visual and sonic feast that resonates deeply with real-world relevancy and emotion

BY KATIE WALSH
Tribune News Service

There’s a moment late in Denis Villeneuve’s sweeping sci-fi epic “Dune: Part Two,” when the camera lingers on a hand emerging out of desert sand, forming into a fist. It’s a small but apt visual metaphor for this sequel’s story, written by Villeneuve and Jon Spaihts, which takes all of the foundational exposition carefully laid in the first chapter, and kicks the plot of Frank Herbert’s 1965 novel into spice-powered motion. In “Dune: Part Two,” power, and violence, rise from the desert sand of the planet Arrakis, where young Paul Atreides (Timothée Chalamet) has found his true path among the desert people known as Fremen.

This film is a spectacular feat of science-fiction filmmaking, marrying immersive world building with engrossing storytelling. It thrums and vibrates, the giant booms of Hans Zimmer’s score rumbling underneath the breathtakingly monumental images crafted by cinematographer Greig Fraser. The visual effects and production and costume design are seamless, simultaneously organic and mechanical, both uncanny and utilitarian. The color, the sound, the sheer weight of it makes for a visual and sonic feast laden with lore.

But it is also a simple story about destiny, with which Paul wrestles, wondering if he can jump off a wheel of fate that churns unrelentingly. In the wake of the Atreides massacre, he joins the Fremen in the desert of Arrakis, running guerrilla terrorist raids on Harkonnen spice harvesting operations, learning to ride giant sandworms and falling in love with a tough warrior, Chani (Zendaya).

For a time, it’s fun, games and warrior names with the jocular bunch, but his future looms large. His nightmares become terrifying visions; his mother, Lady Jessica (Rebecca Ferguson), is now an esteemed Reverend Mother who wants to call forth the long-planned heir of the Bene Gesserit and in the eyes of Stilgar (Javier Bardem), his Fremen mentor, Paul might be the Lisan al Gaib, the prophet for whom they’ve been long waiting. He is both, and he is everything, but he is also just Paul, caught in a centurieslong, swiftly-moving rip current of belief.

On another planet, his dark counterpart is not plagued by any such doubts. Feyd-Rautha (Austin Butler), the



WARNER BROS. PICTURES/AP

Timothée Chalamet, left, and Zendaya in a scene from “Dune: Part Two.” Zendaya’s Chani, the heart of the film, is torn between her love for Paul (Chalamet) and her love for the planet Arrakis.

young Harkonnen na-Baron, sharpens his blades on the organs of his underlings in preparation for his birthday bloodbath jamboree. The sleek brutalism of the Harkonnen planet Giedi Prime, drained of color, is a sharp contrast to the warm, dusty tones of Arrakis, rendered in russet and ochre, and Feyd-Rautha’s gladiator arena celebration is a fascist display that looks like an industrial metal concert meets a War Boys rally as directed by Leni Riefenstahl. The aesthetic difference reflects the philosophical divide between these cultures: One group is a spiritually motivated indigenous tribe to whom every drop of life is sacred, the other faction is blindly obsessed with achieving power through indiscriminate murder.

His head shaved bald, skin powder white, teeth blackened, Butler is captivating and unsettling, brilliantly expressing Feyd-Rautha’s inhuman quality in a nearly reptilian performance. He moves like a serpent, keenly observing his prey, smiling and laughing inappropriately, an apex predator lacking any other instinct but to kill.

Paul, who takes the war name Muad’Dib, clings to the humanity and purpose he finds in the Fremen cause, his own mother hidden behind layers of robes and head-dresses, speaking only in prophecy. His moral compass is Chani, who remains skeptical of any fundamentalist belief system. Her eyes burn with alternating desire and fire, torn between her love for Paul and love for Arrakis, and in the end, they both must choose.

Chani is the heart of the film, though Bardem, with warmth, humor and unwavering faith, is stealthily the most valuable player in an ensemble that includes Josh Brolin, Florence Pugh as Princess Irulan, Stellan Skarsgård, Dave Bautista and Christopher Walken.

We look to genre fiction, to sci-fi and fantasy, to tell us about ourselves in a safely exotic setting. Though “Dune” is rife with strange names and places on-screen, it is the same as our world, where precious resources are violently extracted from vulnerable populations by forces both nakedly evil and those that purport to be benevolent but remain in the throes of capitalistic power. It is a story of genocidal colonization, on which our own countries have been built, which we see on the news every day. “Spice,” oil or minerals are ripped from the earth with blood and brute force on the backs of innocents, while repression and religion make for a heady stew that threatens to boil over into chaotic violence.

“Dune: Part Two” is a stunning achievement of masterly craft and storytelling, and an utterly transporting experience that brings us back to Earth with a renewed perspective on what’s important. It is still a story only partially told, but it resonates deeply with real-world relevancy and emotion.

“Dune: Part Two” is rated PG-13 for sequences of strong violence, some suggestive material and brief strong language. Running time: 166 minutes. Now playing in select AAFES theaters.

Dune: Hiatus between films gave Chalamet time to mature

FROM PAGE 16

“It’s a real gift as an actor when you look in the mirror and you don’t see yourself,” Butler said. “I knew I had a lot of latitude to play.”

For Pugh, it was a “dream” to witness the scale of the sets and be part of not only a transformative experience but also “to be around such dedication and such love and passion and such talent.”

Like most of her peers, she said being in that room during the week of the fight was a highlight of her career.

“It was impressive,” Brolin said. “(These were guys that)

really rehearsed that were truly going at it, that were hurting themselves, that were falling ... You’re like ‘yes, this is old school.’”

Brolin was particularly impressed with the young cast, none of whom leaned on their celebrity, he said.

Of course, at the heart of “Dune” is Chalamet, an actor who was only 23 years old when he made the first. He’d been nominated for an Oscar and was quickly establishing himself as the next capital M movie star. But it was the first time he’d ever led a production of that scale.

By the time he’d return to start

production on “Dune: Part Two,” just a few years later, the difference was striking: Like his character Paul Atreides, he’d also grown up.

“He was like a little kid and he didn’t hide it. He’s like, ‘What is this? What do we do? Oh my God. So big. So many cameras,’” Brolin laughed. “And right now he’s exactly where he should be.”

Chalamet is self-deprecating about this, laughing that he was “but a boy” on the first and in the interim got some furniture. But everyone around him noticed the change.

Bautista was particularly impressed at his dedication to a

training and eating schedule to transform himself into a believably powerful fighter (and rider of sandworms).

“I know he trained his butt off because he wanted to look the part,” Bautista said. “He literally goes from being a boy to being a man; like, he is commanding in the second film.”

Villeneuve was sure he’d get there, too, but still a little relieved that it worked out as he’d imagined.

“Timothée had learned a lot about filmmaking in between both movies,” Villeneuve said. “In Part One, it was the first time he was in a movie of that scale,

surrounded by a lot of movie stars. But in Part Two, he was the one leading. And he did a tremendous job of bringing Paul’s tragedy to life.”

“Dune: Part Two” is the kind of “event cinema” that the cast seems genuinely (and not just contractually) excited to be part of and to see on the big screen — a propulsive and action-packed spectacle that will surely satisfy anyone who complained the first was too meditative.

“It’s storytelling. It’s heart. It’s visually stunning. The soundtrack is incredible,” Bautista said. “It’s a special film, and they just don’t come along very often.”

WEEKEND: MOVIE REVIEWS

Understanding gravity of love

Sandler empathetic as Czech astronaut whose marriage is on shaky ground in sci-fi psychodrama ‘Spaceman’

BY JOCELYN NOVECK
Associated Press

David Bowie’s Major Tom, sitting in his tin can. Elton John’s Rocket Man, missing Earth and his wife. Matt Damon in “The Martian,” left behind to starve. Matthew McConaughey in “Interstellar,” weeping as he watches his kids age without him.

Much art has been made of the infinite loneliness of space travel. And how could it not? Loneliness may be a universal human condition, but what could be lonelier than being removed from the human race entirely?

And so when Adam Sandler, as moody Czech astronaut Jakub in Johan Renck’s “Spaceman,” is asked by a young girl during a broadcast to Earth if he’s lonely, he answers in platitudes but his eyes betray the truth. Yes, he is lonely. Very lonely.

At one point in Sandler’s career, the idea of the actor in a spacesuit as an anxious astronaut heading to the outskirts of Jupiter could only have signaled comedy. But we’ve seen enough great work at this point from Sandler in dramatic roles to know what he’s capable of when the stars are aligned, and he gives a hugely empathetic performance here.

If there’s a flaw in “Spaceman,” despite its tantalizing promise, it’s not a lack of acting heft but strangely, a lack of story

heft. Adapted from the novel “Spaceman of Bohemia” by Jaroslav Kalfar, it paints a world that should be fascinating but is often reduced to seductive yet ultimately frustrating dream sequences. They’re lovely, but we’d like to actually know more about Jakub and his past on Earth, not to mention his relationship with wife Lenka (the always-wonderful Carey Mulligan) beyond seeing her run through yellow fields of flowers.

We begin halfway through Jakub’s mission. That’s 189 days since he left Lenka and Earth for a solo trip to explore the Chopra cloud near Jupiter, glistening and purple and mysterious, beating the Koreans to the punch.

What year are we in? The spaceship looks late-20th century, not 2024 and certainly not futuristic. The production design is terrific here, evoking what such an environment might look like when a guy’s been living in it for six months — rather like what a studio apartment might look like after six months without a cleaning.

Fact is, Jakub, like John’s Rocket Man, misses his wife. They’ve been sending each other video messages, but hers have become spotty. She is pregnant, and angry at having been abandoned for a year. In fact, Lenka records a message telling Jakub she’s deeply unhappy and wants to leave him.

All of which creates a huge Houston-we-have-a-problem moment for the mission,



NETFLIX/AP

Adam Sandler meets a six-eyed life-sized alien spider who becomes like a marriage counselor for him as he grapples with being away from his wife in “Spaceman.”

which needs a focused astronaut. The head of the Euro Space program, Commissioner Tuma (Isabella Rossellini), decides Jakub won’t get to see Lenka’s message. But he senses something is wrong.

And then one night, Jakub awakens with a spider crawling out from his mouth.

Phew — it’s only a dream. But soon enough, the spider appears for real, an actual, six-eyed, life-sized alien. Well, we think for real. The spider could be a dream, and we’re surely meant to consider that possibility. (In fact, maybe the whole mission is a dream and Jakub is a guy in a studio apartment, but let’s not go there.)

At first, Jakub thinks he’s going nuts. He puts on his suit and tries to kill the alien with exterminating gas. But the spider helpfully explains that this won’t hurt him. He is, he recounts, on his way from his own planet, traveling through space and time. Oh, and he may have been around since the beginning of the universe. Also: he’s voiced by Paul Dano, in a gentle tone arguably reminiscent of HAL in “2001: A Space Odyssey.”

If HAL were, perhaps, a therapist — because that’s essentially what the spider becomes, trying to ease Jakub’s loneliness but also very curious about his life on Earth. Mainly they discuss Jakub’s marriage. Jakub is defensive.

“Why do you resist exploration?” asks the spider, whom Jakub names Hanuš. At another point, Hanuš asks: “You have many boundaries, skinny human, perhaps they are the cause of your loneliness?”

This interplay is toggled with scenes of Lenka back home, as well as flashbacks of the genesis of the couple’s love, memories that the spider forces Jakub to explore — along with that whole genesis-of-the-universe thing.

And so the spaceship approaches the mysterious purple cloud, a place that represents both the beginning and perhaps the end, while Jakub approaches an understanding of his love for Lenka and where that all fits in the universe, too.

These late scenes are both visually beautiful and somewhat lacking. Is the message simply that one must travel across space and time (and past Jupiter) to realize what love means? Questions arise, but are not explored.

Still, it’s a pleasant and occasionally mesmerizing ride, thanks in no small measure to Sandler’s skillful empathy and yet another absorbing turn by Mulligan, who never disappoints. In the constellation that is Hollywood, her star continues to be one of the brightest.

“Spaceman” is rated R for language. Running time: 107 minutes. Now streaming on Netflix.

‘Io Capitano’ puts a human face on the global refugee crisis

BY MICHAEL O’SULLIVAN
Special to The Washington Post

Italian filmmaker Matteo Garrone’s résumé swings from gritty, often violent crime drama inspired by real events (“Gomorrah,” “Dogman”) to flights of disturbing, gothic fantasy (“Tale of Tales,” “Pinocchio”), with some social satire (“Reality”) thrown in. In his Oscar-nominated (for best international feature), migrant-themed “Io Capitano,” he unites those varied impulses, fashioning a hero’s journey that feels utterly of the moment: inspired by the true stories of African immigrants, but told in a way that features episodes of both harrowing verisimilitude and hallucinatory magic realism. It’s a film that is gorgeous at times yet also tough to watch.

The epic saga follows Seydou (Seydou Sarr) and Moussa (Moustapha Fall), 16-year-old cousins who embark from Senegal toward Italy, first traveling westward by bus through Mali and Niger and then, fake passports in hand, trekking north across the Sahara toward Tripoli and the Mediterranean on foot. Their adventure will not unspool as they expect.

Sarr, who makes his startlingly assured acting debut here, plays the sweeter, less streetwise of the two boys, and it is Seydou around whom the story revolves. But the type of smarts that have helped his co-conspirator plan the trip won’t come in handy in the desert. They secretly save up money by skipping class and taking construction jobs, dreaming of becoming pop stars in a Europe they’ve seen only on television and in films.



Cohen Media Group

A group treks through the desert in “Io Capitano,” an Oscar-nominated film inspired by the true stories of African immigrants heading to Europe.

The boys almost immediately encounter heartless human smugglers, who don’t even hit the brakes to slow down when a migrant is accidentally thrown from the back of a speeding, overloaded pickup truck. Then there are the gun-toting bandits. Stitched together from the stories of actual migrants by Garrone and co-screenwriters Massimo Ceccherini, Massimo Gaudioso and Andrea Tagliaferri — and as brutal as some of its scenes are — “Io Capitano” is said to have been toned down from some

of the more unsettling material gathered by the filmmakers, including reports of rape.

Paolo Carnera’s desert cinematography, in which the smallness of the migrants is rendered not just palpable but painful, is awesome, in the sense that it inspires both wonder and fear. There are also a couple of lovely dream sequences.

Though it’s filmed by a European, the sensibility of “Io Capitano” feels more African than Italian, with several migrants listed as collaborating writers and also appearing among the large cast of extras.

The story culminates over water, as the last leg of Seydou and Moussa’s odyssey features a reluctant Seydou at the helm of a boat. The climax of “Io Capitano,” which translates loosely as “I’m the captain,” was taken from a story Garrone heard in a Sicilian refugee shelter of a 15-year-old African with no nautical navigation skills who was dragooned into piloting a vessel filled with 250 refugees. (The logic being that Italian authorities won’t arrest a minor for human trafficking.)

Like everything before it, this sequence is nerve-rattling, but also eye-opening. With all that has been said about the global refugee crisis, one voice has been conspicuously left out of all the shouting. “Io Capitano” takes a news story that’s mostly about numbers, and puts a human face on it.

“Io Capitano” is unrated, but contains disturbing images, including scenes of torture and some strong language. In Wolof, French and some English with subtitles. Running time: 121 minutes.

WEEKEND: BOOK REVIEWS

Puncturing puffed-up egos

Tech reporter Swisher revisits Silicon Valley's bro culture once again in 'Burn Book'

By WILL OREMUS
The Washington Post

The phrases “tech reporter” and “rock star” are far apart in semantic space. But they are improbably united in the form of Kara Swisher, who over a 35-year career has emerged as the most recognizable chronicler of the digital revolution.

In leather jackets, aviator sunglasses and a studied frown that says “I’m not buying this, but go on,” Swisher cuts an iconic figure in the Silicon Valley firmament — enough to merit a 2015 cameo as herself on HBO’s comedy series “Silicon Valley.” Known for her dishy scoops and tough interviews of tech’s titans and boykings, the self-dubbed “reportrepreneur” combines the journalist’s nose for a juicy story with the impresario’s instinct for showmanship. It has proved a potent pairing across two eras of media transition — first from newsprint to digital, and more recently from institutional brands to the personal brands of influencers — both of which Swisher saw coming and capitalized on.

“Burn Book” is the breezy memoir of a high-flying journalist who, at 61, is still on top of her game. Speedrunning her illustrious career in under 300 pages, Swisher intersperses brief recountings of well-trodden tech industry lore with tidbits of gossip, behind-the-scenes backstories and zesty one-liners. Along the way we encounter, through Swisher’s gimlet eyes, some of the legends of the digital economy, from Jobs to Zuckerberg to Musk.

She has a knack for puncturing puffed-up male egos, and fans will not be surprised at how many of tech’s luminaries come off as thin-skinned man-children.

In a revealing pre-interview scene, Swisher marvels at how a then-26-year-old Mark Zuckerberg seemed more concerned with his unflattering depiction in the upcoming movie “The Social Network” than the real-world impacts of Facebook. She reflects: “This was the first, but far from the last, flash of a persistent victim mentality that would plague him and the company for years to come as fair crit-

icisms mounted.”

Swisher’s own estimable ego fares rather better in a book whose anecdotes often serve to underscore the prescience of her predictions. Among her formative insights, as a cub Washington Post reporter covering the advent of the consumer internet, was that “anything that can be digitized would be.” What sounds obvious now was dismissed as hogwash by the media barons of the 1980s and 1990s, with whom the fearless Swisher clashed loudly and often.

Her appetite for disruption — “I am, at heart, a capitalist,” she avers — aligned her more with the bright-eyed techies whose ascendancy she traced than with the East Coast establishment her employers represented. That helped her to ingratiate with key subjects before they hit it big, from AOL chief Steve Case to Netscape co-founder Marc Andreessen to Google’s Sergey Brin and Susan Wojcicki, who went on to lead YouTube. As she got to know them, badgering them for info and at times fielding their requests for advice,

To the extent there’s a narrative arc, it’s one of disillusionment with Silicon Valley’s idealistic promise of building a better world.

she honed a tongue-in-cheek journalistic credo: “Despite some evidence to the contrary, every tech mogul is also a human being.”

Don’t expect deep forays into those moguls’ psyches, though. Their characters are sketched only in brief vignettes. Amazon founder Jeff Bezos struck Swisher on first meeting as “feral,” skittering around a warehouse “like a frenetic mongoose.” And while she gets off satisfying shots at familiar targets, there aren’t quite enough incendiary new anecdotes to justify the book’s tantalizing title.

To be fair, that may be at least partly because she has not held back from singeing them in her reportage and punditry.

Some of “Burn Book’s” best lines come when Swisher quotes from her previously published work, like the lead of a profile she wrote for Vanity Fair in 2014 about Uber’s then-CEO: “Every now and then, when he’s spoiling for a fight, Travis Kalanick has a face like a fist.” And her famous interviews of Zuckerberg — one in which he nearly melted into a puddle of sweat onstage, and another years later in which he ventured an ill-advised tangent in defense of Holocaust deniers — did more to torch his reputation than anything she reveals here.

While of less interest to a general audience, Swisher’s scathing sideswipes of some of the media blowhards she encountered at her own workplaces — including the late TV host John McLaughlin, whom she paints as a pompous misogynist and “truly awful human being” — cut deeper than her digs at the tech billionaires. In contrast, a venture capitalist she describes as “morally bankrupt” goes unnamed.

This is not an autobiography, and those thirsting for intimate details of Swisher’s

personal life will finish the book unquenched. Still, she traces just enough of her own story to hint at the origins of both her canny self-reliance and her casual irreverence toward power and authority figures. Her beloved father’s sudden death when she was 5, the paranoid cruelty of her stepfather, societal discrimination against gay people in the Reagan era and rampant misogyny in both the media and tech industries conspired to forge a hardened exterior and wry wit. One aspect of her youth she doesn’t emphasize is the wealth into which she was born and raised, which could help to explain why she’s uncowed by billionaires who inspire fear and toadyism in others.



There’s little of the personal-growth narrative that propels some memoirs. Swisher, in Swisher’s telling, started out as a bold truth-teller, ended up as a bold truth-teller and spent much of the time in between telling bold truths. To the extent there’s a narrative arc, it’s one of disillusionment with Silicon Valley’s idealistic promise of building a better world.

Late in the book, Swisher acknowledges of her relationship to Silicon Valley that she had become “too much a creature of the place.” While she doesn’t dwell on it, the book offers support for the critique that the brand of scoop-driven journalism she long practiced, with its fixation on the personalities and machinations of tech’s power players, came with blind spots.

If the book feels tossed-off in parts, it could have something to do with Swisher’s preternatural workload, which these days includes hosting a pair of popular podcasts, a contributing editorship at New York magazine and raising two young children (her third and fourth) with her second wife. She admits as much in the final chapter, when she cops to asking ChatGPT how she should end the book. Mercifully, she rejected its advice.

In all, it’s a lively read from a sui generis figure, provided you don’t mind rolling your eyes now and then at how often the moral of a given encounter turns out to be that Swisher was right all along.

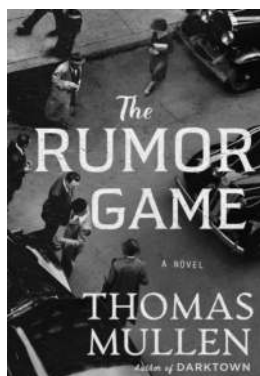
Lehane fans should check out Mullen’s gripping ‘Rumor Game’

By CHRIS HEWITT
Star Tribune

Bemoaning the lack of a Dennis Lehane novel this year? Conveniently, historical thriller writer Thomas Mullen has shifted from Atlanta to Lehane’s beloved Boston for his latest, “The Rumor Game.” And, like Lehane, he’s interested in Irish gangsters, family angst and love stories that probably won’t work out.

Mullen should be every bit as big as Lehane. Beginning with his powerhouse debut about an isolated town that collapses on itself as it tries to hold off the 1918 influenza epidemic, “The Last Town on Earth” (2006), he has written one terrific historical novel after another. Mullen’s “Darktown” trilogy dramatized efforts to integrate the Atlanta police force after World War II, but “Rumor Game” is right in the middle of the war, in 1943.

Reporter Anna Lemire, who is Jewish, writes a column that debunks myths about the war effort, a column that has become increasingly focused on countering antisemitic rumors spread by those who think the U.S. should not



is the smart, plucky (and attractive) go-getter whose bosses don’t understand how good she is. Devon is a brash, charming (and attractive) rake whose preconceptions occasionally get in the way of his detective work.

The way Mullen constructs “Rumor,” alternating between the two protagonists’ individual investigations,

have entered the war.

FBI agent Devon Mulvey, who is Irish, is investigating what amounts to antiwar terrorism, which seems to originate with Irish gangs and which is designed to spread suspicion about the reasons for the war. Inevitably, the investigations of Anna and Devon will cross. Possibly, so will their limbs.

Anna and Devon are memorable characters, recognizable as ’40s movie archetypes. Anna

smartly invites us into the story. Even after Anna and Devon meet, we know things each has not told the other, so it feels like we’re in a better position than either of them to figure out who’s behind a murder, the theft of some weapons and the disappearance of Anna’s best friend, who may know too much.

“Rumor Game” also is a fascinating look at a time when World War II had not yet become “the good war,” when many isolationists (and bigots) still regarded it as a mistake. Mullen’s lean prose captures a variety of attitudes about both the war in Europe and at home — including Devon’s dad, who may be financing antiwar propaganda. Its characters included those who have already experienced loss overseas and others who fear it is just around the corner.

Fans of Lehane and of spy novelist Joseph Kanon (“The Good German”) will enjoy how Mullen explores the complexities of the home front while focusing on two flawed characters who are trying to figure out how to do the right thing.

WEEKEND: LIFESTYLE



Purr-fect places for pussycats

Cat behaviorists explain why your feline friends love to be up high, how to DIY a spot for them

By COLLEEN GRABLICK

Special to *The Washington Post*

It's a scene familiar to most cat owners: Your fluffy friend is curled up on top of a kitchen cabinet, purring like a radiator, or sprawled on your dresser amid a sea of knickknacks it knocked over during its biiiiiiiig stretch.

Many domesticated cats gravitate toward high-up hangout spots, reigning above our (their?) living rooms, bedrooms and kitchens. But what's so attractive about lounging at such altitudes? Is it a show of dominance over the home — an affirmation of the commonly held human belief that cats think they're superior?

According to cat behavior experts, not really.

"They are better than us, but that's not why they go up high," jokes Rita Reimers, a cat behaviorist and co-founder of the Cat Behavior Alliance.

Nearly all domesticated cat behavior can be explained by survival instinct, including their propensity to situate themselves in lofted areas. As both predator and prey, resting at a high vantage point allows cats to eye their potential dinner while avoiding becoming someone else's (yes, this intuition persists even for house cats whose meals get delivered in a dish).

"Everything a cat does is for the survival of themselves and their species," Reimers says. It's less about showing superiority over the home and more a way to gain the most advantageous view of its resources and environment.

While we humans tend to think of our living spaces two-dimensionally, mapping out floor plans and furniture arrangements according to square footage, cats view their world in three dimensions. As natural climbers, they're always looking for ways to get in the air.

"They evolved in areas where they took advantage of trees and rocks and being up high so that they could feel safe and also see where their prey were," says Marci Koski, a wildlife biologist and certified feline behavior specialist.

So without spending hundreds of dollars on a gaudy cat tower, how can you construct comfortable vertical spaces for your four-legged roommate(s) that will keep the whole household happy? We've got you covered:

Observe where your cats like to hang out

It's no use constructing an elaborate perch or shelving system in a room your cat doesn't naturally frequent.

"I go into homes where people have these really great wall setups with all these wall shelves, and it's like the perfect jungle gym for their cats. And they go, 'well, my cat never uses it.' I look at what's there, and it's set up in the basement where there's no window to look out of, or people don't hang out in the basement very much," Koski says.



Get to know where your cat prefers to spend most of its time — chances are this will also be a space where you spend a lot of your time or a room in your home that has a window with an entertaining view.

Despite their self-sufficiency, aloof stares as we coo about how much we love them and general can't-be-bothered demeanor, your cats do like to be around you, Koski says.

Identify your cat's favorite outlook and add a low-effort hammock with suction cups. If you really want your cat to see a show, install a bird feeder outside the window. Take note of which spots in each room it gravitates to; there may be something particularly attractive about the surface of a piece of furniture or the smell of an object that you can replicate elsewhere. It's also helpful to clock where your cat seeks comfort when it's feeling unsafe or scared, and what spaces it tends to avoid.

Use what you already have

There's no shortage of DIY cat tower and shelf tutorials online. Linda Hall, co-founder of the Cat Behavior Alliance with Reimers, recommends using materials or supplies that may already be in your home — plywood, old shelving units, or old blankets and fabric.

If you don't have a preexisting shelf to repurpose for your feline cohabitants, most hardware stores carry budget-friendly mounting or floating shelves (you can even use a piece of plywood) that can be easily affixed to a wall of your and your cat's choosing. Just be sure to pick up some sturdy wall mounts to avoid any major issues, and add a few wooden planks for stairs if there isn't already a natural path of ascension.

Spruce up the space

If you're making a new hangout to redirect your cat's attention from a more problematic area — say, the dining room table — you'll need to dress it to its liking.

Think about the materials and fabrics your cat enjoys. Even just cutting off a square of a blanket, laying down an old sweater or taping down some nonslip drawer lining on a raised platform or shelf can do the trick.

If your lofted space is in a cooler or shaded part of the home, the cozier the material the better, according to Koski. Cats have a high thermal neutral zone — the temperature at which the body doesn't need to spend energy to heat up or cool down. Their bodies are happiest between 83 and 100 degrees, yet we usually keep our homes somewhere in the high 60s to low 70s; this explains their penchant for sunny patches.

Once you've made the spot warm and toasty, you can sprinkle catnip or silvertine (a catnip alternative) on the fabric to make it even more attractive.

Don't create dead ends

Make sure your cat has more than one way of getting up to and down from its mounted perch. Not only does this avoid traffic jams in multicat households (should another four-legged housemate attempt to climb up for a turf war), having an escape route will prevent panic should something spook your cat. This could mean adding a piece of furniture where it can plunk down on its way to the floor or installing a few extra steps around the shelf or perch.

Avoid multicat conflicts

While cats tend to buck human understanding of hierarchical social structures, cohabitating indoor felines do have loose structures of dominance and submission that you should take into consideration.

To avoid any catfights, try to offer multiple vertical options throughout the home, so one cat is not intruding on another's established territory.

You can also create a shelf for each cat on the same wall or in the same room, so dominant and submissive personalities have a safe place to themselves. As Reimer says, typically the higher the cat hangs out, the higher it sits in the social group.

It's about compromise

Having a cat is a daily exercise in negotiation. Sometimes, even after you've created what amounts to a cat paradise in front of a bright, south-facing window, your feline friend will simply decide it still prefers your trinket-clad dresser.

As Hall says, "You can't convince a cat anything they do is wrong."

You may have to suck it up and rearrange your objects to make space for your cat on your furniture, or use a sticky, tack-like glue (see: earthquake putty) to avoid any knickknack ... cat-astrophes. By adding a nonslip pad or a square of its favorite fabric to a corner of the furniture, you can also guide it to staying in a designated area of the shared space. It's not perfect, but it'll do.

"Sometimes cats will just say, 'You know what, this is my favorite spot and I'm going to use it and I don't care what you say,'" Koski says.

WEEKEND: TRAVEL

Booking it through Europe: Literary stops

Getting close to one of the big icons of Western civilization — the Acropolis, the palace of Versailles, the Colosseum — can be the high point of a European trip. But don't paper over Europe's "smaller" achievements. Many of Europe's lasting cultural contributions are captured on dusty sheets of vellum or parchment. Paging through these literary treasures in museums and libraries can raise of few goosebumps of their own.

London

The British Library is vast, but its librarians have managed to cram everything that really matters into a two-room exhibition called "The Treasures." Early Bibles, a First Folio of Shakespeare's works, Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, the Magna Carta and Beatles' lyrics (scribbled on the back of a greeting card) vie for your attention. Surrounded by this bounty, it's clear that the British Empire built some of its greatest monuments out of paper.

Fans can pay their respects to Britain's literary masters in the Poets' Corner at Westminster Abbey. Geoffrey Chaucer was the first literary great to be buried here (in 1400). Among those

interred nearby are Charles Dickens, Robert Browning, Thomas Hardy, Alfred Tennyson, and Edmund Spenser.

Edinburgh

The lives and literature of Scotland's holy trinity — Robert Burns, Sir Walter Scott and Robert Louis Stevenson — are the focus of Edinburgh's Writers' Museum. Burns was Scotland's bard, extolling his native land in poetry. Stevenson stirred the soul with evocative classics like "Kidnapped" and "Treasure Island." Scott — who wrote the historical novels "Ivanhoe" and "Rob Roy" — revived his countrymen's pride in Highland culture and the Gaelic language.

With exhibits mingling first editions with personal artifacts (Scott's pipe, Burns' desk), the museum gives an intimate view of the masters. To enliven all the history, follow up a museum visit with Edinburgh's popular Literary Pub Tour: a kind of walking theatrical performance, in and between a few pubs, where actors wittily debate their takes on Scotland's literary greats.



Rick Steves



CAMERON HEWITT/Rick Steves' Europe

The English-language Shakespeare and Company in Paris is a bookworm's dream.

Paris

The European love affair with books is charmingly demonstrated in the green metal bookstalls that line the Left Bank of the Seine River. Second-hand booksellers, called bouquinistes, have been a Parisian fixture since the mid-1500s, when such shops and stalls lined most of the bridges in Paris. (Business boomed after the Revolution,

when entire libraries were "liberated" from rich nobles.)

Another writers' landmark is the Shakespeare and Company bookstore. Founded in 1919 by free-thinking American Sylvia Beach, the original shop on Rue de l'Odeon was a meeting place for Paris' expatriate literary elite. Ernest Hemingway regularly borrowed books from the store. When James Joyce strug-

gled to find a publisher for his now-classic Ulysses, Beach published it. While the Nazis shut the shop down in 1941, its postwar incarnation near the banks of the Seine carries on Beach's tradition by supporting struggling writers.

This article is used with the permission of Rick Steves' Europe (www.ricksteves.com). Rick Steves writes European guidebooks, hosts travel shows on public TV and radio and organizes European tours.

Pink Weeks, blossom festivals will soon bloom across Europe

Across large swaths of Europe, the fruit trees are blossoming and flowers are raising their pretty heads. Another sure sign of spring is the proliferation of festivals celebrating all this budding beauty. Here are just a few places to celebrate the re-greening of your region:

Almond blossom season in Rhineland-Palatinate: The German Wine Route is a 50-mile stretch of secondary road coursing through the forested hills, vineyards, wine villages and spa towns in the east of Rhineland-Palatinate. In early spring, certain stretches burst into a sea of white and pink, and as twilight sets, villages bathe landmarks in pink spotlights. From March 1-April 7, the region celebrates its "Pink Weeks." In addition to scenic drives and hiking through almond groves, the town of Gleiszellen-Gleishorbach hosts a village fete offering wine, folk culture and a farmers market April 6-7. Online: mandelbluete-pfalz.de



Karen Bradbury

The town of Gimmeldingen, just north of Neustadt, plans its almond blossom festival around peak blossom times and proper spring temperatures, meaning the date is announced only a few short days before it takes place. Online: tinyurl.com/yw5akjv2

Almond Blossom Festival in Sicily: The Valley of the Temples in Agrigento is a sweeping archeological site filled with ancient Greek architecture. From March 9-17, the return of the spring and the blossoming of the almond trees is celebrated with a festival deeply rooted in local culture. Musicians, folk groups, performing artists, craftsmen, chefs and food producers of the region join forces to welcome visitors. The parade made up of traditional Sicilian carts, performers and bands on March 17 is a highlight. Admission fees apply. Online: tinyurl.com/ufzdmjaa

A celebration of tulips in Keukenhof: Seeing the gardens of Keukenhof in Lisse, Netherlands, in full bloom in spring inspires countless visitors to make an early-season,



iStock

Cherry blossom trees along Heerstrasse in the town of Bonn, Germany, create a beautiful tunnel effect.

overseas trip. Last year, during the park's opening season of just eight weeks, 1.4 million visitors came to admire the riotous colors and multitudes of shapes and sizes of tulips, crocuses, daffodils and hyacinths, along with other blooms displayed within the showground's pavilions. Keukenhof will be open from 8 a.m.-7:30 p.m. daily from March 21-May 12. Adult admission costs 19.50 euros online or 23 euros at the gate. Tickets for those ages 4-17 go for 9 euros, while ages 3 and under enter free. Advance purchase is recommended. Online: keukenhof.nl/en

A highlight of tulip season is the annual Flower Parade scheduled for April 20. The Bollenstreek is a display of flower-bedecked floats that slowly travels between Noordwijk to Haarlem. The floats remain on display in the town of Haarlem until 5 p.m. the following day. Online: bloemencorso-bollenstreek.nl/en

Cherry Blossom Festival in Berlin: In early spring, visitors to Germany's capital can get a feel for what that

same season might look like in Tokyo. In 1990, on the heels of Germany's unification, a Japanese TV station initiated a fundraising campaign to buy and plant cherry trees throughout the country. Of the some 9,000 trees procured, many wound up in Berlin, and they now grace parks and public spaces, particularly along the strip where the Berlin Wall once ran. The practice of hanami, or admiring cherry blossoms, comes to the fore at the Gardens of the World in the neighborhood of Marzahn. In and around the park's Japanese-themed gardens, the annual Cherry Blossom Festival is set to unfold April 13-14. Singers, dancers, drummers and other performers show off their skills while chefs provide culinary finesse. The event runs from noon-5 p.m. both days. Park entry fees are charged. Online: tinyurl.com/yeys6vb3

Berlin too far of a trek? Hundreds of blossoming cherry trees grace the streets of Germany's former capital city of Bonn, particularly Heerstrasse und Breite Strasse, where the blossoms stretching over the street create a tunnel effect. Online: tinyurl.com/2f4nseym

The town of Schwetzingen, slightly west of Heidelberg, is home to a palace with extensive gardens, including an enclosed area filled with about 50 mature cherry trees—the perfect backdrop for friend and family photo shoots. Admission to the gardens costs 6 euros for adults and 3 euros for children before March 23; thereafter, the fees increase to 8 euros/4 euros respectively. Online: tinyurl.com/y9kbhmbm

Daffodil Festival in Austria: In late spring each year, the idyllic Alpine region of Ausseerland – Salzkammergut becomes all the more charming with the blossoming of countless thousands of wild narcissi. These tiny daffodils of yellow, white and green are feted from May 30-June 2 with a program made up of folk artists and craftsmen from the local area. Most of the program events of the Narzissenfest unfold in the Kurpark in the town of Bad Aussee. Online: narzissenfest.at/en

WEEKEND: FOOD & DINING



PHOTOS BY MATT WAGNER/Stars and Stripes

The bar area at Mizuki in Kaiserslautern, Germany, includes local favorites as well as Japanese beers like Asahi and Kirin. Sake and nonalcoholic beverages are served, too.

Mizuki rolls up a good impression

Japanese restaurant in Kaiserslautern gets high marks from first-time taster, old hands

BY MATT WAGNER

Stars and Stripes

Life in the rural Midwest didn't leave me with much choice when it comes to Japanese food.

The interest to try it has been there for 15 years, and I was ready to give it a shot upon moving to Germany. But I had heard the complaints from colleagues who had been stationed in Japan about how the Japanese food in the Kaiserslautern Military Community wasn't up to snuff.

Yet when a buddy mentioned a new Japanese restaurant, Mizuki, on Eisenbahnstrasse in downtown Kaiserslautern, I decided finally to dip my toes into the scene. I first tried it with a group of four on a Saturday evening in mid-January.

The food exceeded my expectations. I ordered the chicken gyoza and beef tenderloin yakitori — someone pointed out the irony of it being beef, when yakitori translates to grilled chicken — and I enjoyed the filling and savory taste of both appetizers, especially when dipped in ponzu and teriyaki sauces.

My main meal was salmon teriyaki. I liked the sweet and tangy taste of the sauce mixed with the fish, rice and vegetables.

I even sampled some sushi from my buddy's sake maguro deluxe sushi meal, something I never thought I would do, let alone enjoy. I found myself munching on them while learning how to keep wasabi from burning my nostrils by using a touch of soy sauce to dampen the effects.

Still, my untrained palate couldn't tell whether Mizuki, which opened in December 2023,



AFTER HOURS GERMANY

Mizuki

Address: Eisenbahnstrasse 9, Kaiserslautern, Germany

Hours: Monday and Wednesday through Friday, 11 a.m.-3 p.m. and 5-11 p.m.; Saturday, 11 a.m.-11 p.m.; Sunday, 12-10 p.m.

Prices: Food ranges from 5 euros for soups and appetizers to 34 euros for an item off the grill.

Information: Phone: +49 631 37 32 5171; Online: mizuki-kaiserslautern.de. Reservations recommended.

Matt Wagner

was close to the real deal. I turned to our bureau chief, who spent 13 years reporting out of South Korea and Japan, and his family for the job two weeks later.

They noticed that the menu consisted of pan-Asian dishes, a theme for many Asian restaurants in the Pfalz. That didn't cloud their judgment.

I ordered the King Udon meal and a couple of sides of sushi: two tako (octopus) nigiri and six salmon rolls. My first taste of the udon was acidic and worried me, but the next spoonful tasted as though the broth had mixed well, and I had no problems.

The noodles were too soft, almost melting in my mouth without the need for chewing. A similar observation was noted with the kids' udon. It received a thumbs-up from their daughter, which, considering how picky most kids tend to be, was high praise.

The King Udon had pieces of



The ground floor at Mizuki in Kaiserslautern is usually full, especially on a weekend night. The Japanese restaurant opened in December 2023. Reservations are recommended.



A la carte sushi orders of, clockwise from upper left, sake avocado maki, salmon maki and octopus nigiri.



The King Udon at Mizuki in Kaiserslautern includes the noodles along with shrimp, asparagus and other vegetables.



The barbecue duck at Mizuki in Kaiserslautern comes with an orange-teriyaki sauce, a cucumber salad and rice.



Mizuki in Kaiserslautern also offers sushi sets like the salmon and tuna deluxe meal.

asparagus in it, a nod to the German palate. As for the sushi, I had tried salmon previously, but the octopus was a daring choice for me. And that gamble paid off. I enjoyed the chewy texture and I'd eat it again.

My boss ordered the duck served with an orange-teriyaki sauce. He said the duck had the perfect mix of meat and fat, but the sauce was quite sweet.

His wife got the Mizuki poke bowl, which consisted of salmon, tuna, butterfish and various vegetables, as well as a lot of sauce. It also was served with well-prepared Japanese short-grain rice, which seemed to impress the duo. They also enjoyed the jasmine tea.

Overall, they said the poke was very good and that the duck was

solid, if not exceptional. The sushi put Mizuki on the top level of Japanese restaurants in the city, and the effort also put into the food arrangement was noticeable and appreciated.

The menu is more expansive than others' in town, giving you plenty of options.

Mizuki is also a little more upscale than many similar eateries, meaning you probably shouldn't walk in wearing a replica Arsenal 1991-1993 bruised banana jersey, like I did.

Mizuki also can be a splurge for a meal, but you receive plenty of food for the price. It's worth a try if you have a hankering for sushi or, like me, want to taste Japanese food for the first time.

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The non-Japanese poke bowl at Mizuki includes tuna, salmon and butterfish with avocado, lettuce, peas, bell peppers, other vegetables and rice.

WEEKEND: QUICK TRIPS

Learning and leisure are just a punt away

Unique boating tour on the Cam a great way to experience Cambridge and get a lesson on its history and universities

BY KYLE ALVAREZ
Stars and Stripes

With our time in the U.K. ending, my family and I have been doing our best to hit as many of its memorable locations as possible, so we couldn't pass up Cambridge to go punting on the River Cam for some leisure and learning.

For the uninitiated, a punt is a flat-bottomed boat with a square-cut bow designed for use in small rivers and shallow water. The punter propels the boat by pushing against the riverbed with a pole.

We chose Let's Go Punting from the assorted other providers offering the same service, which introduces the history of Cambridge and its universities.

As requested, we arrived several minutes prior to our scheduled time but were not seated until 10 minutes after it.

I learned that the worker on duty was just putting about 12 people in the boats at random without adhering to scheduled times. Her unapologetic reaction was quite grating.

Fortunately, our 16-year-old punter, Luke Hales, left a distinctly different impression with his friendly and confident manner. His retelling of the universities'



Various punting companies offer tours on the Cam. Punting boats are propelled by a pole that is pushed against the riverbed.

history was excellent, and the jokes he sprinkled in throughout the tour had an impeccable delivery.

He repeatedly drew chuckles from passengers, most of whom were at least 15 to 20 years his senior.

The leisurely drift was as enjoyable for my two young kids as it was for me. They had a great time being on a boat and pointing out the ducks and swans that almost seemed to be visiting us.

My wife, who delights in history, loved hearing about the many fun rivalry stories between all the colleges within Cambridge University. The one that stood out was



PHOTOS BY KYLE ALVAREZ/Stars and Stripes

Kelly and Penelope Alvarez look at Cambridge University in England from aboard a punting boat on the River Cam on Feb. 17.

On the QT

Address: Landing Stage, Thompson's Lane, Cambridge, England

Prices: Various tour options from private to shared range from 20-79 pounds.

Hours: 9 a.m.-5:30 p.m. daily, dependent on river conditions.

Information: Phone: +44 1223651659; Online: letsGOPunting.co.uk; email: info@letsGOPunting.co.uk

Kyle Alvarez

when Cambridge held a competition in the early 1600s to build a clock tower. Which-ever college built it first would lay claim to the tower and the name. Trinity College built the tower using wood structures while the rest built it with stone masonry. Trinity College won the competition and after achieving victory and the naming rights, rebuilt it later with more long-

lasting engineering efforts.

Other unique stories revolved around the royal family. One spicy story, depending on your interests, is how the current king of England was not accepted into any of the colleges at Cambridge and had to have his mother write a letter in order to get him accepted. He then proceeded to have one of the worst academic tenures within the school even to this day.

The entire tour was 50 minutes long, which was a good amount of time to enjoy the surroundings and, if planned properly, can be a pre- or post-meal activity.

Despite the initial annoyance, the relaxing excursion was lovely and met our expectations. In addition, it was a quintessentially British experience for us to savor as a fitting farewell.

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Store Oxford hotel to open in UK city in May

Bloomberg

Oxford is one of the most visited places in the U.K., renowned for stunning medieval and neo-classical buildings. Its great hotels? Not so much.

This will change in May when the Store Oxford opens in what used to be Boswells of Oxford, the city's oldest department store, which dated to 1738 and closed in 2020. The 54,000-square-foot building is being redesigned by the team behind chic Parisian hotels Dame des Arts and Hotel des Grands Voyageurs. It's located in Oxford's historic center just opposite Balliol College, one of the oldest of Oxford University's famed 39 colleges and once home to author Aldous Huxley and economist-philosopher Adam Smith.

Floor-to-ceiling windows that acted as displays for the emporium will stream light into a bright, open lobby and entry-level bar.

A rooftop bar with an outdoor terrace offers sweeping views of the "city of dreaming spires," as Victorian poet Matthew Arnold put it. The vista includes the

Radcliffe Camera, the neoclassic circular library seen on postcards of the city. Of the drinks served, one will be called Second Breakfast, a reference to The Lord of the Rings, and made with bourbon, maple syrup and blueberry. (Author J.R.R. Tolkien attended and taught at Oxford.)

Cocktails will utilize gins and rum distilled especially for the hotel. Downstairs, British brand Oskia will supply products for the spa, which includes a sauna, steam room, ice bar and gym, though no pool.

The 101-room property is filled throughout with clever nods to its own history as well as that of the city. The rooms, some of which present views of a thousand-year-old Saxon tower, have QR codes on the walls, connecting guests to more information.

While the starting size for rooms isn't especially large — 194 square feet — some larger suites offer spacious outdoor terraces with sun loungers and yoga mats and sitting areas that have fireplaces and cozy couches. Room prices start at £285.

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WEEKEND: FOOD & DINING

Peak Peruvian cuisine awaits

Warm, tasty experience at Sabor Peruano worthy of repeat visits near Osan Air Base

By **LUIS GARCIA**
Stars and Stripes

Far removed from the Americas, a restaurant with strong and rich Hispanic flavors stands out from those around it in South Korea.

Sabor Peruano, in the Songtan district of Pyeongtaek, a five-minute walk from the main gate at Osan Air Base, is such a place. The staff warmly receives you and seats you at a table where you'll find a bowl of chips along with salsa dips.

One downside is that the menu comes only in Korean, but it includes pictures of each selection, and the staff can provide a translation to English or Spanish.

With some help, I decided on the bistec a lo pobre for 18,000 won, or about \$13.50, a tasty dish of thin sliced steak chunks over french fries and served with a fried banana and a sunny-side egg over white rice.

Although not the world's fan-



Sabor Peruano

Location: 10, Jungang market-ro 19 beon-gil, Pyeongtaek, South Korea.
Hours: 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Tuesday; noon to 10 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday; 12 p.m. to 8 p.m. Sundays.
Prices: Appetizers and entrees range from 10,000 won to 20,000 won, and desserts at 6,000 won.
Dress: Casual
Directions: Five-minute walk from Osan Air Base's main gate or seven minutes from Songtan Station.
Information: 031-666-1908

Luis Garcia

ciest dish, it was certainly a delicious experience, and I attribute that to its simplicity and the meal's humble origins.

The menu also offers a small selection of Puerto Rican dishes.



PHOTOS BY **LUIS GARCIA**/Stars and Stripes

Sabor Peruano offers Peruvian and Puerto Rican dishes near Osan Air Base, South Korea.



The bistec a lo pobre has thin sliced steak chunks over french fries and served with a fried banana and an egg over white rice.



Sabor Peruano customers are warmly greeted and given chips and salsa dips.



The menu at Sabor Peruano is only in Korean, but it includes pictures of each selection.

My friend ordered a tripeleta, a submarine sandwich of chicken, ham and steak, for 15,000 won.

Any cuisine replicated outside of its country of origin is often skewed, not exactly as adver-

tised. Sabor Peruano, however, achieves what feels like a true rendering of the Peruvian taste and feel.

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Remote Japanese island tries to attract tourists with sushi

By **YUKIHIKO SATO**
Japan News

A council to promote the revitalization of Kitagi Island in Kasaoka, Okayama prefecture, is working to develop a sushi menu for foreign visitors using locally caught fish and other foods from the area.

With the cooperation of a university and various businesses in Fukuyama, Hiroshima prefecture, the council aims to offer a trip to the remote island as an option for tourists to the Bingo region, which includes Kasaoka and Fukuyama, to encourage more visitors to come and extend their stay in the region.

Kitagi is the largest of the Kasaoka Islands, which comprises about 30 islands. It used to be known for its quarries, but is suffering from aging and depopulation recently.

Expectations are high among business operators in the Bingo region for tourism development that will include Kitagi.

"Ninety percent of visitors only stay one night in Tomonoura [in Fukuyama]," said Tatsuhiko



Japan News

A new sushi menu includes yellowtail and red sea bream from Kitagi Island in Kasaoka, Okayama prefecture.

Murakami, 42, president of Tomo Skole Corp. "If we can offer a package that will allow tourists to visit the island from Tomonoura, it will create new options for people who want to see the area."

"The new sushi menu will be one of the attractions used to encourage visitors to stay on the island in the Bingo region," said Kazuhira Fujii, 53, who chairs a revitalization council for Kitagi Island. "We would like to develop plans that will allow tourists to experience something new and different to enhance the appeal of the entire region."

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WEEKEND: VIDEO GAMES

Rebirth of a beloved Final Fantasy game

Second chapter in VII's remake trilogy refreshes the original's script, offers improved graphics and an open world

BY GENE PARK

The Washington Post

Final Fantasy VII is one of the most beloved video game stories ever told because of its exploration of personal identity: how it's shaped through our memories and through our relationships with the people around us. It is deeply personal and emotionally immersive.

Final Fantasy VII Rebirth, which was just released on the PlayStation 5, is like your favorite ex from years ago suddenly reemerging into your life — prettier than ever, her spirits ever brighter and adoration for you still in bloom. It can be as exciting as it is destabilizing. It's hard to be productive when you're forced to examine the time and space between who you once were and who you are today. The characters of Final Fantasy VII once again wreaked havoc on my emotions.

I missed a date for this. I missed a day of work at my second job. I skipped a long-delayed dental appointment. I spilled coffee all over myself twice, something I have never done. Nothing can wreck a life quite like a good Final Fantasy game. Here, then, is the best Final Fantasy of the century, the greatest Square Enix title published since Final Fantasy X in 2001.

It might seem a shame that such an achievement is saddled only to a remake of a 1997 game, especially the second in a planned “remake” trilogy. But this is Final Fantasy VII, arguably the greatest story told in video games, and among the most historically important titles of the medium. It helped established the Sony PlayStation as a game platform. It pushed the boundaries of 3D narrative storytelling. If the writers of Square Enix never dream up a more magical world with more charming, distinctive characters, it is an understandable failure in light of such an achievement.

The “remake” label belies the true nature of this years-long project: a maximalist reinterpretation of the original game that enlivens and clarifies the original script's relationships and themes. When villain Sephiroth undergoes a dramatic early-game personality shift, the original game trusted our imaginations to make that leap with crude, faceless blocky 3D models. Now, we see the creases in his face as he loses grip on reality, the shadow he casts against the wall signaling a seductive “otherness” emerging from him.

Rebirth is so much more wonderful than the first Remake for two reasons: It is no longer trapped by the “prestige” influences of modern and linear games such as The Last of Us, and it covers the most memorable, vital section of the original story. The 1997 game arrived with the aplomb of a late-era Beatles album, packaged in all white and arriving on three compact discs. The Remake of 2020 covered the earliest hours of the game in the steampunk city of Midgar, and it suffered from obvious stretching-out of the more procedural moments of the story.

Rebirth needs no such padding, as it covers the entire first disc of the original game, all the way up to a scene that's become one of the most iconic moments in video game storytelling. The great anticipation and mystery of Rebirth is obvious. How does it tell this story and that particular moment again in 2024? That answer is best left for you to uncover, so all I'll say is that I now walk away from Rebirth with renewed appreciation and confidence in how the original writer, Kazushige Nojima, and his team will finish this new telling.

While 2020's Remake forced players down a linear sequence of hallways, dungeons and events, Rebirth is a remarkably detailed and seamless open world, a true adventure that spans continents and cultures. The original game's depiction of the small village of Gongaga consisted of three static images. In Rebirth, it has canyons and rivers and abandoned factories with several explor-



Square Enix photos

In the 1997 original Final Fantasy VII game, players needed to use their imaginations with crude, faceless, blocky 3D models. The graphics of Rebirth, however, are so vastly improved that we can see, for example, the creases in its soulful characters' faces and the shadows they cast against the wall.



Final Fantasy VII Rebirth offers minigames in each of its five large regions that are fun, attractive and very rewarding in both story and gameplay — unlike that of the side quests in last year's Final Fantasy XVI.

able floors, alongside a fully voiced community of people.

It's hard to overstate how huge of an achievement this is. Outside of the multiplayer online games, single-player Final Fantasy games have struggled to create “open worlds” revolutionized by series such as Zelda and Grand Theft Auto. Previous games had only disconnected pocket regions of explorable space, such as the Calm Lands of Final Fantasy X and Gran Pulse section of XIII. These areas are among the most memorable of those titles exactly because they promise what's now realized here.

Final Fantasy XV was the first modern attempt at a fully explorable world, but it was largely devoid of personality and interesting things to do. Even last year's Final Fantasy XVI struggled to make its world feel cohesive. But Rebirth makes it seem effortless. It's astounding to see and feel the geography change around you, driving from the rocky Corel region to the swamplands of Gongaga with no loading screens.

The variety of gameplay in such a high-budget title is shocking. Video games used to be known for having a variety of minigames inside them — something the origi-



Final Fantasy VII Rebirth has a remarkably detailed and seamless open world that spans continents and cultures, something other single-player games in the franchise have always struggled to create.

nal VII pioneered — but due to rising costs, it's become too expensive to dedicate development time for new game types. Not so in Rebirth, which offers new types of games at each of the five large regions. It's even more astounding that all these games are fun, gorgeous, play well and are very rewarding in story and gameplay. Last year's XVI struggled with the concept of side quests, often failing to offer fun stories or things to do. Rebirth puts that effort to shame.

Much like original game composer Nobuo Uematsu's theme song, the Rebirth soundtrack tells its own stories. A sweeping orchestra may suddenly be joined by an American fiddle to signal the nearby presence of Chocobo, the horse-like birds of the series. Exploration and combat themes weave into each other, with some sections reflecting a character's theme. Rebirth is a game that engages the audience on several artistic layers, and once it all clicks, you begin to understand the date-dropping, coffee-spilling power this game holds over people.

SEE REBIRTH ON PAGE 27

WEEKEND: VIDEO GAMES

Open Roads to the past

Road trip adventure game set in 2003 delves into a different type of nostalgia

BY GIESON CACHO
The Mercury News

When gamers talk about nostalgia, sprite-heavy graphics, chiptune music and enormous square televisions often come to mind, but for the developers of Open Roads, it means crafting a world from their collective past. They recreate their memories and put it in a video game.

That project happens to be a mother-daughter road trip adventure, featuring Keri Russell as the mother, Opal, and Kaitlyn Dever in the role of the daughter, Tess. It takes place two decades ago in 2003. The era becomes obvious as players explore the world in the girls' first-person perspective. They see a cream-sicle-colored iMac sitting on the desk. A hulking cathode-ray tube television sits atop a dresser. Everyone still reads the newspaper.

In a hands-off demo, the developers showed off the early parts of the campaign, which takes place in a home that's about to be sold. It's full of family drama after Opal and her daughter are forced to leave the place after it's been sold. The introduction of-

fers a way for players to explore the environment and its intricately designed setting.

The house looks lived-in with furniture from different eras and childhood scribbles hidden on closet walls. One of the developers said it was done by one of their kids. Wandering around, players will notice that even the music is era appropriate.

As players explore the world as Tess, they discover more about the situation. Opal doesn't get along with her sister and Grandma Helen has a hidden past that appears to have some importance later on. It sets up story beats and mysteries that are explored later.

Open Roads has a different vibe, a slower pace from that of other adventure games. It seems like an experience that rewards players for exploring and delving into the details of the narrative. One of the more notable elements is that though most of the campaign takes place in the first person, it does have moments when the camera changes to the third person and players see Tess and Opal.

They look like they're characters from a Don Bluth project. That deepens the sense of nostal-



PHOTOS BY ANNAPURNA INTERACTIVE/TNS

Tess, left, and her mother, Opal, ride in a car in Open Roads. The road trip adventure game features voice work by Kaitlyn Dever, who plays Tess, and Keri Russell, who plays Opal.



Tess' room in Open Roads comes straight out of 2003, with a big cathode-ray tube television and papasan in the corner.

gia. Don't expect animation of that caliber, though, but players can appreciate the character design.

With a stellar cast, the voice acting is good, and it will make

players want to interact with everything. When Tess picks something up, her mother, who follows her around, will offer commentary or insight into the object. Initially, that sounds in-

triguing, but having a game where one's mother constantly looks over his or her shoulder could be trouble.

Russell's performance and charm and the rapport between the two characters will have to carry the campaign through. Some of that shows up in the dialogue choices that players have. Just remember to pick any response regarding ska.

With its grounded vibe, Open Roads has the potential to offer a different type of story and experience for gamers. Few titles explore a mother-daughter relationship, and fewer still mine nostalgia in a personal way.

Platforms: PC, PlayStation 5, PlayStation 4, Xbox Series X and Series S and Nintendo Switch

Online: annapurnainteractive.com/en/games/open-roads

Rebirth: New battle system controls smooth, easy to use

FROM PAGE 26

Fights are a key part of the Final Fantasy experience (the series was almost named Fighting Fantasy, after all), and this is the best realization of the classic Square Enix battle system ever concocted. Remake laid the groundwork, and Rebirth smooths out the controls.

It's easier than ever to coordinate in-flight attacks and recreate the beautiful choreography of the "Advent Children" film that inspired this trilogy. New synergy attacks, involving two party members, offer a variety of status effects that give them a strategic use case beyond high damage.

It recalls the best moments of what many still call Square Enix's finest game ever made, Chrono Trigger.

It makes sense to mention

Chrono Trigger and Final Fantasy VII Rebirth in the same sentence. Chrono Trigger was created at the very end of the 2D era of video games, the culmination of almost two decades' worth of knowledge and expertise of the medium.

Rebirth is now a similar achievement for this century. It's rewarding to finally see the gameplay depth of classic role-playing games married to the soulful characters that the Final Fantasy franchise has pioneered not just in games but in film.

Nothing can wreck your life like a Final Fantasy game because there's nothing quite like a Final Fantasy story. This is the greatest one, presented in the best way possible.

Platform: PlayStation 5

Online: ffvii.square-enix-games.com/en-us/games/rebirth

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WEEKEND: MUSIC

Q&A

Forever young

Rod Stewart, 79, shows no signs of slowing down

BY JOHN CARUCCI
Associated Press

Sir Rod Stewart will not be slowed. At 79, he continues at full throttle with a busy year. Highlights in 2024 include his 200th show at his Las Vegas residency, an ongoing world tour and a new swing album.

“Swing Fever” is a collaboration with Jools Holland and the talk show host-musician’s Rhythm & Blues Orchestra and tackles some timeless tunes from the Big Band era, like “Pennies from Heaven,” “Lullaby of Broadway” and “Sentimental Journey.”

No stranger to the American songbook, Stewart had one request for Holland: “I’m not going to do any slow songs,” Stewart said. “I want all upbeat happy songs, which we need in these grim times that we live in.”

Stewart expressed gratitude singing songs crafted at a time when a songwriter was a specific job, before bands wrote their own.

Holland, who began his career with the 1980s band Squeeze, joked about how the paradigm had shifted.

“I think the Beatles were to blame. I think everybody thought they could write songs after that. So bands always kept doing it,” Holland said.

Stewart, who has written his share of hits, was happy to concentrate on crooning.

Stewart was recently in New York, and before heading off to a downtown pub to watch his beloved Celtic soccer team take on rivals Hibernian, he took some time to chat with The Associated Press about making music, maintaining his health and whether there’s retirement in his future.

Associated Press: What was the appeal of going back to these tunes?

Stewart: They make you tap your feet. They make you smile. Both of us were brought up on this music. I did “The Great American Songbook,” so for me this was a natural progression. And one thing I said to Jools was, I’m not going to

SEE STEWART ON PAGE 29

Rod Stewart poses for a portrait on Feb. 7 in New York. His new album with Jools Holland, “Swing Fever,” was released Feb. 23.

MATT LICARI/AP



WEEKEND: MUSIC

Declan McKenna

What Happened to the Beach? (Columbia)

British pop singer-songwriter Declan McKenna is back with his third studio album, the bright and experimental “What Happened to the Beach?”

At 16, McKenna burst onto the scene with his 2015 hit “Brazil,” a protest song about FIFA’s politics, a song that’s since earned more than 480 million streams on Spotify. McKenna went on to win Glastonbury’s emerging artists award in 2015 and released his debut album “What Do You Think About the Car?” in 2017. His second record, the ambitious 2019 concept album “Zeros,” rose to No. 2 on the UK charts.

“What Happened to the Beach?” purposefully moves away from the artist’s previous thematic projects, and instead reveals that McKenna, now 25, is focused on sonic experimentation.

The record was made largely in Los Angeles. That location and its chill, sunny, sometimes blasé attitudes served as inspiration for McKenna, who told Rolling Stone UK that the album “doesn’t always demand your attention” in the way some of his past works have. Instead, many of the tracks act like soundscapes, collages of feelings and observations represented by layered instrumentals, found sounds and distorted vocals.

By not “demanding attention,” the tracks are free to become melodically strange and compelling — immersing the listener in the buzzed, dreamlike world they exist within instead of simply sound-tracking reality. That’s especially felt in “Breath of Light,” with its lyrics: “Would you catch me in the center of your cosmic sin / Where the devil’s sippin’ cordial I just can’t win,” set to a background of guitar, percussion and synths, with contorted whispers and hums.

Some tracks have more traditional indie pop hooks: “Nothing Works” is upbeat and catchy; “It’s an Act” softens into a trippy serenade; “Mulholland’s Dinner and Wine” reflects on the characters and setting of LA with a warped production that recalls other contemporary psychedelic pop like Still Woozy and Glass Animals.

Then there are moments like “I Write the News,” “WOBBLE” and the album’s three collaged interludes, “Mystery Planet Pt. 1-3,” that shake the listener out of that familiar atmosphere for a moment, almost as if to remind them that they’re under McKenna’s trance.

Throughout the project, it’s clear that this is simply a freer version of the McKenna that listeners have come to know at play — one who’s willing to make boundary-pushing, personality-revealing choices with his productions, just as he always has with his lyrical topics.

— Elise Ryan
Associated Press



Beyoncé two-steps into country, but it sounds more like a stumble

Note: Oddly enough, this week’s No. 1 song on Billboard’s Hot 100 chart is Jack Harlow’s “Lovin On Me,” which we wrote about at the end of November because, oddly enough again, it charted at No. 2 behind Taylor Swift’s “Cruel Summer,” which, oddly enough for a third time, we had written about as a previous No. 1 song. A tangled web, we know. Anyway, because we’ve already tackled “Lovin On Me,” here’s a few words about the Hot 100’s No. 2 song this week, Beyoncé’s “Texas Hold ’Em.”

Billboard Hot 100 No. 2, Feb. 24, 2024:

‘Texas Hold ’Em,’ Beyoncé

When Queen Bey pivots, we, as music lovers, are trained to two-step with her, no matter which direction she chooses. She’s earned that right after years of working her way through a pop group that didn’t really have a consistent lineup until its final days, staying married to a husband who’s at his most interesting any more when he atones for his infidelities in song and doing her best to be the world’s most celebrated pop star in the Era of Taylor Swift. It’s almost easy to forget about Beyoncé these days. And if that feels criminal to read, it feels downright gross to type. But it’s true. 2023 belonged to Swift’s record-breaking tour all the while Beyoncé shattered stadiums far and wide on her impressive Renaissance run.

But goin’ country? Eh.

Of her two new songs, “Texas Hold ’Em” is the better one, but that’s only because it’s more fun. Grab the acoustic guitar from 2012 Marcus Mumford — you know, the one that he stole from 1996 Dave Matthews — drop an inoffensive kick drum into the background to steady things out, sprinkle in

some forced “whoos” from Ms. “Love On Top,” and it looks like you have the template for a Beyoncé single in the year 2024. If you say you had that on your bingo card for this year, you’re lying harder than Ms. Carter is whenever she tries to convince listeners she’s actually into dive bars.

It feels unfair to say the song is bad, because it’s probably not. In fact, throw an unknown female singer in front of this, and every small town in America would have a lot of fun belting “Lay your cards down, down, down, down” at 1:30 a.m. while pounding lukewarm bottles of Miller Lite.

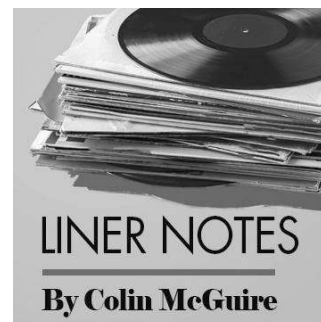
But this isn’t an unknown singer. And Beyoncé has made a career out of staying as far away from those small towns and those dive bars for decades now.

With that, it’s simply too hard to land on anything other than “inauthentic” here. Beyoncé’s secret sauce has been her honesty — be it mocking “Becky with the good hair” or unapologetically sticking by her

man, she might be a cut above all of us, sure, but we accepted that and liked that. In some ways, it was part of her charm. Trying to sell us on the idea that she’s into line dancing while a local band stumbles through Brooks & Dunn covers in an empty bar on a Friday night in the middle of nowhere feels disingenuous, if not utterly cynical.

“We survivin’ off red cup kisses, sweet redemption, passin’ time,” Queen Bey offers to cap off a verse drowning in callbacks. Sometimes, you have to know when to hold ’em or fold ’em.

If Beyoncé knows the first thing about what she is singing about here, she’d get up from that table before the losses start piling up.



Stewart: New album with Holland highlights timeless swing tunes

FROM PAGE 28

do any slow songs, I want all upbeat, happy (claps his hands), which we need in these grim times that we live in.

What was it like doing this record?

I love the whole process of doing live shows. I love recording. I loved when we put this album together. It was such a joy. We didn’t have any arguments or fights or anything like that. It was pure pleasure, and I think that comes across when you listen to it. The whole thing was recorded live in Jools’ studio, which is not a big studio. We had 18 people crammed in there, so all the solos were played live.

Was it freeing to perform songs from an era where songwriters were a separate entity?

I’ve always found songwriting a bit of an agony, really. It’s like going back to school. In fact, when I was in the Faces, they used to lock me in a hotel room with a bottle of wine and say, “You’re not coming out ’til it’s finished.” Because I was notorious. I wanted to go out and



MATT LICARI/AP

Rod Stewart, left, and Jools Holland pose for a portrait in New York.

enjoy myself alone. I didn’t want to sit in a room and write lyrics, and it’s always been a bit of like pulling teeth for me. The joy of this album, obviously, is I didn’t write any of the songs; I had a burning ambition to sing them, and I picked the right guy.

Over the years, you’ve garnered a large female

audience. When did you realize that was happening?

Probably right after “Maggie May,” I think. No, with the Faces, without a doubt because it was a good-looking band, the Faces. I didn’t think any of us were good looking, quite honestly. I still don’t. But we did have some magical appeal to women. It was

great fun. You should have been there. (Laughs)

Did your health scare a few years back change anything?

It’s all part of getting older. My thoughts at the moment are with our king, who’s got some sort of cancer. But I’ve made a promise to myself since I was really young. I’ve always played soccer, and I still do. I play with my kids as well. I keep myself really fit. I work out a bit. I’m mad about nutrition, watching my weight and everything. So I do work at it, and I think that helps a lot. And do your due diligence. You know, men are notorious for not wanting to go to the doctors. You should.

That sounds pragmatic. Do you have any worries about staying healthy?

I’m not obsessed by it. I mean, none of us want to pass on. You do think about that as you get older, but not in a morbid way. I’m not frightened of dying, but I’m just enjoying myself so much. I feel absolutely privileged to be doing what I’m doing.

There was talk a few years ago about a country record. Any

truth to that?

I plan on doing it. We actually started it. We started making a country album. And I went off and made another solo album, but yeah, it’s in the pipeline. The record company would like me to do it. They don’t push me to do it. You know, there will come a time.

What is it about that music?

Once again, it’s what I grew up with. You know, not so much country music, but folk music. You know, the likes of Woody Guthrie and Ramblin’ Jack Elliott and Bob Dylan. Of course, I loved all that stuff. That’s all. That’s why I learned how to play guitar, because I wanted to sing the songs.

Is there an end in sight? Do you see a point where you would retire?

Not really. I suppose, I mean, it wouldn’t be for me to judge, but I imagine if people stop buying tickets for concerts and don’t buy records anymore, maybe that’s a sign. I don’t know. The word “retirement” is not in my vocabulary at the moment because I’m enjoying myself.

WEEKEND: TELEVISION

Q&A

Richonne rises in 'The Ones Who Live'

Actors Gurira and Lincoln, who reunite for 6th spinoff of 'The Walking Dead,' discuss their characters and on-set dynamic

By ALICIA RANCILIO
Associated Press

Danai Gurira remembers a moment filming "The Walking Dead" that she now believes contributed to the future pairing of her character Michonne with Andrew Lincoln's Rick.

It was during Season 3, Gurira's first season on the show. The scene featured Lincoln, Steven Yeun, Norman Reedus, Lauren Cohan and Michael Rooker. Gurira recalls Michonne wielding her trademark samurai sword, ready to kill Rooker's character Merle. Lincoln's Rick stood in between Michonne and Merle, preventing Michonne from going too far.

"You said to me afterwards, 'It was like there was only the two of us in the scene,' Gurira reminded Lincoln in a recent sit-down interview with The Associated Press. "I was like, 'Yeah, that's kind of true... What was that about?'"

Moments like those added up, leaving an impression on the cast, crew and fans, and inspiring the writers to diverge from the comics and unite the two fan favorite characters as a couple, known as Richonne.

Gurira and Lincoln returned to "The Walking Dead" universe on Sunday in "The Walking Dead: The Ones Who Live" on both AMC and AMC+. The actors are executive producers, along with "The Walking Dead" Chief Content Officer Scott M. Gimple and others. The cast also includes Terry O'Quinn ("Lost"), Lesley-Ann Brandt ("Lucifer"), Craig Tate and Matthew August Jeffers.

In this sixth spinoff of the original show, viewers find Rick and Michonne still trying to find their way back to each other after being physically separated for years (or, since the show's ninth season finale, when Lincoln departed.)

The actors were careful to not reveal any spoilers, but spoke about their characters, the original series and working together.

Answers have been condensed for clarity and brevity.

Associated Press: Andrew, for the nine seasons you were on the original series, it's been said you had a producer-like role and took a greater interest in the show as a whole. That all-encompassing role must have been very taxing at the time.

Lincoln: I used to come home exhausted after eight months



CJ RIVERA, INVISION/AP

Actors Danai Gurira, left, and Andrew Lincoln discuss "The Walking Dead: The Ones Who Live" on Feb. 20 in New York.

and it took about two weeks to decompress because it was such a sort of monastic effort of just control day to day, to not miss a scene, "Let's make sure we lock this down. Let's make sure we do this right." I (left the show), had two, three years and then COVID and all that, but I missed it. I missed that responsibility. And then I started to get less and less respect in my house from my children. And they know all of my best jokes. They know my worldview. I've got no currency in my household, so really, I want to get some creds back with my family.

Danai, you joined the show in Season 3 when it was already a hit. The Michonne character was well-known to the comic readers, but were you nervous about how your version would be received? Do you remember how you felt at the time?

Gurira: I really, really wanted the Michonne role and was surprised I'd never come across the story of her before. I thought she was just such an interesting Black woman. I'd never seen a character like her and (as a playwright), I'm busy trying to write Black women. The show



Gurira as Michonne, left, and Lincoln as Rick Grimes in "The Ones Who Live," the sixth spinoff of "The Walking Dead." The characters have been physically separated since the original show's ninth season finale, when Lincoln departed.

was already a juggernaut so it was scary. And not just because she was already this cool character that deserved justice, but also because these guys had already done all this work. Also, I'd never watched the show. I'm a scary cat. I don't watch that stuff. I don't watch horror, I don't watch zombies ... but I had to watch it and I was like, "Oh, this is so not about zombies." And sometimes as a writer you just want to write, but I wanted to be a part of that. Then it was like, "Now this four-foot sword and



AMC/AP photos

me have to become friends." **Andrew, from the pilot episode, the character of Rick was the heartbeat of the show. Viewers obviously loved him, but what are your thoughts on Rick?**

Lincoln: I love him a lot. I miss playing him. I missed his heart. There was a quote that I loved: A hero is a man who does what he can. I think that's him.

Danai, do you think Andrew shares some of Rick's leadership qualities?

Gurira: Andy definitely was very much a leader on the set,

and set the tone and set the energy. There was no ego on the set because he didn't have an ego.

Lincoln: That was set by (show creator) Frank Darabont and all of the ensemble.

Gurira: I had never met Frank, so when I got there all I had was you. You were all I had.

Lincoln: OK, but that was Frank.

Gurira: Yeah, but you could've had it or not. You could've kept it going or not. Whatever! Just take the compliment! You really grounded the energy of the space and made it a place you wanted to go to every day so that everyone loved each other. There was respect. There was joy. It was a joyful place to come to work as we killed each other. You were No. 1 on the call sheet driving the same Ford Focus for nine years.

Lincoln: It was a hybrid. I was saving the planet way before anybody else.

Do you look at "The Ones Who Live" as a chapter to a story or a bow that ties up loose ends?

Lincoln: I'd like to think both. I like to think that it would exist as its own thing, but with a dot, dot, dot afterwards.

WEEKEND: TELEVISION



NETFLIX/AP photos

Gordon Cormier as Aang, an airbender suspected of being the prophesied Avatar, who can control all four elements of air, water, earth and fire and will unite the warring nations, in the new live-action version of "Avatar: The Last Airbender."

Bending a beloved franchise for Netflix

'Avatar: Last Airbender' showrunner says the live-action saga does justice to the anime series, but isn't identical

BY MARK KENNEDY
Associated Press

A new entry in the "Avatar" franchise is about to soar, and James Cameron has no part in it. The world of "Avatar: The Last Airbender" is completely different from Cameron's Pandora, but the two similarly named dueling sci-fi fantasy properties have kept throwing out new entries over the decades. On Feb. 22 — 14 months after the debut of "Avatar: The Way of Water" — Netflix launched "Avatar: The Last Airbender," a multi-part, lush live-action adaptation that mixes adventure and friendship, martial arts and philosophy, all through an Asian lens.

It's a potentially fraught step because fans of this universe are very protective of the franchise, which began as a beloved cartoon series in the anime style airing on Nickelodeon from 2005 to 2008.

"When you have an opportunity to be part of a world that is beloved by generations of people, it can be daunting sometimes because it's a big responsibility," says actor Paul Sun-Hyung Lee. "But, at the same time, as performers, you don't often get chances to sort of dive into worlds like that and to be part of gigantic productions."

"Avatar: The Last Airbender" is centered on a world with four tribes — air, water, earth and fire. Some can manipulate or "bend" their respective elements: hurl giant blobs of water, raise up rocks or zap someone with a wave of flames.

The eight-part saga starts with this world unbalanced — there has been a war for nearly 100 years as the Fire Nation tries to take over the planet, pretty much wiping out the airbenders along the way.

Then a young waterbender named Katara and her older brother, Sokka, discover a 12-year-old airbender named Aang who has been frozen for a century. They realize that he may be the prophesied Avatar who can control all four elements and unite all four nations.

"I never asked to be special," Aang says in the first episode. "The world needs you, Aang," he is told by an elder. "I don't want this power," Aang replies. The elder counters: "Which is why you will make a great Avatar."



Sebastian Amoruso and Kiawentiio in a scene from the new series. Kiawentiio plays Katara, a waterbender who, along with her brother Sokka, accompanies Aang on his mission. Amoruso plays earthbender Jet.

"It's Joseph Campbell's hero's journey," says Daniel Dae Kim, who plays the leader of the Fire Nation, connecting the series to such franchises as "Star Wars" and "The Matrix." "It makes it relatable to any kid or anyone to say, 'I don't have to be born with a sense of destiny.' Anyone can have that destiny thrust upon them."

Netflix has created a lusciously crafted universe, where our heroes soar over roiling seas aboard bison that fly and armies battle with staffs, mid-air flips and power blasts. Port cities teem with elegant sailing ships, costumes are colorful and pockets of humor and romance leaven the action sequences.

"It's such a deep show," says Gordon Cormier, born just a year after the original animated show ended its run and who now plays Aang. "Like the cartoon, it has so many character arcs and just amazing stories."

Aang teams up with Katara and Sokka to travel around their world, looking for clues for a way to channel his inner Avatar. There are plenty of slo-mo martial arts face-offs and mind-blowing manipulations of elements.

Cast members were quick to give credit to showrunner and executive producer Albert Kim for being true to the beloved animated series while developing elements and crafting it for a live-action audience.

"I'm a fan of the original animated series myself and we wanted to do it justice," Lee says. "We wanted to make sure that the OG fans were happy with it, but at the same time, we're not just giving them beat by beat the exact same thing because it already exists."

Dallas Liu, whose credits include "PEN15" and "Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings," plays the Fire Nation's crown prince and says Albert Kim helped them give the Netflix series its own identity.

"I think we found a very nice balance of staying faithful, but also allowing people who have never seen the show to watch a similar journey that still holds the essence of the original series," Liu says.

The show is riding a wave of new TV series that embrace Asian culture, including Max's "Warrior," Paramount+'s "The Tiger's Apprentice," FX's "Shogun" and "House of Ninjas" at Netflix.

The world of "Avatar: The Last Airbender" has had a live-action treatment before — M. Night Shyamalan's film adaptation in 2010 that many fans deride. An animated sequel, "The Legend of Korra," aired from 2005 to 2008.

In addition to the new Netflix series, an animated "Airbender" theatrical film trilogy and an animated TV series are planned, with the first film of the expected trilogy set to hit theaters late next year. (That could be just in time to compete with Cameron's "Avatar 3.")

But first up is the Netflix series, which has some big issues for parents and their kids to chew on: destiny, growing up fast, whether to hide from danger and challenging yourself. And, of course, the notion of hope.

"We have to give people something to live for," Katara says at one point. "That's what the Avatar is — hope. And we need that just as much as we need food and shelter."

That's something Daniel Dae Kim thinks is a notion we can all relate to: "In times like we live in today, hope is a pretty good thing to have. And I think that analogy is something that makes it appropriate for right here and right now."

WEEKEND: HEALTH & FITNESS

Could wearing high heels be good for you?



iStock

A new study found people who wore high heels became better, more efficient walkers afterward — even in flats

BY GRETCHEN REYNOLDS
The Washington Post

Anyone who's ever wobbled around awkwardly in high heels may be surprised by the findings of a much-discussed biomechanics study of the footwear. In the study, young women and men who donned customized high heels for several months soon began walking differently.

But contrary to widespread beliefs about heels, these changes weren't problematic, the researchers found. Instead, the men and women who had worn the heels the most frequently became better, more efficient walkers — not only in heels but also in flats.

The results raise the unexpected possibility that high heels might serve “as a training tool” for people with mobility issues or for healthy women and men, including possibly athletes, who just wish to be able to move faster and with more ease, said Owen N. Beck, an assistant professor of kinesiology at the University of Texas, Austin, who led the study.

But there also could be downsides to slipping into and out of stilettos.

Barbie's heels

Near the start of the movie “Barbie,” before the titular character's existential crisis, she kicks off a pair of high-heeled slippers and keeps gliding right along en pointe, her feet still in the same flexed, tippy-toed position as before. The film was making a cultural point (and excellent visual joke).

But the image also may have had some slight physiological validity, studies suggest. Although past research into the effects of wearing high heels on legs and feet has been limited, it's generally shown that wearing heels regularly for months or years significantly alters how people walk, with or without heels.

In one of the first such studies, Australian biomechanics researchers found that young women who habitually wore high heels walked with shorter, more-thwacking strides than women who usually wore flats, their feet and ankles constantly in a more flexed position, even when everyone was barefoot.

But that study and the few follow-ups since left some questions unanswered about precisely what was happening inside heel wearers' lower legs when they wore heels, and whether those changes might affect the ease — or discomforts — of moving.

They also didn't include men.

These are your legs on heels

For the new study, published this month in the *Journal of Applied Physiology*, Beck and his colleagues looked for healthy young men, as well as women, who had never or almost never worn high heels. By recruiting heel virgins, the researchers hoped to be able to track changes inside people's legs associated with starting to wear the higher footwear.

They wound up with five male and three female volunteers.

The scientists then created high-heeled shoes acceptable to all recruits by attaching foam wedges to the soles of flat Chuck Taylor All-Star Low Top sneakers. Each pair was custom fitted so that a participant's foot would be flexed downward at a 14-degree angle. In practice, this meant the shoes sported about a 2½- to 3-inch wedge heel.

Afterward, the scientists used ultrasound and other techniques to check the length of the volunteers' calf muscles and the stiffness of their Achilles tendons. They also determined how much energy they used to walk for five minutes on a treadmill, in both flat Chuck Taylors and the high-heeled version. People who use

less energy than others are more efficient or metabolically economical walkers.

Finally, they gave everyone an activity tracker and asked them to go forth into the world and wear their new heels every day for 14 weeks.

Shorter calves, stiffer Achilles

Not everyone did. Some of the volunteers “were kind of embarrassed” by the makeshift stacked sneakers, Beck said. Others complained of squished toes or other discomforts, quibbles familiar to any flat-shoe habitue who dons heels on occasion.

But more than half of the volunteers, male and female, wore the shoes most of the time.

After 14 weeks, everyone returned to the lab and repeated the earlier tests. Those volunteers who had mostly given up early on wearing heels showed no changes in their legs or walking.

But those who wore the heels fairly consistently tended to have shorter calf muscles and stiffer Achilles tendons than before.

More surprising, they had also become more efficient walkers, using less energy to go the same speed on the treadmill as before, not only in the heels, but also in flats.

The researchers expected people to get more efficient at walking in the heels over time, Beck said. “You put someone in a new shoe, they'll naturally get better at walking in it.”

But they hadn't necessarily expected those adjustments to translate into easier movement in other situations.

The heel wearers seemed to become “more metabolically economical human beings,” Beck said.

High heels for runners?

He and his colleagues conjecture the

study's findings are probably most meaningful to people with mobility concerns, such as the elderly, who often have a relatively lax Achilles tendon and faltering walking pace. Wearing heels might help stiffen their Achilles and otherwise remodel their lower legs, Beck said, making walking feel “less effortful” and encouraging them to be more active.

Whether the rest of us might likewise benefit, if we aren't already fans of Louboutins or similar footwear, is more speculative.

But “I can see a case” for runners slipping on heels after training or racing, Beck said, “instead of Crocs.”

A stiff Achilles tendon returns more energy with each stride than a looser one, so frequently wearing heels might contribute, over time, to improved running efficiency and speed.

But the study was quite small and involved only healthy, young volunteers, not the elderly or athletes. It also didn't track injuries. Trips and ankle sprains are hardly unknown among heel wearers, and the changes in muscles and tendons that accompany wearing heels might predispose some wearers to tears or other injuries there.

“The likelihood is that there is an optimal balance, between using heels enough to see a positive effect on movement economy but not using them too much that other negative effects, like pain, stiffer tendons, balance issues, etc., start to interfere,” said Neil Cronin, a professor of sport and health sciences at the University of Jyväskylä in Finland. He led the 2012 study of high heels but was not involved in the new research.

More research is needed, he and Beck agree. But, for now, if you'd like your daily walk to start feeling a bit easier, you might consider adding a little height to your regular rotation of shoes.

WEEKEND: FAMILY



Hope Tomkins photos

Hope Tomkins, shown at right with her mother Marcia Mull, holds the long-lost photo of her grandparents at left.

Lost and found treasures

Photo of Iowan's grandparents recovered 16 years after tornado displaced it

By SYDNEY PAGE

Special to The Washington Post

Hope Tomkins lost almost everything in a tornado that destroyed her Iowa home in 2008.

"When we got to our house, there were three walls left standing," said Tomkins, who was about 30 miles away in Iowa Falls when the tornado tore through her community in Parkersburg. "It was indescribable."

The deadly tornado — which packed 205 mph winds — left dozens injured and killed nine people, including five of Tomkins' neighbors.

She lost most of her possessions, including a photo of her grandparents on their wedding day in 1942, which she had proudly displayed in her living room.

"It was one of my most prized possessions," she said. "I lived with my grandma and grandpa for a long time growing up. I have a lot of great memories."

But nearly 16 years after the photo vanished with the wind, she got it back in what felt like an enormous stroke of luck.

Tomkins was scrolling through Facebook on Jan. 22, when she stumbled upon a post from the City of Parkersburg.

"Does anyone recognize this couple? One of the many unclaimed tornado items from over the years," said the post, which included a timeworn photo of a young couple. "Cleaning out the closet at city hall and we found this! Let's see if we can locate the family of the couple in this photo!"

Tomkins paused in disbelief.

"I was like, 'Wait a minute, I know them!'" she said.

Within 15 minutes of the photo being posted, Tomkins commented: "That is my Grandma and Grandpa."

She was floored by the finding, which was first reported by Iowa's News Now.

"I was in so much shock when the picture popped up," she said, adding that she immediately called the Parkersburg City Hall to let them know the photo was hers. She also phoned her mother, Marcia Mull, whose parents are pictured.

Mull was equally stunned.

"I could not believe it," said Mull, 76, who lived in Quarry, Iowa, when the tornado hit. She moved with her husband to an assisted-living facility in Parkersburg about a year ago, across the street from City Hall. She went right away to claim the photo.

"It's in very good condition, considering all the stuff it went through," Mull said. "I have never found another wedding picture of them before."

Chris Luhring, Parkersburg City administrator, posted about the long-lost photo. He found it in a box of old items from the tornado that had been unclaimed.

"I just could not get rid of it," said Luhring, whose aunt died in the tornado.

"Not only do you lose people, but you lose priceless artifacts," he said. "I felt like I possessed a treasure."

After the tornado, the city set up a lost-and-found center, he said, and people brought in items they found strewn around in the wreckage.

"We had thousands and thousands of things that had been recovered, and people turned things in from hundreds of miles away," Luhring said.

That's how the wedding photo landed in the city's possession. Although Tomkins visited the lost-and-found on several occasions, she said, she never spotted the image of her grandparents, Maxine and Raymond Randall — both of whom grew up in Quarry.

"They met, fell in love and got married," said Mull, who is the eldest of her three siblings.

Her parents had a no-frills wedding, she said, adding that her mother wore a black dress because it was the only one she had. Their ceremony was at a local church, and there were just two people in attendance.

Mull's father was drafted into the U.S. Army during World War II, shortly after the wedding, and was stationed in Normandy. He came back to Iowa in 1945 and worked at an appliance company for 33 years.

"We had a happy childhood," Mull said, noting that her parents had a loving marriage. Her father died in 1984, and her mother died in 2007. They were adored by their 11 grandchildren, including Tomkins.

Neither Tomkins, nor her mother, expected to ever see the photo again.

"We were so thankful that we did get it back," said Mull, adding that they're planning to get it restored. They will also have several copies made.

Luhring was glad to be able to get the photo back where it belongs.

"I've got a million stories from the tornado that are not good," he said. "It's nice to have this one."

Mull and her daughter couldn't agree more.

"Don't give up hope of finding treasures," Mull said. "It might be 15 or 20 years, but somewhere down the line, it could happen to you, too."

THE MEAT AND POTATOES OF LIFE

Lisa Smith Molinari



Spontaneously slothful Saturday spectacular

I moped into the living room, falling face-first onto the couch, as if collapsing after a long, exhausting workday. However, it was only 8:30 a.m., and I was still in my pink flowered pajamas, devoid of any desire to be productive.

"Francis!" I mumbled into the couch cushion.

Briskly, my husband appeared, thoughtfully carrying a cup of coffee for me. "Mornin' Hon," he said. "Hey, I was thinking I'd pick up the leaf blower, and then maybe we'd swing by ..." he rattled off a list of Saturday errands that pummeled my brain like hailstones.

I write to-do lists most days, but Francis orally recites his daily tasks. Since retiring from the Navy eight years ago, he commutes out of state weekly for work. But when he's home, our family must endure Francis' recitations.

Typically, he appears in our kitchen with a sense of urgency, hoping to find an audience. Usually, I'm at the table working on my laptop. While his umpteenth cup of coffee brews in the Keurig, Francis begins his oration. "I have two meetings before noon, then I'll leave for my PT appointment, and I'll stop by ..." He rattles on until his schedule has been meticulously proclaimed. It doesn't really matter who's listening, as long as someone bears witness to the tedious details of Francis' life with feigned interest.

I reluctantly lifted my frizzed head from the couch. "Hon, can't we just binge-watch Netflix all day?" I whined.

I'd expected Francis to pooh-pooh this suggestion, but he was silent. It was a beautiful morning, and I'd just proposed that we do nothing but watch TV. Indoors. All day long.

"OK!" he said with surprise enthusiasm. "I'll get wood for a fire. You find something on the boob tube." Like a bear preparing to hibernate, Francis scurried about — gathering wood, letting the dog out and topping off our coffees.

"Whaddaya say we watch a reality show?" I suggested with excitement, knowing Francis would have preferred "The Lost Pirate Kingdom" or "Alexander: The Making of a God" or "Rise of Empires: Ottoman."

"All right," he acquiesced, clearly not wanting to dampen his wife's rare spontaneity.

After a few minutes of searching, I announced, "We've got 'Love Island,' 'Love on the Spectrum,' 'Twin Love,' 'Strange Love,' 'Burning Love,' 'Cosmic Love,' 'The Real Love Boat,' 'Down for Love,' 'Love Is Blind,' 'Alaskan Women Looking for Love' and something called 'FBOY Island.'"

We settled on 'Love Is Blind,' and I fired up the first episode, explaining the premise. "These singles date but never see each other because they're in those pods, see?" I pointed to the screen. "If they get engaged, they meet and then vacation together at a tropical resort. That's where things go haywire."

Francis seemed interested, but he disappeared to the kitchen during Episode 3. During Episode 6 I found him in our bedroom taking a nap. I lured him back downstairs with the promise of peanuts and true crime.

That afternoon, we watched a true crime docuseries while gobbling restaurant leftovers. That evening we broke out cocktails and binged on "The Haunting of Hill House," during which I housed an entire bag of Chex Mix.

The next morning, familiar guilt berated my conscience. "You wasted the entire day," my self-censure began. But I fought back. "I deserve a break every once in a while," I retorted, realizing that as a military spouse I was conditioned to feel "responsible," "in charge" and "in control." The rare instances when I'd slack off, I always felt remorse.

I reminded myself that weekends are for rejuvenating, even if that means lying around all day in pajamas watching morally bankrupt television shows and stuffing one's face.

"I was a total slug all day Saturday," I later bragged to a friend. "And I look forward to doing it again soon."

Read more at themeatandpotatoesoflife.com and in Lisa's book, "The Meat and Potatoes of Life: My True Lit Com." Email: meatandpotatoesoflife@gmail.com

WEEKEND: CROSSWORD AND COMICS

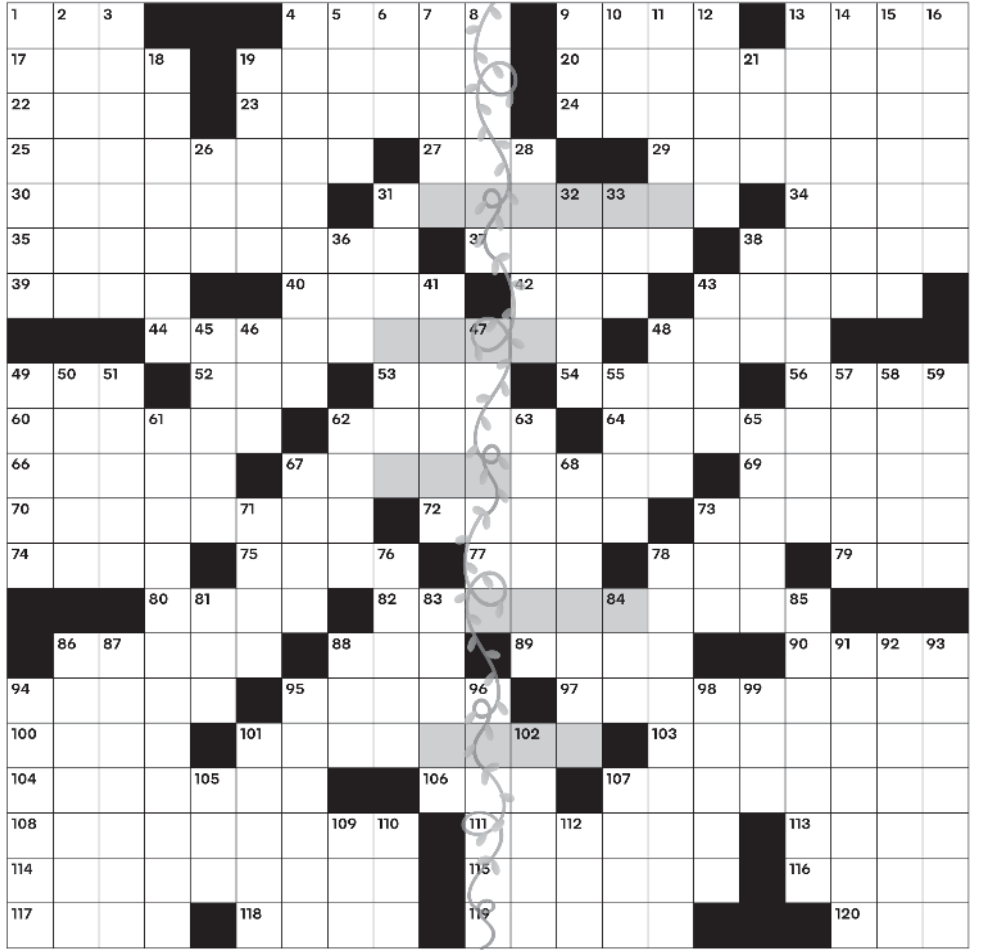
NEW YORK TIMES CROSSWORD

THE INSIDE SCOOP

BY SID SIVAKUMAR / EDITED BY WILL SHORTZ

Sid Sivakumar is an M.D./Ph.D. student at Washington University in St. Louis, training in biomedical engineering and neuroscience. This is his 17th crossword for The Times. Since the theme material appears mostly in the middle, Sid made the grid's sides — and especially the corners — quite open, giving them a themeless feel. "I was very fortunate they turned out so clean and fresh," Sid says. "I'm usually not so lucky!" — W. S.

- ACROSS**
- 1 Mess-hall patrons, in brief
 - 4 Theater backdrop
 - 9 Stressful work?
 - 13 Disorganized stack
 - 17 Home-screen array
 - 19 Port container
 - 20 Clean hands, so to speak
 - 22 Spill (over)
 - 23 Strict sales limit, informally
 - 24 Slow-cooked entrees
 - 25 Boos-y drink?
 - 27 Olympic gymnast Raisman
 - 29 Charge (with)
 - 30 Involves
 - 31 Some kennel personnel
 - 34 Only U.S. coin that does not explicitly indicate how many cents it's worth
 - 35 Eschewed pork and shellfish, say
 - 37 Arena seating sections
 - 38 Perfume ingredient
 - 39 Civil wrong
 - 40 Comedy character who once asked the U.N. secretary general if Disneyland was part of the U.N.
 - 42 Org. whose initials are aptly hidden in "foreign satellite interception"
 - 43 Really hurt
 - 44 Orders more of than necessary
 - 48 Oktoberfest purchase
 - 49 "Clifford the Big Red Dog" ailer
 - 52 "Gross!"
 - 53 Excessively
 - 54 Checkout unit
 - 56 Eyeballs, e.g.
 - 60 "Naw, no way!"
 - 62 Hindu wedding adornment that's said to get darker the more the newlyweds love each other
 - 64 Lifesaving mission, for short
 - 66 Its panhandle abuts British Columbia
 - 67 Prudent
 - 69 Texas A&M athlete
 - 70 One fast-tracked in an interview pool
 - 72 Like Loki
 - 73 Absolutely devour
 - 74 Fitting a little tight
 - 75 Home to the Great Ziggurat of Ur
 - 77 Common jeans feature
 - 78 "Whoop-de-___"
 - 79 Subject of 1960s-'70s addiction research
 - 80 Purges
 - 82 Things that perceptive people might pick up
 - 86 Picture taker?
 - 88 Sound in "Old MacDonald Had a Farm"
 - 89 Windy part of a kite?
 - 90 The "A" of the ACT UP organization
 - 94 Thunderous sounds
 - 95 Piece of info
 - 96 ___-de-camp
 - 100 Proceeds
 - 103 Putting together
 - 104 Hardly worth mentioning
 - 106 ID whose first five digits are sometimes ignored
 - 107 Keister
 - 108 Flight segment
 - 111 Demographic group
 - 113 Tiny member of a swarm
 - 114 Big Ten school that plays home football games at Beaver Stadium
 - 115 Much like
 - 116 What hits the ground running?
 - 117 Seat in the London Stock Exchange?
 - 118 At the earliest chance
 - 119 They get high by the beach
 - 120 Airport screening inits.
 - 11 Joins those on the stage
 - 12 Counterparts of eyes
 - 13 With 61-Down, like some gossip . . . as represented phonetically by each set of shaded squares?
 - 14 Like a bathroom directly connected to a bedroom
 - 15 Feigns indignation
 - 16 Bug
 - 18 Address
 - 19 Barbecue-grill fill
 - 21 Camp bed
 - 26 Summer Olympics host between London and Tokyo
 - 28 Comics sound when something is snatched
 - 31 Clenched, as teeth
 - 32 Recordholder for most games played in the FIFA World Cup (26)
 - 33 Modern ___
 - 36 Trains above street level
 - 38 Delivery that can't be returned
 - 41 "Well, don't wait out here!"
 - 43 Goals
 - 45 Sun shield
 - 46 ___-conscious
 - 47 Variety commonly found in jellies and pies
 - 48 Wax figures?
 - 49 Golf-tournament division
 - 50 President who campaigned on the slogan "Our best days still lie ahead"
 - 51 Real pickle
 - 55 So . . . or a word following "so"
 - 57 Fit for a king
 - 58 Sees red
 - 59 Word before dating or skating
 - 61 See 13-Down
 - 62 Dance at a luau
 - 63 More open to the elements
 - 65 Lake-house rental
 - 67 Unnerves
 - 68 Sea hawks
 - 71 Lyft request
 - 73 Lithium-___ battery
 - 76 "Don't ___ me . . ."
 - 78 1994 single by Hole whose cover art depicts a miniature wedding dress and veil
 - 81 Real-time PC exchanges
 - 83 Man, woman and child, e.g.
 - 84 Little lifter
 - 85 Snore loudly
 - 86 One dropping amorous hints
 - 87 Trigonometry units
 - 88 B-ball in Big D
 - 91 "Am I mistaken?"
 - 92 Turndowns
 - 93 Hot herbal brew
 - 94 Place to pamper pets that purr
 - 95 Some rivers have them
 - 96 Variety that shares its name with a Mideast capital
 - 98 Game with big prizes
 - 99 "I'm not working right now," in email shorthand
 - 101 Believer in Jah
 - 102 Mushroom added to ramen
 - 105 Org. with the phone number 1-800-TAX-FORM
 - 107 Cornmeal cake
 - 109 Info you might send someone when you're running late
 - 110 Liven (up)
 - 112 Stashed away



GUNSTON STREET



"Gunston Street" is drawn by Basil Zaviski. Email him at gunstonstreet@yahoo.com, and online at gunstonstreet.com.

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FACES

Winslet in charge

Actress plays a worshipped leader in HBO's 'Regime,' but takes a softer approach in executive producer role

By HILARY FOX
Associated Press

Kate Winslet is running things — on and off the set of her new TV show, "The Regime."

In the HBO show premiering Sunday, she plays Elena Vernham — also known as The Chancellor, the ruler of a fictional country in Europe, possibly near Poland. Winslet, who is also an executive producer on the show, says she's never been offered a character like this "in her life."

"I've never read a script like this before. I've never laughed so much at the material that was in front of me, as we did every single day, and I really just felt this was an exciting, challenging, terrifying opportunity for me to step totally out of my comfort zone," she says.

As the show's worshipped leader, she came face to face with many huge artworks of herself.

"Initially I thought to myself, oh God, that's so brilliant. I've got to have one. And then I got so sick of looking at them that towards the end I just wanted to burn them all," Winslet laughs.

Sometimes, the production team would neglect to warn her of a large, sequined image of her face on set.

"Funnily enough, I don't like looking at me. It's not a comfortable place to be. So yes, there was a, there was a lot of being confronted with that, this heightened version of myself," she says. "I just had to kind of roll with it."

That's one of the many major differences between the star and the dictator — who

loves to be loved by her people, addressing them regularly and also, occasionally, serenading them with a song ("Santa Baby").

Among her loyal subjects: Guillaume Gallienne, as her husband Nicholas; Andrea Riseborough, who runs the palace, and Danny Webb as one of her many ministers, subservient to her bizarre pronouncements. Martha Plimpton plays a U.S. senator and Hugh Grant is Elena's political rival.

Things in the country are running smoothly — well, as smoothly as they can while Elena deals with her latest hypochondria, paranoia and abandonment issues. Then she hires a soldier, played by Matthias Schoenaerts, in her fight against tiny deadly spores — and begins a relationship with repercussions that shake the regime, and the country, to its core, moving her battles to a much larger scale.

The dark comedy, from "Succession" writer Will Tracy, is billed as a twisted love story about two people who should never have fallen in love, which is "exactly why everybody should watch it," says Schoenaerts.

"The world is full of people that should have never met," he says.

Luckily, off screen, the results were less damaging with lots of laughter on set, Schoenaerts recalls: "It gives us some relief because, obviously, sometimes we really have to go (to dark) places."

And it was much less of a dictatorship than on screen.

"She leads by example," Schoenaerts says of Winslet. "She's always on time, al-



HBO/AP

Kate Winslet plays the neurotic ruler of a fictional European country in "The Regime."

ways prepared, always kind, generous, open and extremely sharp. And she's a lot of fun to work with."

"The Regime" directors Stephen Frears and Jessica Hobbs both agree that a Winslet set is more like a welcoming theater company. "It did feel like that," says Winslet, who has appeared in amateur theatrical productions.

Gallienne remembers that Winslet would take time out to talk to any new cast members so that they felt comfortable and part of the team.

"She's very direct, very honest, but very simple and very kind," he says. "As she says, you know, learn your lines, focus and deliver."

Winslet says that she takes being number one on the call sheet very seriously and tries to lead by example, to "lift the energy every

day and just deliver it and show up and, and really be there for everybody."

"As I'm getting older I feel responsibility and gratitude, you know, both simultaneously," Winslet explains. "It's a really privileged position to be in. And I really respect it."

The self-centered chancellor is a far cry from any real-life figure, if you were wondering, with Winslet describing her character's theatrics as "so enormous and delicious."

"And her hysteria at times, and how volatile she is, how vulnerable she is. I mean, I just couldn't compare her to anyone," she says.

"I couldn't say there were things that I actually liked about her," adds Winslet, "but there were things that really just made me laugh."

'Curb Your Enthusiasm' comedian Lewis dies at 76

By HARRISON SMITH
AND BRIAN MURPHY
The Washington Post

Richard Lewis, the black-clad stand-up comic who mined guilt, anxiety and neurosis for laughs — naming some of his cable specials "I'm in Pain," "I'm Exhausted" and "I'm Doomed" — and played a semi-fictionalized version of himself on HBO's "Curb Your Enthusiasm," died Tuesday at his home in Los Angeles. He was 76.

His publicist, Jeff Abraham, said Lewis died after a heart attack. Lewis announced in April that he was retiring from stand-up, revealing that he had been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease in 2021 and had been struggling in the aftermath of surgeries for his shoulder, hip and back.

A self-deprecating comic with a head of thick, dark hair that he often ran his hands through nervously, Lewis rose to national prominence through his 1980s television specials, telling stories about his failed romances and tu-

multuous childhood while reminding audiences that "life isn't supposed to be great all the time."

He won acting roles as well, starring with Jamie Lee Curtis as a Chicago magazine columnist in the ABC sitcom "Anything But Love" (1989-1992) and playing Prince John, a comically greedy ruler endowed with a mole that inexplicably travels across his face, in Mel Brooks' parody film "Robin Hood: Men in Tights" (1993).

To younger viewers, he was probably best known as a morose mainstay of "Curb Your Enthusiasm," the heavily improvised sitcom starring and created by his childhood friend Larry David, a co-creator of "Seinfeld."

The two met when they were 12, at a summer camp in upstate New York, and "hated each other," Lewis told The Washington Post in 2020. But they reconnected through comedy in the early 1970s, when Lewis was performing some of his first stand-up sets.

With help from comedian David



EMILY BERL/For The Washington Post

Comedian and actor Richard Lewis, shown in 2020, died Tuesday. He was 76.

Brenner, an admirer, he found a wider audience at Los Angeles comedy clubs and performed on a tour with Sonny and Cher.

By the mid-'80s, Lewis was a veteran of Johnny Carson's "The Tonight Show" and was being cited as part of a group of irreverent and often self-reflexive comics that included Richard Pryor, George Carlin and Lily Tomlin.

'Naked Gun' reboot set for 2025

From wire reports

Paramount Pictures is moving ahead with a long-gestating remake of "Naked Gun," the studio announced Wednesday. Liam Neeson will star as the bumbling police detective Lt. Frank Debin in the role made famous by Leslie Nielsen.

Akiva Schaffer will direct the film, set for release in July 2025. The script is by Dan Gregor, Doug Man and Schaffer, who collaborated on 2022's "Chip 'n Dale: Rescue Rangers."

The three "Naked Gun" films, derived from the TV series "Police Squad!," were high-water marks for slapstick comedy. They were released from 1988 to 1994.

Shane Gillis lands a new Netflix special, series

Comedian Shane Gillis has a new Netflix comedy special and series.

The streaming giant has secured Gillis' six-episode comedy series "Tires," premiering May 23, and has greenlit a new stand-up special following 2023's "Beautiful Dogs," which ranked in Net-

flix's Top 10 in five countries and remained in the U.S. Top 10 for two weeks.

"Tires" is built around Shane (played by Gillis), who works at his cousin's auto repair chain. Gillis writes and executive produces the series.

Gillis, who was hired, then quickly fired, in 2019 by "Saturday Night Live" after YouTube videos surfaced of the stand-up comedian making racist, sexist and homophobic jokes, returned to the late-night sketch comedy show Feb. 24 as host.

Other news

■ Powerhouse vocalist Adele is postponing five weekends of her Weekends With Adele residency at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas because of a lingering illness. Adele had not missed a show at the Colosseum, and has sold out all 80 of her performances over 40 weeks.

■ Dave Myers, best known as one half of Britain's adored "Hairy Bikers" TV chef duo, died Wednesday after a battle with cancer, his co-star and friend Si King said Thursday. He was 66.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Lawsuit claims fentanyl drip replaced with water

OR MEDFORD — The first lawsuit brought amid reports that a nurse at a southern Oregon hospital replaced intravenous fentanyl drips with tap water seeks up to \$11.5 million on behalf of the estate of a 65-year-old man who died.

The wrongful death suit was filed Monday against Asante Rogue Regional Medical Center in Medford, The Oregonian/OregonLive reported. It also names nurse Dani Marie Schofield as a defendant.

Last month, Medford police disclosed that they were investigating potential crimes against patients involving the theft of “controlled substances,” which may have led to “adverse” outcomes for some.

Fentanyl is a powerful synthetic opioid that has helped fuel the nation’s overdose epidemic, but it is also used in legitimate medical settings to relieve severe pain. Drug theft from hospitals is a long-standing problem.

Reinstated musher withdraws from Iditarod

AK ANCHORAGE — A musher who was disqualified from the world’s most famous sled dog race only to be reinstated days later has now officially withdrawn from this year’s Iditarod.

Eddie Burke Jr. scratched from the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race, officials said in a statement late Monday. Burke in a Facebook post said when he was disqualified that he leased members of his dog team to other mushers, and it was too difficult to reassemble his team after being reinstated.

A ceremonial start of the 1,000-mile race across the Alaska wilderness is Saturday in Anchorage, followed by the competitive start 75 miles north on Sunday.

Burke, the race’s rookie of the year last year, and 2022 champion Brent Sass were disqualified as allegations of violence against women embroiled the race.

Race officials disqualified Burke on Feb. 19. But the state of Alaska then dropped charges alleging he choked his then-girlfriend in 2022, and the Iditarod Trail Committee reinstated him.

Pieces from memorial sold for scrap, recovered

CO DENVER — Three bronze artworks stolen from a Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. memorial in City Park in Denver, along with seven bronze pieces taken from a nearby fountain, were recovered after being sold to a scrap metal business, Denver Police said Tuesday.

Police said because the items were taken from two memorials and sold as scrap, they do not believe it was a bias-motivated crime. Two suspects are being sought and



LINDSEY WASSON/AP

Shadows and light

People visit the Hole in the Rock at Papago Park, in Phoenix, on Tuesday. Visit Phoenix says the formation is thought to have been used by the ancient Hohokam civilization to track the position of the sun.

one of the men has been identified, police said.

A large plaque depicting Black military veterans from the “I Have a Dream” monument was cut into four pieces prior to being sold, police said. A torch and angel taken from the King monument were also recovered last week.

Investigators learned the pieces missing from the King monument were taken early on Feb. 18.

The thefts from the Joseph Addison Thatcher Memorial Fountain had not been reported until the items were recovered. Some pieces from the fountain remain missing, police said.

Lawsuit claims isolation, abuse at youth facility

WY CHEYENNE — Staff at Wyoming’s state youth detention facility locked juveniles in solitary confinement for weeks at a time, repeatedly buckled one in a restraint chair for up to 12 hours a day and poked fun at another while withholding the leg brace he needed for his disability for months, a federal lawsuit alleges.

The abuses the Wyoming Boys School has been accused of coincided with sharp state budget cuts that shut down part of the facility and occurred even as most other states limit or totally ban juvenile solitary confinement.

For the still-developing brains inside juvenile facilities, the prac-

tice is especially harmful, alleges the lawsuit filed Monday in U.S. District Court in Casper.

Permanent psychiatric conditions including paranoia and anxiety can result for youths, according to the lawsuit filed by three former inmates against the Wyoming Department of Family Services, Wyoming Boys School and 10 of the facility’s employees including Superintendent Dale Weber.

The Wyoming Department of Family Services, which oversees the Wyoming Boys School, refutes the lawsuit’s allegations of wrongdoing, department spokesman Clint Hanes said by email.

Bill to raise marriage age to 18 heads to governor

WA OLYMPIA — A law to establish 18 as the minimum marriage age in Washington state is headed to the governor’s desk for his signature.

State lawmakers in the House and Senate passed House Bill 1455 this session after the measure stalled in the Senate last year and other bills failed to gain traction in previous years.

This year, the House passed it unanimously on the first day of session. On Feb. 23, the Senate voted to pass the bill with a vote of 48-1. Republican Sen. Jeff Holy, of Spokane, cast the lone no vote.

Supporters say it reduces domestic violence and unwanted pregnancies, as well as improves

the lives of teens.

Currently, 17-year-olds in Washington state can marry with parental consent, and those younger than 17 need approval from a judge.

Bill to ban reappointing lawmakers advances

TN NASHVILLE — Republicans in the Tennessee House voted Monday to advance a bill that would prevent local governments from reappointing state lawmakers who were expelled due to behavior.

The proposal is one of several restrictions being considered after the GOP’s high-profile expulsion proceedings last April against Democratic state Reps. Justin Jones and Justin Pearson. It would bar what happened after: Jones and Pearson were reappointed and quickly went back to work.

Pearson, who proposed multiple amendments that were voted down, said the proposal amounted to a government overreach that strips constitutional power from local officials.

Jones and Pearson, two young Black lawmakers, were expelled for waging a protest on the House floor last April calling for gun control just days after a Christian elementary school shooting in Nashville killed six people. They and Democratic Rep. Gloria Johnson joined chants by protesters in the public gallery and outside the chamber.

Johnson, who is white, was spared from expulsion by a single vote after her legal team argued her role was lesser, noting she didn’t use a bullhorn.

Thermal imaging camera helps find child in swamp

FL TAMPA — A sheriff’s aviation unit used thermal imaging to guide deputies to a 5-year-old who had gone missing in a swamp near Tampa.

The autistic girl wandered away from her home Monday evening and was quickly reported missing, Hillsborough County Sheriff Chad Chronister said.

The thermal camera captured images of the little girl walking through ankle-deep water.

“Hey, I think I got her in the woods,” a deputy in the helicopter told deputies on the ground. “She might be able to hear her name if you call her. She might be about 80 feet in front of you.”

A body camera recording showed the moment the deputies made contact with the child.

A deputy called her name and held up his arms. The little girl also held her arms up and walked toward him. He quickly picked the child up.

“Let’s get you out of the water. I’ll get you to everyone,” he told her as they walked back through the woods.

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Classifieds scams can target both sellers and buyers with classified advertisements.

Be aware of the common red flags.

Some of the latest Scam fads are:

❑ Vehicle buyers wanting to buy sight unseen and have the vehicle shipped through an agent using paypal.

❑ People saying Free Dog (different breeds) for adoption.

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Individuals placing classified advertising should use discretion in concluding the sale of their property. Not all potential buyers are reputable or honest. Stars and Stripes suggests that you take precautions to ensure that potential buyers are reputable and will be able to fulfill the terms of the sale. Stars and Stripes is not liable for the contractual relationship between sellers and buyers of merchandise advertised in the newspaper or on the web site.

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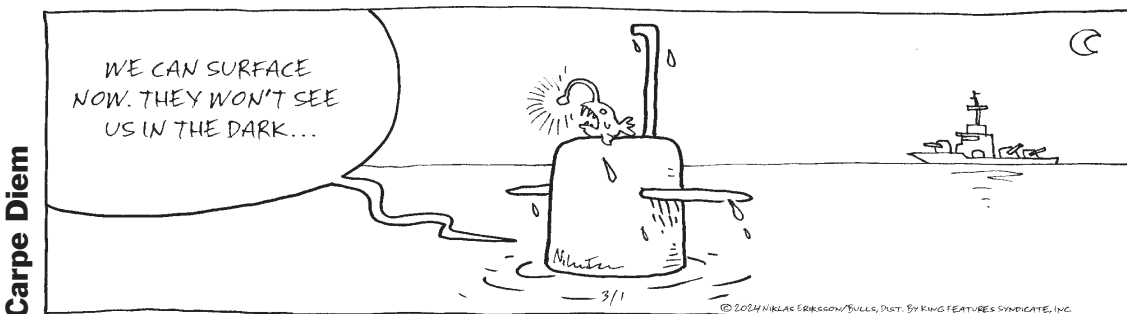
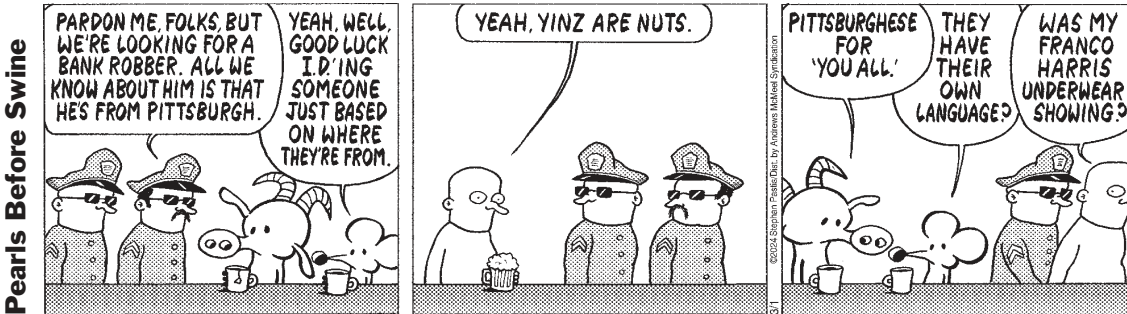
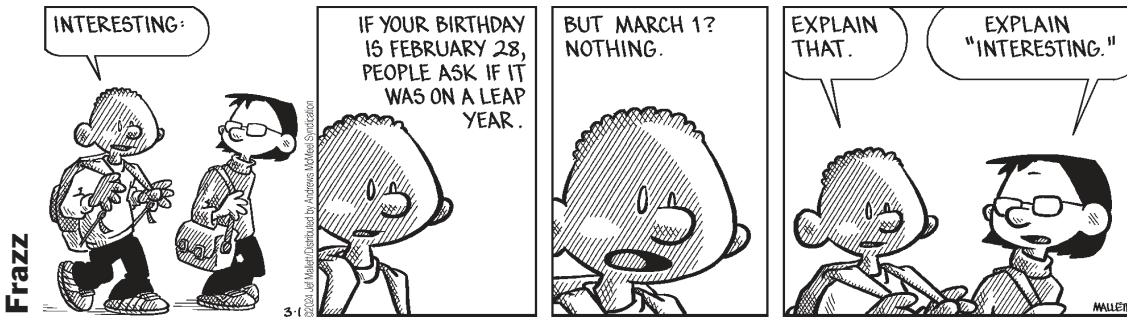
STARS AND STRIPES

However you read us, wherever you need us.

Bizarro



Loose Parts



Eugene Sheffer Crossword

1	2	3		4	5	6		7	8	9	10	11
12				13				14				
15				16				17				
18				19								
20			21		22				23	24	25	26
			27	28				29	30			
31	32	33						34				
35					36			37				
38					39	40			41	42	43	44
					45				46		47	
48	49	50	51								52	
53						54					55	
56						57					58	

- ACROSS**
- 1 Roast VIPs
 - 4 Indian lentil dish
 - 7 Minty quaff
 - 12 Author Fleming
 - 13 Ab — (from the start)
 - 14 Cosmetics mogul Lauder
 - 15 Actress Vardalos
 - 16 TV sci-fi drama starring Thandiwe Newton
 - 18 Tolkien ogre
 - 19 Raiment
 - 20 Video-streaming brand
 - 22 Madrid Mrs.
 - 23 Baby's call
 - 27 Caustic solution
 - 29 Logic
 - 31 Kagan of the Supreme Court
 - 34 Governed
 - 35 Whitewater vessels
 - 37 Ornate vase
 - 38 Clarified butter
 - 39 Lettuce variety
 - 41 Dull sound of impact
 - 45 "Haystacks" painter
 - 47 Big bird
 - 48 Internationally
 - 52 "There's no — team!"
 - 53 Moral principle
 - 54 Sharing word
- DOWN**
- 1 Trivial
 - 2 Nile city
 - 3 Midnight nosh
 - 4 Columnist Maureen
 - 5 Loath (to)
 - 6 Also-ran
 - 7 Yom Kippur observers
 - 8 GI entertainers
 - 9 USPS delivery choice
 - 11 Walker, on a sign
 - 17 Despot
 - 21 Arm bones
 - 23 Intimidate
 - 24 Visual communication syst.
 - 25 Fawn's mama
 - 26 Moreover
 - 28 Talk and talk
 - 30 Goof up
 - 31 Heart chart (Abbr.)
 - 32 — -di-dah
 - 33 Storm center
 - 36 Garbage barge
 - 37 Depleted
 - 40 Leek's kin
 - 42 Robbery
 - 43 Inuit boat
 - 44 "Beats me!"
 - 45 Roman 1601
 - 46 Region (Abbr.)
 - 48 Director Craven
 - 49 Slugger Mel
 - 50 Plato's P
 - 51 Like Abner or Wayne

Answer to Previous Puzzle

F	I	R		A	S	H	Y		T	E	A	M
A	L	E		B	R	I	E		E	G	G	O
R	E	C	U	S	A	L	S		M	A	U	L
		A	S	U		L	E	A	P	D	A	Y
M	A	N	O	R	S		S	N	L			
A	L	T		D	E	V		T	E	R	R	A
A	B	E	T		T	I	P		S	E	E	S
M	A	D	R	E		M	A	C		C	P	A
				E	M	U		D	O	L	L	O
P	L	U	S	O	N	E		A	S	A		
A	I	L	S		R	E	C	R	U	I	T	S
P	A	N	E		I	R	A	S		M	A	O
A	M	A	S		G	O	R	E		S	E	X

3-1 CRYPTOQUIP

LKNG LDTHF DCR MNHH GKR

A E B J H E U E R F E C U D Q B N H

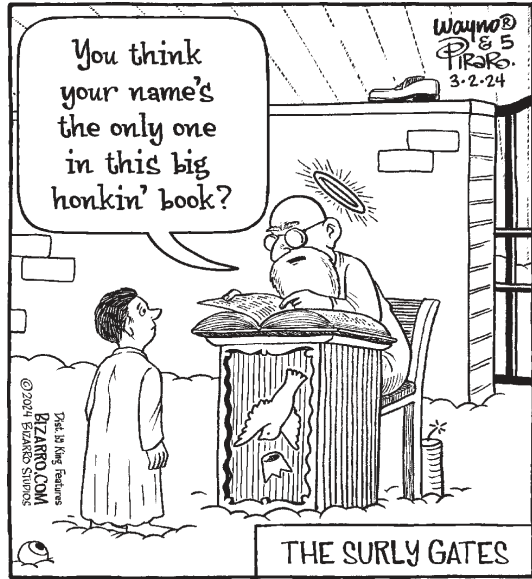
H N C O T N O R M D B B D C N B D C O

B N E H B R C ? M N Q Q E R Q J E F O E C .

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: I WASN'T THE HEAD DESIGNER OF THIS ULTRA-FASHIONABLE NEW GLOVE, BUT I DID HAVE A HAND IN IT.

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: B equals M

Bizarro

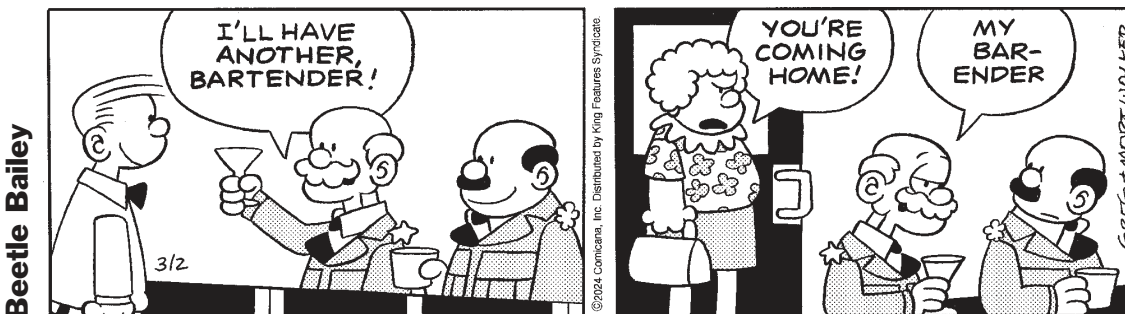
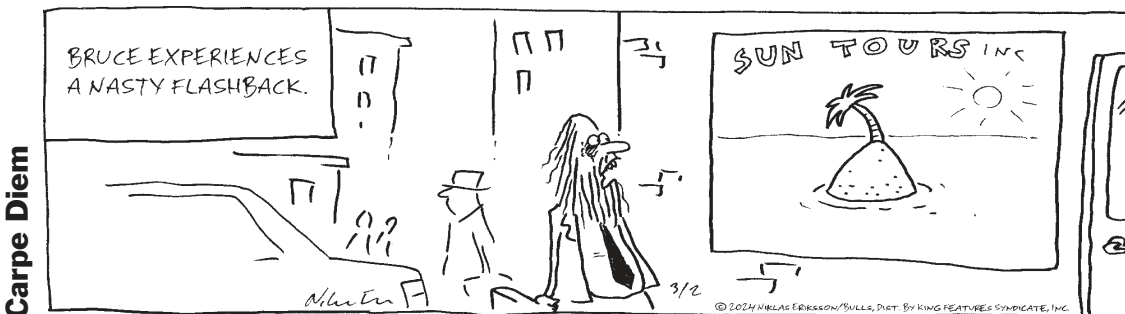
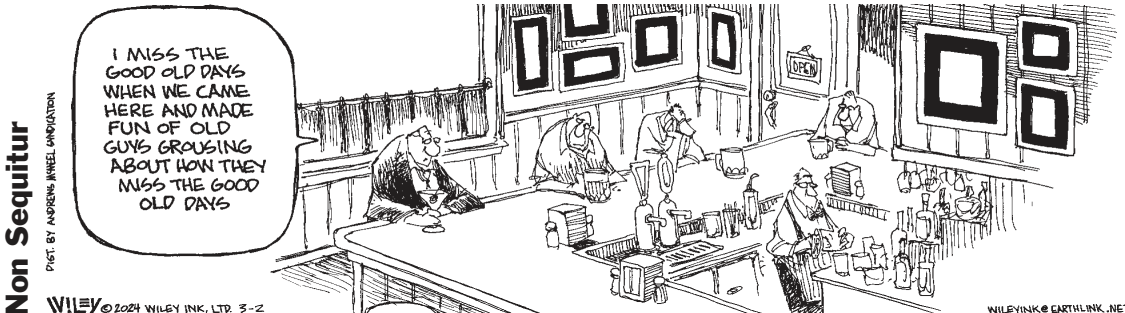
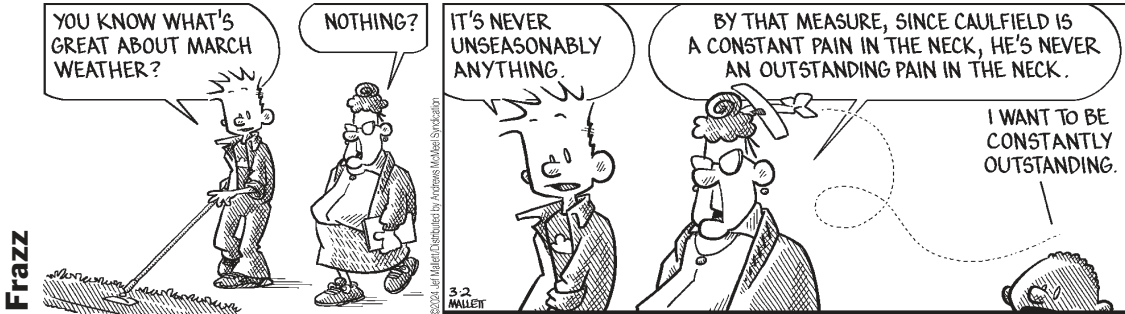


Loose Parts



Eugene Sheffer Crossword

1	2	3		4	5	6	7		8	9	10	11
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38	39	40				41				42	43	44
45						46				47		
48						49				50		
51						52				53		



ACROSS

- 1 Buddhist sect
- 4 Sparkling Italian wine
- 8 Yankee nickname
- 12 Adam's mate
- 13 Thunder god
- 14 Cupid's realm
- 15 "Toy Story" dinosaur
- 16 Novelist Victor
- 17 "So be it"
- 18 "Think again!"
- 21 Pen filler
- 22 Cartesian conclusion
- 23 Nile feature
- 266 on a phone
- 27 Buddy
- 30 Eventful periods
- 31 Floor cover
- 32 Greek cheese
- 33 Sardonic
- 34 Cranberry territory
- 35 More mature
- 36 Biz bigwig
- 37 Altar promise
- 38 In agreement
- 45 Sushi wrapper
- 46 Mon. follower
- 47 Remiss
- 48 "— and Away"
- 49 Some JFK guesses

- 50 Bakery purchase
- 51 Beholds
- 52 Novelist Jaffe
- 53 Rds.

- 24 Blunder
- 25 Nonclerical
- 26 Coffee holder
- 27 Nap site
- 28 Hwy.
- 29 Rowing need
- 31 Farm waker-upper
- 32 Dud
- 34 Spell-off
- 35 Texas city
- 36 Gambler's stacks
- 37 "That is to say ..."
- 38 Burden
- 39 "Uh-uh"
- 40 Verifiable
- 41 Prefix with pilot
- 42 Swiss peaks
- 43 Pace
- 44 Former mates

DOWN

- 1 Nada
- 2 Squared
- 3 Adjoining
- 4 Goddess of wisdom
- 5 Peel corn
- 6 Takeout request
- 7 Pressing things?
- 8 Car thief's dread
- 9 Capital of Italia
- 10 Exceeding
- 11 Contradict
- 19 Sold-out shows
- 20 Eastern path
- 23 Lawn coating

Answer to Previous Puzzle

M	C	S		D	A	L		J	U	L	E	P	
I	A	N		O	V	O		E	S	T	E	E	
N	I	A		W	E	S	T	W	O	R	L	D	
O	R	C		D	R	E	S	S					
R	O	K	U		S	R	A		D	A	D	A	
				L	Y	E		R	E	A	S	O	N
E	L	E	N	A					R	U	L	E	D
K	A	Y	A	K	S			U	R	N			
G	H	E	E		C	O	S		T	H	U	D	
					M	O	N	E	T		E	M	U
W	O	R	L	D	W	I	D	E		I	I	N	
E	T	H	I	C		O	U	R		S	A	N	
S	T	O	L	I		N	P	R		T	K	O	

3-2

CRYPTOQUIP

MLXWGHIIJYIAE RXDIAE DKXZMW
 CWXVBRI BDMV GE RWXZY
 CWHYRMD JYV CWHYRMDMD:
 KMHWRXYVHIHXYMW.

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: WHAT WOULD ONE CALL THE SIMPLIFIED INFORMAL LANGUAGE COMMON AMONG MAILMEN? CARRIER PIDGIN.

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: D equals S

STARS AND STRIPES.

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OPINION

Social media companies are not public utilities

By MATT BAI

Special to The Washington Post

The case brought by tech companies that reached the Supreme Court this week might involve a lot of complicated legalese, but it actually hinges on a simple, unsettled question — one that will define how we treat social media platforms for decades to come.

Have Facebook and X, formerly Twitter, now become the modern equivalent of public utilities, like your phone service or electric company? Or are they media organizations like The Washington Post?

This is the crux of the conundrum facing the justices. The case stems from hare-brained laws passed by the Florida and Texas legislatures (try to contain your surprise), which barred social media platforms from kicking conservative firebrands off their sites. Texas holds that the tech companies are 21st-century utilities that have to be regulated to ensure equal access.

Industry groups funded by Big Tech, meanwhile, have sued to invalidate the law, claiming that they have the same First Amendment rights as any other media company — including the right (if not the responsibility) to decide which content is in the public interest and which isn't.

The debate here has been a long time coming. It remains unresolved, in part, because the tech companies themselves have always tried to have it both ways.

When outraged leftists demand more regulation around content that spreads hatred or misinformation, the companies are quick to assert that they are essentially pipelines for public discourse, rather than content providers. In fact, Congress codified this argument with something called Section 230, a provision that shields social media companies from the same kind of legal jeopardy that a newspaper might face for printing something false.

But when the right tries to impose some

version of political neutrality, as it did in Texas, the same companies embrace exactly the opposite conceit — that they are media companies, no different from any news site, and thus can't be forced to publish content they find offensive.

If they can't decide which kind of company they really are, it's now up to the justices to decide for them, I guess.

Writing in The New York Times this week, Tim Wu — a left-leaning law professor at Columbia University and much more of an expert than I am in all of this — argued that the court should uphold the Texas law and treat the tech companies as though they were utilities. Wu doesn't like the law itself, but striking it down, he says, would effectively bar any kind of government regulation of social media platforms, under the theory that there's no difference, constitutionally speaking, between editors at CNN and an algorithm at Instagram.

I have some sympathy for this argument, in part because I've worked for two of these companies in my career. (I spent five years as the national political columnist for Yahoo and then published a newsletter on Meta's now-defunct Bulletin platform.) I can attest to the idea that tech companies behave nothing like traditional journalism outlets. They're run by engineers who might as well be wiring your house for cable or fixing your water main for all they care about the quality of information you consume online.

And yet, as a nonlawyer, I ultimately come down on the other side of the argument — that social media companies really aren't utilities at all. They maintain no infrastructures of their own — no pipes or towers. They provide no service that we can't live without — nothing as basic as drinking water or electric lights. They require no government license to operate. Most important, they enjoy no monopoly, however much it may feel that way in the moment.

Twenty-five years ago, AOL was a behe-

moth of email and message boards; now it's as much a relic as dial-up internet. There's nothing stopping anyone from creating a new social media platform, and there's every reason to think that Facebook or X — or even Google, in the coming age of artificial intelligence — will be surpassed by some product yet to be invented.

In truth, these tech companies are now content providers who make editorial decisions every day about which posts to promote and which to bury. They are purveyors and aggregators of speech, and it seems to me that they have to be entitled to the same free speech protections as any other kind of media.

But here's the catch: They ought to be just as accountable for their content, too. Which is why, if the Texas law is in fact unconstitutional, then Section 230 — which was adopted almost 30 years ago now, when the internet was in its infancy — should be thrown out as well, or at least revised. The way to police social media companies is to make them liable for the damage they cause.

That doesn't mean you should be able to successfully sue a tech company for every dumb post that has harmful or even tragic consequences. It means that social media sites should be held to a minimum standard of care. To use the language of libel law, any company that exhibits "reckless disregard" for the accuracy of its content should be on the hook for the cost of making it right.

Wherever one falls in this debate, however, it's time for the tech companies to choose a lane — or to have one chosen for them. If you're a public utility, then you're answerable to government regulations. If you're a media company, then you're answerable to the courts.

What you can't be is both things at once, and answerable to nothing.

Matt Bai, a Washington Post contributing columnist, is a journalist, author and screenwriter.

Manage, don't ban, court storming in college hoops

By SHELDON H. JACOBSON

Chicago Tribune

When Wake Forest University's Demon Deacons defeated Duke University's Blue Devils on Saturday, Wake Forest students stormed the court, celebrating their team's victory over a much-maligned in-state rival. Duke player Kyle Filipowski got injured during the exuberant on-court celebration and chaos, which prompted calls to end court storming, with an eye on protecting the players.

Before throwing the baby out with the bath water, so to speak, let's look at the issue dispassionately rather than with a visceral response.

Students are filled with energy and enthusiasm, and sports amplify such feelings. When their team takes down a highly ranked opponent or a bitterly hated conference rival, students want to celebrate. The natural reaction is to storm the court to celebrate the victory with the players.

Yet, anytime nonathletes enter the basketball court, risks emerge.

Students running across a court filled with players as the game ends is a formula for disaster. Unfortunately, Filipowski got caught in the frenzy. University of Iowa superstar Caitlin Clark faced a similar situation when Ohio State University upset University of Io-

wa in Columbus, Ohio, on Jan. 21.

No one wants any players to be injured in the aftermath of an upset victory. The greatest risks are to the visiting players after the home team wins. Notably, anyone caught in the court chaos is vulnerable to injury.

We are able to make predictions, though. Anytime a highly ranked team plays on the road against a conference rival, the risk of students storming the court exists.

Should the practice be banned? Given the predictability, the more appropriate response would be to manage it.

To mitigate risk, the coach and players could make public announcements about responsible celebration for several days before the game. If the administration, instead of issuing directives or threatening penalties, were to have the coach and the players call for restraint, students would be more likely to respond positively.

University of Connecticut, Purdue University, University of Houston and University of Tennessee, the top men's teams listed in recent Associated Press polls, are now at the most risk for court storming when playing on the road. Notably, even major upsets in mid-major conferences can produce such responses.

UConn at Marquette University on March 6 and Purdue at University of Illinois on

March 5 represent the highest potential of students storming the court if their team pulls the upset.

Other sensible, proactive actions could be taken. When an upset is brewing and appears likely, the referees could call a timeout and alert each of the coaches of the emerging situation so they could prepare. Coaches could then remind the players of what may be coming. An escape plan should be discussed during practices so players on the court know exactly what to do to protect themselves and their teammates when the final buzzer sounds.

The good news is that players are rarely injured during court storming events. Players are far more likely to be injured during practice or game time than in the aftermath of an upset loss on the road.

Risks come with the territory for college athletes, during the game and in the aftermath of games. Administration officials could prohibit fans from storming the court, yet managing the risks of the practice is a more appropriate response.

Sheldon H. Jacobson is a professor in computer science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. A data scientist, he applies his expertise in data-driven, risk-based decision-making to evaluate and inform public policy. He is also the founder of the Bracketodds website, a science, technology, engineering and mathematics learning lab at the university.

SCOREBOARD/MLB

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

Wednesday's men's scores

EAST
 American 73, Army 51
 Boston U. 64, Lehigh 62, OT
 Bucknell 68, Loyola (Md.) 46
 Colgate 77, Holy Cross 58
 Duquesne 75, La Salle 63
 N. Kentucky 70, Robert Morris 60
 Navy 62, Lafayette 58
 Northwestern 68, Maryland 61
 Virginia 72, Boston College 68

SOUTH
 Alabama 103, Mississippi 88
 Appalachian St. 89, Old Dominion 64
 Arkansas St. 71, Coastal Carolina 60
 Austin Peay 83, E. Kentucky 79
 Belmont 83, Murray St. 61
 Charleston Southern 58, Radford 57
 Chattanooga 84, Mercer 75
 Duke 84, Louisville 59
 ETSU 81, The Citadel 63
 Florida 83, Missouri 74
 Florida Gulf Coast 79, North Florida 60
 Georgia Southern 87, Marshall 73
 High Point 100, Winthrop 96, OT
 James Madison 84, Georgia St. 78
 Lipscomb 90, Bellarmine 74
 Louisiana Tech 90, W. Kentucky 84
 North Texas 80, Tulane 76
 SC-Upstate 74, Presbyterian 72
 South Alabama 73, Southern Miss. 70
 Stetson 86, Jacksonville 73
 Tennessee 92, Auburn 84
 Troy 87, Louisiana-Lafayette 73
 UNC-Greensboro 100, VMI 58
 VCU 88, Rhode Island 67
 W. Carolina 85, Furman 77
 Wichita St. 74, UAB 66
 Wofford 91, Samford 69

MIDWEST
 Bradley 86, S. Illinois 67
 Creighton 85, Seton Hall 64
 Drake 107, Ill.-Chicago 105, 3OT
 Fort Wayne 79, Wright St. 77, OT
 Green Bay 69, Cleveland St. 61
 Illinois 105, Minnesota 97
 Illinois St. 75, Missouri St. 74
 Indiana St. 85, Evansville 67
 Iowa St. 58, Oklahoma 45
 Marquette 91, Providence 69
 Milwaukee 75, IUPUI 70
 Richmond 80, Saint Louis 64
 St. John's 82, Butler 59
 Xavier 91, DePaul 58
 Youngstown St. 69, Detroit 55

SOUTHWEST
 South Carolina 70, Texas A&M 68
 Temple 65, Rice 43
 UCF 77, Oklahoma St. 71
 UTSA 89, Tulsa 73

FAR WEST
 Arizona 85, Arizona St. 67
 Colorado 88, California 78
 Oregon 78, Oregon St. 71

Wednesday's women's scores

EAST
 Boston U. 89, Lehigh 78
 Bucknell 74, Loyola (Md.) 56
 Colgate 86, Holy Cross 79
 Fordham 62, Saint Joseph's 57
 Navy 58, Lafayette 49
 Saint Louis 78, La Salle 57
 Seton Hall 71, Providence 65
 Tulsa 76, Temple 67
 UConn 67, Villanova 46
 UMass 58, St. Bonaventure 45
 VCU 69, Rhode Island 59

SOUTH
 FAU 80, Tulane 67
 George Mason 78, Dayton 53
 George Washington 45, Davidson 40
 High Point 65, Winthrop 64, OT
 James Madison 69, Coastal Carolina 60
 Kansas 65, UCF 53
 Longwood 67, Gardner-Webb 57
 Louisiana Tech 45, W. Kentucky 41
 Memphis 60, UTSA 53
 Presbyterian 47, SC-Upstate 43
 Radford 81, Charleston Southern 68
 Richmond 90, Duquesne 74
 Troy 102, Appalachian St. 69

MIDWEST
 Ball St. 75, Akron 41
 Buffalo 70, Bowling Green 55
 Butler 73, DePaul 70
 Cent. Michigan 76, Miami (Ohio) 73, 2OT
 Green Bay 70, Fort Wayne 61
 Iowa 108, Minnesota 60
 Iowa St. 82, Kansas St. 76
 Kent St. 76, E. Michigan 64
 Ohio 67, W. Michigan 64
 Ohio St. 67, Michigan 51
 Penn St. 93, Purdue 88
 SMU 88, Wichita St. 84, OT
 Toledo 74, N. Illinois 61

SOUTHWEST
 Oklahoma 71, Texas 70
 Southern Miss. 67, Texas St. 59
 TCU 73, Texas Tech 52

FAR WEST
 Air Force 85, Utah St. 46
 BYU 64, Houston 54
 Colorado St. 54, Nevada 11
 Gonzaga 90, Portland 40
 New Mexico 66, San Diego St. 63
 UNLV 63, Boise St. 57
 Wyoming 88, San Jose St. 73

TENNIS

Dubai Duty Free Championships

Wednesday
At Dubai Tennis Stadium
Dubai, United Arab Emirates
Purse: \$2,855,495
Surface: Hardcourt outdoor
Men's Singles
Round of 16
 Andrey Rublev (2), Russia, def. Arthur Cazaux, France, 6-4, 6-4.
 Alexander Bublik (7), Kazakhstan, def. Tallon Griekspoor, Netherlands, 7-6 (8), 7-6 (2).

Ugo Humbert (5), France, def. Andy Murray, Britain, 6-2, 6-4.
 Jiri Lehecka, Czech Republic, def. Karen Khachanov (4), Russia, 6-7 (6), 7-6 (5), 6-4.
 Sebastian Korda, United States, def. Botik Van de Zandschulp, Netherlands, 6-1, 6-0.
 Daniil Medvedev (1), Russia, def. Lorenzo Sonego, Italy, 3-6, 6-3, 6-3.
 Alejandro Davidovich Fokina (8), Spain, def. Jakub Mensik, Czech Republic, 7-6 (7), 1-0, ret.
 Hubert Hurkacz (3), Poland, def. Christopher O'Connell, Australia, 7-6 (5), 6-4.

DEALS

Wednesday's transactions

BASEBALL
Major League Baseball American League
BALTIMORE ORIOLES — Agreed to terms with RHP Julio Teheran and INF Kolten Wong on minor league contracts.
NEW YORK YANKEES — Claimed INF Jahmai Jones off waivers from Milwaukee. Designated INF Jordan Groshans for assignment.
National League
COLORADO ROCKIES — Claimed OF Sam Hilliard off waivers from Baltimore. Placed RHP Antonio Senzatela on the 60-day IL.
PITTSBURGH PIRATES — Agreed to terms with LF Dustin Peterson on a minor league contract.
SAN DIEGO PADRES — Re-assigned RHPs Yovanny Cruz, Kevin Kopps, Lake Bachar, Moises Lugo, Nolan Watson, Drew Carlton, OFs Tirso Ornelas and Robert Perez Jr., C Chandler Seagle and INF Nate Mondou to the minor league camp. Agreed to terms with OF Tim Locastro on a minor league contract.

BASKETBALL
National Basketball Association
BOSTON CELTICS — Assigned F Jordan Walsh to the Maine Celtics of the G League.
CHARLOTTE HORNETS — Signed F Aleksej Pokusevski.
DETROIT PISTONS — Waived F Mike Muscala.
NEW YORK KNICKS — Assigned F Jacob Toppin to the Westchester Knicks of the G League.
OKLAHOMA CITY THUNDER — Assigned G Lindy Waters III to the Oklahoma City Blue of the G League.

FOOTBALL
National Football League
CINCINNATI BENGALS — Extended exclusive rights tender offers to LS Cal Adomitis and QB Jake Browning for the 2024 season. Officially placed WR Tee Higgins on a franchise tag.
DETROIT LIONS — Declined to tender an offer to exclusive rights for CB Khalil Dorsey making him a free agent.
GREEN BAY PACKERS — Announced mutual agreement with OLB Preston Smith on a contract restructure to create cap space.
KANSAS CITY CHIEFS — Officially placed CB L'Jarius Sneed on a franchise tag. Released WR Marquez Valdes-Scantling.
LOS ANGELES RAMS — Announced that C Coleman Shelton has exercised his player option for free agency.

HOCKEY
National Hockey League
BOSTON BRUINS — Reassigned F Curtis Hall to Maine (ECHL) from Providence (AHL).
COLORADO AVALANCHE — Assigned LW Fredrik Olofsson to Colorado (AHL).
DALLAS STARS — Loaned F Logan Stankov to Texas (AHL).
MINNESOTA WILD — Signed F Marat Khusunudinov to a two-year, entry-level contract.
NEW JERSEY DEVILS — Acquired the fourth-round pick in the 2026 NHL Draft from Dallas for facilitating an existing trade between the Dallas Stars and Calgary Flames for Chris Tanev. To receive the pick, New Jersey traded the rights to unsigned draft choice goaltender Cole Brady to Calgary and have agreed to retain 50% of all future obligations to Tanev's contract for the 2023-24 season.
PHILADELPHIA FLYERS — Waived G Cal Petersen.
PITTSBURGH PENGUINS — Reassigned RW Maxim Cajkovic to Wheeling (ECHL) from Wilkes-Barre/Scranton (AHL).
SAN JOSE SHARKS — Recalled G Magnus Chrona from San Jose (AHL) loan.
VEGAS GOLDEN KNIGHTS — Reassigned D Joe Fleming to Savannah (ECHL) from Henderson (AHL).

PRO SOCCER

MLS

EASTERN CONFERENCE						
	W	L	T	Pts	GF	GA
Inter Miami CF	1	0	1	4	3	1
D.C. United	1	0	0	3	3	1
Charlotte FC	1	0	0	3	1	0
Columbus	1	0	0	3	1	0
Chicago	0	0	1	1	2	2
Philadelphia	0	0	1	1	2	2
CF Montréal	0	0	1	1	0	0
Cincinnati	0	0	1	1	0	0
Nashville	0	0	1	1	0	0
New York	0	0	1	1	0	0
Orlando City	0	0	1	1	0	0
Toronto FC	0	0	1	1	0	0
Atlanta	0	1	0	0	0	1
NYCFC	0	1	0	0	0	1
New England	0	1	0	0	1	3

WESTERN CONFERENCE						
	W	L	T	Pts	GF	GA
Portland	1	0	0	3	4	1
FC Dallas	1	0	0	3	2	1
LAFC	1	0	0	3	2	1
Minnesota	1	0	0	3	2	1
Houston	0	0	1	1	1	1
LA Galaxy	0	0	1	1	1	1
St. Louis City	0	0	1	1	1	1
Sporting KC	0	0	1	1	1	1
Real Salt Lake	0	1	1	1	1	3
Vancouver	0	0	0	0	0	0
Austin FC	0	1	0	0	1	2
San Jose	0	1	0	0	1	2
Seattle	0	1	0	0	1	2
Colorado	0	1	0	0	1	4

Note: Three points for victory, one point for tie.

Wednesday, Feb. 21

Miami 2, Real Salt Lake 0

Saturday, Feb. 24

Columbus 1, Atlanta 0
 Los Angeles FC 2, Seattle 1
 Charlotte FC 1, New York City FC 0
 D.C. United 3, New England 1
 CF Montréal 0, Orlando City 0, tie
 Chicago 2, Philadelphia 2, tie
 Minnesota 2, Austin FC 1
 FC Dallas 2, San Jose 1
 Sporting Kansas City 1, Houston 1, tie
 Real Salt Lake 1, St. Louis City 1, tie
 Portland 4, Colorado 1

Sunday, Feb. 25

Toronto FC 0, Cincinnati 0, tie
 New York 0, Nashville 0, tie
 Miami 1, LA Galaxy 1, tie

Saturday's games

Columbus at Minnesota
 Los Angeles FC at Real Salt Lake
 Orlando City at Miami
 Charlotte FC at Vancouver
 Cincinnati at Chicago
 CF Montréal at FC Dallas
 New York at Houston
 Philadelphia at Sporting Kansas City
 New York City FC at St. Louis City
 Nashville at Colorado
 D.C. United at Portland
 LA Galaxy at San Jose
 Austin FC at Seattle

Sunday's games

Toronto FC at New England

Saturday, March 9

Portland at New York City FC
 Charlotte FC at Toronto FC
 New England at Atlanta
 Chicago at Columbus
 FC Dallas at New York
 Minnesota at Orlando City
 Seattle at Philadelphia
 St. Louis City at Austin FC
 Colorado at Real Salt Lake
 Sporting Kansas City at Los Angeles FC
 Vancouver at San Jose

Sunday, March 10

D.C. United at Cincinnati
 LA Galaxy at Nashville
 CF Montréal at Miami

PRO HOCKEY

PWHL

	GP	W	L	OW	OL	Pts	GF	GA
Montreal	13	5	2	3	3	24	32	29
Minnesota	14	5	4	2	3	22	29	29
Toronto	13	5	5	3	0	21	32	31
Boston	12	4	4	2	2	18	28	30
Ottawa	13	4	5	0	4	16	32	34
New York	13	2	5	4	2	16	30	30

Teams awarded three (3) points for a regulation win, two (2) points for an overtime or shootout win, one (1) point for an overtime or shootout loss, and zero (0) points for a regulation time loss.

Tuesday's game
 Toronto 4, Minnesota 3, OT

Wednesday's game
 Ottawa 2, New York 2

Saturday's games
 Toronto at Ottawa
 Boston at Montreal

Sunday's game
 Minnesota at New York



JERRY HOLT, STAR TRIBUNE/AP

The Minnesota Twins' Byron Buxton is back in center field for the first time in 554 days. He's healthy after two knee surgeries.

Twins' Buxton glad to be back in field

Associated Press

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Byron Buxton patrolled center field for the Minnesota Twins for the first time in 554 days.

Healthy after two consecutive seasons ended with knee surgeries, the 2022 All-Star made his spring training debut at-bat and, most importantly, in the field as the Twins tied the Philadelphia Phillies 3-3 Tuesday.

Aside from a seven-inning appearance with Triple-A St. Paul on a rehabilitation assignment last summer, Buxton hadn't played center field since injuring himself while diving for a ball on Aug. 22, 2022.

The 2017 Rawlings Platinum Glove winner — given to the best overall defender in each league — appeared in 85 games for the Twins in 2023, but only as a designated hitter because his right knee wasn't healthy.

He didn't make a catch on Tuesday, only fielding two balls hit in his direction, but that wasn't the point.

"Great to see him flying around the field. He's looked good all spring," Twins manager Rocco Baldelli said. "He looks strong and he looks explosive right now. Good day for him and a good day for all of us."

The 30-year-old Buxton has not appeared in 100 games since 2017, when he played in 140 games. The second overall pick in the 2012 amateur draft made his major league debut in 2015 and has not made it through a full season without landing on the injured list.

His body feeling good for the first time in two years, there's been plenty of fun experienced by Buxton early in camp. After batting .207 with 17 home runs, 42 RBIs and a .731 OPS in 304 plate appearances last season, Buxton said he's 100 percent healthy after doctors removed the plica tissue

last October, eliminating the pain he likened to a knife stabbing his kneecap.

Whether dominating teammates during wind sprints, taking live batting practice, shagging fly balls or simply participating in a normal schedule, Buxton has spent the first week-plus of spring training showing off this good health at every turn.

Though he originally expected to feel anxious about playing in the outfield, Buxton said he was nerve-free. The Phillies hit a pair of line drives directly at Twins outfielders in the first inning, one to each side of Buxton. He didn't receive his first chance at a ball until Rodolfo Castro singled with two outs in the third inning. Trea Turner followed with an opposite-field double to right-center that Buxton raced down and quickly fired back in, a ball he might have laid out for during the regular season.

"I have a chance at all of them," said Buxton, who went 0-for-2 at the plate. "I'm not going to dive in spring training. But yeah, that was fun."

Buxton will receive two days off from game action until the Twins return home to Hammond Stadium on Friday, Baldelli said. From there, Buxton is expected to play on a normal schedule.

The Twins acquired outfielder Manuel Margot on Monday from the Los Angeles Dodgers for another right-handed hitter and added flexibility, including a trusted backup for Buxton in center field should he need a rest or encounter more trouble.

For now, Buxton is just taking his spring training one day at a time.

"I just want to go with the flow," Buxton said. "If I'm in, I'm happy. If I'm not, I'm on the back fields hitting. I'll still be able to get my work in either way."

MLB

SPRING TRAINING ROUNDUP

Harper settling in as Phillies' first baseman

By **STEPHEN HAWKINS**
Associated Press

Yamamoto makes debut

Bryce Harper is getting settled in as full-time first baseman for the Philadelphia Phillies.

Harper hit a hard single in his first spring training at-bat Wednesday, but the two-time NL MVP also flashed some leather at first base in a 7-7 tie against Atlanta. He made a diving catch on Jarred Kelenic's grounder in the first inning, and started a nifty 3-6-3 on a 105.3 mph grounder by Kelenic in the third.

"Both of them were real good," Phillies manager Rob Thomson said. "He looks very comfortable and he's improving every day."

Harper had Tommy John surgery in November 2022 and made his season debut last May 2 as a designated hitter. An outfielder the previous 11 seasons, his return to the field July 21 was at first base, where he started 36 times in the regular season and 13 in the playoffs.

"The sky's the limit for me because he's athletic," Thomson said. "He's calm, poised. A lot of a lot of good things can happen."

Former Phillies first baseman Rhys Hoskins tore his left ACL in a spring training game last March and signed with the Milwaukee Brewers after the season.

Before Japanese sensation Yoshinobu Yamamoto threw the first pitch in an impressive spring training debut for the Dodgers against World Series champion Texas, Los Angeles third baseman Max Muncy got hit by a pitch on his left hand in the top of the first inning.

Manager Dave Roberts said the ball hit Muncy on the knuckle of his ring finger and that the veteran was getting tests.

"I'm hopeful that it's not going to be too serious," Roberts said.

After getting hit by left-hander Cody Bradford, Muncy stayed in the game to play defense, and was replaced in the fourth inning by Austin Gauthier before his second at-bat. A mainstay in the middle of the Dodgers order the past six seasons, Muncy hit 36 homers and had 105 RBIs last year.

Yamamoto struck out three batters over two scoreless innings.

Counsell vs. Brewers

There was a mix of cheers and boos when new Chicago Cubs manager Craig Counsell returned to his old spring training home for the first time.

The Cubs won 6-1 on the road Wednesday against the Milwaukee Brewers, the NL Central rival



CHARLIE NEIBERGALL/AP

Philadelphia Phillies first baseman Bryce Harper fields the ball during the second inning of a spring training game against the Atlanta Braves on Wednesday in Clearwater, Fla. Harper played five innings at first base.

Counsell managed the past nine seasons.

"It's weird seeing him in those colors, but that's what reality is right now," said new Brewers manager Pat Murphy, who was on Counsell's staff the past eight years.

Brewers shortstop Willy Adames went across the field to hug Counsell before the game.

Budget-conscious Milwaukee won three NL Central titles and made five playoff appearances the past six years before Counsell's contract expired. The Cubs lured him away with a five-year contract worth more than \$40 million that made him the highest-paid manager in the majors.

Sonny opener

Sonny Gray will be the first Cardinals pitcher since Kyle Lohse in 2008 to make his debut for the Cardinals with a start on opening day.

"I don't take that lightly at all," said Gray, the veteran right-hander who signed a \$75 million, three-year deal in November. "I appreciate the opportunity and what that shows."

Gray finished second in the AL Cy Young Award voting last season, when he was 8-8 with a 2.79 ERA in 32 starts for Minnesota. The Cardinals also added former All-Stars Kyle Gibson and Lance Lynn to their rotation in free agency.

St. Louis, coming off its first losing season since 2007, opens March 28 on the road against Shohei Ohtani and the Dodgers.

Top pick Skenes debuts

Pittsburgh pitching prospect Paul Skenes, the top pick in last year's amateur draft, was set to make his spring training debut Thursday when the Pirates faced

Baltimore and Jackson Holliday, the No. 1 selection last summer.

The 21-year-old Skenes had a 5.40 ERA with 10 strikeouts and two walks in 6⅓ innings in limited action in the minors after signing a record \$9.2 million bonus to join Pittsburgh.

While the Pirates have a couple of open spots in their starting rotation, it's likely the hard-throwing Skenes will begin his first full season as a professional in the minors. He was 12-2 with a 1.69 ERA and 209 strikeouts in 122⅓ innings last spring while playing for national champion LSU.

Bullpen problem

The Cleveland Guardians are shutting down reliever Trevor Stephan for three weeks with a deep bruise in his right elbow. Stephan, who appeared in 71 games last season, experienced soreness during a recent training session in Goodyear, Ariz. An MRI revealed the bruising.

Manager Stephen Vogt said Stephan has no structural or ligament issues.

The 28-year-old Stephan went 7-7 with a 4.06 ERA last season.

TJ again for Thompson

Nationals right-hander Mason Thompson will undergo Tommy John surgery for the second time.

Thompson first had the ligament replacement surgery when he was in high school. Now 26 and coming off 51 appearances for the Nationals last season, he felt a pop in his elbow at the start of spring training two weeks ago.

Manager Dave Martinez said Thompson will have the surgery Friday.

Giants injuries

Giants right-hander Tristan Beck returned to San Francisco to

see doctors after dealing with lingering soreness in his right hand.

"He's kind of been pitching through it a bit," San Francisco manager Bob Melvin said. "It just got to a point where we want to find out exactly what it is."

Beck made his big league debut last season by going 3-3 with a 3.92 ERA in 33 games for the Giants.

While he started only three of those games, he is expected to be part of their rotation this year.

Meanwhile, Giants outfielder Mike Yastrzemski made his spring debut Wednesday going 0-for-2 with a walk in their 7-4 loss to Oakland. There are no restrictions at the plate even though he is still building up his throwing from a left shoulder issue that developed during offseason workouts.

Some claims and moves

■ The Yankees claimed infielder Jahmai Jones off waivers from the Brewers. Infielder Jordan Groshans was designated for assignment to make room on New York's 40-man roster.

■ Sam Hilliard is back with Colorado after being claimed off waivers from Baltimore. The Rockies cleared a spot on their 40-man roster by putting right-hander Antonio Senzatela on the 60-day injured list.

Hilliard played 214 games with the Rockies from 2019-22 before getting traded to Atlanta. He played 40 games with the Braves last season before Baltimore claimed him off waivers in November.

■ San Diego agreed to a minor league contract with 31-year-old outfielder Tim Locastro, who hit .232 with two homers and three RBIs and six stolen bases in 43 games and 67 plate appearances with the New York Mets last year.



LINDSEY WASSON/AP

Los Angeles Dodgers starting pitcher Yoshinobu Yamamoto throws against the Texas Rangers on Wednesday in Surprise, Ariz.

AUTO RACING

'Business as normal' as F1 gets started

Probe into Red Bull boss has overshadowed new season; dominant Verstappen aims for 4th straight title

By JAMES ELLINGWORTH
Associated Press

An investigation into the boss of Formula 1's champion team had overshadowed the start of the new season for more than three weeks since Red Bull confirmed it was looking into alleged misconduct toward a team employee by team principal Christian Horner.

Red Bull announced on Wednesday that its internal investigation cleared Horner of the charges, and he will remain in charge of the F1 team.

Senior F1 figures such as Mercedes team principal Toto Wolff and McLaren counterpart Zak Brown called for the investigation — conducted by an external lawyer — to be handled transparently.

The details of the allegations have not been made public but the investigation had been the major talking point in the run-up to this weekend's season-opening race in Bahrain. The Red Bull announcement came shortly after the team drivers had finished their regular pre-race media availability and less than 24 hours before the first practice session.

"The independent investigation into the allegations made against Mr. Horner is complete, and Red Bull can confirm that the grievance has been dismissed. The complainant has a right of appeal. Red Bull is confident that the investigation has been fair, rigorous and impartial," the Red Bull par-



DARKO BANDIC/AP

Red Bull team principal Christian Horner, left, and Red Bull driver Max Verstappen of the Netherlands dominated F1 last year with Verstappen winning 19 races en route to a third straight series title.

ent company said in a statement.

Red Bull won all but one race last season, and its driver Max Verstappen is the three-time defending champion.

Horner had remained in his post during the investigation as part of what he called a "business as normal" approach, and was in charge of the team for preseason tests last week, even as he admitted the investigation was a distraction. He had denied wrongdoing.

"For everyone, it's nice, of course, when things are resolved," Verstappen said last week at testing.

On the track, Red Bull again seems to be the team to beat after a season in which Verstappen and Sergio Perez won all but one race. Verstappen, who finished with a record 19 wins, said the investigation has not been a distraction. While most teams seem to have used the 2023 Red Bull as inspiration for their new cars, Red Bull has evolved, using a slim sidepod design that Mercedes previously tried with little success.

Red Bull was strong throughout the three days of testing, though Ferrari drivers Carlos Sainz Jr. and Charles Leclerc posted the

fastest times on the second and third days.

Practice in Bahrain was widely seen as a continuation of last week's preseason testing at the same track as teams tried out set-ups and strategies. The daytime conditions were not representative of qualifying and the race, which will be held in the evenings.

Hamilton's switch

Seven-time champion Lewis Hamilton is going into his last season with Mercedes ahead of joining Ferrari next year.

For the 39-year-old Hamilton, there's the hope that Ferrari will allow him to fight for an eighth title after Mercedes was uncompetitive in the last two years. It's also making a childhood dream come true. At testing in Bahrain, Hamilton reminisced about driving Michael Schumacher's Ferrari in a video game as a child.

"We've had an absolutely incredible journey together, we've created history within the sport, and I'm very proud of what we've achieved," Hamilton said of his time with Mercedes. "I'm writing my story and I felt like it was time to start a new chapter."

The sudden announcement shook up F1 and leaves some leading drivers unsure of their places for next year. Sainz was expecting a contract extension at Ferrari but is making way for Hamilton to partner Leclerc.

The open seat at Mercedes has fueled speculation about drivers ranging from 41-year-old two-time champion Fernando Alonso, still at Aston Martin, to the 17-year-old Mercedes junior driver Kimi Antonelli, who is making his Formula 2 debut this week.

Andretti's fight

Michael Andretti and General Motors are still developing a car for F1 but they don't have a spot on the grid yet.

The governing body, the FIA, has approved Andretti's application to become the 11th team but F1 rejected the proposed U.S. team for 2025 and 2026, arguing it would not be competitive — something Andretti and GM dispute.

In GM and its Cadillac brand, Andretti has the backing of one of the world's leading auto manufacturers, and GM has applied to be an F1 engine supplier from 2028. "Our joint teams are continuing to develop our car at pace," GM Racing director Jim Campbell said this month.

The series' existing American team, Haas, looks to be headed for a difficult season, its first since Guenther Steiner — a star of the "Drive To Survive" series on Netflix — was dropped as team principal last month. Haas drivers Kevin Magnussen and Nico Hulkenberg were consistently among the slowest over the three days of testing.

American Sargeant heads into 2nd season stronger

By JENNA FRYER
Associated Press

Even before Logan Sargeant finished his rookie Formula 1 season, a set of expectations were given to the American on what he needed to do to keep his ride at Williams.

It still took until December for Williams to confirm Sargeant would get a second season. He was the last driver finalized for this year's 20-car grid.

But he enters the new season — it starts this weekend in Bahrain — already ahead of schedule.

"First and foremost, I've asked him to surprise the world in terms of his physical fitness, his approach and his performance," Williams team principal James Vowles said. "We've changed quite a bit with him across the winter period, his trainer is different, his training programs are completely different. You should see he's a much more confident person and he carries that well."

Sargeant delivered on Vowles' ask by adding a little more than 11 pounds to his frame during the offseason — muscle that should help the Floridian with car handling a year after he was consistently outperformed by teammate Alex Albon.

Sargeant scored just one point all of last year and it didn't come until the U.S. Grand Prix, five races before the end of the season.



DARKO BANDIC/AP

American driver Logan Sargeant is back with Williams for a second year after an offseason spent focusing on his training.

Albon, meanwhile, scored 27 points across the season and was ranked 13th in the final driver standings.

"I wasn't physically in the place I need to be and I've done everything I can to get on top of that. For example, I'm five kilos heavier than I was at the end of last year, and I feel much more healthy and much more ready to go," Sargeant said. "I feel like a different man, I feel like physically I am in the best shape I've ever been. And I believe in

the condition I'm in now, and will continue to get to, will be simply just helping me feel more comfortable in the car and extract performance."

Sargeant is the first American to race in F1 since Alexander Rossi in 2015 and his underwhelming rookie season did little to build a fanbase in the lucrative United States market that hosted a series-high three races last year.

But Williams last year had a car that was difficult to drive and both he and Albon were forced to adapt. Albon believes this year's FW46 will be easier for Sargeant to handle.

"Logan will have that experience now into this year, I don't think it'll be so much of a learning curve for him," Albon said. "I personally believe that the car's going to be a bit easier to drive. Our car was very unique. I spent two years refining a very strange driving style, which for someone coming into the car for the first time, without any prior F1 experience, is difficult.

"It was very easy to overdrive the car. I think naturally the car's going to go towards him as in a bit less on a knife edge and more usable," Albon continued. "So I think what you're going to see is a guy with a lot more experience and a car that should be more usable and that will in itself bring performance."

"We should have a car that is more suiting to both drivers," Vowles said. "I'm hoping that we've got rid of some of these really nasty effects from last year, but that will also make a platform for him where he should be able to grow much quicker than he did in 2023."

Vowles has also tried to relieve some of the pressure on Sargeant by telling him to follow the same guidelines that helped him earn a second season with Williams.

"What I've asked him to do is to approach the first few days of driving the car with caution again, the same way he did at the end of last year, build up into it and don't try and rush into success," Vowles said. "That's the confidence I placed in him. That's why he's back in the car. I need him now to not go back to his old ways of trying to extract too much from himself and from the car too quickly, but rather approach things progressively."

Sargeant goes into this year much more confident after a season that he admitted took a physical toll on him. He needed the extra work as F1 prepares for a record 24 races this year.

"The offseason has been such a good opportunity for me to take a step back and look at myself from mental, emotional and physical standpoint where I need to improve, where I need to get better," Sargeant said.

NHL

Detroit starting to see GM's plan come to fruition

BY LARRY LAGE
Associated Press

DETROIT — Steve Yzerman's patient plan to turn around the Detroit Red Wings looks like it may be paying off.

The rolling Red Wings routed the Washington Capitals 8-3 on Tuesday night, winning six straight games for the first time in nearly five years with their first eight-goal game since 2017.

"We've got some work to do in some areas, but it's very encouraging," Yzerman said in an interview with The Associated Press after his team's latest win. "We're getting stronger as the season goes on."

Yzerman returned to Detroit as general manager in April 2019 — three years after its last playoff game — to take on the tall task of fixing a franchise that had fallen on hard times after being one of the league's best for two-plus decades.

The Hockey Hall of Famer spent his entire NHL career in the Motor City, where he's a favorite athlete, and the fan base kept its faith in him even as the postseason drought lingered under his leadership.

The Red Wings seem to have their groove back and are moving toward their first playoff appearance since 2016.

"They're as good as any team in the National Hockey League," Capitals coach Spencer Carbery said.

Lately, that's been a fact.

Going into Thursday, Detroit had the longest active winning streak in the Eastern Conference — matched by only Nashville in the league — and leads the wild-card standings. The Red Wings are also closing in on Toronto for the Atlantic Division's third guaranteed spot in the playoffs.

Washington and the New York Islanders, who played at Little Caesars Arena on Thursday night, are among the teams chasing the Red Wings for a wild card.

If the Red Wings beat New York, it would be their first seven-game winning streak since January 2012.

"These four-point games are new for us," Detroit coach Derek Lalonde said. "This late in the season, there's a little extra urgency to them."

"But that team that's chasing, they're literally playing for their season. You saw that in New York (Monday) night, winning in Dallas, something not many people can do. We'll have (the Islanders') best again on Thursday."

The franchise's fans, which included Lions defensive end Aidan



DUANE BURLESON/AP

Detroit Red Wings right wing Patrick Kane moves the puck up the ice against the Washington Capitals on Tuesday in Detroit. The Red Wings had won six straight going into their Thursday matchup with the Islanders.

Hutchinson against Washington, are clearly fired up about the team's chances to make the playoffs. The seven-year postseason drought is Detroit's longest since the 1970s.

Lalonde is hoping Lions coach Dan Campbell is the next to make an appearance.

"I got the bat signal out," Lalonde said. "I know he's in the combine right now. Obviously I would love for him to come and address the boys."

The Red Wings are led offensively by Alex DeBrincat, Dylan Larkin and Lucas Raymond. They're getting plenty of scoring support from the likes of veteran Patrick Kane, who was signed in November, and defenseman

Shayne Gostisbehere, who scored twice against the Capitals.

"We've got a pretty balanced attack with offensive contributions from all four lines, and defense," Yzerman told the AP.

Detroit unleashed its offense throughout the night against the Capitals as seven of its players had at least one point in a game for the first time in eight years.

"Right from the start, you could see the talent through their lineup and through their roster and the plays they make," Carbery said. "With the finish they had, it was on full display."

Yzerman refused to spend big money in free agency, or via trades, until the team was good enough to compete and he decided the time to

make moves was last summer.

Alex Lyon, a career backup, was signed to add depth, and he has emerged as the No. 1 goaltender with a four-game winning streak of his own to improve his record to 18-8-2 this season.

Lyon finished with 18 saves for the Red Wings, whose last six-game run was from March 23 to April 2 of 2019, to help hold off wild-card contenders for at least another night.

"All these games matter, but especially against teams that are right behind us," center Joe Veleno said. "That kind of gives us an extra chip on our shoulders when they come in here to play. It definitely feels a lot better to be in these positions."

Stars acquire defenseman Tanev in trade with Flames

BY STEPHEN WHYNO
Associated Press

The Dallas Stars acquired defenseman Chris Tanev from the Calgary Flames on Wednesday night, the latest addition by a Stanley Cup contender in the Western Conference ahead of the March 8 NHL trade deadline.

Dallas sent a 2024 second-round pick, 20-year-old defense prospect Artem Grushnikov and a 2026 conditional third-rounder to Calgary for Tanev, who was considered one of the top trade candidates available. The Flames are retaining half and New Jersey another quarter of Tanev's \$4.5 million salary as part of the deal, which also includes the Stars flipping a '26 fourth-round pick to the Devils for unsigned goaltending prospect Cole Brady.

"We are fortunate to have the opportunity to add a player of Chris' caliber to our team," Stars general manager Jim Nill said. "He is a proven defenseman with postseason experience that is



ROSS D. FRANKLIN/AP

Chris Tanev is expected to add depth to a Stars defensive corps that's headlined by Miro Heiskanen and also includes veteran Ryan Suter.

comfortable in all situations on the ice. Chris is one of the best penalty killers in the NHL and will be a tremendous asset to our special teams play."

Tanev, 34, gives the Stars some much-needed depth not only on the penalty kill, but defensively 5-on-5 to try to get through the gauntlet that is the playoffs in the West.

The league-leading Vancouver Canucks already got the top center available by trading with Calgary for Elias Lindholm, and the Winnipeg Jets, tied with Dallas atop the Central Division, followed suit by acquiring Sean Monahan from Montreal.

The Stars, who lost to eventual champion Vegas in the Western finals last season, are adding the 6-foot-2, 193-pound Tanev to a blue line that's headlined by Miro Heiskanen and also includes veteran Ryan Suter and defensive stalwarts Esa Lindell and Jani Hakanpaa.

Tanev, in the final season of a four-year, \$18 million contract, is averaging nearly 20 minutes of ice time this season and has a goal and 13 assists in 56 games.

Calgary might not be done dealing, either. First-year general manager Craig Conroy has another pending free agent defenseman in Noah Hanifin and could likely fetch a significant return for goaltender Jacob Markstrom, signed

through 2026, if he chooses to trade him.

Grushnikov was a second-round pick of the Stars in the 2021 draft. The Voskresensk, Russia, native has played nearly 50 games in the American Hockey League since moving up from junior hockey.

"Artem is a player our organization has identified, for some time now, as being a strong addition to our prospects pool," Conroy said. "We are excited to acquire a player with Artem's qualities and look forward to his contributions to the Flames' success for a long time. We have also been able to secure another second-round draft pick in 2024 and the potential for a third-round selection in 2026."

The condition on the 2026 third-round pick is Dallas reaching the Cup Final this year. If the Stars do not win three rounds, no pick is transferred.

Brady, 23, has appeared in nine college games this season with UMass. He was a fifth-round pick of the Devils in 2019.

NHL

Scoreboard

Eastern Conference

Atlantic Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Florida	59	39	16	4	82	194	142
Boston	60	34	12	14	82	202	165
Toronto	58	33	17	8	74	216	185
Detroit	59	33	20	6	72	213	186
Tampa Bay	61	32	24	5	69	208	207
Buffalo	59	27	28	4	58	171	178
Montreal	59	23	28	8	54	167	211
Ottawa	57	25	29	3	53	190	203

Metropolitan Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
N.Y. Rangers	60	40	17	3	83	201	164
Carolina	59	35	18	6	76	194	165
Philadelphia	60	31	22	7	69	183	177
New Jersey	59	30	25	4	64	198	205
Washington	58	27	22	9	63	153	186
Pittsburgh	56	27	21	8	62	170	154
N.Y. Islanders	58	24	20	14	62	170	197
Columbus	58	19	29	10	48	171	214

Western Conference

Central Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Winnipeg	57	37	15	5	79	176	135
Dallas	61	35	17	9	79	218	187
Colorado	60	36	19	5	77	221	189
Nashville	60	33	25	2	68	188	188
St. Louis	59	30	26	3	63	171	185
Minnesota	59	28	25	6	62	188	196
Arizona	58	23	30	5	51	168	192
Chicago	59	15	39	5	35	123	208

Pacific Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Vancouver	61	38	16	7	83	221	170
Vegas	59	33	19	7	73	192	167
Edmonton	57	35	20	2	72	204	170
Los Angeles	58	29	19	10	68	178	160
Calgary	59	29	25	5	63	185	184
Seattle	58	25	22	11	61	163	169
Anaheim	58	20	35	3	43	151	207
San Jose	57	15	37	5	35	120	222

Note: Two points for a win, one point for overtime loss. Top three teams in each division and two wild cards per conference advance to playoffs.

Wednesday's games

N.Y. Rangers 4, Columbus 1
Edmonton 3, St. Louis 2, OT

Thursday's games

Arizona at Toronto
Buffalo at Tampa Bay
Carolina at Columbus
Montreal at Florida
N.Y. Islanders at Detroit
Vegas at Boston
Minnesota at Nashville
Winnipeg at Dallas
Colorado at Chicago
Los Angeles at Vancouver
Pittsburgh at Seattle
Anaheim at San Jose

Friday's games

Arizona at Ottawa
Philadelphia at Washington
New Jersey at Anaheim

Saturday's games

Winnipeg at Carolina
Florida at Detroit
Edmonton at Seattle
Colorado at Nashville
Minnesota at St. Louis
Montreal at Tampa Bay
N.Y. Rangers at Toronto
Ottawa at Philadelphia
Vegas at Buffalo
Boston at N.Y. Islanders
Columbus at Chicago
San Jose at Dallas
Pittsburgh at Calgary

Sunday's games

Arizona at Washington
New Jersey at Los Angeles
Winnipeg at Buffalo
San Jose at Minnesota
Vancouver at Anaheim
Pittsburgh at Edmonton

Scoring leaders

Through Wednesday

	GP	G	A	PTS
Nikita Kucherov, TB	60	38	65	103
Nathan MacKinnon, COL	60	35	63	98
Connor McDavid, EDM	55	22	72	94
David Pastrnak, BOS	60	38	47	85
Artemi Panarin, NYR	60	35	47	82
J.T. Miller, VAN	61	30	51	81
William Nylander, TOR	58	31	48	79
Auston Matthews, TOR	57	52	25	77
Mikko Rantanen, COL	60	31	45	76
Elias Pettersson, VAN	61	29	46	75

Fighting down but not going anywhere

League has seen a drop 20 years since record-setting brawl

BY STEPHEN WHYNO
Associated Press

Minnesota's Marcus Foligno took a hit, delivered one of his own to Chicago's Jarred Tinordi, and the two big guys dropped the gloves. Outdoors in front of 82,000 people in the Meadowlands, it took even less for Matt Rempe and Matt Martin to spice up the Rangers-Islanders showdown with a fight.

When Morgan Rielly cross-checked Ridly Greig for firing a slap shot into an empty net? Some pushing and shoving. Nothing more.

"How there wasn't a brawl there, I don't know how everyone didn't start fighting," wondered Todd Simpson, a 50-year-old retired player who piled up more than 1,300 penalty minutes in 580 NHL games. "That should've been a big fight."

All of these situations were over the past month alone, riveting reminders that fighting is alive and well in the NHL even if it is diminished in many ways. It has been 20 years since Simpson and his Ottawa teammates got into a fight fest at Philadelphia, a game that still holds the NHL record with an astounding 419 penalty minutes. Of 40 players who suited up, 23 got at least two minutes of penalty time. Many got far more.

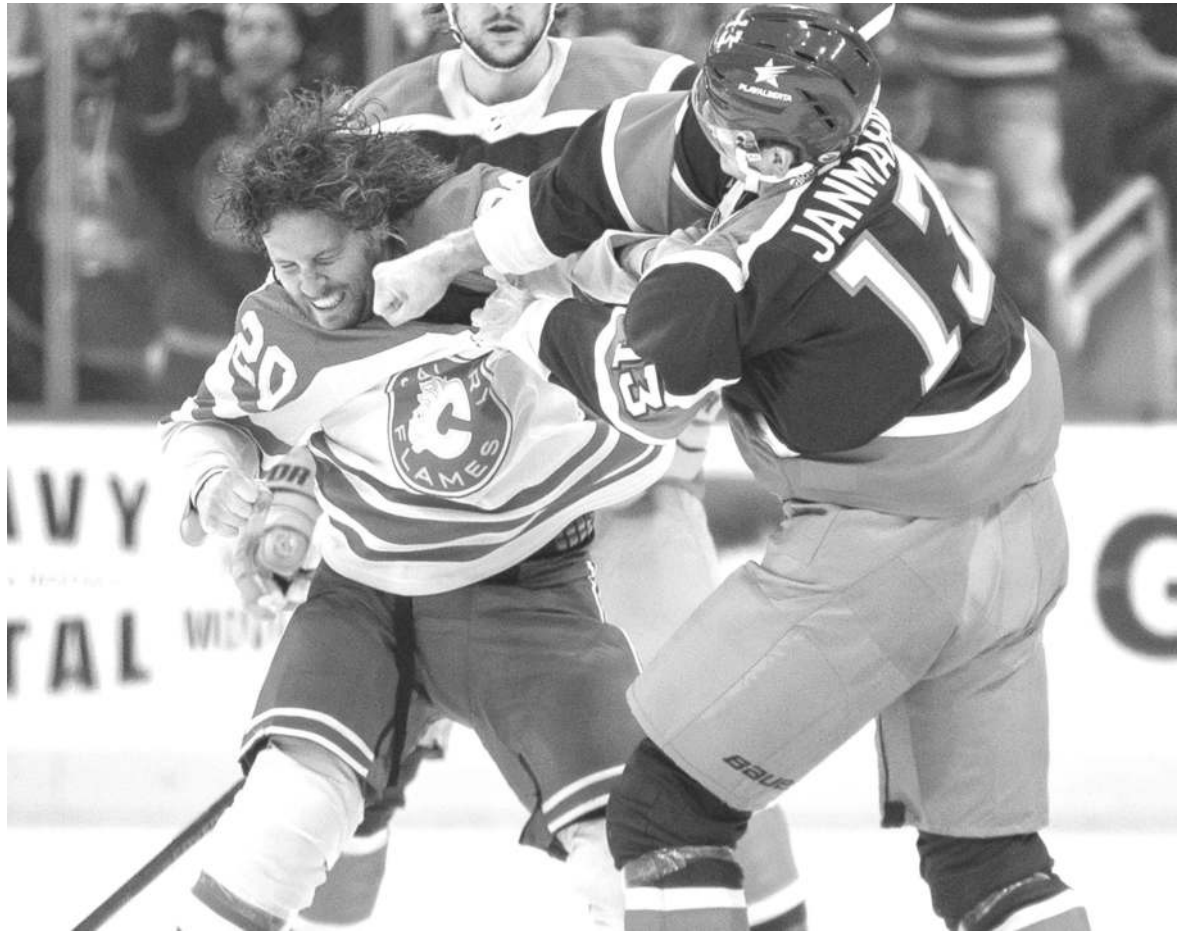
Those kinds of massive clashes are long gone, faded like the cheap shots and blood in "Slap Shot." Like the beloved movie, however, fighting is warmly remembered, even desired, by many fans of the game and cheering on the brawls remains common. Those fans need not worry: Even in the NHL, which has fewer and fewer spots for goons these days, fighting is rare but certainly not gone, with a fight coming roughly every four or five games across the league.

Many see a permanent place for it in a sport that values standing up for teammates, even as they have watched some of the biggest fighters left shells of themselves by repeated blows to the head.

"It doesn't happen often, but you still have to have it," said Vancouver Canucks coach Rick Tocchet, whose 237 career fights rank 21st all-time. "When I played, you could really use as intimidation. You can still use it a little bit today, but not as much. The staged fighting and all that stuff, that doesn't work anymore. But there is a time and place for it."

Fighting on the wane

The NHL does not publicly list



JASON FRANSON, THE CANADIAN PRESS/AP

The Calgary Flames' Blake Coleman and the Edmonton Oilers' Mattias Janmark fight during the second period Feb. 24 in Edmonton, Alberta. Instances of NHL fighting are down about 200% from 20 years ago.

penalties by type, including fighting and other major infractions. According to HockeyFights.com, there have been 219 fights this season through Monday with 63 more projected before the playoffs begin for a total of 282, which would be a sharp drop from the 789 in 2003-04. That is a 200% decrease over 20 years and significantly down from 645 as recently as 2010-11.

Rule changes are part of the reason. The institution of the salary cap in 2005 made it more difficult for a team to pay a player whose skills were limited to throwing punches and protecting stars. In 2013, it became illegal to take a helmet off to fight and mandatory visors were grandfathered in.

"It's obviously evolved a lot where guys like myself back in the day no longer exist — one-dimensional fighters no longer exist," said Riley Cote, who fought 50 times in 156 games with Philadelphia from 2007-10 and countless other times in the minor leagues. "It's been a natural progression. ... I'm not sure at the NHL level they'll ever fully phase it out, but they're doing a pretty good job of trying."

No one expects a fighting ban, like the ejection and suspension policies that exist in college and internationally. NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman has said the fighting helps keep tensions from boiling over.

"Fighting, in the spontaneous sense, tends to act as a bit of a ther-

mostat when things happen in the course of the game," Bettman said in 2013. Discussing a fight between Jarome Iginla and Vincent Lecavalier, Bettman said, "I'd rather them be punching each other than swinging sticks at each other."

Will fighting survive?

A 2011 survey by the NHL Players' Association and CBC found that 98% of players at the time didn't support the complete elimination of fighting. A vast majority of those players are now out of the league, replaced by a generation that has made hockey faster and more skilled than ever — but still willing to drop the gloves on occasion and wanting that option.

"It always needs to be in the game," said St. Louis Blues captain Brayden Schenn, who has fought twice this season but never more than four times a year as a professional. "You need guys to police it themselves, and if you're going to run around and make a big hit, you've got to know that sometimes you're going to have to deal with the consequences."

That is certainly the opinion of Steve Oleksy, who HockeyFights.com credits with 107 bouts at various levels, including the NHL. He is 38 and retired and, after at least a couple of concussions and other wear and tear, is sometimes irritated in noisy places. Long drives and playing recreational sports are hard on his hands, which delivered hundreds

of punches over the years. He believes fighting will be virtually extinct a decade from now.

"I think it declines exponentially, but I also think the definition of a fight has changed so much," Oleksy said. "The number of actual punches, actual fights — what we would deem a fight back in the day — I just don't think that's there, either. And I think with that comes the rise in incidents like the cross-checking incident, slashing, two-handers, things like that."

Fighting's legacy

Like many sports, hockey is facing the fallout from decades of its players suffering concussions and other traumatic brain injuries when safety wasn't the top priority it is now.

Patrick Sharp, who fought a handful of times as a player and is now in the Flyers' front office, said he cringes when he sees a player's helmet come off taking a heavy punch or banging their head on the ice. It's what happened to George Parros during a fight in 2013 that left him unconscious after falling face first.

The deaths of old-school enforcers like Derek Boogaard and Bob Probert, who were posthumously found to have chronic traumatic encephalopathy, or CTE, has changed some minds when it comes to glorifying fighting the way it used to be. Oleksy contends that heavyweights of that vintage are no longer in the game and the risk of serious injury is much less now.

NFL/NBA

NFL SCOUTING COMBINE

Sweat tops list of huge linemen

BY MICHAEL MAROT
Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — Defensive tackle T’Vondre Sweat might have been the biggest guy on Texas’ campus the past five seasons.

It may be a fitting title for the NFL next season, too.

After extra medical checks caused a nearly four-hour delay in his scheduled appearance at the league’s annual scouting combine, the 6-foot-4, 365-pound former Texas star brushed aside any lingering concerns, stood at the podium and made sure it was worth the wait.

“I’m just a big guy,” he said. “You know, a lot of people get scared of the numbers and all that, but when y’all see me move tomorrow, I feel like a lot of people are going to be like, worried about his numbers? You know what I mean?”

Sweat certainly cut an imposing figure for the Longhorns, but he doesn’t look like any other defensive prospect at the combine.

Byron Murphy II, who played next to Sweat the past three seasons and has been projected to be the first defensive tackle taken in April’s draft, wore a fitted shirt that showed off his muscular 6-1, 308-pound frame.

The biggest threat to the Texas tandem being first off the board, could be Johnny Newton, who played last season at 6-2, 295. His college teammate at Illinois, Keith Randolph Jr., also is at the combine after producing another solid season, at 6-5, 300.

Yes, all are big men — just not as much as when they’re in the presence of Sweat.

But for Sweat, this is about more than size.

Late last year, he won the 2023 Outland Trophy and the Big 12 Defensive Player of the Year award. He was a unanimous All-American and struck the Heisman pose after catching a 2-yard TD pass in the Big 12 championship game. He won a conference title, played a big part in Texas’ first appearance in the four-team College Football Playoff and then headed to Mobile, Ala., where he participated in and met with team executives at the Senior Bowl.

He also has something to prove — even in his extra-large body, he’s nimble enough to be an NFL game-wrecker.

Murphy, Newton and Randolph face other questions.

Newton won’t work out in Indy after undergoing foot surgery in January for a partial fracture though it didn’t impact his performance last season. Scouts should have another chance to see the reigning Big Ten Defensive Player of the Year work out, though.

At the moment, Randolph is the lowest rated of the big four. Draft analysts question whether he’s big enough or quick enough to become an NFL starter. Then again, he didn’t really begin playing football until he was a junior in high school.

Murphy, on the other hand, attended the same Texas high school (DeSoto) as Von Miller and has drawn comparisons to three-time AP NFL Defensive Player of the Year Aaron Donald.

Those making the comparisons expect Murphy to make a seamless transition from college to the pros and make an immediate impact. His projection: top 10, maybe higher.



ERIC GAY/AP

At 6-foot-4 and 365 pounds Texas’ T’Vondre Sweat is the largest of the defensive line prospects at the NFL scouting combine.

NBA scoreboard

Eastern Conference

Atlantic Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Boston	46	12	.793	—
New York	35	24	.593	11½
Philadelphia	33	25	.569	13
Brooklyn	22	36	.379	24
Toronto	22	37	.373	24½

Southeast Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Miami	33	25	.569	—
Orlando	33	26	.559	½
Atlanta	26	32	.448	7
Charlotte	15	43	.259	18
Washington	9	49	.155	24

Central Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Cleveland	38	20	.655	—
Milwaukee	38	21	.644	½
Indiana	34	26	.567	5
Chicago	28	31	.475	10½
Detroit	9	49	.155	29

Western Conference

Southwest Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
New Orleans	35	25	.583	—
Dallas	34	25	.576	½
Houston	25	33	.431	9
Memphis	20	39	.339	14½
San Antonio	11	48	.186	23½

Northwest Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Minnesota	42	17	.712	—
Oklahoma City	41	17	.707	½
Denver	40	19	.678	2
Utah	27	32	.458	15
Portland	15	42	.263	26

Pacific Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
L.A. Clippers	37	20	.649	—
Phoenix	34	24	.586	3½
Sacramento	33	25	.569	4½
L.A. Lakers	32	28	.533	6½
Golden State	30	27	.526	7

Wednesday’s games

Dallas 136, Toronto 125
Indiana 123, New Orleans 114
Minnesota 110, Memphis 101
Chicago 132, Cleveland 123, 2OT
Denver 117, Sacramento 96
L.A. Lakers 116, L.A. Clippers 112

Thursday’s games

Milwaukee at Charlotte
Utah at Orlando
Atlanta at Brooklyn
Golden State at New York
Oklahoma City at San Antonio
Houston at Phoenix
Miami at Denver
Washington at L.A. Lakers

Friday’s games

Charlotte at Philadelphia
Cleveland at Detroit
Dallas at Boston
Golden State at Toronto
Indiana at New Orleans
Portland at Memphis
Sacramento at Minnesota
Milwaukee at Chicago
Washington at L.A. Clippers

Saturday’s games

Atlanta at Brooklyn
Utah at Miami
Portland at Memphis
Denver at L.A. Lakers
Houston at Phoenix

Sunday’s games

Philadelphia at Dallas
Golden State at Boston
L.A. Clippers at Minnesota
Charlotte at Toronto
Detroit at Orlando
Indiana at San Antonio
New York at Cleveland
Oklahoma City at Phoenix

Scoring leaders

Through Wednesday

	G	FG	FT	PTS	AVG
Doncic, DAL	51	594	369	1755	34.4
G.-Alexander, OKC	57	626	450	1777	31.2
Antkumpo, MIL	57	653	416	1749	30.7
Mitchell, CLE	47	454	248	1315	28.0
Durant, PHO	51	517	279	1426	28.0
Brunson, NY	55	539	300	1524	27.7
Curry, GS	54	486	248	1486	27.5
Booker, PHO	48	460	296	1318	27.5
Tatum, BOS	55	505	307	1484	27.0
Fox, SAC	51	498	232	1372	26.9
Edwards, MIN	56	518	310	1490	26.6



DAVID ZALUBOWSKI/AP

The path to the NBA crown goes through Nikola Jokic, left, and the Denver Nuggets, who won the franchise’s first title last season.

Wild: Denver prioritizes players’ health over seed

FROM PAGE 48

cago to advance. The Heat made it all the way to the NBA Finals before losing to Denver in five games. The Lakers, too, were in the play-in tournament, winning their matchup, before going on a run all the way to the Western Conference finals.

Right now, Sacramento sits in the eighth spot and would travel to Dallas to face Luka Doncic and the Mavericks. The loser would draw either the Lakers or the Warriors, with either James or Curry being knocked out — or both.

That’s still down the road, though.

The playoff picture in the West remains way too blurry, unlike the Eastern Conference where Boston leads by eight games over Cleveland. Miami, Philadelphia and Indiana are tied for fifth, 13 games back.

“The Western Conference has just been a bear for as long as I can remember, and this year is no exception,” Thunder coach Mark Daigneault said. “Great teams up and down. Very, very potent and capable teams on any given night.”

The path to the crown, of course, goes through Nikola Jokic and the reigning champion Denver Nuggets after they won their first NBA title in franchise history. Jokic is putting up MVP-worthy numbers once again, averaging 25.9 points, 12.3 rebounds and 9.3 assists.

But with Jamal Murray and Kentavious Caldwell-Pope dealing with nagging injuries this season, Nuggets coach Michael Malone has stated he will prioritize health over chasing a particular seed.

“I’m much more concerned with getting all of our players to the finish line healthy,” said Malone, whose team is currently third. “Knowing that if we are healthy

going into the postseason, I have the utmost confidence this team can go into any building in the entire NBA and win a series.”

This season may be the dawn of a new era for the Warriors, who captured four titles behind the nucleus of Curry, Draymond Green and Klay Thompson. Now each in their 30s, the trio is getting some younger help in the form of Brandin Podziemski and Jonathan Kuminga.

“I look forward to coming to the gym every day and seeing all these guys,” said Golden State coach Steve Kerr, who recently signed on for another two years. “We have a fun mix of vets who are Hall of Famers, champions, and then these young guys who are learning and growing. It feels like the chemistry and the connection within the group is really, really strong. It makes for a fun team to coach.”

Clippers coach Tyrone Lue deserves his share of kudos for reshaping the team into a contender after the arrival of James Harden as part of a trade involving Philadelphia. Initially, the Clippers stumbled with Harden on the court. They’ve found their groove, going 23-5 in December and January.

In Dallas, Doncic and Kyrie Irving are in synch, winning nine of 11 in February.

The Timberwolves are looking to finish the regular season No. 1 out West for the first time since 2003-04, when Kevin Garnett led them to the conference finals before losing to the Lakers.

Most important to them is consistency.

“It will all fall into place,” Minnesota guard Mike Conley said, “if we do the right things.”

AP sports writers Dave Campbell, Janie McCauley and Kristie Rieken, along with freelance writer Craig Meyer, contributed to this report.

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

No. 17 Saint Mary's has big turnaround

Gaels on verge of outright WCC title

By **JOSH DUBOW**
Associated Press

MORAGA, Calif. — When Saint Mary's stumbled to five losses in the first eight games of a season that began with high expectations, the immediate goals were much more modest than conference titles and NCAA Tournament berths.

"I was hoping for 4-5 when we were 3-5," coach Randy Bennett said. "That's exactly how we approached it."

The 17th-ranked Gaels (23-6, 14-0 West Coast Conference) did that and haven't slowed down a bit.

They have won 20 of the past 21 games to move to the verge of denying perennial power Gonzaga a share of the regular-season conference title for just the second time in the past 24 seasons.

Saint Mary's has already clinched the top seed in the WCC tournament next month in Las Vegas for a second straight season and could win its first outright conference title since 2012 by winning at Pepperdine on Thursday night or against No. 23 Gonzaga at home on Saturday.

"We knew just keep pounding the rock and eventually it's going to break," forward Alex Ducas said about the mindset following the shaky start. "You don't know if it's going to be the fifth time hitting the rock or the thousandth time, but eventually it will break. We knew that. That's all part of maturing as a team."

The Gaels came into the season ranked 23rd for the fourth presea-

son ranking in school history, despite losing two-time all-conference guard Logan Johnson and defensive stopper Kyle Bowen to graduation.

Ducas had to work his way back to health from a back injury and Bennett had to incorporate Augustas Marciulionis — the son of former NBA star Sarunas — and Joshua Jefferson into the lineup.

The early results were lacking, with the Gaels facing a difficult nonconference schedule that led to losses against Weber State, San Diego State, Xavier, Utah and Boise State.

"You got to always be the hunter," center Mitchell Saxen said. "I think early in the season, sometimes we were afraid to lose, whether that was coming in ranked at the start of the year or whatever it may be. But we've really just grown as a team there."

Through Wednesday, the Gaels have won 15 straight games for the longest active winning streak in the nation and have set a school record with 14 straight conference wins.

They have been dominant in that stretch, leading the nation in point differential (plus 21.3 per game), ranking second in rebounding differential (plus 11.1 per game) and fifth in opponent shooting percentage (39.2%).

They have even survived a season-ending knee injury to Jefferson and have kept rolling.

"It could have gone a lot of different ways, but they just kept hanging in there and getting better and staying together," Bennett



JOHN HEFTI/AP

Saint Mary's guard Augustas Marciulionis, guard Aidan Mahaney, center Mitchell Saxen, far right, and other players huddle in the second half against San Diego in Moraga, Calif., on Feb. 24. Saint Mary's won 88-62.

said. "You can get beat up by losses and especially a team that is as young as we are. I know it sounded like we had a lot of good players coming back. They weren't good yet. They had to become good."

Bennett has made a career of developing players since taking over a two-win team in 2001 that played in a tiny gym in a Bay Area market focused on professional teams.

He tapped a pipeline of Australian players early in his tenure to build a program that has become

one of the most successful on the West Coast with 16 straight non-pandemic seasons with at least 20 wins.

The Gaels have the eighth-most wins in the country over the past 15 seasons and have won either a share of the regular-season conference title or the conference tournament seven times in that span.

Now the next question for the Gaels will be whether they can translate this run into NCAA Tournament success. Saint Mary's is set to make its third straight tournament appearance for the

first time in school history, but the Gaels haven't made it past the opening weekend since going to the Sweet Sixteen in 2010.

But first is the more immediate goal of winning the conference.

"Our whole deal is one step at a time, one punch at a time, one round at a time," Bennett said. "That's where I would say we've been good. And sometimes they believe in it and sometimes they don't. These guys have. You can hear it when they talk. They talk right. That's what gives us a chance."

New rule for block-charge calls leads to smoother game

By **JOHN MARSHALL**
Associated Press

Arizona guard Pelle Larsson takes a devilish pride in drawing charges, even if it leaves him battered, bruised and buried in ice bags after every game.

"It makes the offense look kind of stupid, to be honest," Larsson said. "It's even better than a steal or a block. It's a turnover and a foul, so it's the best defensive play you can make."

Drawing an offensive foul is often a momentum changer, putting a charge in the charge-taking team, deflating the offending defenders.

It's also been a massive point of consternation, a slippery slope on which no one's exactly sure where the parameters for a block or a charge fall with the players who crash to the hardwood.

The NCAA took a stab at clarifying block-charge calls by implementing a new set of guidelines for



RICK SCUTERI/AP

Arizona guard Pelle Larsson reacts after getting fouled during the second half against Washington on Feb. 24 in Tucson, Ariz.

the 2023-24 season.

Unlike past attempts, this one seems to have hit the mark.

"I think it's been good. I do," Houston coach Kelvin Sampson said. "It's one of those rules, I think

it's made it easier for the officials because now it's clearly cut and dry."

The NCAA Playing Rules and Oversight Panel laid out the new rules over the summer.

A defender now must be in position at the time the offensive player plants a foot to go airborne for a shot. If the defender arrives after the player has planted, officials have been instructed to call a block when there's contact. Secondary defenders also have to be outside the restricted arc to draw a charge.

Previously, defenders only had to be in position to draw a charge before the offensive player went airborne.

As a result, all those instances of sliding in front of a driver, secondary offenders jumping in the way at the last second or undercutting a player already airborne are now automatic block calls.

"I can only tell you from what I have witnessed and what I have heard from officials and coaches," NCAA coordinator of officiating Chris Rastatter said. "The number of block/charge plays at the basket is way down, which was the main

intent of the rule change. I believe the impact of the rule change has been positive."

The numbers back it up.

Scoring is up across college basketball — 73.89 points per game so far after finishing 71.76 last season.

Alabama (91.1) and Arizona (90.1) are the first teams to average more than 90 points per game since Gonzaga in 2020-21. The number of teams averaging at least 80 points per game has increased from 18 last year to 44 this season.

The NCAA doesn't differentiate types of offensive fouls, but the eye test has been pretty clear so far.

"I think what you're seeing is more scoring at the rim," Arizona associate head coach Jack Murphy said. "Defenses have had to adjust. Way more vertical contests and less bang-bang plays at the rim that are 50/50 block/charge. I think it's been good for the game."

SPORTS



Patience paying dividends
GM's plan has Detroit in position to end playoff drought » **NHL, Page 44**

AROUND THE NBA



MARK J. TERRILL, ABOVE, AND JEFF CHIU, BELOW/AP

If the playoffs started today, LeBron James, above, and the ninth-place Lakers would host Stephen Curry, below, and the 10th-place Warriors in the play-in tournament.

The wild, wild West

Tight race to finish with slim separation among teams

By PAT GRAHAM
Associated Press

It's almost hard to picture a postseason without both LeBron James and Stephen Curry.

And yet it very well could happen. They're both on the bubble.

That's just the strength of the Western Conference this season. As it currently stands, James and his ninth-place Los Angeles Lakers would host Curry and the 10th-place Golden State Warriors in the play-in tournament, with the loser being eliminated and the winner still needing to win another to actually make the postseason field.

From top to nearly bottom, the West has

been a grind this season. Consider this: Kawhi Leonard and the Los Angeles Clippers reside in fourth and four games out of the No. 1 seed. They're also a five-game slide away from falling into play-in territory.

Uncertainty reigns in a conference where the Minnesota Timberwolves sit atop the standings with a 42-17 mark and the youthful Oklahoma City Thunder are just a half game back at 41-17.

The next several weeks are going to be a mad dash for seeding — and playoff survival.

"The depth of the West and the amount of teams that are legit threats is as deep as it's ever been," said Phoenix coach Frank Vo-

gel, whose team has a record 34-24 but is the same number of games out of first as New Orleans (35-25), and both are a game away from the play-in line.

A quick refresher course on the format for the play-in tournament that takes place April 16-19: The seventh and eighth seeds will play in each conference and the winning team will earn the seventh seed into the NBA playoffs. The eighth seed still has a safety net and will face the winner of the ninth and 10th seeds to see who gets in.

Last season, Miami lost its first game in the play-in bracket, then beat Chi-

SEE WILD ON PAGE 46



Sargeant stronger going into F1 season » Auto racing, Page 43

