TV: Showrunner talks return of 'Fargo' after hiatus **Page 28**

GAMES: Alan Wake 2 staff talk sequel **Page 27**

MOVIES: Woo makes a dull 'Silent Night' **Page 20**

EUROPE & PACIFIC WEEKEND EDITION

COLLEGE FOOTBALL
Georgia, Alabama quarterbacks fill big shoes at programs
Page 48

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Purging Russia's legacy

SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA/Stars and Stripes

Latvians in Riga celebrate Lacplesis Day, or Freedom Fighters' Remembrance Day, on Nov. 11, to mark the Latvian army's victory over a joint Russian-Germany army during the Latvian War of Independence in 1919. After a torchlight procession, the torches are stuck in the ground.

Baltic nations seek to abolish Kremlin influence in wake of Ukraine war

BY SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

RIGA, Latvia — A 69-year-old pensioner born in Ukraine, living in Latvia and holding a Russian passport has spent months studying the Latvian language in hopes of earning the right to stay in the country she has called home for 40 years.

She is on her second three-month course in a year and has failed her first attempt to pass the language exam now required for Russian citizens to extend their Latvian residency permits.

"If someone had hinted to me that this was waiting for me, I would have never come here," said Natalya, who arrived in Riga, the Latvian capital, from Odesa, Ukraine, in 1984. She declined to provide her last name, saying she was nervous about repercussions.

Natalya is one of 20,000 Latvian residents subject to an amended immigration law adopted after Russia's invasion of Ukraine last year that requires Russian citizens wishing to extend their residence permits to prove a proficiency in Latvian, a challenging language for foreigners to master.

The policy is part of a host of controversial "de-Russification" measures sweeping the Baltics as they ride a wave of anti-Russia sentiment to purge Russian influence and the remaining vestiges of their Soviet past. Moscow annexed the Baltics in 1940, and the three countries — Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania — only gained full independence with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

"The war in Ukraine opened up a new opportunity to regain Latvian dignity and also make Latvian society more amalgamated," said Maris Andzans, director of the Center for Geopolitical Studies Riga, an independent think tank. "This is a historical opportunity for the Baltic states, especially for Latvia and Estonia, to get rid of the remaining issues here."

The unresolved issues mainly concern the continued prevalence of the Russian language, in schools and public life.

About one-third of the populations of Latvia

SEE PURGING ON PAGE 9

Poll: Public prefers troops in Middle East above all else

BY JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

Events in Israel appear to have revived American angst about security in the Middle East, which was rated as the most important destination for deploying U.S. forces abroad, according to a new survey.

Released Thursday, the Reagan Institute poll gauged public opinion on a wide range of security matters. It showed that 31% of those asked think the Middle East is where the American military should be focused, up from 11% a year earlier.

"Americans have shifted where they think the United States should focus its military forces, likely due to recent geopolitical events," the institute said in a statement.

The war in Gaza, launched after an October terrorist attack on Israel by Hamas, has brought more U.S. military forces into the region amid concerns about a broader military escalation across the Middle East.

In recent weeks, U.S. troops have come under repeated fire from Iranian proxies in Syria and Iraq and at sea.

East Asia was rated as the second-highest priority in 2023, with 23% saying it should be the top area of focus for U.S. forces.

That number was down from 31% and 37% in the previous two

SEE TROOPS ON PAGE 8

MIDEAST
Truce in Gaza extended as more people freed
Page 8

BUSINESS/WEATHER

EUROPE GAS PRICES

Country	Super E10	Super unleaded	Super plus	Diesel
Germany	$3.647	$4.210	$4.566	$4.555
Change in price	-5.1 cents	-4.9 cents	-5.2 cents	-6.3 cents
Netherlands	..	$4.540	$4.814	$5.054
Change in price	..	-5.6 cents	-5.4 cents	-2.1 cents
U.K.	..	$4.210	$4.566	$4.555
Change in price	..	-4.9 cents	-5.2 cents	-6.3 cents
Azores	..	..	$4.416	..
Change in price	..	..	-5.2 cents	..
Turkey	..	..	$4.232	$5.018*
Change in price	..	..	-5.2 cents	No change

Fuel prices are updated daily. These prices are effective Dec. 1. The change in price is from Nov. 24.

PACIFIC GAS PRICES

Country	Super E10	Super unleaded	Super plus	Diesel
Japan	..	$4.209	..	$4.199
Change in price	..	-5.0 cents	..	-6.0 cents
Okinawa	$3.289	..	..	$4.199
Change in price	-5.0 cents	..	..	-6.0 cents
South Korea	$3.319	..	$4.239	$4.229
Change in price	-5.0 cents	..	-5.0 cents	-6.0 cents
Guam	$3.349**	$3.909	$4.269	..
Change in price	-5.0 cents	-5.0 cents	-5.0 cents	..

*DieselEFD **Midgrade
Pacific prices for the week of Dec. 1-7

EXCHANGE RATES

Military rates

Euro costs (Dec. 1)	$1.07
British pound (Dec. 1)	$1.23
Japanese yen (Dec. 1)	144.00
South Korean won (Dec. 1)	1257.00

Commercial rates

Bahrain (Dinar)	0.3768
Britain (Pound)	1.2625
Canada (Dollar)	1.3589
China (Yuan)	7.0960
Denmark (Krone)	6.8333
Egypt (Pound)	30.9004
Euro	0.9167
Hong Kong (Dollar)	7.8106
Hungary (Forint)	349.16
Israel (Shekel)	3.7214
Japan (Yen)	148.39
Kuwait (Dinar)	0.3088
Norway (Krone)	10.7508
Philippines (Peso)	55.53
Poland (Zloty)	3.99
Saudi Arabia (Riyal)	3.7512
Singapore (Dollar)	1.3369
South Korea (Won)	1299.55
Switzerland (Franc)	0.8756
Thailand (Baht)	35.29
Turkey (NewLira)	28.8617

(Military exchange rates are those available to customers at military banking facilities in the country of issuance for Japan, South Korea, Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. For nonlocal currency exchange rates (i.e., purchasing British pounds in Germany), check with your local military banking facility. Commercial rates are interbank rates provided for reference when buying currency. All figures are foreign currencies to one dollar, except for the British pound, which is represented in dollars-to-pound, and the euro, which is dollars-to-euro.)

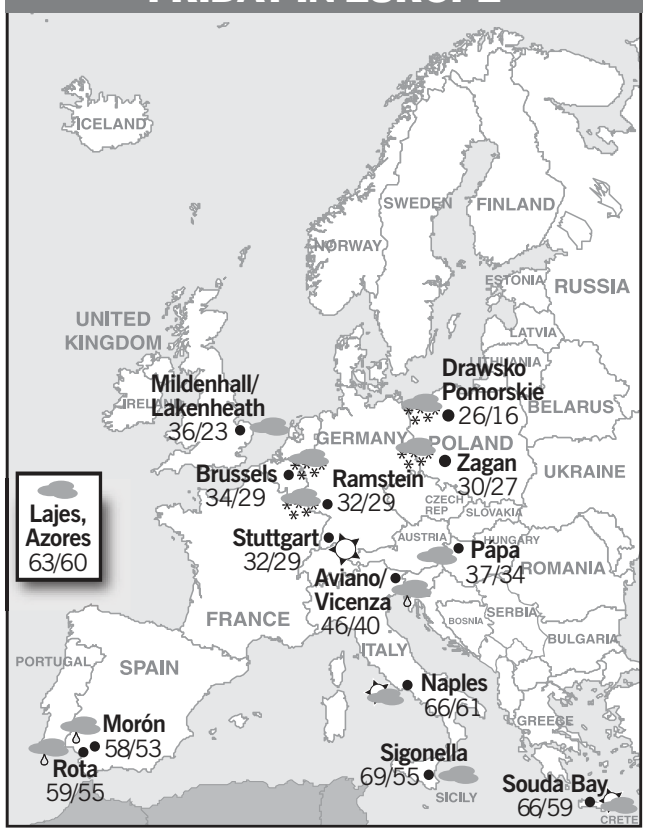
INTEREST RATES

Prime rate	8.50
Interest Rates Discount rate	6.00
Federal funds market rate	5.33
3-month bill	5.41
30-year bond	4.44

WEATHER OUTLOOK

FRIDAY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

FRIDAY IN EUROPE



SATURDAY IN THE PACIFIC

The weather is provided by the American Forces Network Weather Center, 2nd Weather Squadron at Offutt Air Force Base, Neb.

TODAY IN STRIPES

Classified 35
Comics 34,38-39
Crossword 34,38-39
Opinion 40
Sports 41-48
Weekend 13-34

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MILITARY

Rescue efforts continue for Osprey

Air Force aircraft was on routine training mission off Yakushima when it went down

BY HANA KUSUMOTO AND ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

TOKYO — Search-and-rescue efforts continued Thursday for an Air Force CV-22B Osprey that crashed the previous afternoon with eight aboard in southwestern Japan.

The tiltrotor aircraft — stationed at Yokota Air Base in western Tokyo and assigned to the 353rd Special Operations Wing — was on a routine training mission off Yakushima, an island in Kagoshima prefecture, when it went down, according to Air Force Special Operations Command.

"The cause of the mishap is currently unknown," the command said in a statement released several hours after the incident. "The crew's condition are unknown at this time."

One of the eight crewmembers has been confirmed dead, a spokesman for the Kyushu Defense Bureau, an arm of Japan's Ministry of Defense, said by phone Thursday.

The Osprey had been en route to Kadena Air Base, Okinawa, from Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni near Hiroshima, he added.

It's customary in Japan for some government officials to speak to the media on condition of anonymity.

The individual recovered Wednesday was found near an empty, 20-person life raft and what appeared to be aircraft wreckage, a spokesman for Japan's 10th Regional Coast Guard Headquarters said by phone hours after the crash.

The body was returned to the U.S. military on Thursday afternoon, a coast guard news release said.

Nothing was found during search-and-rescue efforts overnight, the coast guard announced in a news release Thursday morning.

Japanese Coast Guard

A member of Japan's coast guard checks out a 20-person life raft found during search-and-rescue efforts after an Air Force CV-22 Osprey went down off southwestern Japan, on Wednesday.

It said the search was continuing with six patrol boats and two helicopters, along with vessels and aircraft from the Self-Defense Forces and the town of Yakushima.

The coast guard will also use side-scan sonar to capture images of the seabed, according to the release.

U.S. Ambassador to Japan Rahm Emanuel met briefly with Japan's Foreign Affairs minister, Yoko Kamikawa, Thursday in Tokyo, according to a news release from the ministry. The pair committed to coordinating on the investigation.

Japan grounds Ospreys

The Kagoshima Airport Office said an Osprey made an emergency landing request for Yakushima Airport at 2:38 p.m., according to a Yomiuri newspaper report.

A witness quoted by public broadcaster NHK on Wednesday said he saw the Osprey suddenly turn upside down and fire near its left propeller before it fell into the water.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirokazu Matsuno, during a news conference Thursday morning, called the incident tragic.

"Such accidents cause great concern to the residents living in the area and it is regrettable," he said.

In the hours following the crash, Okinawa prefecture asked that Ospreys stop flying until the accident's cause is identified, a prefectural spokeswoman who handles military affairs said by phone Thursday.

The request was sent to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Okinawa Defense Bureau and Okinawa Liaison Office.

The Japan Ground Self-Defense Force grounded its Ospreys for the time being, Matsuno said, adding that the Japanese government has urged the U.S. side to confirm its tiltrotor aircraft are safe before flying them in Japan.

Stars and Stripes

An Air Force CV-22 Osprey is at Yokota Air Base, Japan, in 2018.

At least one U.S. Osprey has been in involved in the search-and-rescue efforts, Japanese defense officials told The Associated Press.

A Self-Defense Force training flight planned for Thursday was canceled as Japan grounded all 14 of its Ospreys, according to AP.

"First of all, we need to do our best to rescue the human life and continue to work to grasp the accident situation quickly," Matsuno said.

'Serious concerns'

Marine veteran Timothy Loranger, a Los Angeles-based attorney specializing in aviation law and military aircraft, said it will likely be at least a year before an investigation into the crash is concluded — a process that's largely reliant on recovering the Osprey.

"Getting the aircraft back, starting an inspection of the aircraft systems — the flight systems record a lot of data, and hopefully that's preserved," he told Stars and Stripes by phone Wednesday. "If it involves material issues or engine issues, they bring in subject matter experts and determine what the cause was."

Loranger said he's concerned about ongoing issues with the Ospreys, pointing to a spate of mishaps over the past several years, including an Aug. 27 crash that killed three U.S. Marines in Australia.

"If you look at the hours that the aircraft has flown without a major mishap, it seems generally safe," he said. "But there seems to be something going on with the aircraft and they haven't been able to pinpoint the problem."

Loranger said it's too soon to draw conclusions about Wednesday's crash, but he believes a serious review of the aircraft is warranted.

"The hope is that they are going to dig down and find the answers and resolve it," he said. "Because, you know, with three crashes in a year and a half, there are serious concerns from people in the community."

Stars and Stripes reporter Mari Higa contributed to this report.

Tires from US Navy plane stuck in Hawaii bay resting on reef

Associated Press

KANEOHE BAY, Hawaii — Tires from a large airplane that's been stuck in a Hawaii bay for more than a week are resting on parts of a reef, according to video the U.S. Navy released Wednesday as it figures out a plan to remove the aircraft.

There were no injuries to the nine people who were on board when the plane landed Nov. 20 in shallow water just offshore of Marine Corps Base Hawaii at Kaneohe Bay. The base is about 10 miles from Honolulu.

The Navy is investigating what caused the plane to overshoot a runway.

The underwater footage shows the "two points of contact the aircraft has with the coral and the remainder of the aircraft floating above," the Navy said.

The video shows tires on the coral as tiny fish swim through rock crevices.

A Navy team removed nearly all of the estimated 2,000 gallons of fuel on the plane, Rear Adm. Kevin Lenox said Monday.

Cmdr. Mark Anderson, who is leading the Navy's mobile diving and salvage unit working at the site, said the plane was sitting on a mixture of coral and sand. The left engine is resting on coral. The plane rises a little with the tide, so the full weight of the plane is not on the coral, he said Monday.

Kaneohe Bay is home to coral reefs, an ancient Hawaiian fishpond and a breeding ground for hammerhead sharks.

Sierra Club of Hawaii Executive Director Wayne Tanaka said the video underscores potential damage to the reef.

"It confirms what we've known: We have a jet plane sitting on coral reef," he said. "We don't know how much it moved, how much it could move."

State environmental officials expect to conduct a damage assessment once the plane is removed.

U.S. Navy video via AP

Navy divers assigned to Mobile Diving and Salvage Unit One conduct an underwater survey of the U.S. Navy's P-8A Poseidon in Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii, on Tuesday.

MILITARY

US shoots down 2nd drone sent out from Yemen

By Doug G. Ware
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — A Navy warship for the second time in recent weeks shot down a drone in the Middle East launched by Iranian-backed rebels in Yemen, Pentagon officials said Wednesday.

The USS Carney shot down the drone because it was approaching the Navy vessel near the Bab el-Mandeb strait, a waterway that connects the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden near the Arabian Sea, according to a defense official who spoke on condition of anonymity. Much of Yemen's southern coastline borders the strait and Gulf of Aden.

"At approximately 11 a.m. Yemen time while in the South Red Sea, a U.S. Navy ship shot down an unmanned aerial vehicle launched from Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen," the defense official said. "Although its intentions are not known, the [drone] was heading toward the ship."

The confrontation on Wednesday did not cause injuries to American personnel or damage to U.S. property, the official said, adding the Carney was escorting a supply ship and another vessel carrying military equipment to the region when the shootdown occurred.

The USS Carney is an Arleigh Burke-class destroyer that's been in the region for weeks. The defense official also said the destroyed drone was an Iranian-made KAS-04.

The Houthis in Yemen are one of many militant groups sponsored and aligned with the Iranian government.

"The Houthis and Iran have a long-standing relationship," Air Force Brig. Gen. Pat Ryder, the Pentagon's chief spokesman, said Tuesday. "When it comes to our forces, we are going to do whatever we need to do to ensure they stay protected."

The shootdown comes after several weeks of increased militant attacks against U.S. forces at various locations throughout the Middle East.

Iranian-supported groups, for example, have launched dozens of attacks targeting multiple U.S. bases in Iraq and Syria, and the Houthi rebels in Yemen have also previously engaged with American troops.

In mid-October, the USS Carney shot down several enemy drones and rockets fired by the Houthis in Yemen. The Pentagon called it a self-defense strike, but officials said they were not certain where the rockets and drones were targeted. Ryder said they could have been aimed at Israel, just days after the Oct. 7 Hamas attack that killed hundreds of Israeli civilians and touched off a new conflict between the longtime adversaries.

"These missiles [and drones] were deemed a threat, and so the Carney took action," Ryder said after the October incident. "We have the capability to defend our broader interests in the region and to deter regional escalation. … The crew of the Carney did just that."

The Carney has been in the Middle East as part of the U.S. effort to stabilize the region and deter other countries or groups from escalating the Israeli-Hamas conflict. The ship is armed with missiles, torpedoes and several guns and is part of the military's Aegis Ballistic Missile Defense System, a program that provides defense against short- and intermediate-range missiles.

Wednesday's shootdown came one day after another Iranian-made drone flew within 1,500 yards of the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower, which was patrolling international waters in the Persian Gulf. Navy officials said the drone violated safety protocols and endangered U.S. service members on the aircraft carrier.

AARON LA/U.S. Navy

The Arleigh Burke-class, guided-missile destroyer USS Carney fires at Houthi missiles and drones in the Red Sea on Oct. 19.

Somalia intensifies maritime patrols as fears grow of resurgence of piracy

Associated Press

BOSASO, Puntland — Somalia's maritime police force on Thursday intensified patrols in the Gulf of Aden following a failed pirate hijacking of a ship earlier this week.

The commander of the maritime force in the semiautonomous region of Puntland, Abdullahi Mohamed Ahmed, told The Associated Press that patrols in the waters had doubled and were on a 24-hour rotation to deter pirates.

"Here now we have many challenges. We had initially dealt with the pirates and stopped their activities, but recently on top of al-Shabab and ISIS we have had to look out for them again,"

On Sunday, the U.S. military said it had captured five men who had attempted to hijack an Israeli-linked tanker off the coast of Yemen

U.S. and British militaries said the armed attackers seized the Liberian-flagged Central Park, managed by Zodiac Maritime, in the Gulf of Aden. The pirates had attempted to escape using speedboats but surrendered after being pursued by American destroyer the USS Mason, a statement from Central Command said.

Yemeni Houthi rebels have conducted recent attacks on commercial vessels on the Gulf of Eden, seen as part of a rise in violence in the region due to the Israel-Hamas war. But the Pentagon said this latest attempt was carried out by Somali nationals.

That is the first in many years and has led the Somali government to appeal for international support to deter a resurgence of piracy in the Horn of Africa.

N. Korea rebuffs US envoy's offer to negotiate 'on any topic'

By David Choi
Stars and Stripes

CAMP HUMPHREYS, South Korea — The sister of North Korea's leader has rejected a United States request for negotiations and likened the idea to a ploy by Washington to infringe on her country's power to govern itself.

Kim Yo Jong, a senior official for the Workers' Party of Korea, said the North's sovereignty "can never be an agenda item for negotiations, and therefore, [Pyongyang] will never sit face to face with the U.S. for that purpose."

Her statement came three days after the U.N. Security Council met Monday to discuss North Korea's nuclear weapons program and its repeated violations of the council's resolutions.

A rocket fired Nov. 21 to place a spy satellite in orbit violated resolutions prohibiting Pyongyang from using ballistic-missile technology, deputy spokesman for the secretary-general Farhan Haq said in a news release after the launch.

Monday's meeting included U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Linda Thomas-Greenfield, who reiterated Washington's offer to North Korea to negotiate "on any topic" without any preconditions.

"[North Korea] can choose the time and the topic, but [it] needs to make that choice," she said.

North Korean Ambassador Kim Song defended the launch, calling it his nation's sovereign right.

He said the satellite aims to provide a "clear picture of the dire military moves of the United States."

The ambassador said the North is exercising its right to to self-defense and mentioned how the U.S. military has sent strategic assets, including aircraft carriers and B-52 bombers, to the peninsula several times this year. On Sunday, South Korean and Japanese warships trained with the Carl Vinson Carrier Strike Group south of Jeju Island.

Those U.S. "strategic assets are not for defense," Kim Song said.

Thomas-Greenfield replied that such military exercises "are routine and are defensive in nature; and we intentionally reduce risks and pursue transparency by announcing the exercises in advance, including the dates and the activities.

"Unlike [North Korea's] launches using ballistic missile technology, these actions are not prohibited by U.N. Security Council resolutions," she said. "So, we reject strongly the disingenuous [North Korean] claim that its missile launches are merely defensive in nature, in response to our bilateral and trilateral military exercises."

North Korea has fired 22 ballistic missiles in 15 days of testing so far this year. The communist regime has also launched three rockets carrying satellites this year; the first two were unsuccessful.

MILITARY

Fight against 'price gouging' on military parts heats up

By John M. Donnelly
CQ-Roll Call

Two Democrats who serve on panels that oversee the Pentagon have stepped up their campaign to curb what they call widespread "price gouging" in contracts for military spare parts.

Democratic Sen. Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts and Rep. John Garamendi of California, both of them members of their chamber's Armed Services Committee, pressed their case Wednesday in a pair of letters obtained by CQ Roll Call.

Warren and Garamendi expressed outrage that defense contractors are exploiting loopholes so the companies can regularly refuse to provide the Defense Department legally required data to document that their parts' prices are fair and reasonable on contracts awarded without competition.

One of the missives went to Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and the other to Kevin M. Stein, president and CEO of Cleveland-based TransDigm Group Inc., a company that has been at the center of the spare parts pricing controversy for more than a decade.

"Contractors who consistently refuse to turn over cost and pricing data continue to rake in DoD contracts," Warren and Garamendi wrote to Austin.

In the lawmakers' letter to Stein, they wrote that his company's "ongoing refusal to provide DoD with pricing data is unacceptable given the company's record of ripping off the government and taxpayer."

'Egregious' records

The lawmakers cited not just TransDigm but also Boeing Co., one of the Pentagon's top contractors, as having "particularly egregious" records on this score.

Those two companies have publicly denied wrongdoing in these matters.

TransDigm, for its part, refused to provide the Pentagon with cost data on 401 different items in a one-year period ending September 2022, according to a previously undisclosed Defense Department report to Congress on contractor cost disclosures.

Defense Department Undersecretary for Acquisition and Sustainment William LaPlante wrote in the report that the problem may be bigger than is known.

"The Department believes the problem in obtaining data from contractors to support fair and reasonable prices may be more prevalent than what has been collected to date, particularly with respect to sole source commercial products," LaPlante wrote in the report, which was obtained by CQ Roll Call.

The Pentagon inspector general's office disclosed in December 2021 that TransDigm owed the department nearly $21 million for overcharges on spare parts — the latest in a series of adverse audit findings about the company's pricing practices.

The lawmakers noted in their Wednesday letter to Stein that there has been "no public update of the status" of the $21 million refund. They asked Stein to provide one.

In 2019, TransDigm repaid the government $16 million for a similar set of overcharges.

As for Boeing, the prior year's Defense Department report on the issue found that Boeing had declined to provide cost data on nearly 11,000 parts on one contract.

9,400% profit

The Pentagon's history of paying inflated prices for military spare parts is infamous. Stories about the issue surged during the 1980s defense buildup, including examples such as a $400 plastic knob for a fighter jet and a $37 screw for a ballistic missile, not to mention an ordinary hammer for $435.

Recent disclosures echo those bygone reports. In 2019, the Pentagon inspector general disclosed one instance where TransDigm charged $4,361 for a half-inch metal pin — representing nearly 9,400% in excess profit.

Other defense contractors besides TransDigm have been found to have overcharged for spare parts. These include top Pentagon contractors — Boeing, Raytheon Technologies Corp. (now RTX Corp.) and Lockheed Martin Corp.

Warren has ridden herd on the spare parts problem for many years.

She and Garamendi have been joined by other members from both parties in both chambers — including California Democratic Reps. Ro Khanna of the Armed Services Committee and Barbara Lee of the Appropriations Committee — in attempting to hold the Pentagon to account for oversight of spare parts prices.

The House-passed fiscal 2024 Defense appropriations bill contains an amendment by Lee that would require a Pentagon report to the Appropriations committees in both chambers on the department's efforts to crack down on contractors that have charged excessive prices for parts.

In May, Warren joined with four other senators in writing Austin about that problem and the broader scourge of procurement fraud.

The other senators on that letter were Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., Ron Wyden, D-Ore., Charles E. Grassley, R-Iowa and Mike Braun, R-Ind.

Loopholes

At the same time, Warren has joined with Braun and Garamendi on legislation that would close some of the perceived loopholes.

These include one that enables contractors to withhold cost data from the Pentagon in cases where a part is like a commercial one — even if the part is only being sold to the U.S. military, experts have said.

Companies are also able to avoid disclosure of cost data for deals worth less than $2 million. That threshold was raised in the fiscal 2018 NDAA from $750,000 in an effort to streamline contracting and acquisitions.

In this week's letter to Austin, Warren and Garamendi expressed concern that the department is not moving aggressively enough to tackle the problem.

"It remains unclear if any acquisitions have been canceled or if DoD is otherwise using its full authority to ensure the government isn't being ripped off," they wrote.

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MILITARY

NORAD readies annual Santa Claus tracker

BY PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN
Stars and Stripes

The U.S. military will once again monitor the whereabouts of Santa Claus on Christmas Eve.

On Friday, the North American Aerospace Defense Command in Colorado Springs, Colo., will reactivate Noradsanta.org, where users can find festive music, games, videos and a countdown clock to Christmas. On Dec. 24, the website goes live with updates on Santa's worldwide journey.

NORAD has turned the tracker into a Christmas tradition, which began in 1955 and has grown more sophisticated with the times.

"Our hope is that the excitement and reaction is the same today as it was 68 years ago," said John Ingle, a spokesman for the joint U.S.-Canadian command, which is tasked with protecting the continent from air and sea threats.

More than 2 million people combined follow NORAD's Santa-specific social media accounts on Facebook and YouTube.

The command also has a Santa-tracking app available on Android and iOS devices. And last holiday season, more than 16 million people around the world visited its website.

"Our expectation every year is to see more and more people join us in tracking Santa," Ingle said.

NORAD's predecessor, the Continental Air Defense Command, began tracking Santa's Christmas journey by coincidence. A Sears Roebuck department store mistakenly used the CONAD telephone number in an advertisement that encouraged children to phone St. Nick.

Volunteers at the NORAD Tracks Santa Operations Center in Colorado Springs, Colo., inform callers of Santa's location and the number of gifts he's delivered on Dec. 24.

Realizing the error, the command's director of operations, Col. Harry Shoup, instructed his staff to tell young callers that military radar was being monitored for indications of a reindeer-guided sleigh traveling from the North Pole, and the tradition was born.

Those who want to telephone for updates on Santa's progress can still do so on Dec. 24 between 4 a.m. and midnight Mountain Time by calling 811-446-6723.

Last year, the call center — which is run by more than 1,000 U.S. and Canadian uniformed personnel, Defense Department civilians and community volunteers at Peterson Space Force Base — answered more than 250,000 calls.

PHOTOS BY CHARLES MARSH/Defense Department

Volunteers carried on a tradition dating back to 1955 at the NORAD Tracks Santa Operations Center at Peterson Space Force Base in Colorado on Dec. 24. They'll be back this year.

In a bid to extend its reach, the NORAD Tracks Santa website will be available in Korean for the first time this year, bringing the number of languages offered to nine.

English, Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese and Spanish are the other available languages.

"Our team at NORAD and our contributors put a lot of work into making the NORAD Tracks Santa program a success," Ingle said. "But the real magic — that special moment the program offers — has been and will always be between the person answering the phone and the person on the other end asking, 'Where's Santa?' "

wellman.phillip@stripes.com
@pwwellman

Navy veteran is working to heap holiday cheer on refugees in Japan

BY KELLY AGEE
Stars and Stripes

YOKOTA AIR BASE, Japan — Navy veteran Ervin Lawrence — a dead ringer for Santa Claus — is gathering gifts donated at bases across Japan in hopes of spreading some Christmas cheer to Ukrainian refugees in the country.

Instead of a sleigh and eight reindeer, Lawrence and his wife, Rika, drive a van around Japan for Santa Delivery, a charity they started several years ago to help those still struggling after a massive earthquake and tsunami struck northeastern Japan in March 2011.

They were at Yokota, the home of U.S. Forces Japan in western Tokyo, on Thursday collecting donations that they'll deliver to the Embassy of Ukraine in Tokyo on Dec. 7. The pair said they fathered enough candy to fill 400 goodie bags.

"Our charity is putting smiles on people's faces, and just bringing in a little bit of Christmas cheer," Lawrence told Stars and Stripes in an interview at the base visitors' center.

More than 2,100 Ukrainian refugees have been living in Japan since Russian invaded Ukraine on Feb. 24, 2022, according to the Immigration Services Agency's website. About half of those live in the Kanto region, which includes Tokyo and several U.S. military bases.

"They're stuck in a country that they don't understand the language and terrified about what's happening back home," Lawrence said. "And this just gives them happiness and brings smiles to people's faces."

Lawrence said Santa Delivery has also collected donations from Camp Zama, where he worked for 23 years as a functional technology specialist; Misawa Air Base; and off-base communities and companies across Japan.

So far, they've received 139 toys from Mattel in Japan; 100 Christmas ornaments; 500 Christmas cards; and 50 Christmas cakes, which are a tradition in Japan.

They're hoping to reach a goal of 750 wrapped candies. So far, about 250 have been donated. Some people have given cash to help Santa Delivery out with things like gas money and tolls.

The Lawrences also started a GoFundMe, Santa Delivery 2023, to help them support their mission. Donations go toward expenses like gas and tolls.

"We appreciate any and all donations that we can get," Lawrence said.

Santa Delivery started in 2016 after the Lawrences participated in a U.S. military charity run that raised money to buy sports equipment for children orphaned by the 2011 disaster.

"We fell in love with the area and started Santa Delivery that following Christmas," said Lawrence, an eight-year Navy veteran who served as a boiler technician between 1983 and 1991.

Ervin Lawrence

Navy veteran Ervin Lawrence has been dressing as Santa to spread holiday cheer to the less fortunate in Japan for the past seven years.

The charity has been getting translation and other help from Iryna Makovskia, who works for Ukraine Mental Health Interaction Center Himawari in Tokyo. The center offers refugees a place to gather, speak in their native language, do Ukrainian activities and learn about Japanese culture.

"When people help Ukraine, my heart is filled with gratitude and respect," she told Stars and Stripes in a recent text message. "Christmas is a great time to believe in magic. It is important to bring Ukrainians together so that they do not feel lonely but feel like a big Ukrainian family in Japan."

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MILITARY

USS Indianapolis teams with drones in drill

Littoral combat ship coordinates exercise to destroy target boat in the Persian Gulf

BY ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

A U.S. Navy littoral combat ship coordinated with unmanned vessels and a flying drone to destroy a target boat during an exercise in the Persian Gulf, service officials said.

The exercise Monday came amid increasing encounters between Iranian drones and the U.S. military in Middle East waters, including one this week described by Navy senior officials as unsafe and unprofessional.

The Freedom-class USS Indianapolis networked with the drones to identify the target, which was destroyed by a MARTAC T-38 Devil Ray surface drone armed with missiles, U.S. Naval Forces Central Command/U.S. 5th Fleet said in a statement Wednesday.

The exercise relied on a person at Task Force 59's Robotics Operations Center in Bahrain to make decisions, according to the statement.

The results prove "these unmanned platforms paired with our manned combat ships can enhance fleet lethality," Capt. Colin Corridan, the task force's commodore, said in the statement.

MARITA SCHWAB/U.S. Army

The littoral combat ship USS Indianapolis sails with two T-38 Devil Ray unmanned surface vessels and an Arabian Fox MAST-13 drone during exercise Digital Talon 2 in the Persian Gulf on Monday.

The exercise involving USS Indianapolis was the second time in just over a month the Navy used a drone in the Middle East to fire lethal munitions. The earlier go-around also used a T-38 Devil Ray to destroy a target boat, the service said.

Other drones in the Monday exercise included a Flexrotor aircraft, an Arabian Fox MAST-13 and an additional T-38.

Task Force 59 is known for its experimentation with drones in patrolling Middle East waters.

The unit only recently began working on arming drones, Stars and Stripes reported earlier in November.

In September, underwater, surface and aerial drones tracked Iranian military vessels over several days during patrols in and around the Strait of Hormuz, the Navy said last month.

The exercise on Monday came two days before the destroyer USS Carney shot down a drone coming toward the ship that was launched from Houthi-controlled territory in Yemen, U.S. officials said. The Houthis are backed by Iran.

On Tuesday, an Iranian drone came within 1,500 yards of the aircraft carrier USS Dwight D. Eisenhower during routine flight operations in the central Persian Gulf, Navy officials said.

Vice Adm. Brad Cooper, 5th Fleet commander, characterized Iran's drone flight as "unsafe, unprofessional and irresponsible."

Days earlier, the destroyer USS Thomas Hudner shot down multiple one-way attack drones, which also originated from Houthi-controlled territory in Yemen, U.S. officials said.

Iran-linked militants have launched dozens of attacks on land-based U.S. military forces in Syria and Iraq since the beginning of the Israel-Hamas war on Oct. 7.

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Air Force colonels to mourn suicide victim after father's plea

BY JENNIFER H. SVAN
Stars and Stripes

The Air Force's most senior leaders won't be at the memorial service next week for a young airman who died by suicide, after a desperate plea from his father to have the service's top brass in attendance.

"This invitation is for you to stand by the side of a grieving family" and show the strong leadership required to "eradicate the horrific epidemic of military suicide," Sean T. Stevenson wrote Nov. 22 in an open letter to military leaders posted on Reddit's Air Force page.

Senior Airman Sean "Ryan" Stevenson died Nov. 1, "broken and alone," let down "by the very Air Force he dearly loved," wrote the father, a retired Air Force chief master sergeant.

The letter was addressed to the Air Force's top leadership, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs and the secretary of defense. The letter included his son's last written words, in which he apologizes to his family.

The 24-year-old was qualified as an aviator at Cannon Air Force Base in New Mexico and was preparing to go to his next duty station in Japan when he ran into a series of logistical roadblocks that appeared to push him over the edge.

Sean T. Stevenson

Senior Airman Sean "Ryan" Stevenson

His unit, the 43rd Intelligence Squadron, is hosting a memorial ceremony Thursday, and two colonels will attend on behalf of Air Force leadership, the service said Wednesday.

The attendees will include Col. Jeremy Bergin, the 27th Operations Wing commander, and Col. John Thorne, the commander of the 363rd Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance Wing, both of whom were part of Stevenson's chain of command.

The elder Stevenson remains optimistic that top Pentagon officials will show up at the memorial and "take a visible stand to end this scourge," he said Thursday to Stars and Stripes.

If they don't, the words of service members commenting on his post "will continue to be the voice and face of the suicide crisis our military finds itself in."

On Reddit, Stevenson's letter received over 1,300 interactions and hundreds of comments. His son's final words were found on his computer by officials investigating his death, Stevenson said.

The airman was a tactical systems operator with more than 800 combat flying hours over Afghanistan and Somalia, according to his obituary. The note found on his computer described his despair as his life began to unravel.

He wrote about his desperation to get out of Cannon after more than five years at the base, which is considered by some airmen to be one of the Air Force's least desirable locations.

Despite numerous attempts, his medical clearance was scheduled only two weeks before his transfer, and he didn't complete checkout before his scheduled departure.

He went to the airport anyway without telling his unit, afraid of missing his flight. When he was ordered to come back, he said, "my heart dropped, I couldn't think, and my hands were shaking."

In closing, he told his parents, "I loved the Air Force since I was a kid, but over the last year, I have learned just how little the Air Force cares about me."

One Reddit commenter said he "so much" related to the airman's words after having been stationed at Cannon himself.

"I felt the frustration and I screamed internally because I saw my own troops go through that same hell" when they prepared for a move, the comment said.

Another person was struck by the airman's seeming lack of comfort to talk with his leadership.

"I notice this is a pretty common theme in the military, especially with younger members who fear possible negative repercussions," the person wrote.

Stevenson's death is under investigation, the Air Force said in a statement Wednesday.

"We are committed to fostering a culture that encourages help-seeking behavior and dispels the perceived stigma of seeking mental health treatment," the statement said.

The Air Force did not provide its most recent suicide statistics following a written request, saying they are provided quarterly to the Pentagon.

The Pentagon's latest report shows data from April 1 to June 30. The Air Force's active component had 20 known or suspected suicides, up five from the same period in 2022, and 34 during the first six months of the year, according to the report.

The latest annual suicide report for the U.S. military, released last month, shows 492 suicide deaths among active duty, National Guard and reserve personnel in 2022, down from 524 in 2021. The totals for active-duty personnel rose from 328 in 2021 to 331 last year, according to the report.

The active-duty Air Force had 63 suicide deaths in 2022, 12 more than in 2021, according to the report.

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MIDEAST

Truce in Gaza extended as more freed

BY WAFAA SHURAFA, JACK JEFFERY AND MELANIE LIDMAN
Associated Press

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip — Israel and Hamas agreed at the last minute Thursday to extend their cease-fire in Gaza by another day to allow more hostages and prisoners to be released. But any further renewal of the truce, now in its seventh day, could prove more daunting since Hamas is expected to set a higher price for many of the remaining hostages.

Hamas freed two Israeli women Thursday afternoon and more hostage releases were expected to follow, the Israeli military said. At least 10 Israelis a day, along with other nationals, have been released during the truce, in return for Israel's release of at least 30 Palestinian prisoners.

International pressure has mounted for the truce to continue as long as possible after weeks of Israeli bombardment and a ground campaign following Hamas' deadly Oct. 7 attack on Israel that triggered the war. Thousands of Palestinians in Gaza have been killed and more than three-quarters of the population of 2.3 million have been uprooted, leading to a humanitarian crisis.

Israel has vowed to resume the fighting — with the goal of dismantling Hamas — once the cease-fire ends.

The talks appear to be growing tougher, with Hamas having already freed most of the women and children it kidnapped on Oct. 7. The militants are expected to make greater demands in return for freeing scores of civilian men and soldiers.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who met with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and other top officials on his third visit to the region since the start of the war, said he hoped the cease-fire could be extended and more hostages could be released.

"This process is producing results. It's important, and we hope that it can continue," he said.

ADEL HANA/AP

Palestinians visit their houses destroyed in the Israeli bombings in Al-Zahra, on the outskirts of Gaza City, on Thursday, during the temporary cease-fire between Hamas and Israel.

Qatar and Egypt, which have played a key role in mediating, are seeking to prolong the deal by another two days, according to Diaa Rashwan, the head of Egypt's State Information Service.

Thursday morning, Palestinian gunmen opened fire on people waiting for buses along a main highway entering Jerusalem, killing at least three people and wounding several others, according to Israeli police.

The two attackers, brothers from a neighborhood in annexed east Jerusalem, were killed. After the attack, six other members of the family were detained, and the government ordered their house be demolished. Hamas claimed responsibility for the attack, casting it as retaliation for the killing of women and children in Gaza and the occupied West Bank and other Israeli "crimes."

The attack did not appear to threaten the truce in Gaza. But escalating violence — including Israeli raids — in the West Bank and east Jerusalem could blow back to wreck the quiet in Gaza, even though these areas are not covered under the cease-fire. On Wednesday, Israeli troops killed two Palestinian boys during a raid in Jenin, according to Palestinian health officials. The Israeli military separately said the raid killed two Islamic Jihad militants.

Tense hostage talks

Netanyahu is under intense pressure from families of the hostages to bring them home. But his far-right governing partners are also pushing him to continue the war until Hamas is destroyed, and could abandon his coalition if he is seen as making too many concessions.

Israel says it will maintain the truce until Hamas stops releasing captives, at which point it will resume military operations aimed at eliminating the group, even as the Biden administration has urged it to operate with far greater precision if it does so.

The initial truce, which began Friday and has now been extended twice, called for the release of women and children. Israeli officials say Gaza militants still hold around 30 women and children, who would all be released within a few days at the current rate. The two women released so far on Thursday — who are 21 and 40 years old — have returned to Israel.

It's not clear how many of the remaining female hostages might be soldiers. For soldiers and the civilian men still in captivity, Hamas is expected to demand the release of high-profile Palestinians convicted of deadly attacks, something Israel has strongly resisted in the past.

Israel says around 125 men are still held hostage, including several dozen soldiers.

An Israeli official involved in hostage negotiations said talks on a further extension for the release of civilian men and soldiers were still preliminary, and that a deal would not be considered until all the women and children are out. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because talks were ongoing.

The 210 Palestinians released, including at least seven Israeli Palestinians, have been women and teenagers. The teens were largely accused of throwing stones and firebombs during confrontations with Israeli forces. A number of the women were detained for pro-Palestinian social media posts that Israeli authorities said constituted incitement of violence. Several were convicted by military courts of attempting to attack soldiers, some of them after being found carrying scissors or knives near security positions.

Anxious respite in Gaza

Palestinians in Gaza have been calling for a permanent end to the war, saying the temporary truces don't resolve the humanitarian catastrophe across the territory. Over 1.8 million people, around 80% of the territory's population, have fled their homes, with more than 1 million sheltering in U.N. schools

In the central city of Deir al-Balah, life's daily struggle now consists of hunting down basic commodities such as flour and cooking gas that remain scarce despite increased aid entering during the truce.

"People want the war to stop ... to see what happened in our homes and to our families," said Samir Yaghi, who fled from Gaza City. He said he's been searching for flour but can't find any.

Troops: South America, Africa were low on list when divvying up US forces

FROM PAGE 1

years. Home to China, the Pentagon's so-called top "pacing threat," East Asia had been the top security priority for Americans since 2020.

In general, global events tend to drive how Americans prioritize security challenges and the military's role in dealing with them.

But while priorities change, one consistent finding over five years of polling is that a majority of Americans believe that the U.S. should maintain a global military presence, the Reagan Institute said. In 2023, 66% of those polled favored a worldwide presence.

"Americans want our military to have bases abroad to deter attacks and respond swiftly to emerging threats, contrasting with only 28% who advocate for a reduction in overseas military presence, favoring troop deployment only in response to aggression," the poll said.

Still, the military's global role and the vast number of overseas bases it maintains remain points of contention. Over the years, the outlook on having large bases in places like Germany has shifted, depending on the politics at any given time.

Before Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine, it was commonplace for both Republicans and Democrats to call for large-scale troop reductions and base closures in Europe. Americans, too, put Europe close to the bottom of the priority list.

In 2021, only 5% of those polled by the Reagan Institute named Europe when asked to select only one region where troops could be deployed.

But those numbers spiked in the aftermath of Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Last year, 18% said Europe was their number one military priority, and in 2023 that number increased to 19%.

When given the choice to divvy up where troops are sent, there was less disparity among regions, with 19% allocated to the Middle East, 18% to East Asia and 17% to Europe.

Meanwhile, 13% were allocated to South Asia, 13% to Central America and 10% to South America.

Joining South America at the bottom was Africa, which also was allocated 10%. On the question of selecting only one place for U.S. forces, just 2% picked Africa.

While low on the priority list for Americans, missions in Africa are among the most dangerous for U.S. forces, given that troops have been killed in recent years on counterterrorism missions stretching from Niger to Somalia and Kenya.

The Reagan Institute survey was conducted from Oct. 27 to Nov. 5 and has a margin of error of plus or minus 2 percentage points.

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EUROPE

Purging: Baltic nations push native languages to cut Russian influence

FROM PAGE 1

and Estonia are ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking, a legacy of a half century of Soviet rule that saw large numbers of Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians settle in the Baltics to Russify and rebuild after World War II.

Prior to the Ukraine war, a person merely proposing the demolishment of Riga's Soviet-era "Victory" monument would be branded a "national radical," Andzans said. Now such views are considered mainstream, he added. The memorial, viewed by many Latvians as a symbol of Soviet subjugation, was torn down last year.

Similar monuments commemorating Soviet soldiers who defeated Nazism have been toppled across the Baltics, often over the objections of their Russian-speaking communities, who say the removals defile the memory of relatives who fought and died in the Red Army.

Conservative lawmaker Rihards Kols, chairman of the Latvian parliament's foreign affairs committee, said such actions are long overdue and show "an awakening in our society, in our consciousness."

They are also deemed critical for national security after Russian President Vladimir Putin partly justified his invasion of Ukraine as an intervention to protect ethnic Russians from oppression and "genocide." Russian citizens in Latvia are "absolutely right now" considered a threat, Kols said.

"We understand that it is vital to our existence to introduce these reforms," he said. "The problem is still those who associate themselves with Czarist Russia, with the Soviet Union. There are people in Latvia that are nostalgic for Soviet times."

That mindset is believed to be widespread among residents who gave up Latvian-issued documents in favor of Russian passports following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. An additional 200,000 residents in Latvia and 65,000 residents in Estonia are considered stateless because they or their families arrived during the Soviet occupation and failed to naturalize after the Baltics won independence.

Many of Latvia's Russian citizens under age 75 are enrolled in Latvian language classes to be able to demonstrate a basic knowledge of Latvian, and, in effect, their loyalty to a country where they have lived for decades. Those who are unable to do so could face expulsion.

Natalya, the 69-year-old pensioner, said she fell into "a total depression" when the new residency law passed, spending days in bed worried about her future. She was 30 when she moved to Latvia from Ukraine for a job opportunity and said she never learned Latvian because "everything was in Russian."

"When you go to some establishments, they don't want to speak Russian anymore even though earlier they would speak it with you."

Natalya
69-year-old pensioner in Latvia

Later, she decided to apply for Russian citizenship because it meant she could retire and receive a pension years earlier than a citizen of Latvia.

"And now time has passed, and they're saying, 'Go back to those who gave you your citizenship,' but where? We don't have anyone there," Natalya said. "I am an only child; I don't have children. I have relatives in Odesa but to them I'm a traitor."

She said she began selling furniture and searching for places in Russia to relocate to, convinced she will never be able to grasp Latvian at her age. Natalya takes some comfort now in a two-year grace period announced by the Latvian government this summer but said she feels discriminated against in a city where she once spoke Russian freely.

"When you go to some establishments, they don't want to speak Russian anymore even though earlier they would speak it with you," she said. "Before the war, everybody was more personable, there was a friendship of the people."

There is a risk that the steps the Baltics are taking will deepen divisions between ethnic Latvians and Estonians and their Russian minorities, said Andzans, the think tank director. But any potential short-term tension is outweighed by an urgency to integrate societies as much as possible, he said.

"It's better to finish the job earlier while the window of opportunity is still open," he said. "Currently the Baltic states are safer than ever, and Russia is weaker than in past decades. But Russia is going to get back on track, unfortunately, so it looks like the window is slowly closing."

SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA/Stars and Stripes

The streets of Riga, Latvia, sprawl toward the Daugava River, as seen from St. Peter's Church. Many Latvians recall their days as members of the Soviet Union.

Russian language speakers attend a Latvian language class in Riga, Latvia, in November.

The Baltics were long hesitant to pursue tough de-Russification measures due to fear of Russia's reaction and pushback from the West, Andzans said. With Russia's attention focused on its war in Ukraine, that trepidation has largely dissipated, he said. The criticism has lingered.

The European Broadcasting Union and other international journalism organizations warned last month that Latvia's proposal to remove Russian from its public radio and television broadcasts will "undermine citizens' fundamental human rights" and make Russian speakers more vulnerable to disinformation and propaganda.

And human rights experts for the United Nations have expressed concern about restrictive laws in Latvia and Estonia that will require Russian-language schools to phase out instruction in Russian, calling them discriminatory.

Igor Pimenov, a former member of Latvian parliament and chairman of the board of an association that advocates for Russian language schooling in Latvia, said his group sees the forced transition as an attack on multiculturalism and an affront to democratic values.

"What could be more important than the desire of people to keep their cultural identity?" he said. "My family is not a threat to the Latvian culture and Latvian language, why should my theoretical grandchildren study in the Latvian language? The problem is these are not parents deciding but the state deciding what is better for their children."

Latvian officials argue the education reforms will eliminate one of the main drivers of segregation, make children from Russian-speaking families more employable and sever the link between a Russian-language education and the consumption of Russian state media.

"We see that the best integrator in a society is through language," Kols, the lawmaker, said. "I have come around people in my life in Latvia where I speak to them in Latvian, and they reply, 'I will not speak in your dog language' — that is an attitude, an imperialistic thinking [we are fighting]."

Hundreds of miles north in Narva, the most ethnically Russian city in Estonia, some residents bristle at what they perceive as a sidelining of the Russian language and culture. They also echo the Kremlin's narrative about the war in Ukraine, despite Estonia's ban on Russian television channels.

"No one will win against Russia," said a 65-year-old man fishing in the Narva river, who only agreed to be identified as a "pensioner." "Ukraine has always been full of fascists, Nazis. I don't know, I don't like them."

Sympathy toward Russia is typical in Narva, said Elena, 63, and Argo, 53, a Russian-Estonian couple. They recalled how crowds thronged the city's promenade this spring to watch World War II victory day celebrations across the river that separates Narva from Russia.

Argo said he was glad to see Estonia promoting its language after completing schooling in Estonia that was dominated by the Russian language.

Today he feels out of place in Narva, where even his doctors insist he speak Russian.

"Estonians are the ones who are being offended. Why do I have to speak Russian in Estonia?" he said. [De-Russification] should've been done 30 years ago."

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NATION

Fake Facebook accounts targeted US voters

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Someone in China created thousands of fake social media accounts designed to appear to be from Americans and used them to spread polarizing political content in an apparent effort to divide the U.S. ahead of next year's elections, Meta said Thursday.

The network of nearly 4,800 fake accounts was attempting to build an audience when it was identified and eliminated by the tech company, which owns Facebook and Instagram. The accounts sported fake photos, names and locations as a way to appear like everyday American Facebook users weighing in on political issues.

Instead of spreading fake content as other networks have done, the accounts were used to reshare posts from X, the platform formerly known as Twitter, that were created by politicians, news outlets and others. The interconnected accounts pulled content from both liberal and conservative sources, an indication that its goal was not to support one side or the other but to exaggerate partisan divisions and further inflame polarization.

The newly identified network shows how America's foreign adversaries exploit U.S.-based tech platforms to sow discord and distrust, and it hints at the serious threats posed by online disinformation next year, when national elections will occur in the U.S., India, Mexico, Ukraine, Pakistan, Taiwan and other nations.

"These networks still struggle to build audiences, but they're a warning," said Ben Nimmo, who leads investigations into inauthentic behavior on Meta's platforms. "Foreign threat actors are attempting to reach people across the internet ahead of next year's elections, and we need to remain alert."

Meta Platforms Inc., based in Menlo Park, Calif., couldn't definitively link the Chinese network to the Chinese government, but it did determine the network originated in that country. The content spread by the accounts complements Chinese government propaganda and disinformation that has sought to inflate partisan and ideological divisions within the U.S.

To appear more like normal Facebook accounts, the network would sometimes post about fashion or pets. Earlier this year, some of the accounts abruptly replaced their American-sounding user names and profile pictures with new ones suggesting they lived in India. The accounts then began spreading pro-Chinese content about Tibet and India, reflecting how fake networks can be redirected to focus on new targets.

Meta often points to its efforts to shut down fake social media networks as evidence of its commitment to protecting election integrity and democracy. But critics say the platform's focus on fake accounts distracts from its failure to address its responsibility for the misinformation already on its site that has contributed to polarization and distrust.

For instance, Meta will accept paid advertisements on its site to claim the U.S. election in 2020 was rigged or stolen, amplifying the lies of former President Donald Trump and other Republicans whose claims about election irregularities have been repeatedly debunked. Federal and state election officials and Trump's own attorney general have said there is no credible evidence that the presidential election, which Trump lost to Democrat Joe Biden, was tainted.

When asked about its ad policy, the company said it is focusing on future elections, not ones from the past, and will reject ads that cast unfounded doubt on upcoming contests.

And while Meta has announced a new artificial intelligence policy that will require political ads to bear a disclaimer if they contain AI-generated content, the company has allowed other altered videos that were created using more conventional programs to remain on its platform, including a digitally edited video of Biden that claims he is a pedophile.

"This is a company that cannot be taken seriously and that cannot be trusted," said Zamaan Qureshi, a policy adviser at the Real Facebook Oversight Board, an organization of civil rights leaders and tech experts who have been critical of Meta's approach to disinformation and hate speech. "Watch what Meta does, not what they say."

Meta executives discussed the network's activities during a conference call with reporters on Wednesday, the day after the tech giant released its policies for the upcoming election year — most of which were put in place for prior elections.

Vehicle connected to homicide crashes into bus during pursuit

Associated Press

MILWAUKEE — A vehicle wanted in connection with a homicide in Chicago crashed into a school bus during a police chase in Milwaukee on Wednesday, sending multiple people to area hospitals.

Police in Milwaukee said in a statement that they began chasing the vehicle shortly before noon. The vehicle collided with the school bus, which flipped and crashed into several other vehicles.

The driver of the suspect vehicle, a 26-year-old man, fled but was captured after a brief foot chase, police said. The statement did not offer any further details about the suspect or the homicide.

Two passengers in the suspect vehicle, one a 26-year-old and the other a 3-year-old, were hurt. The 26-year-old suffered what police called "non-fatal" injuries and the 3-year-old suffered serious injuries. They were both taken to a hospital for treatment.

The 71-year-old school bus driver and the 30-year-old driver of another vehicle were taken to hospitals with injuries.

No other injuries were reported. Police said the bus driver was the only person on the bus.

WISN-TV/AP

A vehicle wanted in connection with a homicide in Chicago crashed into a school bus during a police chase in Milwaukee on Wednesday, sending multiple people to area hospitals.

SETH WENIG/AP

A man, center, carries a banner with the colors of the Palestinian flag after the protesters holding it were escorted off stage after the lighting of the Christmas tree Wednesday at Rockefeller Center in New York.

Rockefeller Center tree is lit in midst of pro-Palestinian protest

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The iconic Christmas tree at Rockefeller Center was lit by more than 50,000 multicolored lights Wednesday night as crowds massed in New York City for the holiday tradition.

Two blocks from the celebration, seven people were taken into custody during a pro-Palestinian Manhattan protest, police said Thursday in a story in the New York Daily News. One of the protesters was charged with felony criminal mischief, five others were charged with obstructing governmental administration.

The protest included thousands of Palestinian supporters plus a smaller pro-Israeli contingent.

Police had warned of the potential for protesters to interrupt the event, as recent gatherings in New York have drawn activists seeking to bring attention to the Israel-Hamas war.

The massive tree — a 12 ton, 80-foot-tall Norway spruce from upstate New York — was illuminated in Rockefeller Center by about five miles of LED string lights and topped with a 900-pound star covered in 3 million gleaming crystals.

Mayor Eric Adams took part in the lighting before a cheering throng and a chorus sang "Joy to the World."

An opening night ceremony in Manhattan featured appearances by Cher, Barry Manilow and Kelly Clarkson, among others. The Radio City Rockettes also performed.

Starting in the 1930s, the Christmas tree tradition has drawn thousands of visitors to the city each year during the holiday season. The tree will remain lit from 5 a.m. to midnight every day until Jan. 13. On Christmas day, it'll be lit 24 hours.

Videos posted to social media showed several hundred chanting pro-Palestinian protesters, many carrying Palestinian flags, in front of the News Corp. building, not far from the tree site.

NATION

Henry Kissinger dies at 100 years old

Secretary of state for 2 presidents played major role in US history

BY NANCY BENAC
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, the diplomat with the thick glasses and gravelly voice who dominated foreign policy as the United States extricated itself from Vietnam and broke down barriers with China, died Wednesday, his consulting firm said. He was 100.

With his gruff yet commanding presence and behind-the-scenes manipulation of power, Kissinger exerted uncommon influence on global affairs under Presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, earning both vilification and the Nobel Peace Prize. Decades later, his name still provoked impassioned debate over foreign policy landmarks long past.

Kissinger's power grew during the turmoil of Watergate, when the politically attuned diplomat assumed a role akin to co-president to the weakened Nixon.

"No doubt my vanity was piqued," Kissinger later wrote of his expanding influence. "But the dominant emotion was a premonition of catastrophe."

A Jew who fled Nazi Germany with his family in his teens, Kissinger in his later years cultivated the reputation of respected statesman, giving speeches, offering advice to Republicans and Democrats alike and managing a global consulting business. He turned up in President Donald Trump's White House on multiple occasions. But Nixon-era documents and tapes, as they trickled out over the years, brought revelations — many in Kissinger's own words — that sometimes cast him in a harsh light.

BOB WICKLEY/Stars and Stripes

Secretary of State Henry Kissinger boards Air Force One as President Gerald Ford and his wife, Betty, wave in Tokyo in 1975.

Never without his detractors, Kissinger after he left government was dogged by critics who argued that he should be called to account for his policies on Southeast Asia and support of repressive regimes in Latin America.

For eight restless years — first as national security adviser, later as secretary of state, and for a time in the middle holding both titles — Kissinger ranged across the breadth of major foreign policy issues. He conducted the first "shuttle diplomacy" in the quest for Middle East peace. He used secret channels to pursue ties between the United States and China, ending decades of isolation and mutual hostility.

He initiated the Paris negotiations that ultimately provided a face-saving means — a "decent interval," he called it — to get the United States out of a costly war in Vietnam. Two years later, Saigon fell to the communists.

And he pursued a policy of detente with the Soviet Union that led to arms control agreements and raised the possibility that the tensions of the Cold War and its nuclear threat did not have to last forever.

At age 99, he was still out on tour for his book on leadership. Asked in a July 2022 interview with ABC whether he wished he could take back any of his decisions, Kissinger demurred, saying: "I've been thinking about these problems all my life. It's my hobby as well as my occupation. And so the recommendations I made were the best of which I was then capable."

Even then, he had mixed thoughts on Nixon's record, saying "his foreign policy has held up and he was quite effective in domestic policy" while allowing that the disgraced president had "permitted himself to be involved in a number of steps that were inappropriate for a president."

CARLOS BONGIOANNI/Stars and Stripes

Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger addresses members of the Senate Armed Services Committee in 2018, as former Secretary of State George Shultz looks on.

As Kissinger turned 100 in May 2023, his son David wrote in The Washington Post that his father's centenary "might have an air of inevitability for anyone familiar with his force of character and love of historical symbolism. Not only has he outlived most of his peers, eminent detractors and students, but he has also remained indefatigably active throughout his 90s."

Asked during a CBS interview in the lead-up to his 100th birthday about those who view his conduct of foreign policy over the years as a kind of "criminality," Kissinger was nothing but dismissive.

"That's a reflection of their ignorance," Kissinger said. "It wasn't conceived that way. It wasn't conducted that way."

Kissinger continued his involvement in global affairs even in his last months. He met Chinese leader Xi Jinping in Beijing in July, as bilateral relations were at a low point. And 50 years after his shuttle diplomacy helped end the 1973 Mideast war, when Israel fended off a surprise attack from Egypt and Syria, Kissinger warned of the risks of that conflict repeating itself after Israel faced a surprise assault by Hamas on Oct. 7.

Tributes for Kissinger from prominent U.S. officials poured in immediately upon word of his death. Former President George W. Bush said the U.S. "lost one of the most dependable and distinctive voices on foreign affairs" and former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg said Kissinger was "endlessly generous with the wisdom gained over the course of an extraordinary life."

Kissinger's consulting firm said he passed away at his home in Connecticut.

Kissinger was a practitioner of realpolitik — using diplomacy to achieve practical objectives rather than advance lofty ideals. Supporters said his pragmatic bent served U.S. interests; critics saw a Machiavellian approach that ran counter to democratic ideals.

He was castigated for authorizing telephone wiretaps of reporters and his own National Security Council staff to plug news leaks in Nixon's White House. He was denounced on college campuses for the bombing and allied invasion of Cambodia in April 1970, intended to destroy North Vietnamese supply lines to communist forces in South Vietnam.

That "incursion," as Nixon and Kissinger called it, was blamed by some for contributing to Cambodia's fall into the hands of Khmer Rouge insurgents who later slaughtered some 2 million Cambodians.

Heinz Alfred Kissinger was born in the Bavarian city of Fuerth on May 27, 1923, the son of a schoolteacher. His family left Nazi Germany in 1938 and settled in Manhattan, where Heinz changed his name to Henry.

Kissinger had two children, Elizabeth and David, from his first marriage.

Fed's inflation gauge shows price pressures cooling off

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Federal Reserve's preferred inflation measure cooled last month, the latest sign that price pressures are waning in the face of high interest rates and moderating economic growth.

Thursday's report from the Commerce Department said prices were unchanged from September to October, down from a 0.4% rise the previous month. Compared with a year ago, prices rose 3% in October, below the 3.4% annual rate in September. It was the lowest year-over-year inflation rate in more than 2 1/2 years.

Excluding volatile food and energy costs, increases in so-called core prices also slowed. They rose just 0.2% from September to October, down from a 0.3% increase the previous month. Compared with 12 months ago, core prices rose 3.5%, below the 3.7% year-over-year increase in September.

Economists closely track core prices, which are thought to provide a good sign of inflation's likely future path.

With inflation easing, the Fed is expected to keep its key benchmark rate unchanged when it next meets in two weeks.

Applications for jobless aid slightly up; ongoing claims reach highest in 2 years

Associated Press

Slightly more Americans filed for jobless claims last week, pushing the overall number of people in the U.S. collecting unemployment benefits to its highest level in two years.

Applications for unemployment benefits rose by 7,000 to 218,000 for the week ending Nov. 25, the Labor Department reported Thursday.

However, 1.93 million people were collecting unemployment benefits the week that ended Nov. 18, about 86,000 more than the previous week and the most in two years. Continuing claims have risen in nine of the past 10 weeks.

Jobless claim applications are seen as representative of the number of layoffs in a given week.

Analysts say the continuing claims are rising because many of those who are already unemployed may now be having a harder time finding new work.

And while the labor market remains strong, some softness is beginning to show.

Hiring has slowed from the breakneck pace of 2021 and 2022 when the economy rebounded from the COVID-19 recession. Employers added a record 606,000 jobs a month in 2021 and nearly 400,000 per month last year. So far in 2023, monthly hiring has averaged a still-solid 239,000, but it's come in below 200,000 in three of the last five months.

Employers are also posting fewer job openings.

The Federal Reserve has raised its benchmark interest rate 11 times since March 2022 to slow the economy and rein in inflation that hit a four-decade high last year. The job market and economic growth remained surprisingly resilient, defying predictions that the economy would slip into a recession this year.

EUROPE

Russian missile strikes pound eastern Ukraine

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Russian missiles tore through apartment buildings in eastern Ukraine's Donetsk region, local officials said Thursday, killing at least two people and burying families under rubble as the Kremlin's forces continued to pound the fiercely contested area with long-range weapons.

Russian military units simultaneously launched six S-300 missiles toward the Donetsk region during the night, according to Ukrainian Internal Affairs Minister Ihor Klymenko. Another two were fired separately in the same area, the Ukrainian air force said.

The simultaneous missile strikes hit three Donetsk cities — Pokrovsk, Novohrodivka and Myrnohrad, Klymenko said. The cities lie 15-25 miles from the front line.

The battlefield has seen few major changes in recent months. A Ukrainian counteroffensive that started in June dented deep Russian defenses in some areas but has failed to change the complexion of the 22-month war.

Moscow has held firm in most of the areas it occupies while using the long-range weapons to inflict damage on Ukraine, including civilian areas.

Emergency workers pulled the body of a 62-year-old man from the wreckage of a destroyed multi-story building in Novohrodivka. Another death was reported in the same city by Ukraine's Emergency Service. Four more people may be under the rubble, including a child, authorities said.

In Pokrovsk, the strikes destroyed a multi-story building, nine houses, a police office and cars. Emergency crews helped rescue a man with a 6-month-old baby, covered in blood, in his hands, officials said.

The head of the city administration, Serhii Dobriak, said it was fourth time Pokrovsk came under attack in the past month.

"They are striking the city center, the houses," he said. "They are just destroying the civilian population."

He urged people to evacuate because "the intensity of strikes is increasing."

All three of the targeted cities are close to Avdiivka, a city where a fierce battle has taken place in recent months.

Avdiivka is a gateway to parts of the Donetsk region still under Ukrainian control.

Ukrainian officials said recently that Russian forces have ramped up attacks in eastern Ukraine in an attempt to gain ground near Avdiivka and around Bakhmut, another key front-line city.

In southern Ukraine, Russian forces shelled residential areas in the Kherson region, damaging critical infrastructure and a school, the office of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said. One person was killed, the office said.

Russia's foreign minister faces Western critics at talks

Associated Press

SKOPJE, North Macedonia — Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov faced Western critics while attending international security talks Thursday in Northern Macedonia, where he blamed "NATO's reckless expansion to the East" for war returning to Europe.

Lavrov arrived in Skopje to attend meetings hosted by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. The diplomats of several OSCE member nations, including Ukraine, boycotted the event due to Lavrov's planned attendance amid Russia's war in Ukraine.

The Russian foreign minister spoke for 15 minutes before walking out of the meetings. He blamed what he described as Western tolerance of the "ruling neo-Nazi regime in Kyiv" for the war that started with Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

"The very existence of Russians and their decisive contribution to the history of Ukraine are denied," Lavrov said. "There are plenty of facts. The OSCE and its relevant institutions are silent."

Russian President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly alleged that Ukraine's government is made up of "neo-Nazis," even though the country has a democratically elected Jewish president who lost relatives in the Holocaust.

Putin and other Russian officials have invoked the Holocaust, World War II and Nazism to legitimize the invasion of Ukraine. Historians see their rhetoric as disinformation and a cynical ploy.

Western ministers attending the OSCE meeting were sharply critical of Lavrov after he spoke.

"Russia's attempts to blame others for its own choices are transparent," said Danish Foreign Minister Lars Lokke Rasmussen, who was speaking when Lavrov walked out.

Based in Vienna, Austria, the OSCE is an intergovernmental organization focused on promoting security, stability, and cooperation among its participating states.

WEEKEND

‘Fargo’ returns after long hiatus

Television, Page 28

HOLIDAY GIFT GUIDE

Whether you have a hefty list or are just shopping for people who can be difficult to buy for, The Associated Press has some suggestions to keep spirits bright

Pages 15-17; 19

AP, iStock photos/Stars and Stripes illustration

Music — 18 Movies — 20 Travel & Food — 21-25 Video games — 27 Crossword — 34

WEEKEND: GADGETS & TECHNOLOGY

iStock

The results might be embarrassing, but it still might be fun to find out what your go-to jams were in 2023.

Wrapping up users' habits

How to see what you listened to the most all year on Spotify

BY EMILY BLOCH
The Philadelphia Inquirer

Be honest — how many times did you listen to Jordan Mailata and Patti LaBelle's cover of "This Christmas"? Even if you don't want to say, Spotify knows.

The music platform's annual Spotify Wrapped — a deep dive into its users' listening habits, packaged into a glitzy summary — is back for its seventh year, leaving the internet with mixed feelings.

Some audiophiles wait for this moment with bated breath while others try their best to avoid it, going as far as muting terms like wrapped on their social media feeds ahead of time.

The annual release features a series of aesthetically pleasing, shareable graphics that give insight into the listener's tastes — for better or worse.

Wrapped calls out users for songs they've listened to on repeat and other potentially mockable habits. Do you share your account with your kids and they listen to the Wiggles constantly? Did you listen to Taylor Swift's "1989 (Taylor's Version)" bonus tracks an embarrassing number of times?

Here's what else you need to know.

How do I see and share my Spotify Wrapped?

To see your Spotify Wrapped, users can use either the mobile or web browser versions of the music streaming service. It is not available to view on the desktop app.

Here are the steps to take:

1. Open Spotify on your phone. A prompt to see your 2023 Wrapped should be visible from the home page of the app. If it isn't, or you're using a web browser, visit www.spotify.com/us/wrapped.

2. The Wrapped Story will walk you through your genre, song and artist listening patterns.

3. This year's Wrapped also characterizes users' listening habits as one of 12 types of listeners. Results include things like "hypnotist," for their tendency to concentrate and listen to albums all the way through, or "vampire," for "embracing darkness" and listening to "emotional" and "atmospheric music more than most."

4. Each slide of the Wrapped Story has a "share" button at the bottom. Click that button to save each individual slide to your camera roll or post on social media. At the end of your Wrapped Story, there will be a second opportunity to save and change the color scheme of your Top Artists summary.

Is there a version of this for Apple Music or Amazon Music?

Amazon does not have a version.

Apple Music has a feature called Replay available all year where users can see a detailed view of their listening habits. On Tuesday, however, the platform debuted its first Wrapped-style "year-end experience."

Similar to Spotify Wrapped, it shows users their top stats including songs, albums, and artists. But critics say it's lacking in "unique, shareable experiences like Spotify's 'Audio Aura' in 2021 or its 'listening personality' feature in 2022."

What's the time frame for Spotify Wrapped data collection?

It's ambiguous.

In past years, platform spokespeople said data were analyzed between January through October, treating November and December as "cheat months" for blasting holiday music and whatever else listeners were hiding.

That's changed this year.

When a tweet in October from the entertainment aggregating account Pop Base suggested the cutoff was on Halloween, Spotify weighed in.

"Hmm, that doesn't sound right to us," Spotify's official account replied to Pop Base on X (formerly Twitter). "Don't worry, Wrapped is still counting past Oct. 31."

We don't know exactly when listening data stopped being collected this year. But we can assume it was sometime in mid-to-late November.

Can I modify my results?

Nope. You get what you get, corny repeat song outings and all — unless you plan ahead.

It's too late to make edits this year, but Spotify does have a feature where you can opt out of including a song or artist from your listening data.

While using Spotify, users can click the ellipses next to a song and select "exclude from your taste profile."

For example, if you exclude your nightly sleep music playlist or your brown noise for studying, those songs will have "less influence" on your weekly Discover playlists and on your annual Wrapped data, according to Spotify.

But for now, it's time to lean into all the embarrassing glory — one cheesy breakup anthem at a time.

GADGETS

Unique gift alternatives to Apple's wireless earbuds

BY GREGG ELLMAN
Tribune News Service

Like it or not, it's that time of year. Once again, true wireless earbuds will be one of the most popular electronic gifts this season. Sure, it's easy and safe to buy the popular white ones, and you can't go wrong. But there are many choices. Here are a few:

Jabra's **Elite 10** true wireless (Bluetooth 5.3) earbuds ($249.99) offer all-day comfort: Jabra's ComfortFit technology uses a unique EarGel design to help relieve in-ear pressure. The Dolby-powered sound pumping out of the Elite 10s is also outstanding.

Jabra Advanced Active Noise Cancellation works well and is touted by Jabra as twice as strong in performance as that of its standard ANC. The Elite 10s are easy to control with physical on-ear buttons. For hands-free calls, six-mic technology makes them shine.

They come with extra ear gels and an IP57 water and dust rating. Using the included storage charging case (USB-C and Qi) will yield 36 hours with the ANC off and 27 hours with it on. The Elite 10 is available in 11 colors.

Jabra also has the **Elite 8** Active true Bluetooth 5.3 wireless earbuds ($179.99). Jabra testing shows them to be the world's toughest earbuds: They are constructed with military-grade durability and an IP68 rating, making them waterproof, sweatproof, dust-proof and drop-resistant.

Those using them for active sports will like the ShakeGrip technology, which keeps the earbuds in place without shifting. Sound from the 6mm speakers is powered by Dolby Audio and is assisted by Adaptive Hybrid Active Noise Cancellation. The ANC in the Elite 8s is rated as 1.6 times stronger than that of Jabra's standard ANC. A six-microphone system keeps calls crystal clear — the earbuds also have windproof call technology.

When playing music, the battery is rated for up to 56 hours with the ANC off or 32 hours with the ANC on. Color choices include black, mint, navy, dark grey and caramel.

Online: jabra.com

OneOdio's **OpenRock S** open ear conduction Bluetooth 5.3 earbuds are ideal for athletic use with a patented adjustable ear hook design. They also have great sound with 16.2mm dynamic drivers and OneOdio's patented TubeBass Technology and dynamic audio algorithm. Touch controls on the earbuds work well, and four advanced AI-powered noise-canceling microphones provide perfect voice transmission on hands-free calls.

The ear hook design ensures they stay in place, even during the most active pursuits. Their open-air design is ideal for any activity in which you still want to hear your outside surroundings.

They have an IPX5 water-resistant rating to allow use in light rain or when sweat is an issue. The battery is rated for 60 hours with the 750mAh USB-C charging/storage case; the earbuds on their own will produce about 19 hours of playtime.

With the Audiophile app (iOS and Android), custom audio EQ settings can be made and saved.

Online: oneodio.com; $89.99, available in black or light khaki

Status Audio's **Between 3ANC** true Bluetooth 5.2 wireless earbuds are unusual with three drivers: two balanced armature drivers and one 10mm dynamic driver in each earbud. What this means to the user is crystal-clear sound with a deep bass.

They feature Active Noise Cancellation up to 38 decibels and a transparency mode to hear one's outside surroundings. With an IPX5 water-resistant rating, users won't have to worry about sweat, splashes or getting caught in the rain.

Hands-free calls will broadcast your voice with supreme clarity from the six beamforming microphones with environmental noise reduction. They will play for 8 hours continuously with the ANC on or 12 hours with it off. Add the wireless charging case, and you'll get up to 24 additional hours.

Online: status.co; $199, available in Bone (white) or Onyx (black)

While the cost of true wireless earbuds can strain a holiday gift budget, House of Marley recently launched the **Little Bird** True wireless Bluetooth 5.3 earbuds for $39.99.

In true HOM fashion, the craftsmanship of the Little Bird is first class and eco-friendly, using bamboo and recycled plastics. They have a battery life of six hours and up to 24 with three more charges from the included USB-C charging/storage case.

The sound they produce is clear and crisp from the 10mm drivers. Touch controls work well, as does the internal microphone. The Little Bird earbuds also have a mode to enhance the sound while gaming or watching movies.

Online: thehouseofmarley.com

WEEKEND: HOLIDAY GIFT GUIDE

Crowd-pleasing choices

From saving wildlife to satisfying football fans, check out these eclectic suggestions

BY LEANNE ITALIE
Associated Press

Staring down a hefty holiday gift list? There's something for everybody out there.

Artisan gifts can be a hit. Head to Etsy.com to tap into the global handmade marketplace's trends for the season. This year, they include "grandpa chic," a counterpoint in home decor to the "granny chic" and "coastal grandma" vibes of recent years. In homage to gramps, think rich tones of burgundy, olive green and tobacco brown, and lots of dark woods, plaid textiles and leather.

"The interest in adding more texture and depth to the home is more important than ever," said Etsy trend expert Dayna Isom Johnson.

If you haven't got time for that or any other gift hunt, consider one or more of these:

Dassai Blue sake provides a tasty indulgence in a beautiful bottle. Spirits are good gift options for the holidays.

DASSAI/AP

Sun hats for all: A company called Wallaroo Hats appreciates UPF sun protection in hats, and hears you when you've begged for a wider range of styles. They also appreciate the need for sun hats to be travel friendly. So why not hats all around for men, women and kids? Ranging from $35 for a visor to $71 for a wide brim.

Some kitchen whimsy: The Loch Ness Monster is legendary. A company called Ototo has turned Nessie into a soup ladle in green, turquoise or purple. And it stands up by itself. The company sells lots of other colorful, fun kitchen gadgets, including a baby Nessie tea infuser and colander spoon. $17 for soup and $16.95 for tea. Online: ototodesigns.com

A little cycling: Travel planning and prep ideas are abundant online, but National Geographic's "100 Bike Rides of a Lifetime" offers the info and the eye candy in a handy book. It spans the Americas, Europe, Africa, Asia and Oceania. And it has options for the casual to the most expert riders. Know-before-you-go advice and options for shortish trips to three-month expeditions. $35.

Baby Phat is back: Kimora Lee Simmons sold her iconic Y2K label in 2010 but bought it back in 2019, in time to tap into the popularity of all things early aughts. That includes velour galore, low-rise jeans, miniskirts and graphic T-shirts. She recently launched her first full collection and buying site since her return with some of her signature styles from back in the day. On offer: her Siamese cat logo. Sold exclusively on Babyphat.com. Prices range from $40 to $100.

The Paw Patrollers: PAW Patrol is on a roll! The new animated hit "PAW Patrol: The Mighty Movie" is a sequel to the preschool series that delights millions of kids. Gund has put out plush for hero pups Chase and Skye, both in their shiny uniforms from the movie. They come 9 and 6 inches tall, at $12 and $16.

Football fan fun: "The Football 100," by Mike Sando, Dan Pompei and The Athletic NFL staff. The greatest football players of all time? Debate away, but note the expertise on display in this collection of reportage from those who study the game and see its warriors up close. Football's history unfolds in profiles and bonus chapters. So who's on top of the list? SPOILER: Tom Brady. William Morrow. $40.

OTOTO/AP

Kitchen gadget gifts are useful and, in this case, whimsical. This nesting kitchen colander, soup ladle and tea infuser come in the shape of the Loch Ness Monster.

A little taste: The sake-making Sakurai family of Japan has just opened a brewery and tasting room in Hyde Park, N.Y., and launched a U.S. brand, Dassai Blue 50. The premium sake, which gets its name from a Japanese proverb about the color indigo, is available in 30 states via shipping by Union Square Wines & Spirits. Order it as a surprise for your stateside buddies. $28.99 for a 720 milliliter bottle.

For your colorers: Crayola has put out a set of pre-shaded, black-and-white photos on heavy cardstock for realist creations. The HD Coloring Kit includes 30 color pencils and 20 images of flowers and animal life. Adult coloring book fans and young artists ages 8 and up can enjoy. $19.99.

CRAYOLA/AP

This product illustration shows the Crayola HD Coloring Kit. Drawing kits for adults and children alike are good options for holiday gifts.

Date night surprises: There's a new set of cards called "It's a Date!" that include 40 scratch-off ideas for couples fun, romance or just plain silliness. The cards include the length of time and estimated cost of each activity. Some may not cost a cent. Good for a range of ages. The idea is to scratch off then execute no matter what it is. $17.99. Available on Amazon.

Save an elephant: The women founders behind The Elephant Project donate 100% of their proceeds from the plush elephants they sell to organizations that help fight poaching and care for injured and orphaned elephants. A choice of four different stuffies or a bundle of three. $39 to $105.

Purchases of this plush doll sold by The Elephant Project raise money for injured and orphaned elephants. Donations are one option for holiday gifts.

THE ELEPHANT PROJECT/AP

A taste of pickleball: Please your pickleball-loving giftees with a high-end paddle from Proxrpickleball.com. They have collabs with top players who offer input in the design process. That includes Zane Navratil. His signature paddle has a 6-inch handle to assist backhands and a length of 16.5 inches. Available on the company's site. $209.99.

PlayStations are plentiful: Recall, if you will, the gamer frenzy over the PS5 shortage due to semiconductor chip and supply chain snarls. That's no more, Sony says. This is the first season since the console was released in November 2020 that there are PS5s aplenty. There are standard and digital edition versions, and various bundles with games and other extras. Looking for a base price? $499.99, but shop around.

10 ideas sure to strike a chord with music lovers

BY MARIA SHERMAN
Associated Press

For the obsessive record collector or the casual listener, the shower singer or the rock star of tomorrow, a music-inspired gift is never a faux pas over the holidays.

The challenge, of course, is in the decision making. Is a genre-specific festival ticket the way to go? What about a box set fit for a budding audiophile?

Here's a variety gift guide for the audio lover in your life — from photo card binders for the K-pop superfan to a pair of some of the best headphones on the market and a cheese board that looks surprisingly hi-def.

It'll be music to their ears.

UNCOMMON GOODS/AP

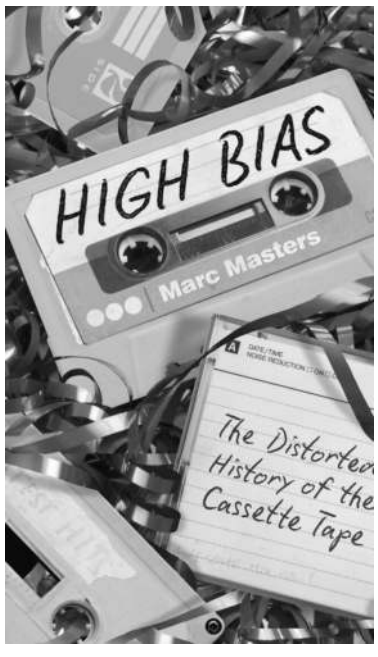
You can't spin your vinyl on the "Turntable Cheese Board," but you can put out all of the charcuterie hits at your holiday party.

Give 'em Simone: There are vinyl box sets, and then there is "Four Women: The Nina Simone Complete Recordings 1964-1967," a massive, seven-LP collection built from the seven albums Simone released for the Philips label during her most prolific creative period. That's 1964's "Nina Simone in Concert" and "Broadway-Blues-Ballads"; 1965's "I Put A Spell On You," "Pastel Blues" and "Let It All Out"; 1966's "Wild Is the Wind"; and 1967's "High Priestess of Soul," remastered from the original tapes. It is the ideal way to celebrate the musician and civil rights activist, and the ideal gift for a music fan of any walk. **Cost:** $199.96

VERVE LABEL GROUP/AP

If you're looking for a vinyl box set, "Four Women: The Nina Simone Complete Recordings 1964-1967" is a seven-LP collection covering the iconic musician and activist's most prolific creative period.

Hit "play": The cassette tape revolutionized the music industry and the music listening experience: You could make mixtapes for loved ones, record that hit song from the radio or, best of all, carry your favorite album around with you. In "High Bias: The Distorted History of the Cassette Tape," music journalist Marc Masters provides the definitive text on the tiny-but-mighty piece of plastic. Perfect for the pop-culture obsessed. **Cost:** $20



UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA PRESS/AP

Marc Masters' "High Bias: The Distorted History of the Cassette Tape" could be a good read for the pop culture fan on your list.

For your pleasure: In 2021, Harry Styles entered the beauty game with his company, "Pleasing," beginning with colorful, gender-neutral nail polish. It continued to grow, eventually including skincare and makeup. This holiday season, Styles has entered the fragrance game. Launched this month, Styles' perfume line includes "Closeness," described as a "woody musk scent"; "Rivulets," which is a "floral, fresh amber scent"; and "Bright, Hot," a "heady woody amber scent with top notes of plum and tobacco." Something for everyone, or, at least, the pop music fan in your life. It's a welcome distraction from One Direction's indefinite hiatus. **Cost:** $135

Say cheese: This one might give an audiophile a heart attack, but that doesn't make it any less adorable. 'Tis the season to break out the charcuterie board and host a great holiday party — but why not do it in musical style? The "Turntable Cheese Board" from Uncommon Goods is exactly what it sounds like — a cheese board designed to look like the most expensive, slick turntable, featuring a slate platter and hidden slicer in the one arm. Delicious. **Cost:** $78

VIKING/AP

Barbra Streisand has finally put out her long-awaited memoir, "My Name is Barbra," which checks in at 1,040 pages.

Hear it loud: There's never a wrong time to upgrade headphones — in fact, it makes for a great gift. Sony's MDR-7506 headphones are a particularly wise selection. This pair is perfect for aspiring producers, music students, podcast hosts of the future, anyone who wants to look cool walking down the street with studio-grade headphones and beyond. They're an industry standard for a reason. **Cost:** $80-$130

The way she was: On Nov. 7, Barbra Streisand released her very long and very long-awaited memoir, "My Name is Barbra." She'd talked about it for years — in 2021, she told Jimmy Fallon that Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis had asked her to write a memoir in the early 1980s, when the former first lady was an editor at Doubleday. (Heck, during an Associated Press interview in 2009, Streisand mentioned that she had been writing chapters about her life, in longhand. "I go back and forth," Streisand said at the time. "Do I really want to write about my life? Do I really want to relive my life? I'm not sure.") But beyond the wait — and the fact that "My Name is Barbra" is well worth it, a larger-than-life autobiography coming in at a whopping 1,040 pages — are the revelations that await the reader. From her childhood to her marriage to the making of "Yentl" and beyond. **Cost:** $47

K-pop cool: Far too often, holiday gift guides — even those specifically catering to music enthusiasts — fail to account for dedicated, artist-specific fandoms. And that's a shame, because the most thoughtful presents are often the most specific ones. They communicate to the gift-receiver that the gift-giver really gets them. That they listen. For the K-pop lover, why not get a photocard binder where they can store their limited-edition collection? Just make sure you know who their "bias" (a K-pop term for favorite member) is first, OK? That would be embarrassing. **Cost:** $13-$20

It's not a phase: In his second book, "Goth: A History," Lol Tolhurst, co-founder the influential "goth" band The Cure, explores the often-misunderstood movement, what he calls "the last true alternative outsider subculture." It's about the music subgenre born out of late-'70s punk and dread, of course (Joy Division, Bauhaus, Siouxsie and the Banshees) but also touches on Tim Burton films, Edgar Allan Poe's poem "The Raven," Mary Shelley's novel "Frankenstein," Emily Brontë and an adolescent period marked by black nail polish and nihilism. It's a well-rounded, interdisciplinary and definitive history and part-memoir, perfect for that friend who swears he liked that band before they were big. **Cost:** $20-$25

There's something going on: In 1995, The Roots dropped their influential sophomore album, "Do You Want More?!!!??!," a critically acclaimed album in hip-hop canon. Now, nearly three decades later, a four-LP box set has been released — a remastered version of the original two LP albums and now with bonus tracks curated by Questlove himself. He and Tariq Trotter, aka Black Thought, wrote the liner notes, and that's a kind of exclusive commentary you can only pay for. (And if you're feeling really generous, you could also throw in Trotter's new book, "The Upcycled Self: A Memoir on the Art of Becoming Who We Are" and become the greatest gift giver in your circle.) **Cost:** $89.98

Te amo: What do music fans really want for the holidays? The live music experience, of course. In 2024, the Latin music festival Besame Mucho is headed to Austin, Texas, following the success of its inaugural year in Los Angeles, and should be considered a hot-ticket item. The lineup features Los Tigres Del Norte, Banda MS, Grupo Frontera and many more — a can't miss event. **Cost:** $275-950

WEEKEND: HOLIDAY GIFT GUIDE – ALBUMS

"Christmas Songs" by David Foster and Katharine McPhee

"Ella Wishes You A Swinging Christmas" by Ella Fitzgerald

"A Family Christmas" by Andrea, Matteo and Virginia Bocelli

"Just A Dirtbag Christmas" by Wheatus

"Christmas with Brandy"

Fill your stocking with Cher's first holiday album, an Ella Fitzgerald classic and much, much more

By Maria Sherman
Associated Press

What is a holiday season without festive music? The classics are great, but the classics performed by some of the best performers across pop, R&B, rock, opera, soul and beyond? That's a real reason to celebrate.

In honor of the most wonderful time of the year, The Associated Press' Music Writer Maria Sherman has compiled some of the best new holiday releases for your listening pleasure. Because sometimes the best thing that can happen to an old classic is revitalizing it with a new performance.

Ella Fitzgerald, "Ella Wishes You A Swinging Christmas": Don't bore us, get to the chorus — or in the case of this collectible vinyl release of "Ella Wishes You A Swinging Christmas," give us the hits! Ella Fitzgerald's 1960 holiday record is largely considered by critics to be one of the greatest of all time — so why not celebrate the best of the best on a new piece of wax? It's not a bad gift idea, either.

Cher, "Christmas": Somehow, "Christmas" is Cher's first holiday album — not that she hasn't been asked to do one in the past. "I just didn't want to do one," she told the AP. "I didn't know how I was going to make it a 'Cher Christmas album.'" The secret, it turns out, was to get a bunch of A-list collaborators on her album, something she's never done before. There's Cyndi Lauper on "Put A Little Holiday In Your Heart," Stevie Wonder on "What Christmas Means to Me," Darlene Love on "Christmas (Baby, Please Come Home)," Michael Bublé on "Home," and even the rapper Tyga on "Drop Top Sleigh Ride." There's something for everyone, and then some.

Brandy, "Christmas with Brandy": For those looking for a seductive holiday album, the search is over. R&B great Brandy has released "Christmas with Brandy," a collection of sultry — and in other moments, soulful — imaginations of Christmas classics and originals. Like on "Christmas Gift," which features her daughter Sy'Rai, and "Feels Different."

Elsewhere, Brandy offers a PG-13 holiday special. "Help me undress, oh, yes / I'll be your present / Just give me your presence / That's all that I'm askin' of you," she sings on chorus of the lead single, "Christmas Party for Two." "Take my body / Boy, you know you got it / Just look what you started / It's a Christmas party for two."

Chicago, "Chicago Greatest Christmas Hits": Lifelong fans of the rock band with horns are familiar with Chicago's extensive holiday discography: starting with 1998's "Chicago XXV: The Christmas Album," (reissued in 2003 as "Chicago Christmas: What's It Gonna Be Santa" with six additional tracks), 2011's "Chicago XXXIII: O Christmas Three," and 2019's "Chicago XXXVII: Chicago Christmas." But the only way to complete the collection — or begin your own, and with just the singles — is to check out "Greatest Christmas Hits," which pulls from all those releases and is sold in festive red and green vinyl.

Andrea, Matteo and Virginia Bocelli, "A Family Christmas": Italian opera singer Andrea Bocelli got the whole family together for a new, deluxe edition of their first album together, "A Family Christmas." Andrea, his 26-year-old son Matteo and his 11-year-old daughter Virginia teamed up for the release, adding four new recordings to the collection: "Let It Snow," "Silver Bells," "E' Natale!" and "Winter Wonderland." If you can listen to the famed tenor harmonize with his children and not shed a tear, you're a stronger person than most.

Wheatus, "Just A Dirtbag Christmas": Far too often, holiday albums carry an air of seriousness. But the most wonderful time of the year requires moments of levity — as well as deep existential thought about the nature of love and family and what really matters on this Earth. Enter Wheatus, the '90s radio rock band best known for their ubiquitous hit, "Teenage Dirtbag." "Just a Dirtbag Christmas" plays into the single's popularity, featuring a string quartet version of "Teenage Dirtbag," as well as a rewritten, holiday-appropriate version of the song. Humor abounds, like in the pop-rocking comedic additions of "You Made Me Believe in Christmas," "Feels Like Christmas," "Mean Christmas." Break out the bucket hat and the Yule log for this one.

"Under the Tree" by Ally Brooke

"Christmas" by Cher

"Chicago: Greatest Christmas Hits"

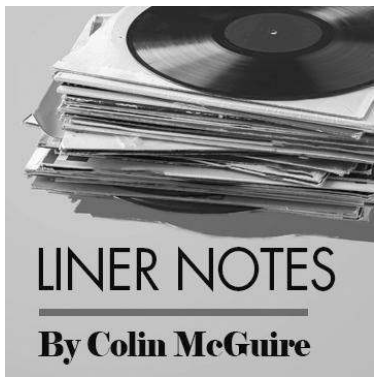
"Luther Vandross Classic Christmas"

David Foster and Katharine McPhee, "Christmas Songs": No strangers to holiday albums, the dynamic duo of David Foster and Katharine McPhee released their completed "Christmas Songs" collection earlier this year. This is one for the traditionalists among us: jazz-y, theatrical interpretations of Christmas classics that deliver a nostalgic satisfaction, amplified by their combined, immense talent. Well, theirs, and the skills of The Tabernacle Choir at Temple Square, whose reimagined "Amazing Grace," arranged by Foster, is a song to behold.

Luther Vandross, "Luther Vandross Classic Christmas": Released nearly two decades after the R&B and soul giant's death, "Luther Vandross Classic Christmas," is a short but memorable modern-day Christmas classic: a three-track EP built off the never-before-released "At Christmas Time," "May Christmas Bring You Happiness" and a special bonus a cappella mix of "At Christmas Time." There's no better time of the year to hear the velvet voice do what he does best.

Ally Brooke, "Under the Tree": All is fair in love and war and girl groups. Emmy Award winner Ally Brooke, formerly of Fifth Harmony, is back with a brand-spanking-new Christmas EP titled "Under the Tree." Anchored by the shimmery retro-pop title track, "Under the Tree" is a Brooke original that has her repeating "You can find me under the tree (Under the tree) / I'll be waitin' on Christmas Eve (Christmas Eve) / Baby, unwrap me," in its cheeky chorus. It is light-hearted, amorous fun. And it quickly does a 180, rounding out the tracklist with "White Christmas," "I'll Be Home for Christmas," and of course, the classic, "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas."

WEEKEND: MUSIC



Billboard Hot 100 No. 2, Nov. 25, 2023: 'Lovin On Me,' Jack Harlow

Note: For the second month in a row, Taylor Swift's "Cruel Summer" came in at No. 1 on the Hot 100 for the first week of the month. Because we wrote about it in November, we figured we'd move on to what landed at No. 2 this week.

Well, the song was good enough to unseat The Beatles in the UK for Harlow's first No. 1 single over there. Taylor Swift, however? The Hot 100 has something to say about that (at least for this week). Even so, a couple listens to this boppy, pop-rap jingle and you'll have a tough time getting it out of your head.

Harlow

Clocking in at below 2 ½ minutes, Harlow is smart enough to not overstay his welcome, a trick more important than ever now in a popular culture that is losing its attention span by the gigabyte.

The result is simple, an up-tempo beat that is startling with its lack of aggression and a laid-back flow from Harlow that cites whips, chains, getting love from Detroit and, of course, the suggestion that "if you came with a man, let go of his hand."

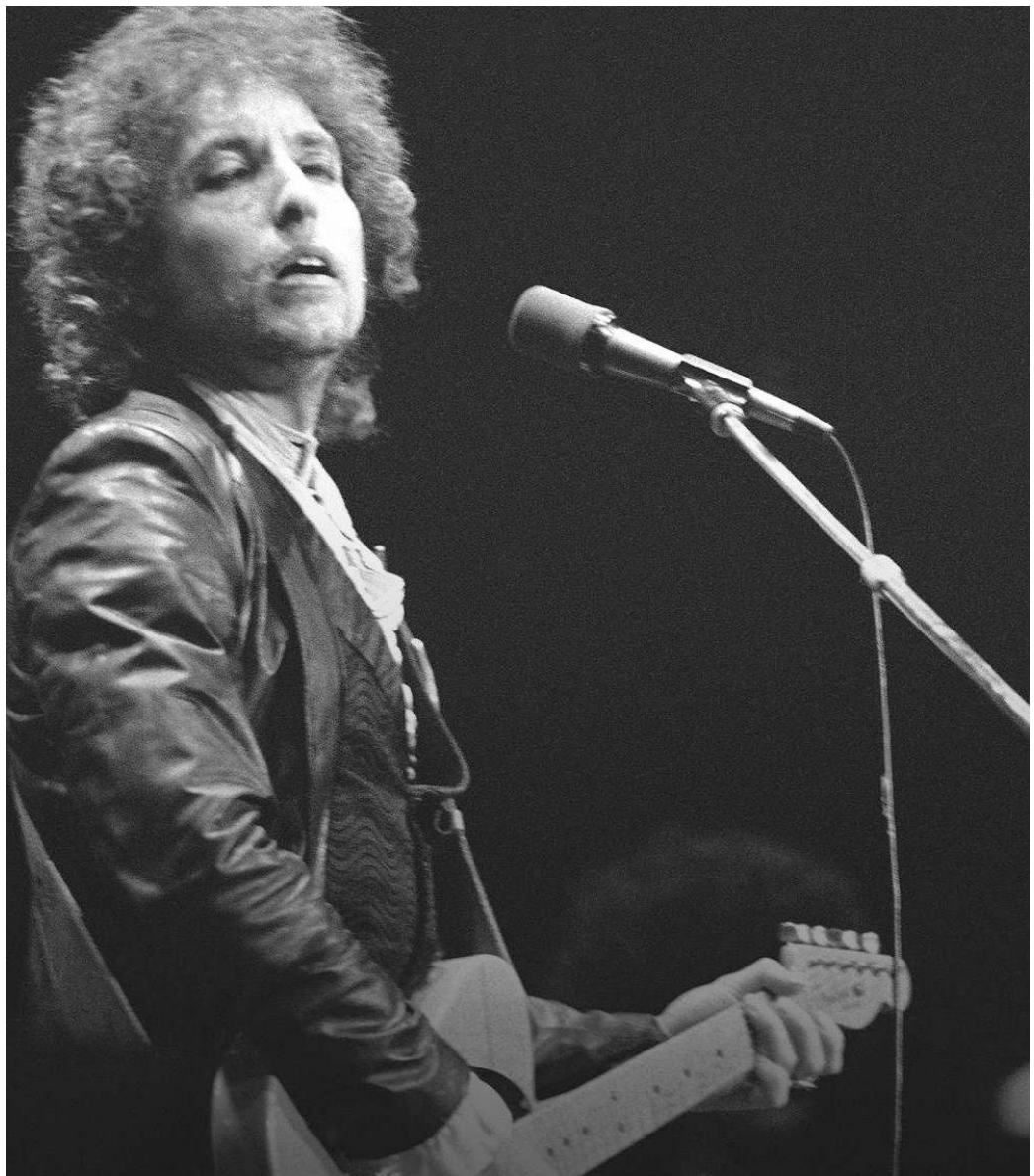
The hook is the point of consequence, complete with a Cadillac Dale sample that recalls the tenacity of 1995 R&B.

Not only does it serve as a solid counterpoint to Harlow's signature calm flow, but it's as a reminder that there probably isn't a song from that genre in that era that can't be sampled with success today.

He's on record as saying this song officially marks a new era for his career. If so, you can't get much bigger than knocking The Beatles off the top of the UK charts.

Or, well, unless that means he can overpower Taylor Swift stateside.

The thing is, with a chorus as infectious as this, and some undeniable production that is both deliciously lazy and unapologetically trendy, Harlow's new era may just take him to a new level.



Bob Dylan

The Complete Budokan 1978 (Columbia/Legacy)

Bob Dylan with flute and saxophone isn't for everyone.

But that's what you get with "The Complete Budokan 1978," a deluxe box set presenting two live shows at Tokyo's Nippon Budokan Hall, from a tour that has been derided in some corners as "Dylan going Vegas."

The extravagantly packaged four-disc set expands upon the 1979 "Bob Dylan at Budokan" live record that caught Dylan in Japan on just the second week of his 1978 world tour that would run for 10 months.

The tour started after the widely acclaimed Rolling Thunder guerrilla tours across the United States in 1975 and 1976, and just before Dylan's conversion to Christianity in 1979.

In fact, Dylan has pointed to a fan throwing a small silver cross on stage in November 1978 as helping to spur his conversion. But that's a story for another time, and one that was explored deeply in the "Trouble No More" box set released in 2017.

"The Complete Budokan 1978" includes full concerts from Feb. 28 and March 1, 1978, with Dylan breaking out dramatically reworked versions of his well-known songs complete with backing singers, violin, flute and saxophone. Even today, 45 years later, the arrangements are striking for how far afield they are from the recorded versions.

A chipper, violin-heavy instrumental version of "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" opens both concerts and sets the mood.

On "Mr. Tambourine Man," Dylan speeds up the tempo with the flute front and center. And on "I Threw it All Away," the backing singers are given a prominent role as Dylan tinkers with the lyrics. If you ever wanted to hear "All Along the Watchtower" with flute, now is your chance.

It can be jarring for those not already well-versed with the original 1979 live release. But for Dylan fans who have eschewed this period of his career, there are hidden gems here worth uncovering.

"The Man in Me," in just its sixth time played live and with new lyrics, is beautifully delivered, complete with a saxophone solo. "One of Us Must Know (Sooner or Later)," from 1966's "Blonde on Blonde" also shines under a dramatic reworking, with the backing singers and sax giving the song new dimensions.

The packaging is top notch, with an expansive 12-by-12-inch photo book, liner notes and a box of memorabilia that includes two posters, replicated tour program, tickets and flyers.

— Scott Bauer
Associated Press

Bob Dylan performs at Westphalia Hall in Dortmund, Germany, on June 27, 1978.
AP

PinkPantheress

Heaven Knows
(Warner UK)

How do you become introduced to PinkPantheress?

Is it the viral, U.K. garage-sampling TikTok hits "Break It Off" or "Pain"? Or is it an inescapable song of the summer, "Boy's a Liar Pt. 2," featuring Ice Spice? Or "Angel," her contribution to the Mark Ronson-produced "Barbie" soundtrack? Or something else entirely?

There are countless ways in, but the destination is the same: sugary hooks that satiate, her sweet soprano carrying an addictive chorus above hybrid production. It's culminated in "Heaven Knows." The debut full-length record from the U.K. star, who keeps her real name hidden, features 13 tracks she also co-produced.

"Heaven Knows" is sometimes hyperpop, sometimes ornamented with pan flutes ("Blue"), sometimes 2000s emo-by-way-of-My Chemical Romance -inspired church organs (that's "Another life," featuring the Nigerian artist Rema of "Calm Down" fame), and sometimes something else entirely.

Any momentum after virality is rarer than the initial 15 minutes of fame. PinkPantheress is an exception because of the tools she wields: Her songs, up until this point, have been remarkably short — a minimalistic sensibility born from her understanding of what works on TikTok, often crafting snippets of a track, seeing if it works on the platform, and building them out from there.

It's sharpened her ability to identify a hook that works in a song about failed adventures in love as well as death.

In the middle of "Heaven Knows" is "Internet Baby (interlude)," led by a memorable hook and the repeated refrain of "I am not your internet baby." In the context of the song, it is a declaration to a needy love interest, but in the context of the album, it is a reminder that PinkPantheress' online successes have offline resonance.

— Maria Sherman
Associated Press

Prince & The NPG

Diamonds and Pearls
Super Deluxe Edition
(Warner Records)

The amount of music left behind by groundbreaking funkmaster Prince is, thankfully, good and voluminous. To that end, a newly remastered reissue box set, "Diamonds and Pearls Super Deluxe Edition," offers his 13th studio album from 1991 with his backing band, The New Power Generation, once again. There are 47 previously unreleased tracks for Prince fans from his vaunted vault, and over two hours of live performance footage.

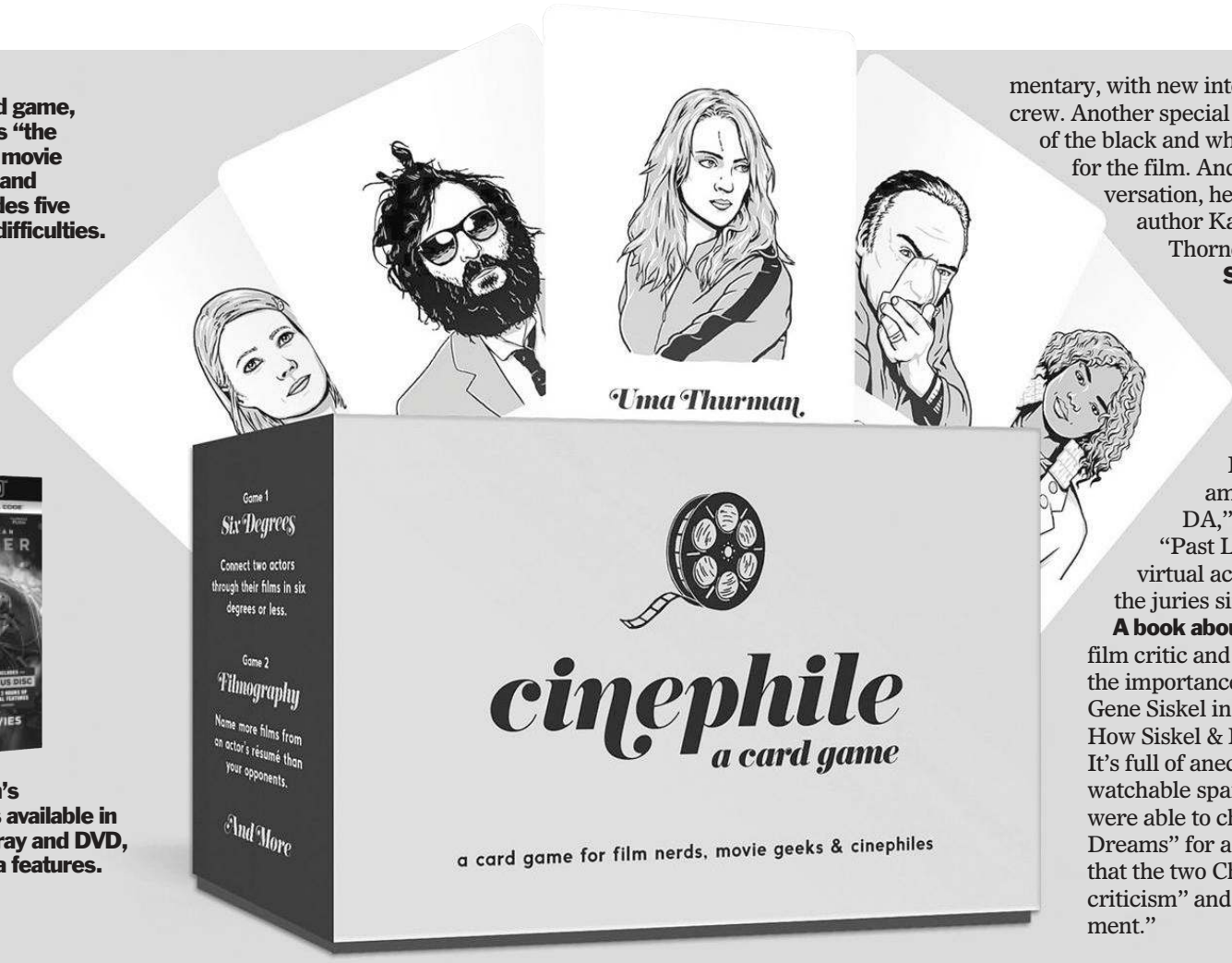
Sure, the lush Dolby Atmos mix of the title track "Diamonds and Pearls" is there, with its gorgeous musical swells and Prince's soulful voice. So are a handful of other versions of the track, including a longer version and audio from live tour performances.

"Cream" is back with its salacious delivery. But better still is "Cream (N.P.G. Mix)," a version with an extra layer of stuttered percussion and a deep, melodic synth.

All told, this massive special release is a must-have for Prince fans who have been partying like it's 1999 since roughly 1982.

— Ron Harris
Associated Press

WEEKEND: HOLIDAY GIFT GUIDE – MOVIES



The Cinephile card game, right, described as "the ultimate game for movie geeks, film nerds and cinephiles," includes five games of varying difficulties.

CINEPHILE/AP

Christopher Nolan's "Oppenheimer" is available in 4K Ultra HD, Blu-ray and DVD, with hours of extra features.

NBC UNIVERSAL/AP

Ideas for the movie lovers who think they've seen it all

BY LINDSEY BAHR
Associated Press

It's been a wonderful year at the movies for cinephiles, but what do you get for the film lover who has seen everything already?

The holidays always bring anniversary releases of tried-and-true classics, like the 4K Ultra HD 25th Anniversary Titanic re-release, as well as tricked-out 4K sets of the year's biggest hits, like "Barbie" of course. But there are plenty of more unique options, at all price points, from a high-roller ticket to the Sundance Film Festival in January to a Criterion Channel subscription and more.

Sofia Coppola book: Sofia Coppola dug into her personal photos from 25 years of filmmaking for her first book, "Sofia Coppola Archive 1999-2023." In the 479-page book, Coppola takes you on a visual journey from "The Virgin Suicides" through "Priscilla," including intimate behind-the-scenes photos with all the famous faces she's worked with, from Kirsten Dunst to Bill Murray. There are inspiration boards, script pages with handwritten annotations, correspondence with collaborators, as well as personal introductions to each film.

Polish film posters: Whether you're trying to upgrade a loved one's movie poster collection from whatever was in their college dorm room or just trying to find something a little off-beat, this delightful collection of Polish Film Posters is a great place to start. There is a long, rich history to these artistic interpretations of Hollywood marketing materials. Some are surreal, some abstract, and all are reflective of the individual artist. The prices are all over the place depending on whether you choose vintage or reprint: An original "Godfather" poster designed by Tomasz Ruminski will set you back some $912, but Leszek Zebrowski 's haunting "Eyes Wide Shut" design is only $40 and Andrzej Krajewski 's pop-inspired "Pulp Fiction" piece is $43.

POLISH POSTER GALLERY/AP

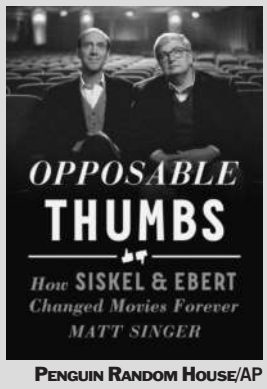
A poster for Stanley Kubrick's film "Eyes Wide Shut" rendered by a Polish artist.

Criterion Channel subscription: Streaming options can be a treacherous place for classic and indie film fans, but thankfully the Criterion Channel is going strong with thoughtfully curated selections every month. The format is easy to use, and spotlights which movies are new and which will expire at the end of the month. They even have a section where you can choose films based on running time: Only have 90 minutes or less? There's a section for that. Their December lineup includes a spotlight on Parker Posey; retrospectives dedicated to Yasujiro Ozu and Ousmane Sembène; some holiday noir, MGM musicals and "Hitchcock for the Holidays."

'Oppenheimer' 4K: Can you hear the music? Christopher Nolan's "Oppenheimer" is finally available to watch in your living room over the holidays. The 4K Ultra HD, Blu-ray and DVD will include over three hours of special features, including a 70-plus-minute making-of documentary, with new interviews with Nolan, the cast and crew. Another special feature looks at the development of the black and white 65mm film stock pioneered for the film. And you can also watch a panel conversation, held this summer, between Nolan, author Kai Bird and physicists like Kip Thorne.

Sundance Film Festival pass: This is a pricier one, but it is possible to get access to the 40th Sundance Film Festival in January with an in-person or virtual pass. For $850 (not including travel and lodging in Park City, Utah), you could be among the first to see the next "CODA," "Beasts of the Southern Wild" or "Past Lives." Or for $225, you can get virtual access to the award winners, and let the juries sift through the gems and duds.

A book about Siskel and Ebert: The longtime film critic and editor Matt Singer takes a look at the importance and impact of Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel in his book "Opposable Thumbs: How Siskel & Ebert Changed Movies Forever." It's full of anecdotes about their infamous, ever-watchable sparring, and the ways in which they were able to champion small films like "Hoop Dreams" for a mass audience. Singer writes that the two Chicago critics "democratized criticism" and "turned it into mass entertainment."



PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE/AP

Longtime film critic and editor Matt Singer looks at the influence of critics Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert.

Cinephile game: Described as "the ultimate game for movie geeks, film nerds and cinephiles," this set includes five levels of varying difficulties. The filmography level, for instance, asks players to name more films than their opponent for whatever name comes up on the card (like, say, Samuel L. Jackson, which could keep things going for a while.) If you need more of a challenge, the expert level tests your ability to connect two actors in fewer than six degrees (like, Cillian Murphy and Jason Momoa... go!). You can play many of these alone, or with a crowd.

A deep cut T-shirt from Steven Soderbergh's storefront: Did you know Steven Soderbergh has an online marketplace with art and clothes and swag? Or, sorry, it's "the artist formerly known as Steven Soderbergh," according to the website. These are delightful deep cuts, but the biggest seller on extension765.com is a soft, black, vintage-inspired, cotton T-shirt designed by Joanna Bush with 18 LU 13 printed in bold white letters. Soderbergh comments, "Our biggest seller. Why? No idea. But I know this: if you work on the set of a movie or a series or anything that involves Teamsters and you wear this hat /t-shirt/backpack, at SOME point, someone who drives a vehicle will come up and say NICE HAT or NICE T-SHIRT. Because this license plate has serious movie cred.'" It's easily google-able, but we won't spoil it here.

'Home Alone' cookbook: You don't need to make your family disappear or defend your home from gold-toothed bandits to enjoy the silliness of "The Unofficial Home Alone Cookbook." Recipes — there are 75 of them — include a "lovely cheese pizza," and "junk & rubbish sundaes." It just might not be for foodies.

This T-shirt available from Steven Soderbergh's online marketplace is a big seller with a connection to classic cinema.

TRACKSHOT MEDIA/AP

WEEKEND: MOVIE REVIEWS

A dull 'Silent Night'

Woo's dialogue-free revenge fantasy is tiresome and its characters reduced to stereotype, problematic tropes

BY KATIE WALSH
Tribune News Service

The dialogue-free action movie "Silent Night" is a fascinating experiment — but a failed one. As it turns out, modern action movies, though they can be ideal vessels for bombastic image-making, need words to convey humor and humanity, and not even one of our foremost action auteurs, John Woo, can make it work without those two elements.

"Silent Night" is Woo's much heralded return to Hollywood after two decades. (His last American film was 2003's "Paycheck.") The Hong Kong filmmaker behind movies like "Face/Off" and "Mission: Impossible II," as well as his iconic collaborations with Chow Yun-Fat, "Hard Boiled" and "The Killer," is the poet laureate of action movies, known for his expressive, evocative and highly influential style.

One would think a stylist like Woo could make a dialogue-free project work, but not with the dog of a script he's been handed by screenwriter Robert Archer Lynn. The story of "Silent Night" is a rabid right-wing "Death Wish"-style revenge fantasy trafficking in some of the most virulently dangerous conspiracy theories about life in an urban metropolis, where children are gunned down in their front yards by Mexican gangs on Christmas Eve. The violent ethnic stereotypes only get worse from there.

The opening "in medias res" is promising, a slo-mo foot race that focuses on the jingle bell necklace and bloodied Christmas sweater worn by our anti-hero Brian Godlock (Joel Kinnaman). It's an overly bright, color-saturated Southern California Christmas, and there's a certain irreverence that hints at something like "Crank," the mid-aughts high-concept Jason Statham vehicle by Mark Neveldine and Brian Taylor. I never thought I'd long for the charms of these roller-skating action filmmakers, but at least they had a sense of humor about themselves and their work, a tone that disappears almost immediately in "Silent Night."

Brian tracks down a pair of vehicles locked in a chaotic shootout racing through town (we don't know it yet, but it's the shootout that has killed his son in a drive-by). He faces off with the last-standing gunman, a heavily tatted gangster (Harold Torres), who shoots him in the throat, destroying his vocal cords. Therein lies the whole "silent" conceit, which carries through to every other character in the film, including Brian's wife Saya (Catalina Sandino Moreno) and "Las Palomas" gang force detective Vassell (Kid Cudi).

Speaking of Saya, she seems to not notice that Brian, grieving the loss of their son, is in the garage getting radicalized on YouTube, assembling an arsenal and training himself to become a vigilante.

It's a byproduct of living in the U.S. these days that it's no fun at all to watch a white man with a vendetta against people of color suit up in a trench coat with his illegally purchased weapons and an array of explosives. It's a stomach-turning image, and it should be. When Brian finishes his training and heads out to try his hand at being Batman against the "G17" gang, it's exhausting rather than exhilarating.

LIONSGATE/TNS

Joel Kinnaman is anti-hero Brian Godlock in "Silent Night."

Woo still has visual flair, and there are some striking images and even surrealist sequences as Brian storms the glass factory where the gang is holed up. He utilizes fog and headlights in this gritty setting, and long shots that call to mind sequences from "The Raid" and "Atomic Blonde." But the film is tiresome, soundtracked only to grunts, gunshots and grinding techno music, without any punchlines to punctuate the tension. You realize that these quips and asides add breaths and beats to the rhythm, providing a release valve that never comes in "Silent Night," which pummels away without respite.

But more importantly, words add humanity to these characters. Everyone on-screen is reduced to stereotype and problematic tropes without being allowed anything to say. Back in the silent era, Buster Keaton and his peers pulled off action filmmaking with humor and heart, but the failure of "Silent Night" proves that it's a much taller order when it comes to modern moviemaking.

"Silent Night" is rated R for strong bloody violence, drug use and some language. Running time: 104 minutes. Now playing in select AAFES movie theaters.

'Renaissance' documents Beyoncé tour and the sweat behind it

BY MIKAEL WOOD
Los Angeles Times

"Renaissance: A Film by Beyoncé" shows us the pop superstar onstage in a succession of incredible costumes, pulling off intricate vocal runs, busting out complicated dance moves, beaming out at stadium audiences like she's powering the place with her smile.

It also shows her leafing through a binder of laminated documents as she bemoans the high cost of steel.

Written, directed and produced by Beyoncé herself (she's also credited with "creative direction," just to be safe), "Renaissance" documents the 42-year-old singer's lavish 2023 tour behind her Grammy-winning album of the same title. The tour won rave reviews and rang up more than $575 million in ticket sales, according to Billboard. The accompanying movie follows the recent film version of Taylor Swift's blockbuster Eras tour that similarly arrived on screen in a lucrative distribution deal with AMC Theaters.

Yet unlike "The Eras Tour," which stays onstage with Swift as she played Inglewood's SoFi Stadium in August, the nearly three-hour-long "Renaissance" wants to take the viewer behind the scenes to reveal the hard work that's made Beyoncé unquestionably the greatest live performer of her generation. It's a celebration of talent, yes, but also of the commitment, the sacrifice, the sheer tenacity required to pull off the illusion of effortlessness.

We've seen this conventional blend of performance, rehearsal and backstage scenes before, in concert documentaries like "The Last Waltz" and "Buena Vista Social Club," as well as in the singer's 2019 "Homecoming" film about her epic headlining gig at the previous year's Coachella festival. Because Beyoncé no longer does traditional interviews, she uses these film projects as her chance to discuss her craft and to break (or confirm) news about her tightly guarded private life. Here, she talks about a knee injury she sustained shortly before the tour's launch and about her 11-year-old daughter Blue Ivy's much-memed participation in the show as a dancer.

JOHN KATSILOMETES/TNS

"Renaissance" documents Beyoncé's 2023 concert tour.

"She told me she was ready to perform, and I told her no," Beyoncé recalls — a conviction affirmed to Beyoncé's dismay when Blue Ivy's wobbly debut was widely criticized on social media. But the film tracks Blue Ivy as she doubles down on her training, ultimately becoming a fan-favorite fixture of the Renaissance show. (There's a very moving shot of Jay-Z in the crowd one night as he proudly beholds the sight of his wife and daughter killing it onstage together.)

What distinguishes "Homecoming," which came from Netflix, and "Renaissance" is the latter's exhibition on the big screen, a presentation it lives up to with gorgeously photographed concert footage from what looks like at least a dozen tour dates.

It's a thrill to get an up-close view of how hard she's hitting the choreography in "Cozy"; it's a treat to examine the psychedelic jockey's uniform she's wearing for "Cuff It." "Break My Soul" is a frenzied blast of sound and color, with Beyoncé parading around a circular runway in a pink latex dress, her small army of dancers twirling and twerking behind her. Just try to take your eyes off her.

Or your ears: Though her earlier albums showcased her curatorial skills, the ingeniously assembled "Renaissance" heralded Beyoncé's ascent as an arranger and bandleader to the lofty ranks of Prince and Stevie Wonder. The movie, which really shouldn't be screened at anything less than top volume, reiterates her mastery in sequences like one where she threads together her songs "Church Girl" and "Get Me Bodied" with her cover of "Before I Let Go" by Frankie Beverly and Maze.

Between the set pieces, we see Beyoncé practicing, practicing, practicing; we see her frowning, legal pad in hand, as some lighting cue or musical transition fails — for now — to match the vision in her head. We also travel with her to her hometown of Houston, where she recounts the showbiz aspirations she developed as a child, and to a vacation home on the French Riviera, where she talks about her family life with Jay-Z and their three children. The divulgence carries the weight of privileged insight, though it's shrewdly apportioned, of course — intimacy on Beyonce's terms, as always.

"Renaissance: A Film by Beyoncé" is unrated. Running time: 168 minutes. Now showing in select theaters.

WEEKEND: TRAVEL

Peaceful, progressive Oslo a real kick

On one of my many return visits to Oslo I was struck by how peaceful the city felt. It seemed a world away from the commotion and angst that comes with the 24-hour news here in the United States.

I couldn't help but take notes: Parents park their baby carriages on the sidewalk as they abandon their infants for a few moments to step into a store to do some shopping. You can hear birds in the city center, which is nearly traffic-free. And when you do see a car, it's usually electric. A "congestion fee" keeps most cars from the center of town. A tunnel takes cars under the city rather than through it.

Matching memories I have from my childhood visits, down at the harbor I notice a weather-beaten sailor standing at the stern of his boat. He's hoping to sell before sunset the last of the shrimp he caught before sunrise. Across the pedestrian boulevard, the old yellow train station is now the Nobel Peace Center, which explains the vision of a man who dedicated the wealth he earned inventing dynamite to celebrate peacemakers. Nearby, the brick City Hall — where the prize is awarded — is decorated by statues glorifying noble workers as it towers high above the harbor action.

Every time I come to Norway, I'm fascinated by their experiment in big government. My friends here enjoy telling me why they don't mind their high taxes. For example, everyone loves November. It's "half tax month" as the government wants people to have some extra money for the upcoming holidays.

Rick Steves

Coming out of the pandemic, the Nordic countries experienced a baby boom, even while birth rates fell in many other countries. Strong social safety nets in the Nordics, coupled with tax incentives for new babies, are likely key reasons. In Norway, parental leave is very generous. Families get up to 12 months leave at 80 percent pay. While the mom and dad can split the leave as they like, men are required to take at least a month of paid paternity leave when their baby arrives.

While I'm noticing more babies in Scandinavia, I'm also noticing much less smoke. I remember a time decades ago when tobacco smoke was a real problem for American travelers in Europe. Then Italy and Ireland went smoke free ... and so did Scandinavia. Today, much of Europe is as smoke-free as the U.S. In Norway's bars, restaurants, cafés and trains, it's clean air for all.

When the sun's out, Oslo's parks are packed — filled with the joy of families barbecuing on a disposable, charcoal-heaped aluminum pan called an engangsgrill (one-time grill). American visitors will also notice a lot of nudity — primarily topless women and naked kids. Parents let their kids play naked in city parks and fountains, and it's really no big deal.

Scandinavia has a casual approach to nudity, and I'm not talking just mixed saunas (common throughout Europe). Many Americans are amazed at what runs on prime-time TV. My friend tells me that Norway has mixed PE classes with boys and girls showering together from the first grade on. Scandinavians are quick to point out the irony that while much of America goes into a tizzy over a teacher who shows students a photo of Michelangelo's naked David, it is America that statistically has the biggest problem with sex-related crimes.

Travel makes it clear there are more ways than one to live your life. That's one reason why I keep on travelin'.

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.

Rick Steves

Statues by Gustav Vigeland delight the many Oslovians who love relaxing in Frogner Park on a sunny day.

Events at German Christmas markets make visits a must

While it might seem that an ever-increasing number of Christmas markets are opening up for their seasonal runs earlier than ever before, the first weekend of the Advent season usually serves as the start signal. In 2023, the first Advent Sunday falls on Dec. 3.

While there's no bad time to visit a German Christmas market, there are some dates that are particularly fortuitous. Here's a look at some events that can make a market visit all the more unique and special.

Nuremberg: In a tradition dating back to the time of Martin Luther some 500 years ago, it's not St. Nikolaus who delivers the presents but a figure known as the Christkind. She also helps to make the annual opening of the Nuremberg Christmas Market a festive event. At 5:30 p.m. on Dec. 1, the lights in and around Nuremberg's Hauptmarkt square will be dimmed and the gathered masses will cast their eyes toward a perch set high upon the stunning 14th-century Frauenkirche. Following a short speech in which a blond-locked young woman welcomes visitors to this year's edition of the market, choirs sing and brass musicians play. The Christkind then descends to ground level, where she hands out small gifts to children in the crowd. Online: christkindlesmarkt.de/en/christkind

Karen Bradbury

Frankfurt: It gets pretty loud in the city of skycrapers when the Frankfurter Stadtgeläut, or Grand Bell Ringing of Frankfurt, plays out. The clanging and chiming of 50 bells from 10 churches can be experienced in all its auditory glory from 4:30 p.m.-5 p.m. on Saturday, and once again from 5 p.m.-5:30 p.m. on Dec. 24. Saint Nikolaus will make an appearance live on stage at the Römerberg at 5:10 p.m. on Wednesday. On the weekend of Dec. 16-17, visitors can enjoy a trip on an old-timey steam train chugging alongside the Main River. The journey begins and ends at the Eiserner Steg. Tickets can be purchased upon boarding. Online: tinyurl.com/3ezrt3ms

iStock

Krampus folk figures are set to make their way through the streets of Munich on Dec. 10.

Stuttgart: On the first Advent weekend, the part of the city known as Möhringen hosts a market with a difference: the 37 or so stands are run by charitable organizations. Shoppers can find not only unique, handmade items here, but also know that the profits made from their purchases will help support worthy local causes. The market runs 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Dec. 2. Online: tinyurl.com/3pewjdtr

Bernkastel-Kues: On Dec. 2, the Mosel River becomes the focal point as guests atop the bridge and on the riverbanks await the arrival of a group of brave swimmers bearing lit torches, whose honor it is to accompany St. Nikolaus as he arrives in town by boat. Upon arrival, St. Nick will hand out chocolate to the kids in the crowd. At 6 p.m. on Dec. 16, it's all eyes to the skies as fireworks are set off to music. The Middle-Ages facades of the houses will be lit up by lasers starting at 8 p.m. Dec. 22 and 7 p.m. Dec. 23. Online: tinyurl.com/mvvjhp9p (pdf).

Wiesbaden: From Dec. 8-10, shoppers looking for quality handicrafts can find leather goods, silk scarves, handmade jewelry and the like at the Weihnachtsverkaufsausstellung "Kunsthandwerk," a handicrafts sale and exhibition. The event takes place in the foyer of the Town Hall from 11 a.m.-7 p.m. daily. On Dec. 10, visitors can enjoy an "American Christmas" from 3:30 p.m.-5 p.m. on the stage next to the Town Hall. Online: tinyurl.com/522c9x2v

Dresden: The city's annual Christmas market, known as the Striezelmarkt, will take place for the 589th time this year, making it Germany's oldest event of its kind. On the second weekend of Advent each year, visitors are in for some sweet treats. Following a 500-person parade made up of members of Dresden's Bakers' Guild and other traditional clubs, the festive cutting of a massive Stollen will take place at 12:15 p.m. Dec. 9. The half-kilo cuts of this fruit bread made of nuts, spices and dried or candied fruit and covered in a mantle of sugar are then sold for 10 euros per piece. Proceeds from the sale of the Stollen benefit local charities. On Dec. 10, spicy gingerbread cookies enjoy their time in the spotlight. Online: tinyurl.com/mvkavt2f

Munich: They might look a real fright, but the hairy, scary wooden-masked Krampus won't do anybody any harm. From 3 p.m.-5 p.m. Dec. 10, around 300 or these gnarly Alpine folk figures will make their usual run from Sendlinger Strasse to the Marienplatz, rattling chains and cracking whips as they go. Online: tinyurl.com/ypyyhvka

Annaberg-Buchholz: In the state of Saxony's Ore Mountains, mining traditions run deep. Parades and processions made up of costumed miners, which originally served to honor the lords of the land on special occasions, make up an important part of the state's Christmas traditions. The largest parade of its kind takes place on the last Advent weekend. At 1:30 p.m. Dec. 23, about 1,000 marchers clad in the festive dress of their particular regions will join forces in a grand parade. The parade is followed by a closing concert in front of the town's St. Annenkirche. Online: tinyurl.com/4ct6kh47

WEEKEND: QUICK TRIPS

Thurn und Taxis Museum photos

The courtyard of St. Emmeram Palace now hosts Christmas markets and concerts. The Thurn und Taxis Palace Festival in July sees more than 30,000 visitors every year.

This Regensburg home has 1,000 rooms

St. Emmeram Palace is home to the Thurn und Taxis family, one of Germany's largest and wealthiest private landowners

By Michael Slavin
Stars and Stripes

In the heart of Regensburg lies the elegant palace of the Thurn und Taxis family, and unlike many others in Germany, St. Emmeram Palace is still inhabited.

Not only does this former monastery-turned-palace showcase a beautiful array of state rooms, ballrooms and more, it also comes with a small history lesson.

The family had an uncommon rise to nobility during the 15th century. The Thurn und Taxis — loosely translated as tower and badger in English — used the postal service as the source of its wealth and prestige.

Omodeo de Tassis, the patriarch of the family, was credited with creating one of the first modern postal systems. His system allowed the mail to move along quicker from post to post until it was delivered.

The idea brought the family great wealth and an appointment into nobility by Emperor Maximillian I of the Holy Roman Empire.

While the postal business has evolved over the years, the family acquired several other companies and still retains its name on a beer it sold to the Paulaner brewery about 30 years ago. The family remains in Regensburg as one of Germany's largest private landowners and wealthiest, according to the state room tour guide.

The stables at the Thurn und Taxis museum showcase a collection of carriages and sleighs the family owned over the years.

The grand estate, including space solely reserved for the family, includes approximately 1,000 rooms, a portion of which is open to the public.

Tickets for both the state rooms and the stables can be purchased online. The state rooms require a tour guide. That tour takes around 90 minutes and is led by a German-speaking guide.

There are also English audio guides available for the tour, free of charge upon request in the gift shop.

The throne room in St. Emmeram Palace was more of a formality in the converted monastery. The throne was mobile, often placed in the town square where the family would hear the concerns of the people.

The tour goes through the palace, telling not only the history of the building but also of those who inhabited it. Filled with period decorations and furnishings, these rooms are a portal to the past.

Visitors are also encouraged to check out the stables and the treasury, where much of the family's signs of wealth are on display.

Note that photography is not permitted throughout most of the building. Your cool Instagram picture will have to wait until you are outside.

Several events, including Christmas markets and concerts, are held throughout the year on the palace grounds as well.

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@mikeatstripes

St. Emmeram Palace

Address: Emmeramspl. 5, 93047 Regensburg, Germany
Hours: Open daily from 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.
Prices: Stable and treasury admission, 4.50 euros; state room tour, 16 euros.
Information: Online: thurnundtaxis.com

Michael Slavin

WEEKEND: FOOD & DINING

Restoring the appeal of pizza in the Pfalz

Writer commends pie at Caruso Ristorante & Vini, but finds several meals' worth of treasures on the menu

BY MATT WAGNER
Stars and Stripes

Panic had started to set in after two bad pizza experiences in my neck of the Nordpfalz.

I refused to believe that my best choice was a doner kebab place, which is described best as passable.

Thus, Caruso Ristorante & Vini in Kirchheimbolanden, Germany, about 30 minutes north of the U.S. Army's Kleber Kaserne, caught my eye. It's next to my doctor's office, and the smells emanating from the building early one day got me salivating.

I made a reservation for one on a Thursday evening, and what I tasted surpassed my expectations.

Serving customers since 1995 just south of the Stadthalle an der Orangerie, Caruso is no surprise to the inhabitants of the town affectionately dubbed Kibo. Its popularity was evident from the few empty tables — most of them two-seaters.

After looking at the menu, I decided to give other items a try as well, building up to the pizza I considered to be the main event.

The first item was a daily special: a pumpkin cream soup. I have grown fond of it here in Germany, and Caruso did not miss. It was hot, heavy and rich in flavor. The seeds added a nice texture contrast, and dipping slices of bread into the soup really soaked up the flavors.

I decided to try the next item on a whim. The tortelloni Gorgonzola sounded pretty good based off of the menu's description, but it wasn't supposed to be the main meal for me.

That all changed when the server brought out the dish. I immediately recognized the smell, which was similar to my homemade Alfredo sauce. After lathering part of a tortelloni in it, I took a bite.

I let out a perhaps too loud squeak of delight. The sauce relied on the natural flavor of the cheese, and it was so creamy that each bite filled me with bliss.

The Gorgonzola sauce was so good that I did everything but lick the plate clean. A server saw me struggling to use a fork to lap it all up once the tortelloni was consumed (at a rapid pace, I might add) and took pity, bringing out a couple of slices of bread. By the end, I left practically nothing on the plate, and I pined for more.

It was then that the server asked if I was ready for the pizza. I had forgotten completely about my main reason for coming to Caruso, and the weight of all that cheese hit me like a ton of bricks.

The server saw that written in my eyes and body language and suggested waiting 10 minutes. I agreed that this would be the best course of action.

My stomach still wasn't ready when the pizza came out, but I reminded myself of my purpose.

I took my first slice of pizza and realized that it made up for my bad experiences thus far. The dough was thicker on the outside and thinner toward the middle, just the way I like it, and the sauce was the best I have had since moving to Germany.

The cheese and pepperoni were first-class as well.

Thankfully I was able to take half the pizza home because I couldn't have another bite, no matter how much I enjoyed it.

I originally went to Caruso looking to restore my faith in the pizza scene but instead found an entire menu worth sampling. The good news is that it's just minutes away from my house, so I will have ample opportunity to do so.

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PHOTOS BY MATT WAGNER/Stars and Stripes

Caruso Ristorante & Vini has been in the town of Kirchheimbolanden, Germany, affectionately known as Kibo, since 1995.

AFTER HOURS GERMANY

Caruso Ristorante & Vini

Address: Im Kuechengarten 1 67292 Kirchheimbolanden
Hours: 11:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. and 5:30 to 10 p.m. Sunday, Monday and Wednesday through Friday, 11:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. and 5 to 10 p.m. Saturday. Closed Tuesdays.
Prices: Food starts at 8 euros for appetizers and 11 euros for main dishes. It can range up to 30 euros, although many are 14-20 euros. Pizza begins at 9 euros with a gluten-free option available.
Information: Online: da-caruso.de; Phone: +49 6352 1777

Matt Wagner

Pumpkin cream soup was a daily special at Caruso Ristorante & Vini on Nov. 2. The soup came with bread for dipping.

This pepperoni pizza served at Caruso Ristorante & Vini in Kirchheimbolanden restored faith in such pies in the German region. The waiter seemed disappointed in such a basic order, though.

The tortelloni Gorgonzola proved to be the highlight of the night at Caruso Ristorante & Vini. The sauce relied on the natural flavor of the cheese, and it was so creamy that each bite brings bliss.

WEEKEND: QUICK TRIPS

Celebrities, cosplay at Comic Con

Planners expect Dec. 8-10 event in Tokyo to draw as many as 80,000

BY KELLY AGEE
Stars and Stripes

Get ready to cosplay your favorite character while rubbing elbows with the stars of "Star Wars," "Harry Potter" and Marvel's "Avengers" at this year's Tokyo Comic Con.

The convention is taking place Dec. 8-10 at the Makuhari Messe convention center in Chiba, east of central Tokyo. As many as 80,000 people are expected, Tokyo Comic Con president Mitsuaki Munegumi told Stars and Stripes by video call on Nov. 14. About 67,000 people attended last year.

The list of celebrity guests this year includes Benedict Cumberbatch and Tom Hiddleston, who play Dr. Strange and Loki, respectively, in Marvel's "Avengers"; Ewan McGregor, who portrayed a young Obi-wan Kenobi in the "Star Wars" prequels; Christopher Lloyd, Doc Brown in the "Back to the Future" trilogy; Natalia Tena, Tonks in the "Harry Potter" films; and Evangeline Lilly, Hope Pym in the "Ant-Man" movies.

They'll be joined by Mads Mikkelsen, who played Hannibal Lecter in the "Hannibal" TV series; Mackenyu, who portrays Roronoa Zoro in the live-action show "One Piece"; and Temuera Morrison and Daniel Logan, who both played Boba Fett in the "The Book of Boba Fett" miniseries.

Screen-used memorabilia on display will include "Titanic" costumes worn by Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet and "Star Wars" lightsabers and TIE fighters.

"You can take a picture with the movie props and backdrops, so it will be an interesting experience for our audience," Munegumi said.

General admission tickets per day are 4,400 yen, or about $30, for adults and 2,500 yen for high school students. Admission to celebrity panel discussions is free, but there's a charge for autographs and photographs. For example, Benedict Cumberbatch is 33,000 yen, or about $224.

Comic Con started out in 1970 as Golden State Comic Book Convention, organized by comic book enthusiast Shel Dorf and a group of San Diegans, according to the Tokyo Comic Con website.

Munegumi staged the progenitor of Tokyo Comic Con in 1998 when he brought David Prowse, who portrayed Darth Vader in costume in the original "Star Wars" trilogy, to the Hollywood Prop Museum in the Tokyo Tower. James Earl Jones did the voice-over that audiences associate with Vader.

Prior to Prowse's appearance, Munegumi had been putting on photo and autograph sessions with celebrities for decades, he said.

"As one of the fans of movie stars, that's why I wanted to do this," he told Stars and Stripes last year.

Starting in 2000, Munegumi booked small hotels, ballrooms and other small convention halls as demand grew for a bigger venue to hold celebrity signings and meet-and-greets.

The first Tokyo Comic Con opened its doors in December 2016 at the Makuhari Messe.

"Tokyo Comic Con is my child," Munegumi said.

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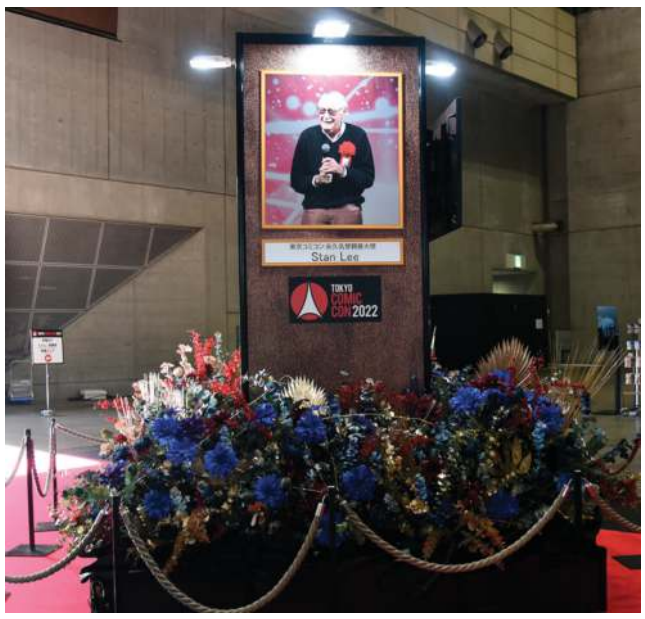
PHOTOS BY KELLY AGEE/Stars and Stripes

The opportunity for cosplay is one of the big draws of a Comic Con, as seen at Tokyo's event in Chiba last year.

Celebrities, including Christopher Lloyd, center, from "Back to the Future," assemble at last year's Tokyo Comic Con. Lloyd is also scheduled for this year.



Last year's event at the Makuhari Messe convention center included a tribute to Stan Lee of Marvel Comics.

Tokyo Comic Con

Directions: About a 12-minute walk from the east exist of Kaihimmakuhari Station.
Times: 10 a.m. to 8 p.m., Friday and Saturday; 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., Sunday.
Costs: General admission tickets per day are 4,400 yen, or about $30, for adults and 2,500 yen for high school students. Admission to celebrity panel discussions is free, but there's a charge for autographs and photographs. Tickets are available on the event's website.
Food: A food court will offer a variety of dishes, from sushi and ramen to gourmet hot dogs and steaks.
Information: tokyocomiccon.jp/en

Kelly Agee

WEEKEND: TRAVEL

iStock

Japan became the fastest-growing destination for Millennial and Generation Z travelers in 2023. Pictured: Tokyo city and Mount Fuji.

The great return

Japan No. 1 among fastest-growing destinations of 2023

By Sarah Rappaport
Bloomberg

Young people were really, really disappointed they couldn't go to Japan during the COVID-19 pandemic. They made up for it, big time, in 2023.

Japan, one of the last countries to re-open its borders, became the fastest-growing destination for Millennial and Generation Z travelers in 2023, according to data from American Express. Bookings were up more than 1,300% compared with the "normal" pre-pandemic year of 2019, the company said.

The data comes alongside American Express' annual trending destination list released last month, which suggests places to go for 2024 based on card members' bookings and Amex Travel consultants' recommendations. For example, if travelers like the culture and natural beauty of Sedona, Ariz., in the American southwest, they should try visiting Santa Fe, N.M., instead, the company suggests. Amex's global trend report released earlier this year indicated that 89% of younger travelers say they want to visit someplace they've never been before, off the beaten path.

Some of those places off the beaten path made it to the top five fastest-growing destinations of 2023: the northern Indian province of Rajasthan, home to the cities of Jaipur and Udaipur, where bookings increased more than 600%; and San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, where bookings increased more than 400%.

Like Japan, Australia — where bookings were up almost 800% since 2019 — endured an extensive pandemic lockdown that made traveling there extremely difficult. In the case of Rajasthan, the prolonged suffering associated with India's brutal second wave of the pandemic caused a significant slowdown to the travel recovery.

Demand was pent up for these destinations, with the pressure valve releasing just this year, says Audrey Hendley, president of American Express Travel.

"Japan has been on the big list of trips that people want to take, and trips are getting booked now further in advance," she says. People are now also seeing the country as a potential ski destination, not just making the typical stops in Tokyo and Osaka, she says.

Rounding out the top five growing destinations for 2023 was a perennial hotspot that managed to keep the momentum growing after strong performance in both 2021 and 2022. Italy came in at number four with an increase of more than 500%, while San Miguel de Allende in Mexico landed in fifth.

Other companies say their data matches up directionally with that of Amex.

"Japan is absolutely surging in interest," says Carolyn Addison, head of product at luxury travel outfit Black Tomato. "From the sales side, we saw a 93% increase in Japan bookings versus 2019, and a 175% increase in bookings from 2022."

In absolute numbers, she says it's the second most popular country for trips globally this year, second only to Italy — a testament to Japan's growing year-round appeal.

iStock

Pleasure boats in Porto Cervo Marina, on the island of Sardinia, Italy. Travelers might want to consider it instead of Amalfi.

"While popularity over cherry blossom and festive seasons will never wane, some [clients] have embraced traveling over the summer despite the heat," she says, adding that winter travel to Japan has also surged both for skiing and culturally-driven trips.

Amex recommneds the lesser-known town of Porto Cervo in Sardinia rather than the well-traveled town of Amalfi in 2024.

"Our customers don't want to go to the place they've been seeing everywhere on Instagram," Hendley says.

Looking for inspiration for 2024? Here's Amex's list of the top 10 destination suggestions.

- If you like Blue Mountains, Australia, try: Adelaide Hills, Australia
- If you like Istanbul, Turkey, try: Bodrum, Turkey
- If you like Amalfi, Italy, try: Porto Cervo, Italy
- If you like the US Virgin Islands try: St. Kitts & Nevis
- If you like Sapporo, Japan, try: Niseko, Japan
- If you like Riviera Maya, Mexico, try: San Miguel De Allende, Mexico
- If you like Sedona, Ariz., try: Santa Fe, N.M.
- If you like the Maldives try: The Seychelles
- If you like Agra, India, try: Udaipur, India
- If you like the Dolomites try: Zermatt, Switzerland

WEEKEND: BOOKS

Fashioned by Ringo Starr

Former Beatle's 'Beats & Threads' features never-before-seen photos

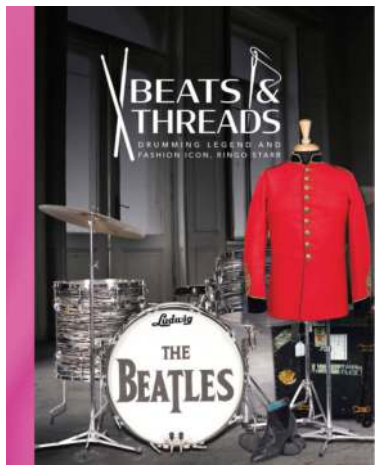
BY KARU F. DANIELS
New York Daily News

Ringo Starr's latest book is a colorful literary chronicling his music career and standout fashion sensibility.

Titled "Beats & Threads," the 312-page tome features photos of the legendary former Beatle's drum kits and "era-defining" fashion over 70 years.

Sold through the publishing division of Julien's Auctions, the book has a list price of $80 — with autographed limited editions selling upwards to $750.

The Los Angeles-based auction house said the book features "nearly 300 shimmering images capturing iconic and many never-before-seen intimate moments of Ringo's illustrious life and career, along with the drum icon's warm memories told in his own words."

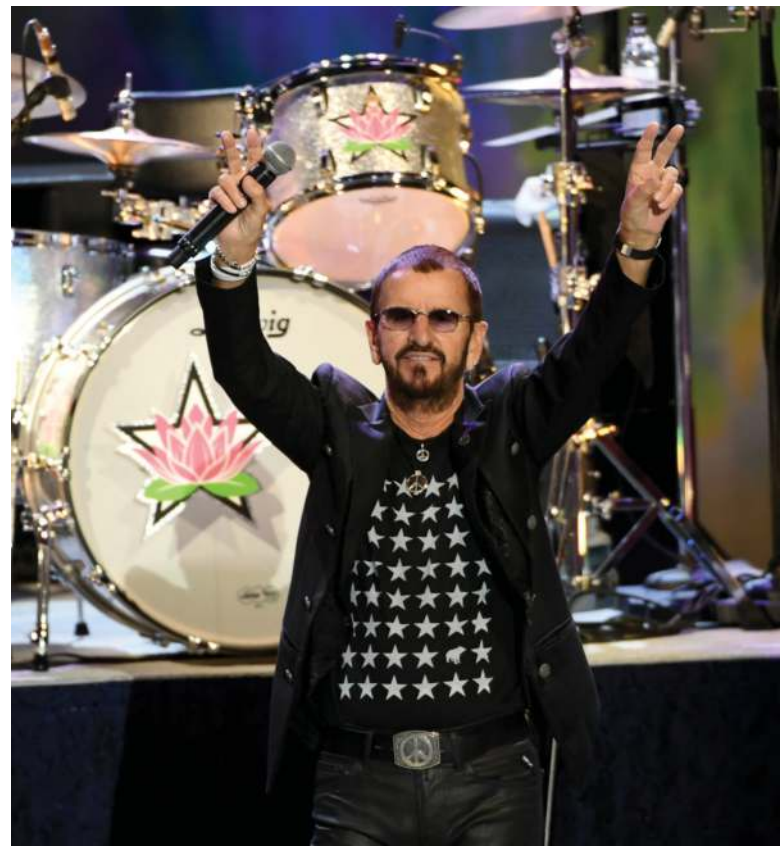


Proceeds from "Beats & Threads" will be donated to the Lotus Foundation, a charity founded by Starr and wife Barbara Bach, which supports projects connected to "family and child welfare, women's issues, addiction recovery and education."

During the 2022 Thanksgiving season, the "Yellow Submarine" crooner partnered with Julien's Auctions to sell limited-edition life-size statues of his signature "peace" sign to raise money for the foundation.

The 83-year-old Rock & Roll Hall of Famer blazed a new trail in music last month when he and surviving Beatles member Paul McCartney released "Now and Then," the "final song" to feature all members of the Fab Four.

The AI-powered track, which employs the same technology "Lord of the Rings" auteur Peter Jackson used for the Apple TV docuseries "The Beatles: Get Back," hit the Top 10 of the Billboard Hot 100 during its first week of release.



TNS

Ringo Starr, shown in 2019, has remained active, recently releasing a new song with Paul McCartney and a new book, "Beats & Threads."

'Welcome to The O.C.' revisits the TV drama

BY MIKE HOUSEHOLDER
Associated Press

"California, here we come."

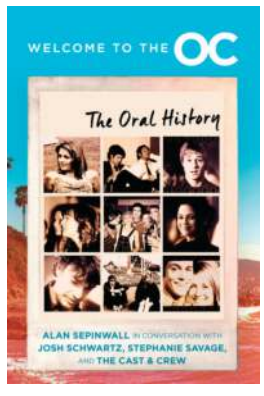
The refrain from the Phantom Planet tune "California" that served as the theme song for "The O.C." welcomed viewers to Fox's short-lived but much-loved prime-time soap that focused on a group of teenagers and parents navigating the emotional ups and downs of life in affluent Newport Beach.

Now, 20 years after the show's debut, Rolling Stone TV critic Alan Sepinwall is taking readers "right back where we started from" in a splendid retrospective that relies on the memories of those who brought the show's 96 episodes to life.

"Welcome to The O.C." — the title references a memorable line from the pilot (minus a not-so-friendly word that punctuates the sentiment) — features recollections from creator Josh Schwartz, executive producer Stephanie Savage, the show's stars, Fox executives and many more.

The oral history serves as a definitive look-back at the four-season series that introduced "Chrismukkah" (a celebration of both Christmas and Hanukkah in the blended Cohen household) and a host of indie-rock bands whose songs played over some of "The O.C.'"s biggest moments.

None was more monumental than the controversial decision to kill off Mischa Barton's Marissa Cooper, one of the show's central characters, in season three's finale in 2006.



The book devotes a chapter to the behind-the-scenes intrigue that led to Barton's exit as well as the fallout. Spoiler alert: Those close to the show didn't like it very much, starting with Barton herself, who called it "a little bit of a bummer."

Kelly Rowan, who played Cooper's neighbor, Kirsten Cohen, said the storyline was "a big mistake," breaking up the characters who came to be known as "The Core Four" — Kirsten Cohen's comic-book- and indie-music-loving son Seth, played by Adam Brody; Ben McKenzie's Ryan Atwood, a troubled outsider who is taken in by the Cohens; Summer Roberts (Rachel Bilson), Seth Cohen's dream girl and classmate; and Cooper, the beautiful girl-next-door who is Ryan's soulmate.

Savage acknowledged it was a "terrible, terrible mistake."

And Schwartz, who at the time was one of the youngest EPs in the television industry, agreed.

"I very quickly realized, 'Oh my God, what have we done? I think we made a terrible mistake,'" he said.

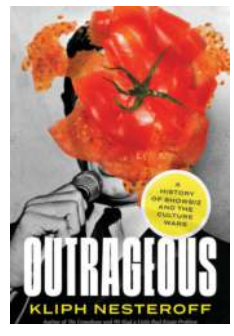
"The O.C." lasted one more season. Schwartz and Savage went on to helm a multitude of other small-screen gems, including "Chuck" and "Gossip Girl." The Core Four had become stars, and the show gave screen time to future headliners such as Chris Pratt, Olivia Wilde and Shailene Woodley.

"Welcome to The O.C." is a must-read for viewers of the show's original run, but it works, too, for those meeting the Cohens and their fellow Orange County residents for the first time via streaming services.

'Outrageous' argues that showbiz history repeats

"There is nothing new under the sun." So goes the adage which conveys the tendency for history to repeat itself.

It's this unstated premise that drives Kliph Nesteroff's latest book, "Outrageous: A History of Showbiz and the Culture Wars." In it, Nesteroff artfully seeks to demonstrate how current catchphrases like "cancel culture" and "political correctness" are just variations of the same generational and ideological divides that have undergirded American society throughout Hollywood's history.



Nesteroff turns his attention to comedians in particular, citing the ways in which they have historically been unique targets of the culture wars.

His arguments are cogent and his histories entertaining — how is it possible that "vaguely defined spirit of the times" is not a quote about wokeness, but instead a denunciation of critiques levied on comedians more than half a century ago?

Still, it's worth noting that Nesteroff began his career as a comedian, which perhaps betrays an inherent sympathy for the prophetic martyrs who have frequently been subjected to unjust censorship and criticism through the history of showbiz.

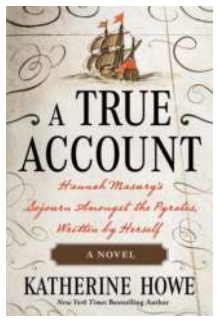
— Krysta Fauria/AP

Historical fiction 'A True Account' tests borders of reality

BY DONNA EDWARDS
Associated Press

Hannah Masury, for a brief time, was a pirate. At least, according to the mysterious manuscript that shows up on Professor Marian Beresford's desk, brought by a bright-faced student excited at the possibility of finding treasure.

Novelist and historian Katherine Howe embarks on a dazzlingly fun work of historical fiction, "A True Account: Hannah Masury's Sojourn Amongst the Pyrates, Written by Herself: A Novel" — aptly named given the way it tests the boundaries between reality and imagination.



When undergrad Kay Lonergan brings Hannah's found manuscript to her professor, Marian's years of cynicism have hardened her. She highly doubts its authenticity. But Kay convinces Marian to approach her famous explorer of a father and persuade him, and his expedition society club, to back their trip in search of long-lost pirate booty.

And is that jealousy we detect in the professor? The further the story gets, the more it seems that Kay is everything Marian wishes she was: young, exciting, fashionable, carefree, commanding, self-assured. But Hannah's manuscript might be just the thing to bring excitement into Marian's dull life — and to finally win her father's attention and approval.

History buffs will appreciate the accurate inclusion of figures such as pirate William Fly and Puritan preacher Cotton Mather. Others are likely to enjoy Hannah's wry take on the happenings of the early 1700s.

"A True Account" starts slowly, but quickly becomes a wild voyage of satisfying twists and has an even more satisfying ending. The story ties threads of fact and fiction into an intricate knot that's just as enjoyable to look at as it is to untangle.

WEEKEND: VIDEO GAMES

Q&A

Epic Games

Alan Wake 2 follows horror novelist Alan Wake, who is trapped in an alternate dimension, as he attempts to escape by writing a new story.

Multiple perspectives of a nightmare

Alan Wake 2 development staff discuss the narrative-driven horror sequel, which features 2 playable characters

By Ebenezer Samuel
New York Daily News

From Until Dawn to The Evil Within series to all those excellent Resident Evil games, I've played plenty of horror video games. But I've never had to stop playing one just 10 minutes in.

That's exactly what I did when I started Alan Wake 2, though. And that's because I've never played a game quite this creepy and legitimately scary. The opening moments of Alan Wake 2 start you off in a green-gray world, walking uncertainly around with no clothes except your hairy back. And then just minutes in, the screen flashes with images of something else. As you walk, this continues — and you don't know why.

Those images got to me early on, leaving my mind to run wild about what they could be, what they could mean — and why I would be better off playing Alan Wake 2 in the daytime and not at night. And it's this extreme horror factor that's captivated gamers since the game's release. In Alan Wake 2, developer Remedy Entertainment proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that a game can still excel with storytelling and mood as its backbones.

Alan Wake 2 arrives in a gaming landscape that increasingly gravitates toward multiplayer games and rogue-lites instead of story-driven experiences. Emblematic of that was the struggles of Immortals of Aveum, a story-focused first-person shooter, earlier this year. But Remedy remains steadfast in its story-first approach, crafting a pulse-pounding atmosphere and tale. In an interview, creative director Sam Lake and game director Kyle Rowley explained why the story game remains as relevant as ever, and how current-generation tech makes Alan Wake 2 an even more complete experience:

Daily News: The original Alan Wake was released way back in 2010, on the Xbox 360 generation of consoles. How was it different developing this sequel a whopping 13 years later — and two generations of consoles later?

Kyle Rowley: The biggest thing for us for this game is that we have access to the solid-state drives on the consoles now, which means that we can feed data to the game a lot faster. I'd say four of our core mechanics rely on us being able to feed data to the game really quickly.

One is the fact that on an instant button press, you can access both Saga (Anderson), one of our FBI profilers, and then Alan. They can access this, like, headspace, basically. We instantly teleport you the player there, and you can wander around in a free space. So, like, that's something that we just wouldn't have been able to do on previous (console) generations. And, you know, visually, I think with the next generation of consoles, we can have much higher-fidelity visuals with higher density.

How much did you focus on storytelling in this game?

Sam Lake: That was a big, big ambition. No. 1 was two playable characters (Alan Wake and Saga) in two different worlds — and with that, two points of view into this kind of, like, psychological horror story where we are questioning what the truth is? What's fiction? What's true, what are memories, what's actual false memories — all of this, but giving the player control over the pacing. So this is very much interactive storytelling.

How challenging is that storytelling when you've had so much time between games, 13 years? Is this game more for the person who played the first Alan Wake, or more for a new generation of gamer?

Lake: This is very much a Remedy Connected Universe experience. There is a ton of content to be discovered by our returning fans, threads that we will pick up and take further exploration into, content that you will discover, things that you didn't know before. While we go into this experience with Saga Anderson ... all the new players go in as well. And for fans of Control (the 2019 action game from Remedy) coming back, they do know a lot more about the background and recognize things. But that's not essential for understanding and enjoying the story.

Rowley: The thing was that Saga will act as a point of view for new players. There's kind of hidden elements related back to Control and the Remedy Connected Universe scattered throughout.

Are there any games that you took inspiration from?

Rowley: We were lucky enough to ... when we were thinking about doing this game, there was kind of, like, a revival of modern horror with the Resident Evil remakes. And then outside of games, there was kind of a big resurgence in terms of modern horror with, like, Hereditary. And we've kind of taken learnings from Silent Hill. Like, if you go even back to original Silent Hill, the idea that atmosphere is the foundation that the horror is built on top of.

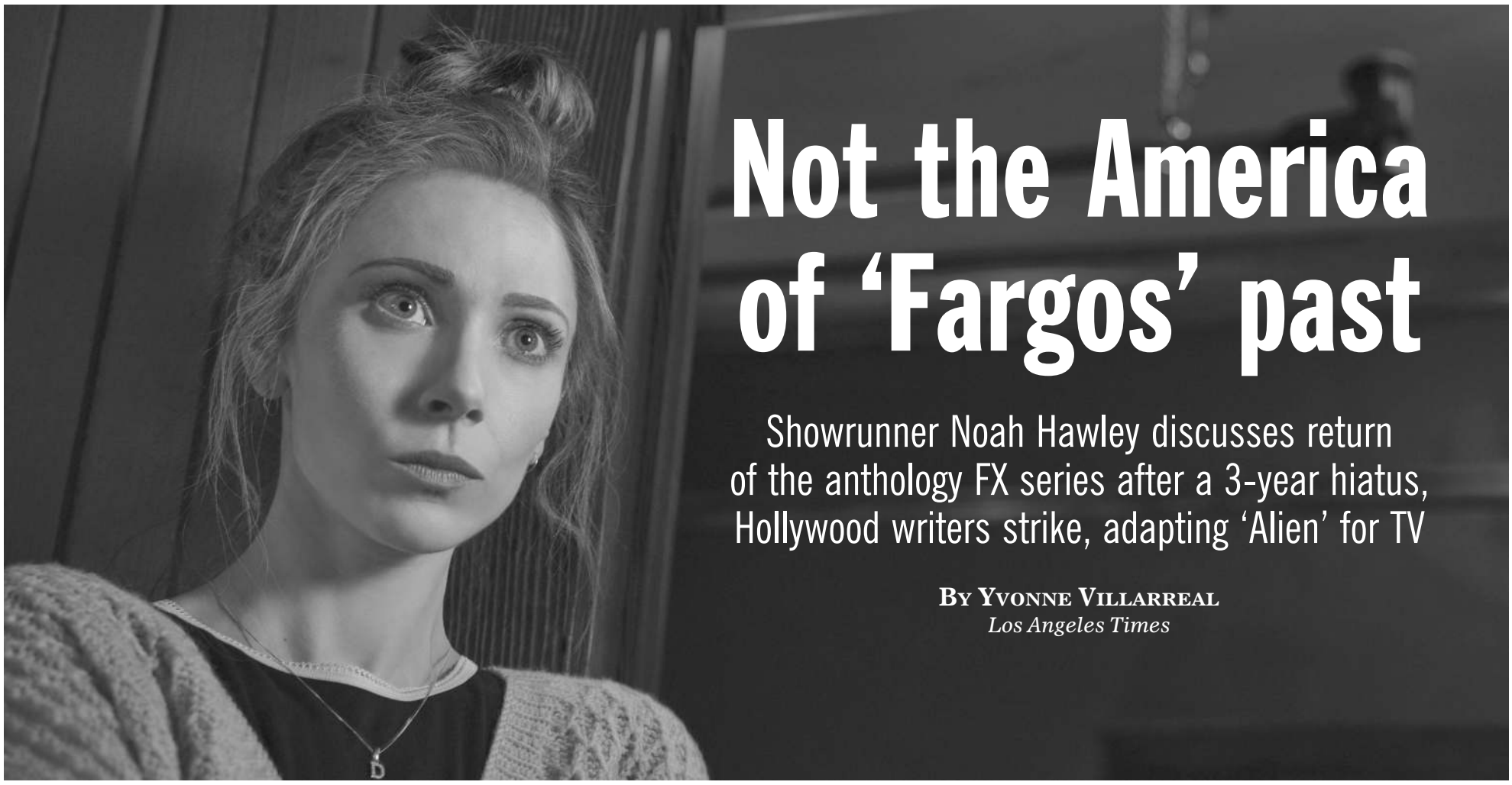
Lake: Atmosphere plays a big, big role, and just this kind of being-paranoid nature of something being wrong and we don't quite know what is wrong for the longest time. That's a big part, going back to the original inspirations obviously, or the original Alan Wake.

Alan Wake 2, and all this narrative focus and creativity, arrives in an era when the multiplayer game and constant replayability are bigger themes than ever. But the narrative game, when done well, can still dominate, right? Why is that?

Lake: The industry is big enough now that it can support multiple different types of games. Like, there's people who really want and love multiplayer games. They love socializing with their friends, you know, having a beer on a Friday night and shooting some stuff. But there's also a lot of players, I think, who really appreciate narrative-driven experiences. If we look at the kind of, biggest games that came out this year, the Spider-Man (on PlayStation 5), there's, like, so many good games that are narrative-focused. I think that we're excited about creating stories, story-driven games. I'm hoping that we get to keep doing it.

Online: alanwake.com

WEEKEND: TELEVISION



Not the America of 'Fargos' past

Showrunner Noah Hawley discusses return of the anthology FX series after a 3-year hiatus, Hollywood writers strike, adapting 'Alien' for TV

BY YVONNE VILLARREAL
Los Angeles Times

FX

The new installment of "Fargo" tells the story from the kidnapped wife and mom Dorothy "Dot" Lyon's (played by Juno Temple) point of view.

Just before working on the new season of "Fargo," Noah Hawley — the showrunner who adapted the Coen brothers' unforgettable dark comedy film into one of TV's most striking anthology series — did something he had never done before: He went back and watched all four seasons of the show.

"What was great in watching those first four seasons was that I was far enough away that I didn't even really remember what the fears were in the moment when it was still a working document," Hawley says. "I reminded myself, most importantly, they're all so different, and that this one should be as well."

The series returned to FX last week after a three-year hiatus. And while "Fargo" again resets from previous seasons with a new timeline and characters, this installment is more closely aligned with the eccentric and beloved 1996 film from Joel and Ethan Coen about a bungled kidnapping and extortion attempt.

Premiering with two episodes directed by Hawley, the fifth season takes place in 2019 and stars Juno Temple as Dorothy "Dot" Lyon, a seemingly typical Midwestern wife and mom who is kidnapped and suddenly thrust back into the secret life she thought she had left behind. The people searching for her include North Dakota sheriff and ex-husband Roy Tillman (Jon Hamm), her mysterious kidnapper named Ole Munch (Sam Spruell) and deputies Witt Farr (Lamorne Morris) and Indira Olmstead (Richa Moorjani), who are working the case.

The story opens with Dot getting arrested during the chaos of a school board meeting that's devolved into an all-out battle.

"In telling the most contemporary story, I was really grappling with this idea that underlies the entirety of 'Fargo,' which is this idea of 'Minnesota nice,'" Hawley says. "The comedy and the drama of the film is wrapped around this idea that in a polite society, people don't know how to bend, they only break. Then you start to think, 'Well, who's going to the school board meetings except those people?' We're seeing that veneer shatter. It felt like the most visceral and visual way to signal from the first moment that it's not the America of 'Fargos' past; we're in a different spot here."

Since the last season of "Fargo" ended, the multi-hyphenate storyteller — he started out as a songwriter and musician — released his sixth novel, "Anthem," a thriller that follows a group of teenagers through an apocalyptic America, and began work on an upcoming "Alien" adaptation for FX.

In a recent video call from his home in Austin, Texas, Hawley talked about dabbling with the original source material this season, how "Home Alone" and "Die Hard" influenced the storytelling, making headlines during the writers strike and figuring out the aesthetic of "Alien" for TV.

Revisiting the story from the wife's point of view

The Coen brother's Oscar-winning film stars William H. Macy as a car salesman in Minneapolis who hatches an ill-fated plan to have his wife kidnapped, and Frances McDormand as a pregnant police chief working the case.

As a TV spinoff following an anthology format, the show each season has taken place in a different era, with a different story, cast and set of characters. Set more recently than previous seasons, Season 5 also plays with the premise of the original film more directly.

"That story of the Bill Macy character [Jerry Lundegaard] who has his wife kidnapped because he thinks his rich father-in-law will pay the ransom and he loses control of the whole thing — I thought there was something interesting to that because the only one who doesn't really get much screen time or voice is the wife. I thought it was interesting to revisit the story from the wife's point of view, while exploring the very concept of wifeness. It's the story of a wife who was kidnapped by her husband; it's just not the man she is married to right now. But what happens if they come for her in almost identically the same way that they come for the wife in the movie, but something very different happens because she's not that person. She's a very different person because she has had to escape from an abusive husband in the past."

As Ole Munch, one of her kidnappers, describes her, Dot is no ordinary housewife: She's a tiger. She's a woman who is quick on her feet, finding ways to scorch or clobber her kidnappers. Back at home after successfully fleeing, she enlists her daughter to engineer traps around their home to slow another kidnapping attempt. In her first role since her Emmy-nominated turn in Apple TV+'s "Ted Lasso," where she played model-turned-businesswoman Keeley Jones, Temple showcases her ability to tap into the darkness and humor that's signature to "Fargo."

"What I told Juno is that Dot is not a large person, she's not a ninja, but what she has is an active imagination. She has an ability to be creative in her thinking under extreme pressure. There is a kind of 'Home Alone' or even 'Die Hard' quality to the show at times as this woman, who you see is outnumbered and seemingly with no options, but it's amazing what she can find in the kitchen or the utility room to fend off some attackers. Dot is a mother. She has a 12-year-old daughter, and what you need is an actor who is so winning and mischievous and playful that you think she's a great mom. If you didn't have that, you would have someone who you would feel like is a terrible mother because she's putting her child in danger, but instead what she's really trying to do is teach her daughter how to fend for herself and to make a game out of it."

Hamm, as her preacher/sheriff ex-husband, who thinks he's above the law, continues "Fargo's" knack for putting together an eclectic ensemble cast that features high-profile Hollywood actors (past seasons have featured Billy Bob Thornton, Kirsten Dunst, Ewan McGregor and Chris Rock) in some wonderfully quirky roles. In Episode 2, "Trials and Tribulations," Hamm's Roy is soaking in an outdoor hot tub, his nipple rings in view, when he's visited by the two FBI agents who question him. He rises from the water, exposing himself to the agents before wrapping himself with a towel emblazoned with his face — swag from his reelection campaign.

"In the old days, a character like Roy, who is a Bible-quoting, constitutional sheriff, you wouldn't have seen him as a square conservative, moral majority. But I think what we learned during the Trump era is that we live in 'Tiger King' America now. There is a kind of redefining what Christianity is that often includes a lot of hedonism. I wanted to have that element in there with the nipple rings on Jon, which are never spoken to, but they just say something about him, which is he's a square, seemingly, at least square-jawed man. He's got a sex trunk in his bedroom, and he smokes some weed. This is not the G-man of old."

When asked how you tell Jon Hamm, "Hey, so nipple rings ...?", Hawley laughed.

"It's in the script. He's got to go in, they have to take a cast of his nipples and make fake nipples that they then glue to him. And then the towel — Roy's running for reelection, and there's a billboard with his

SEE HAWLEY ON PAGE 29

WEEKEND: TELEVISION

Hawley: ‘Alien’ to resume production in 2024 now that strikes have ended

FROM PAGE 28

face on it, and if you’re going to cover yourself with your towel, you’re gonna have one with your own face. So these elements are just the specific details that are both where comedy lies, but they’re also critical to great drama as well. Make a choice, make it specific and you’ll make it memorable.”

Writers strike, new agreement

As Hollywood’s contentious writers strike entered its 20th week in mid-September, Hawley was one of several prominent TV showrunners who sought a meeting with the Writers Guild of America, the union that represents TV and film writers, as talks with the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers, which bargains on behalf of studios, were at a standstill. After spawning headlines and fueling questions as to whether it signaled disunity among the membership, the meeting ultimately didn’t take place. On Sept. 24 — after a 146-day strike, the second-longest in Hollywood history — the WGA and AMPTP announced that an agreement had been reached.

“The last thing that I wanted to do was to start a fight. The point was simply to ask, ‘Hey, what’s going on? We’re not hearing anything.’ That was literally the entire motivation of it that then led to the events that have been reported on.

“The reality is that I never got in the room to ask the questions. What happened instead was they went back in the room and they made the deal, and that was great. I don’t need those answers as long as we’re moving things forward. I think it’s dangerous when you get into any situation in which the rule is that you can’t ask questions, because that implies some level of disloyalty. And I don’t think that’s what anyone was trying to do. But I do think that we have a unique union in that a not insignificant part of our union is also management — responsible for employing not only members of our same union but also members of every other union. And those are good people, the showrunners, to keep involved in the process.”

Hawley says he is pleased with the terms of the new agreement, which outlined increases in wages and residuals, minimum staffing requirements in television writers rooms, payments based on the success of streaming shows and protections on artificial intelligence.

“When you can lift the floor, the ceiling lifts automatically. I think that the fear is, in Hollywood, everyone always talks about precedent. And the moment you can establish new precedents, you’re not going back now. I do feel like there’s a lot of pain and, unfortunately, a lot of pain suffered by people who won’t realize any benefits from the deal that writers made, because they’re not writers. But I think we all appreciate the sacrifice that others have made, because we’ll be there for them.

“What was most important for me, really, was the value of writers. The reality is almost every other place around the world, the person who writes the show, owns the show. In America, I create a show and I am hired as an employee on that show. We’re not negotiating over that. What’s on the table are a series of other points in which to improve our standing as employees on our own shows, and to that extent we also individually negotiate deals. I think we made great strides in fighting off a devaluation of the creative brains that make the shows and the movies.”

His next TV adaptation: ‘Alien’

After putting his stamp on “Fargo,” Hawley is in the process of adapting another established cult movie, “Alien,” into a TV series for FX. He is directing the first hour of the sci-fi spinoff, which was first announced in December 2020, and said about 70% of it was shot before filming was suspended over the summer. With the industry beginning to power back up now that the writers and actors strikes have ended, Hawley confirmed plans to resume production in 2024.

“The plan now is to go back in January, prep the rest of the season — it’s an eight-episode season — and start shooting again in early February through July. We’re filming in Bangkok, which is another world away and has been such a great experience for me. It’s aliens and spaceships and science fiction; it’s a whole new palette and genre.

“It’s weird to start, then stop and wait. I was able to cut together what I shot and to really think deeply about what have I learned and do some script revisions, so there’s also invaluable-ness to the opportunity of time, which is something in TV you never get because you’re always racing.”

The series is set in a time period before the events in the 1979 sci-fi horror classic, and it is the first story in the franchise that takes place on Earth. As Hawley explained, building out the mythology is what made adapting the “Alien” universe for TV compelling to him.

“The prequels aside, because those are historical documents, what do we really know about the ‘Alien’ universe? We know there’s a company called Weyland-Yutani. We don’t know a lot more about it. We don’t know what the government structure is, the politics of it, what’s Earth — none of that. That’s liberating on some level to not have to thread various needles. But the challenge is also that we’re only ever in these artificial environments, the spaceship or a prison or whatever. What does an apartment look like on ‘Alien’? That basic stuff of the palette of ‘Alien,’ the design of that ship, that dripping is so specific. I think that the sweaty aesthetic of ‘Alien’ plays very well into climate change and the hot, wet future that we’re all moving toward. Technology in the first two movies was rooted in the retro futurism of the ’70s and ’80s. Is that our aesthetic? Those challenges really excite me because I would much rather deal with computers that look like that than holograms and feel like I’m in an Apple store.

“What’s rooted in the horror of ‘Alien’ is discovery. The life cycle of this creature, besides being insane, is truly terrifying. It’s an egg, and inside that egg is a creature that attaches to your face. I’m already out. But then that creature that attaches to your face lays another creature inside of you — hold on a second. Then that creature bursts out of your chest and grows to 9 feet tall? What is this creature? The experience of watching ‘Alien’ for the first time is so visceral; it just gets worse and worse and worse and worse. [Director] James Cameron was able to take that and turn it into an action movie in which you knew what the life cycle was, so there was the horror of anticipation. But who’s laying those eggs? So he added that other element to it. But after that, there’s no discovery or surprise; we’re just doing that again and again.

“The challenge for me is: Is there a way that we can take the audience back to “wait, what’s happening? What does this thing do?” That was the first challenge. The second challenge, which is why I think it justifies a show with multiple hours of storytelling, is that it’s not just a monster movie. It’s about humanity trapped between this primordial “they want to eat us” past and the AI future, and they’re both trying to kill us. We’ve created these tools that are turning on us, or if we program them correctly, we’ll go insane. Those elements of humanity, artificial intelligence, trans-humanism — ‘what’s the future of humanity?’ is a really interesting thing to talk about right now. Combined with the revenge of nature — we’re experiencing that now as weather or viruses or whatever. If we’re in a place where our self-driving cars are gonna kill us, or we’re going to drown in them, there’s a story to be placed in the middle of that.”

FX

Jon Hamm plays Roy Tillman, Dot’s preacher/sheriff ex-husband, in the new season of “Fargo.” Tillman thinks he’s above the law.

“The comedy and the drama of the film is wrapped around this idea that in a polite society, people don’t know how to bend, they only break. Then you start to think, ‘Well, who’s going to the school board meetings except those people?’ We’re seeing that veneer shatter. It felt like the most visceral and visual way to signal from the first moment that it’s not the America of ‘Fargos’ past; we’re in a different spot here.”

“Fargo” showrunner Noah Hawley

TNS

WEEKEND: TELEVISION

PRIME/TNS

Eddie Murphy plays Chris Carver in Prime Video's "Candy Cane Lane," a a fantasy twist on the popular "suburbanites competing for the best decorated house" theme.

Coming down the broadcast chimney

Movies and TV specials to watch this holiday season

BY ROBERT LLOYD
Los Angeles Times

'Tis the season for much more than gift exchanges, cocktail parties and cozy sweaters: The holidays bring with them a bumper crop of films and TV shows. Here are the key titles to watch this season, from late-breaking Oscar contenders and acclaimed TV dramas to holiday classics old and new. Hot cocoa sold separately.

Holiday programming comes in all sorts. Let it be clear that when I say "Christmas," which I will repeatedly here, I am speaking of the secular American holiday that involves presents, stockings, reindeer, elves, misers with melting hearts and a jolly old fat man. (As for Hanukkah and Kwanzaa, counting all the way back to the dawn of television, precious little exists.)

So let's take a look at what's waiting under the pagan solstice tree and see what might be worth watching:

Disney+ leads the pack in original scripted content, though it may not ease the sting of it raising your rates. This year brings forth a **second season of "The Santa Clauses"** (now in progress), with the question of who will succeed the Big Man in Red (Tim Allen) still up in the air. Allen, as always, is comfortable in his fat suit, and as before, the television series is better than the movies were — just as silly but much wittier.

Also from the House of Mouse is **"The Naughty Nine,"** a B-grade heist movie for kids in which a crew of abnormally talented small fry break into the North Pole to steal the presents they consider rightfully their own, held back on account of them being on the naughty list. Santa, when he appears (not a spoiler), is Danny Glover, and that is the most surprising thing about this pleasant episode of bad behavior with a moral.

"Dashing Through the Snow" (Disney+) gives us Lil Rel Howery as Santa Claus and Chris "Ludacris" Bridges as a divorced dad who doesn't believe. The movie is promisingly co-written by Scott Rosenberg (the "Jumanji" movies) and former "Saturday Night Live" head writer Paula Pell, and co-stars Mary Lynn Rajskub. But, really, they had me at "Lil Rel Howery as Santa Claus."

In the same vein, but from Prime Video, is **"Candy Cane Lane"** (Dec. 1), a fantasy twist on the popular "suburbanites competing for the best decorated house" theme. Eddie Murphy is your obsessed family man, whose encounter with Jillian Bell as a mischievous elf leads to chaotic hilarity when the creatures of "The 12 Days of Christmas" all come alive. Tracee Ellis Ross plays Murphy's wife. You can tell this will be fancy even before you shake the package, and however good or bad it turns out to be, it'll give you a chance to watch some fine comic character actors, including Robin Thede, Nick Offerman and Ken Marino.

DISNEY+/TNS

Eric Stonestreet plays Magnus Antas, the Mad Santa, in "The Santa Clauses," now in its second season. The question of who will succeed Tim Allen's Santa is still up in the air.

Back at Disney+, **"Christmas with Walt Disney"** (now streaming) is not a visit to wherever the cryogenically frozen old animator is being kept, but a video scrapbook consisting of home movies, holiday-themed film clips and footage from Disneyland back when you could go there without having to choose between that and your kids' college fund.

Disney, having added **"Doctor Who"** to its portfolio, is also the platform for three new specials. The first of which, **"The Star Beast"** — sounds half-Christmas-y, anyway — premiered Nov. 25, with subsequent episodes to follow Dec. 2 and Dec. 9. David Tennant temporarily returns as the Doctor, Britcom-fan-favorite Catherine Tate returns as companion Donna and Neil Patrick Harris is the evil Toymaker. Russell T. Davies, who brought the series back from the dead — can it be 18 years now? — once again runs the show.

As always, the yuletide content offered by Hallmark, Lifetime and Great American Family comes in overwhelming waves. I wouldn't go so far to say that they're all the same — there's at least four templates — but they are all in the business of giving you what you came for, with cosmetic variations. Among the new-

SEE HOLIDAY ON PAGE 31

WEEKEND: TELEVISION

More than just a pretty face

Former 'WKRP in Cincinnati' star Anderson reflects on her comedic acting career, new Christmas project

BY NEAL JUSTIN
Star Tribune

In "Ladies of the '80s: A Divas Christmas," Loni Anderson plays a former soap opera sensation learning to accept that she's no longer an ingenue. In a pivotal moment, she removes her wig, revealing gray hair to her co-stars.

It's a scene that had the Minnesota native reminiscing about a similar occasion from her younger days.

As a stage actor in the '60s, Anderson snagged the part of Billie Dawn in "Born Yesterday" at the one-time Friars Dinner Theatre in Minneapolis — but only after purchasing a $19.95 blond wig to cover her natural brown hair. She didn't tell the director about the ruse.

"On opening night, I got a standing ovation at the start of the second act," the 78-year-old actor said during a recent phone interview from her Los Angeles home. "When the show was over, I came backstage and ripped my wig off in front the cast. There was dead silence. I asked the director, 'Would you have cast me if you knew I wasn't a blonde? He said, 'I'd like to think I'm open-minded enough that I would have considered it.'"

Anderson didn't actually dye her hair until she played brainy beauty Jennifer Marlowe in "WKRP in Cincinnati." It's a show that should have the same legacy "The Office" does, but clearing the music rights has kept streaming platforms from picking up the sitcom and introducing it to a new generation.

"It's too bad," she said. "I watched a few episodes recently and it's still relevant. In many ways, it was way ahead of its time."

"WKRP" showed off Anderson's impeccable comic timing, also on display in "Divas," premiering Saturday on Lifetime. But she struggled to be taken seriously.

"Being pretty and funny wasn't a thing," she said. "I didn't like the way some people treated me, like I didn't have a brain."

Anderson might have chosen a different path if her comedic gifts would have been more appreciated when she was starting out.

"I won the talent portion of the Miss Roseville pageant for doing stand-up, although nobody called it that back then," she said, recalling her 1963 victory. "I did a take off on something Dorothy Parker wrote. I wanted to be funny. What held me back was that I didn't look funny."

LIFETIME/TNS

From left, Donna Mills, formerly of "Knots Landing"; Nicollette Sheridan, also a former star of "Knots Landing"; Morgan Fairchild of "Flamingo Road"; Linda Gray of "Dallas"; and Loni Anderson of "WKRP in Cincinnati," co-star in the Lifetime movie, "Ladies of the '80s: a Divas Christmas."

These days, Anderson is only interested in material that makes her laugh. Unlike her character in "Divas," she's not interested in fame for fame's sake, which explains why she's turned down "Dancing with the Stars" several times.

She's content spending time with her husband, Bob Flick, a founding member of the Brothers Four, whom she met when his folk group performed at a movie premiere in Minneapolis. She was a high school student, hired by a local newspaper to pose for pictures with the visiting musicians.

"He was so cute and we talked on the phone a few times after that. But my dad got in the way," she said. "I was jailbait."

The two reconnected after Anderson's divorce from Burt Reynolds. a split that got more attention than her screen work.

"I wanted to be a character actress that was always working and never have to deal with notoriety," she said. "Obviously, I didn't get what I wished for."

Holiday: Musical specials among Santa's many gifts this year

FROM PAGE 30

comers is Lifetime's new **"Ladies of the '80s: A Divas Christmas"** (Dec. 2), with Donna Mills, Loni Anderson, Morgan Fairchild, Linda Gray and Nicollette Sheridan as a quintet of daytime soap stars reunited for a reality TV weekend.

Their success has led inevitably to various knockoffs, from old-school broadcasters to big-name streamers. This year's unusual suspects include Freevee's **"Exmas,"** which gives you Leighton Meester and Robbie Amell as a formerly engaged couple competing for the affection of his family; ALLBLK's **"Christmas Holidate"** (now available), a dating app comedy with Jasmine Burke and Iroko Anyogu; and QVC+ and HSN+'s **"The Recipe Files"** (now streaming), a product placement mystery starring Ashlee Simpson.

There's a sense in which new Christmas specials are expressions of nostalgia for old Christmas specials, and that's never more the case than when music, which rings so many emotional (sleigh) bells, is in the mix. Quite delightful is **"Hannah Waddingham: Home for Christmas"** on Apple TV+, a sparkly, black-tie hour wrapped tightly around the "Ted Lasso" — and musical theater — star from the stage of the plush 1904 London Coliseum.

From Las Vegas hails Barry Manilow's **"A Very Barry Christmas"** (Peacock, Dec. 12), in which Bette Midler's old music director wassails you with yuletide favorites and his own hits.

Max

Actor Selena Gomez is hosting a special four-week edition of her cooking show: "Selena + Chef: Home for the Holidays."

What they call country nowadays is on display in **"Christmas at the Opry"** (Peacock, Dec. 8), hosted by Wynonna Judd, with Kelly Clarkson, Brenda Lee and Mickey Guyton, among others, while down the road in Memphis, Tenn., **"Christmas at Graceland"** (now on Peacock), where the 1970s are preserved in amber, will pay tribute to the King and the King of Kings.

From now until New Year's and until the leftovers run out, this is a time for eating and overeating. Selena Gomez's **"Selena + Chef: Home for the Holidays"** (streaming on Max) is a special four-week edition of the "Only Murders in the Building" star's irresistible teach-me-to-cook-that series. Sharing its subtitle is the two-part **"MasterChef Junior: Home for the Holidays"** (Fox, Dec. 10), from the greatest of all American cooking competitions, which, along with the miracle of tots with knife skills, will bring you fake snow, Gordon Ramsay in a Santa suit and the Hanukkah and Kwanzaa content elsewhere missing. And the Roku Channel's **"The Great American Baking Show: Celebrity Holiday 2023,"** with judges Paul Hollywood and Prue Leith establishing its "Great British Baking Show" bona fides, tests whether Joel McHale, Phoebe Robinson and Arturo Castro, among others, can cook as well as a fifth grader.

Among the many traditional offerings, **"A Charlie Brown Christmas"** remains as fresh as new snow nearly 60 years after its debut. The classic can be seen on Apple TV+ for subscribers anytime and, in the spirit of the season, free for everyone else on Dec. 16 and 17. Linus would approve.

Does red wine give you a headache?

Recent scientific research offers a surprising suggestion that could work for some drinkers: buy a cheaper bottle

BY MARÍA LUISA PAÚL
The Washington Post

Red wine is a welcome addition to most holiday dinners — that is, unless you're one of the unlucky drinkers who gets a throbbing headache after just a glass or two.

Red wine headaches have almost certainly been around since humans discovered how to make booze out of fermented fruit. Scientists have long tried — to no avail — to understand why even a small glass of wine can make some feel like they need a pain reliever within 30 minutes of taking a sip.

In the past, tannins, sulfites and histamines have been blamed. Now, after testing about a dozen compounds found in red wine, findings from a team of researchers point to another culprit: quercetin, a compound found in grape skins.

"Quercetin absorbs ultraviolet light, so it's sunscreen for the grapes," said Andrew Waterhouse, a professor emeritus of oenology — also known as wine chemistry — at the University of California at Davis. Waterhouse, who co-authored the study that was published last month in the journal Scientific Reports, said the amount of quercetin found in wine is directly related to the grapes' sun exposure. "So, if you grow your grapes with a lot of shade, they don't make much of this. But if you grow them where they get a lot of sun, then they make more quercetin."

Quercetin doesn't only help prevent grapes from scorching in the sun. In humans, it's a powerful antioxidant that may help protect against heart disease and cancer. But when alcohol is added to the mix, quercetin can cause headaches, Waterhouse said.

"Your body has this system in place to get rid of the alcohol you drink, and the quercetin, it turns out, gums up the works," he said. "Essentially, the quercetin from red wine stops the process halfway through."

The human body has a complex process for eliminating alcohol and toxins that can be harmful to cells. Most alcohol — chemically speaking, ethanol — is broken down inside the liver, where two steps take place. First, enzymes help break down the ethanol molecule into acetaldehyde, a highly toxic substance and known carcinogen. Then, they turn the acetaldehyde into harmless molecules of acetate — a fatty acid that plays a role in the body's energy production and lipid synthesis — which is eventually broken down into waste.

But when quercetin enters the bloodstream, it gets converted into quercetin glucuronide — a compound that blocks the enzyme that turns acetaldehyde into acetate. Left with the buildup of a "nasty toxin," Waterhouse said, heads begin pounding.

It's unclear how many people are affected by red wine headaches, but it's a fairly common condition, said Morris Levin, a neurology professor at the University of California at San Francisco who co-authored the study. As the director of the university's Headache Center, Levin said he has found "that maybe a third of my patients talk about a history of at least one red wine headache." People who are prone to headaches and migraines appear to be particularly susceptible to red wine headaches — which "are very different than waking up with a hangover."

Unlike the dreaded hangover, red wine headaches can happen "within a few minutes to a couple of hours after drinking the red wine," Levin said — and they're marked by a "throbbing sensation all around the head, nausea and just overall feeling crappy."

But Waterhouse said there's a "workaround, sort of" for red wine lovers who want to avoid headaches — that is, going for cheaper wine.

"As a general rule, cheaper wines have less quercetin," Waterhouse said. "Usually it's because the grapes get less sunlight than those in, say, the really expensive cabernet they make in the Napa Valley."

But be warned: Less quercetin can mean the wine's tannins might taste less silky.

Unfortunately, there's still no cure for red wine headaches. Though Levin has in the past told his patients to hydrate or try taking ibuprofen before drinking, red wine headaches are "kind of resistant to treatment."

So, will headaches always be the price to pay for a glass of red wine?

It remains to be seen.

Waterhouse and Levin are hoping to test their theory about quercetin with an upcoming clinical trial. Further research could focus not only on preventing or curing red wine headaches, but also lead to a better understanding of migraines as a whole.

In the meantime, the scientists said, people prone to the pesky headaches might have to be flexible about their vino of choice. Levin, who himself recently developed a somewhat unpleasant reaction to red wine, suggested opting for varietals like pinot noir and syrah, which tend to have a lower alcohol content.

"Plus, it's always a good idea to work on stress reduction — particularly, around this time of year, to reduce the possibility of getting a headache," Levin said.

Another option might be dumping red wine altogether. Unlike its crimson cousin, white wine doesn't have quercetin since the grapes' skins are removed before fermentation.

"For what it's worth, white wine pairs terrifically with turkey," Waterhouse said. "Rosé wine can be safe too."

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A team of researchers has found a possible culprit for those red wine headaches that some drinkers often experience — quercetin, a compound found in grape skins.

WEEKEND: FAMILY

Outside the new toy box

Prevent a pile of plastic by gifting experiences, purchasing secondhand

BY MAGGIE PENMAN
The Washington Post

For many parents of young kids, the holiday season inspires a combination of fear and dread of the growing mountain of plastic stuff. Is it possible to give your kids a happy holiday without adding to the clutter in your house — and, eventually, in landfills?

Toy industry analysts and parents say it is — and toy makers are starting to offer more sustainable choices.

"Sustainability is important to the toy companies right now because it's important to Gen Z and millennial parents, who are the prime toy-buying moms and dads," said independent industry analyst Chris Byrne. Nearly 3 in 4 parents with children under 11 said that sustainability is important in their toy purchases, according to research commissioned by Byrne's site, thetoyguy.com.

Still, making (and buying) toys sustainably is easier said than done. Earlier this year, Lego said an experiment with making its bricks out of recycled plastic bottles failed to reduce carbon emissions.

Out of the popular toys tested by researchers at DePaul University, plastic toys had the highest greenhouse gas emissions, though it mattered what type of plastic was used. The United Nations and the Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment (WEEE) Forum found in a recent analysis that 7.3 billion e-toys — car racing sets, electric trains, music toys, talking dolls, drones, etc. — are now discarded annually.

But there are ways to mitigate the impacts of holiday toy shopping. Here are some tips from experts and parents to keep the holiday season happy — and more sustainable.

Seek out greener toy makers

Byrne said a number of greener toy companies have popped up in recent decades to meet the needs of new generations of parents. Because of concerns over the use of plastics, toymakers have begun experimenting with more environmentally friendly materials such as bamboo and plant plastic made from sugar cane. There has also been more focus on reducing packaging.

At the same time, kids may ask for toys that don't meet the sustainability standards their parents have in mind. If they want a Barbie DreamHouse, Byrne said, they probably won't be happy with a "hemp yurt."

The most sustainable toy is the one your kid will actually play with, he said, because that won't end up in a landfill — and it might even get passed down to the next generation.

Buy secondhand, try a toy swap

One way to buy toys more sustainably is to buy them used, which has the added advantage of costing less.

Mallory Domingue, a mom of two in D.C., has always been concerned about sustainability, but when she had her first daughter 6 years ago, the stakes suddenly felt higher.

"The state of the planet and what bringing a child into that looked like and the consequences of that was a tipping point for me to just do everything in my power to mitigate what I could," she said.

Her solution has been to look to her community — through a neighborhood internet mailing list and Buy Nothing groups.

"People just want to get stuff out of their house," she said. "So last year I did all of my Christmas shopping for the girls that way."

Byrne, one of five kids, notes these can also be opportunities to communicate your values to your children.

"My mother used to say Santa's sleigh is very big, but it's got to carry toys for all the children. So be careful what you ask for," he said. "So my brothers and I would sit down with our lists and we would do horse trading. Okay, you ask for this. I'll ask for this."

This taught Byrne and his brothers about sharing and being thoughtful about how much they asked for — and the trading was kind of fun.

"But it was brilliant because they didn't have a huge budget for the holidays," Byrne said.

Gift experiences instead of things

After filling their houses with toys during the pandemic, many families now want to move away from the clutter. Instead of toys, consider giving the kids in your life an experience.

That's been a big part of the solution for Domingue and her family. Her go-to gift for other kids in her life is a Mason jar of homemade sugar cookie mix with rainbow sprinkles and a cookie cutter on top.

"I can't tell you how many moms stop me and say, what a great gift. It wasn't clutter. I got to spend time with my child doing something fun," she said. For the adults in her life, she'll give them an IOU for a homecooked meal. "Time is the one thing that we have a very finite amount of."

If you are interested in gifting an experience — consider an ice skating outing or tickets to see live music. Or, try collaborating on a kid-friendly recipe to get some quality time, and a delicious meal together.

Get friends and relatives involved

Molly Braverman is the director of the Broadway Green Alliance, an organization that's working to make theater more sustainable. She's also a parent — which has made the mission feel more urgent — and has issued a whole new challenge of "stuff."

For Hanukkah this year, she's going to visit the local children's thrift store to find gifts for her daughter. When she is done playing with the toys, Braverman plans to donate them back.

Her greatest victory, though, has been getting her mom to use Facebook Marketplace, she said.

"She loves buying stuff for her granddaughter," Braverman said. "But it doesn't need to be new. And she has so much fun chasing the deal."

Looking for ecologically friendly toys? The ones your child will actually play with are the best, because they won't end up in a landfill.

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THE MEAT AND POTATOES OF LIFE

Lisa Smith Molinari

Hide-a-beds, septic tanks and other fun traditions

With a tiny snort, you awaken from a bad dream about being tied to a railroad track with a locomotive barreling toward you. You grope in the darkness, relieved to find yourself in a bed, with no threat of being torn to smithereens by an oncoming freight train.

Relieved yet half-conscious, you exhale, smack your lips and turn on your side to nuzzle back into your pillow.

"Ouch!" What's that dull pain across the middle of your back? It dawns on you: "I'm not in my own bed." You pry your eyelids open and in the dim early morning light, you take in your surroundings.

Wood paneling. Burnt sienna sculpted carpeting. Wagon wheel light fixture. Console television. Framed portrait of you in the fourth grade with an enormous split between your two front teeth. And an excruciatingly uncomfortable metal bar pressing against the middle of your back.

"Oh yeah," you finally recall, "It's the holidays. I'm at my mother's house. In the basement that my parents converted into a family room in 1977. On the old hide-a-bed couch."

Although you'd rather lay there uncomfortably, reminiscing about growing up in that little brick ranch, nature calls. You slowly roll your aching torso to the edge of the paper-thin mattress, setting off a cacophony of squeaking springs. Standing silently by the harvest gold plaid couch, you wait until you're certain your spouse is still asleep before tiptoeing up the carpeted basement stairs to the bathroom.

Ever since moving out of your childhood home, you've enjoyed basic human entitlements such as public drinking and wastewater systems. You've become accustomed to the ample gush of clear, potable water from faucets, shower heads and toilet tanks.

But in the one tiny bathroom shared by every living soul in your mother's crowded house, there are plumbing issues you've long since forgotten about. As you flick on the fan light, you spy the coral orange countertops and mint green porcelain that were original to your 1950s childhood home. You step inside, and detect the familiar odor of rotten eggs.

You are about to blame Uncle Eddie, but then you remember. The sulfuric well water is the source of the odor.

Next to the crocheted tissue box cover is a note from your mother, reminding the family of the limitations of the old well and septic tank: "If it's brown, flush it down, but if it's yellow, let it mellow." You sit on the mint-green commode, leafing through an old National Geographic, wondering how on earth you grew up this way.

After waiting for the water supply to recover from your flush, you get in the shower. Your pampered hair follicles will have to survive the 79-cent bottle of VO5 Strawberries and Cream shampoo your mother bought at the dollar store. Mid-lather, one of the kids knocks, begging, "I gotta go!"

Ignoring Grammy's hand-written sign, she flushes. You yelp as scalding hot water cascades from the shower head. There's another knock at the bathroom door, as other family members enter to brush their teeth and use the toilet while you brave water temperature fluctuations behind the frosted glass shower doors.

Eventually, you emerge from the only bathroom, dressed and ready for another day of visiting with family over the holidays. You might get dirty looks from your relatives, who have to wait an hour for the hot water supply to build back up before they can shower. You might have frizzy hair from your mother's cheap shampoo. And you might suffer a back spasm from sleeping on that cursed hide-a-bed.

But you won't mind because you realize that having family to visit with over the holidays is a blessing. These quirky people brought you into this world and are the reason you're never really alone. No matter how annoying holiday family visits might seem, when you consider the alternative, you know it's all relative.

Read more at themeatandpotatoesoflife.com and in Lisa's book, "The Meat and Potatoes of Life: My True Lit Com." Email: meatandpotatoesoflife@gmail.com

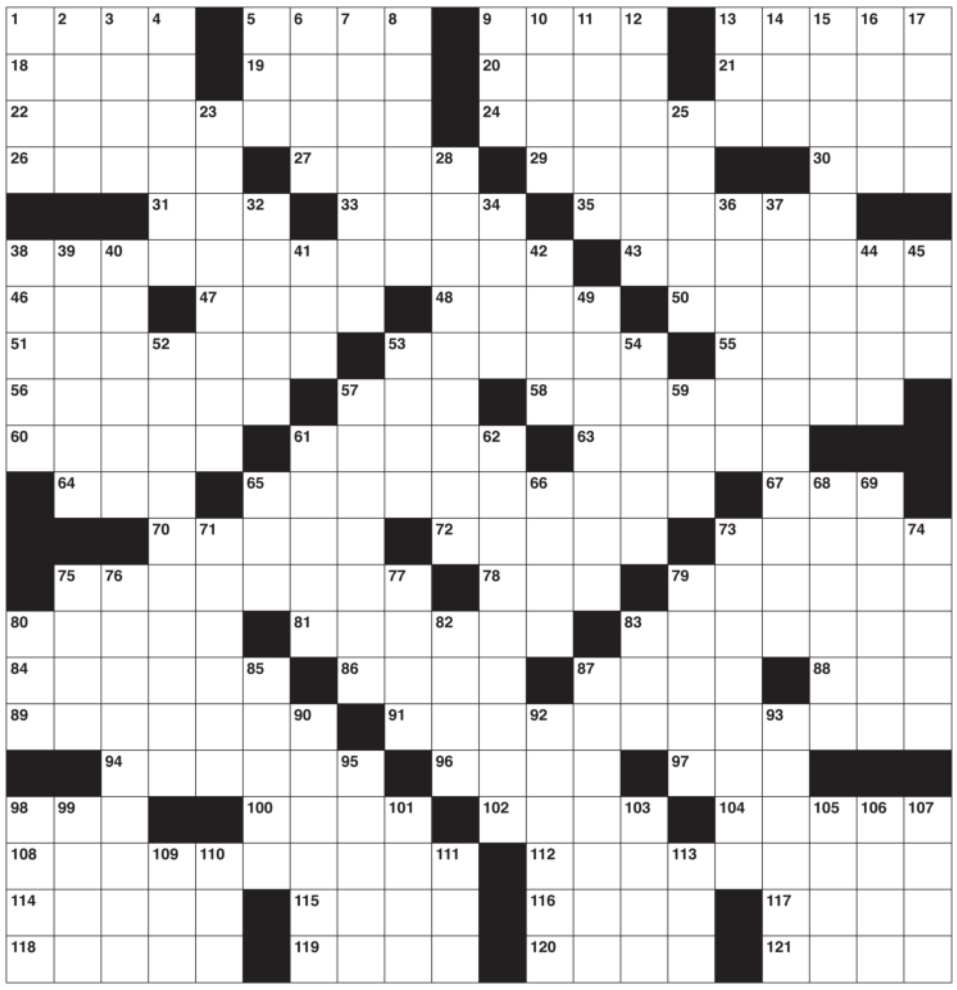
WEEKEND: CROSSWORD AND COMICS

NEW YORK TIMES CROSSWORD

THANKSGIVING MEAL PREP

BY REBECCA GOLDSTEIN AND RACHEL FABI / EDITED BY WILL SHORTZ

Rebecca Goldstein, of Albany, Calif., is a research scientist at Merck, developing immunotherapies for cancer. Rachel Fabi, of Syracuse, N.Y., is a bioethics professor at SUNY Upstate Medical University. They met via the online crossword community and now hang out on weekly Zoom calls. They both love collaborating. Rebecca says, ''Having a second mind can really elevate an idea.'' Rachel adds that she enjoys having someone to share puns with. — W. S.



ACROSS

1 It grows on trees
5 Dance form featured in the documentary ''Kumu Hina''
9 If-then-____ (programming trio)
13 Fruit in the custard apple family
18 Home to Dublin and Toledo
19 Ritual whose name translates to ''covenant''
20 Locale for many cabs
21 Common lab culture
22 Stockpile bread?
24 Research hors d'oeuvres online?
26 ''Ditto''
27 Tizzy
29 Rural tower
30 Catchy tune, in slang
31 Fighting sport, for short
33 Since
35 ''Time to head out!''
38 Selects green-bean casserole, candied yams and mashed potatoes?
43 What a ghost might do to you
46 Chortled syllable
47 Loch Ness monster, apparently
48 Love lines?
50 Eases
51 Blast from the past, so to speak
53 ''Full House'' twins
55 Setting in ''Nomadland''
56 Kilt folds
57 Alex's partner in the jewelry industry
58 Features of a vacant stare
60 Gets caught
61 Sanctify
63 ''Cease!'' on the seas
64 Part of a rock band?
65 Debate roasting versus deep-frying?
67 Groove
70 ''There ____ enough words''
72 Word with bump or trap
73 Former Florida flier
75 Breaking up
78 Corn unit
79 Inventor Gray who had a patent war with Alexander Graham Bell
80 Martin of Hollywood
81 City on the Kenai Peninsula
83 ''Let me join!''
84 Foolish
86 Unspecific amount in a recipe
87 Small game, often
88 Some nail-biters, for short
89 Developing
91 Steers the dessert cart?
94 Fame
96 Cupid's counterpart
97 Grabbed a chair
98 Some sex cells
100 Heads of org. charts
102 Part of some pods
104 November birthstone
108 Make cranberry sauce from scratch?
112 Reserve the chardonnay for later?
114 On a bias
115 Off-the-wall
116 Actress Jessica
117 Noted Celtic musician
118 Kind of question
119 Shiny silver sticker?
120 Bid first, say
121 ''____?'' ''___!''

DOWN

1 ____ tea
2 Exclamations of enlightenment
3 Outer layer
4 1988 Beach Boys hit with a geographical title
5 ''The White Lotus'' network
6 Web addresses
7 Stage name of Montero Lamar Hill
8 St. Francis of ____
9 Official lang. of Guyana
10 Land through which the Mekong River flows
11 Go bad
12 Quarter backs?
13 Letter before cue
14 Landmark health legislation, for short
15 Certain recyclable, in the Midwest
16 Brand aptly found in ''natural pooch food''
17 Tendril
23 ''Ba-dum-tss'' sounds
25 Led Zeppelin's ''Whole ____ Love''
28 Aids in planning
32 Untold millennia
34 G-men
36 Buffalo N.H.L.ers
37 Work on one's whisking technique?
38 Slices and dices
39 ''Absolutely not''
40 ''Goodness!''
41 Enter a bear market
42 Tournament ranking
44 Clinton and Obama, astrologically
45 Approx.
49 Chuck Taylor All Star, e.g.
52 Pro tip about seasoning stuffing?
53 Length of some fun runs, informally
54 Backed up
57 Having an even score
59 Macy's Thanksgiving ____ Parade
61 Hairstyle that the Brits call ''fringe''
62 Captain Marvel, e.g.
65 Start of some countdowns
66 Peruse
68 Open, as a drain
69 Home to Faa'a International Airport
71 German candy with a caramel center
73 Toddler's time out?
74 Parsonage
75 Sicilian stratovolcano
76 Things behind the Times?
77 ''____ the night before Christmas . . . ''
79 Pitchers
80 Thur. + 3
82 Arthur of tennis
83 Rage
85 Philanthropist Pratt for whom the Baltimore public library system is named
87 Measurer of acidity
90 Pluck
92 Entrance
93 Put in a hold
95 ''For real,'' in modern parlance
98 Go-ahead
99 Metaphor for a migraine
101 Lucid
103 Inspiration for the tribute band A*Teens
105 Winter candle scent
106 Actress Taylor-Joy of ''The Queen's Gambit''
107 Ardor
109 Ryan Gosling's role in ''Barbie''
110 Common factor
111 It ends when 1/1 begins
113 Boyo

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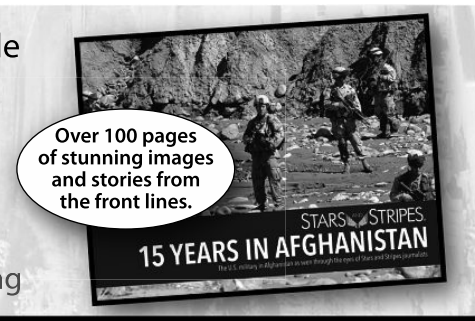

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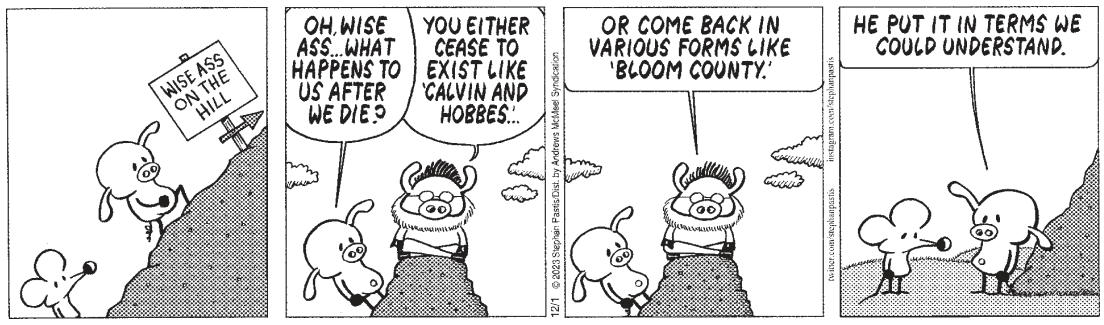
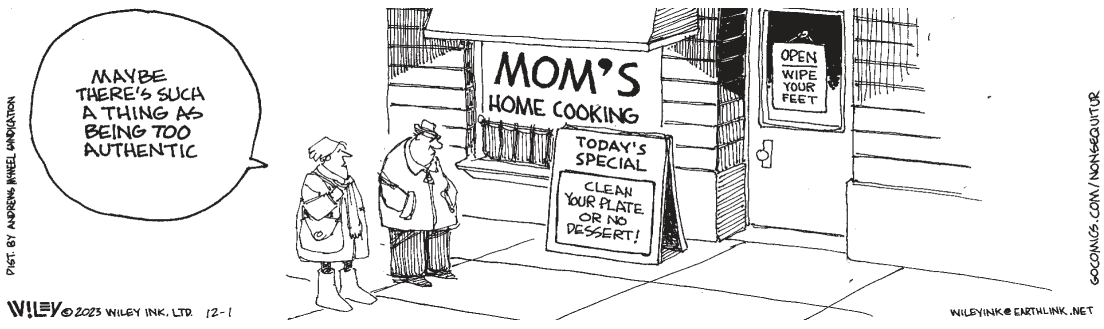
Frazz

Pearls Before Swine

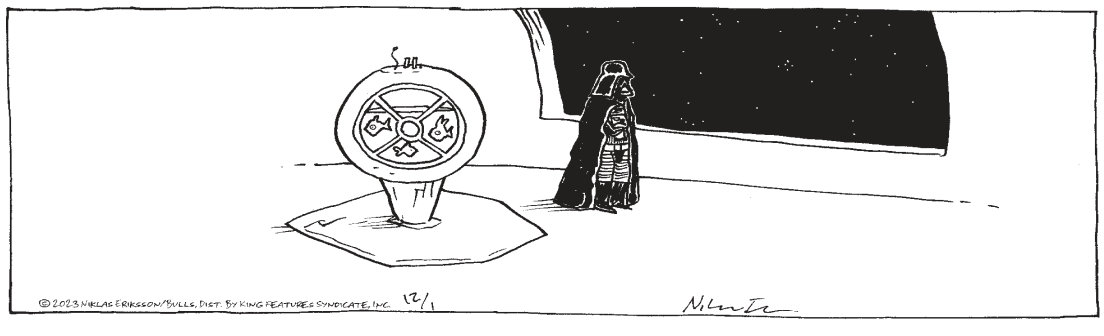


Non Sequitur

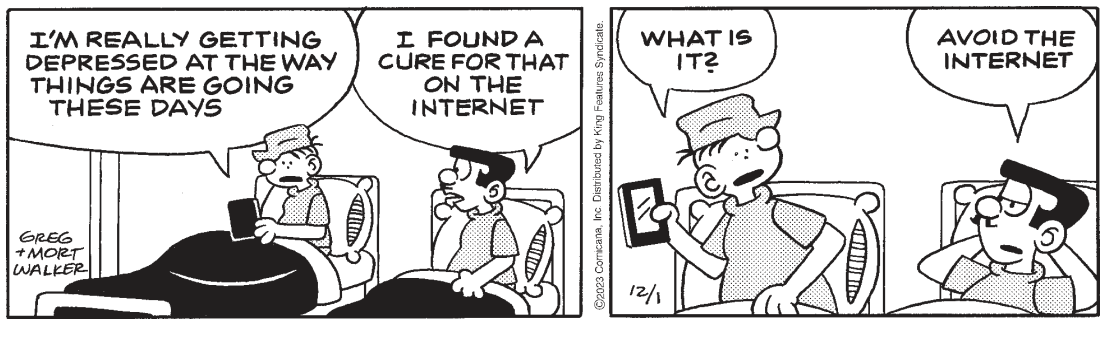


Candorville

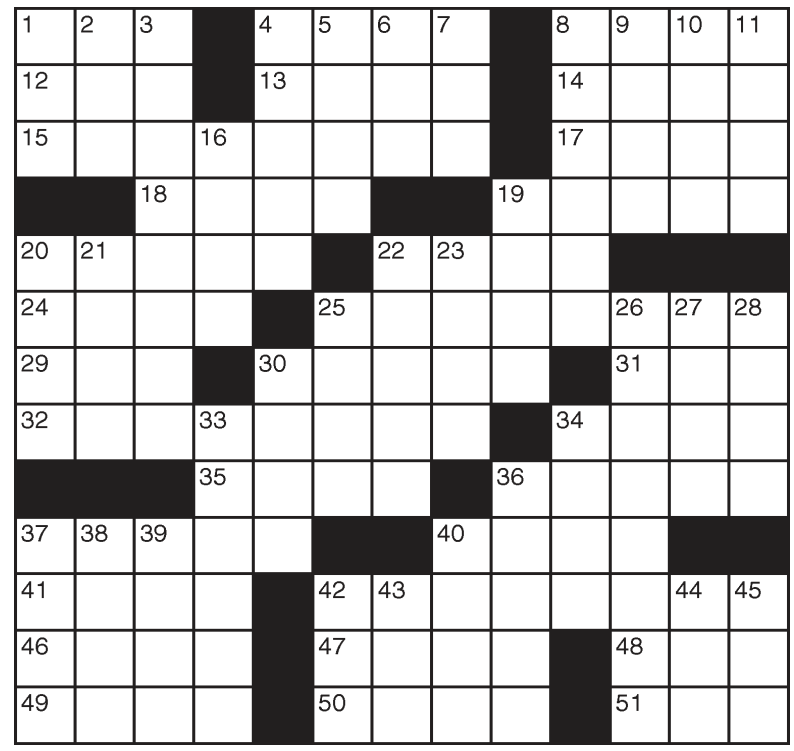
Carpe Diem



Beetle Bailey



Eugene Sheffer Crossword



ACROSS

1 Armed conflict
4 Be slack-jawed
8 Akron's state
12 Land in la mer
13 Mob scene
14 Shaving mishap
15 Coffee-flavored liqueur
17 Beagle's bane
18 Ethel's pal on old TV
19 Choreographer Alvin
20 Sheriff's star
22 Bridge fee
24 Pub orders
25 Cheesy diner favorite
29 Irish actor Stephen
30 Big books
31 PBS funder
32 Song by Etta James
34 Prudish
35 — Godiva
36 Inventor Howe
37 Senate broadcaster
40 Sir Guinness
41 Throat clearer
42 Agra landmark
46 Country singer Evans
47 Tart fruit
48 Prefix with center
49 Band boosters
50 Shortened wd.
51 Lion's home

DOWN

1 Humorist
2 Boxer Laila
3 Genuine, with "the"
4 Dinner prayer
5 Ethereal
6 Luau dish
7 Greek vowel
8 Videotaped
9 Mound
10 Frozen drink brand
11 Fine
16 Coffee cups
19 Regrettably
20 Lisa's brother
21 Out of the storm
22 Kid's belly
23 Draft status
25 Frog's kin
26 Fortified
27 "Star Wars" royal
28 Highland hats
30 Eliot Ness, e.g.
33 Andean critters
34 Entreaty
36 Fudd of cartoons
37 Juanita's home
38 Counterfeit
39 Criminal, to cops
40 "This is — for Superman!"
42 Airport org.
43 Cleric's garment
44 Gorilla
45 Architect Maya

Answer to Previous Puzzle

E	L	L	A		S	A	M		B	I	R	D
D	I	E	M		C	I	A		I	N	T	O
A	R	E	A		E	R	R		R	A	S	H
M	A	R	L	O	N		I	N	C	H		
			G	R	E	E	N	T	H	U	M	B
R	U	R	A	L		M	E	H		R	E	L
A	H	E	M		C	B	S		O	R	S	O
P	O	P		S	U	E		T	R	Y	S	T
T	H	U	M	B	D	R	I	V	E			
		L	E	A	D		W	A	G	E	R	S
L	I	S	A		L	E	I		A	C	A	I
C	O	E	N		E	R	S		N	O	R	M
D	U	D	S		D	A	H		O	N	E	S

12-1 CRYPTOQUIP

TC GORX CKYHW SVUTSV DK WDOZD WYVVFTRN KR UKZSIZKX FTYYKAW, AKIYS DEOD GOHV EVOS YTRVW?

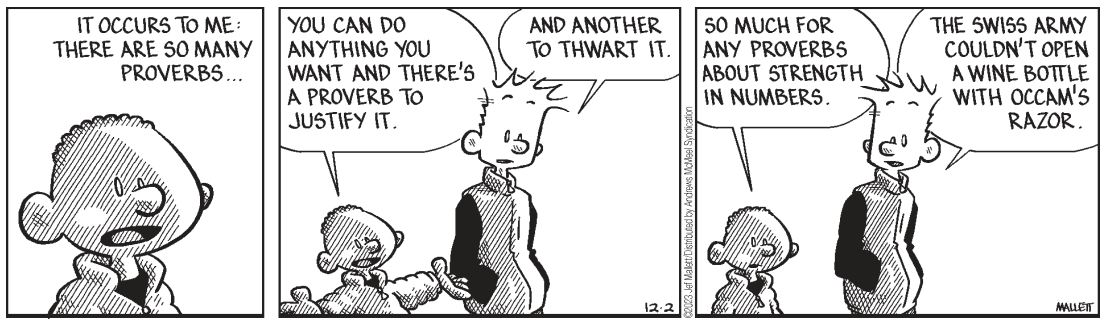
Yesterday's Cryptoquip: BIG CONTEST TO SEE WHICH OF THE PIGS WOULD ROOT UP BURIED ITEMS THE FASTEST: A SNOUTING MATCH.

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: E equals H

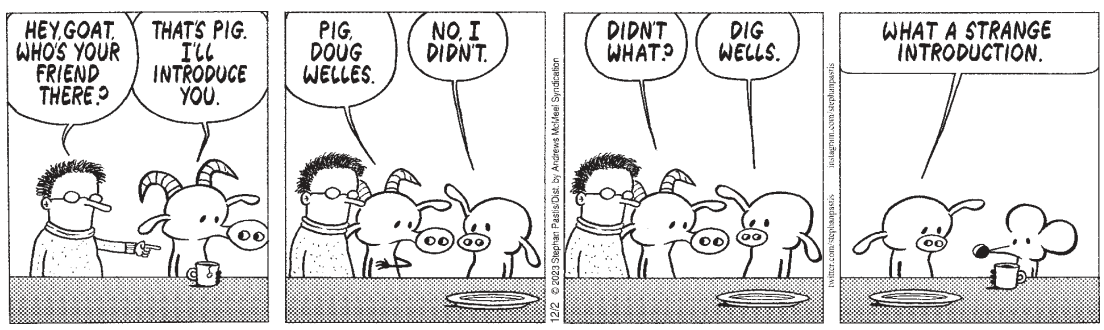
Bizarro

Loose Parts

Frazz

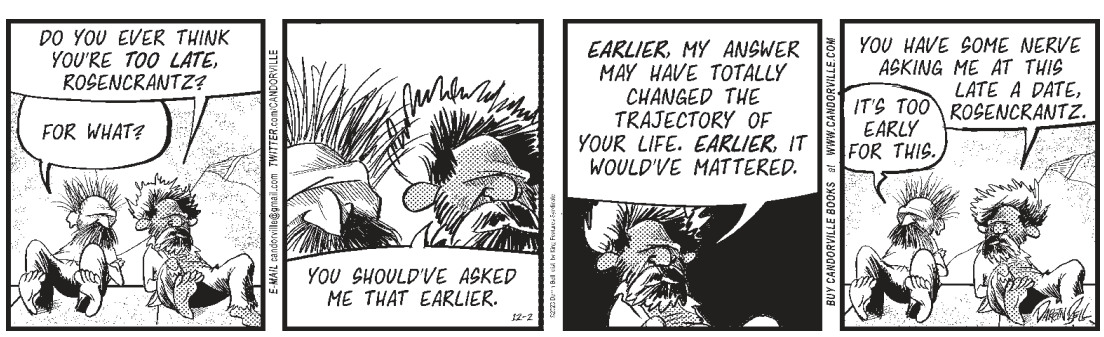


Pearls Before Swine

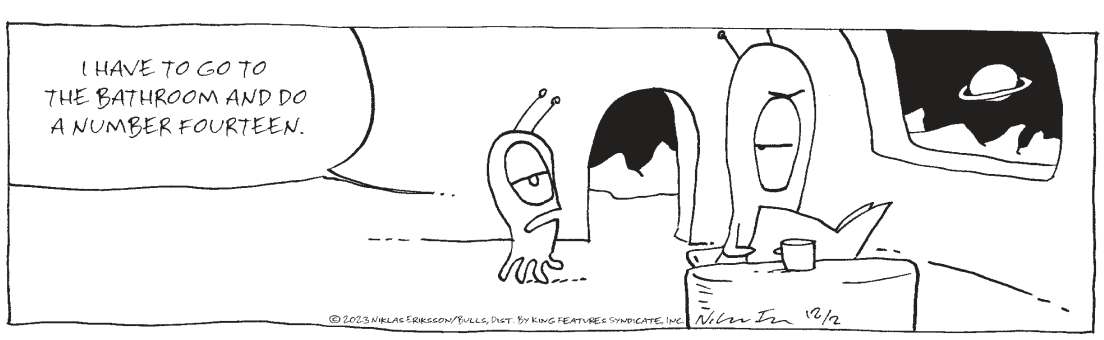


Non Sequitur

Candorville

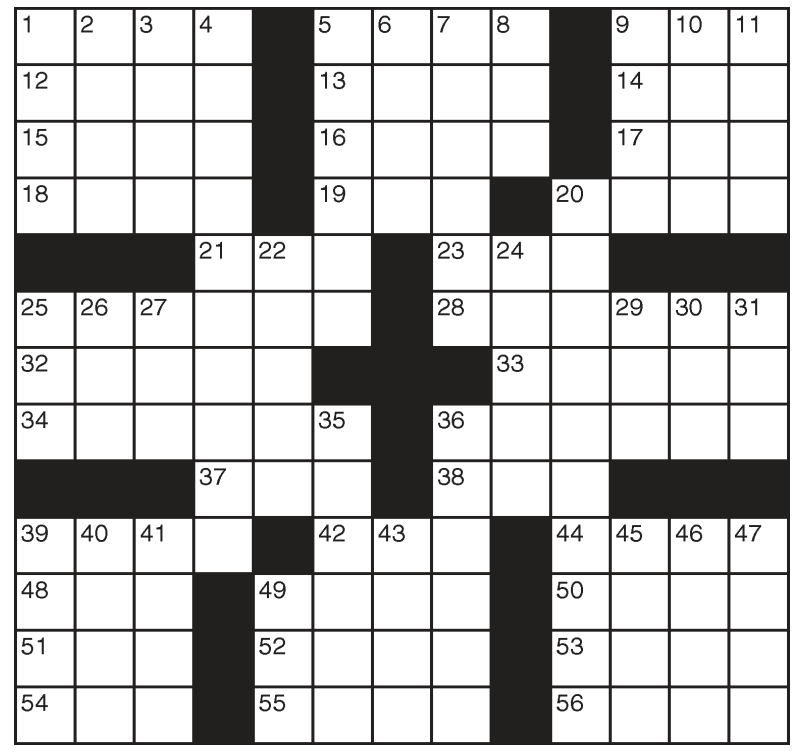


Carpe Diem



Beetle Bailey

Eugene Sheffer Crossword



ACROSS

1 Trenches
5 Online auction site
9 Binge
12 Bickering
13 Edible gelato holder
14 Exist
15 Bean variety
16 Aspiring atty.'s exam
17 Pep
18 Thunder god
19 Oft-torn knee part, for short
20 Crazes
21 Texter's "No more!"
23 Egg (Pref.)
25 Firetruck necessity
28 Full chromosome set
32 Winning
33 Stair part
34 Playful talk
36 Guarantee
37 Perfume label word
38 "Not impressed"
39 Meadows
42 Unruly group
44 Craving
48 Mensa stats
49 Wrench, for one
50 Concept
51 Fanatic
52 "Clair de —"
53 Forbidden act
54 Sportage maker
55 Stuff tightly
56 Goals

DOWN

1 Huck's transport
2 Hexagonal state
3 DVR brand
4 When new employees begin work
5 Patisserie buy
6 Pear choice
7 Not digital, as a watch
8 Still
9 Coffee, slangily
10 Bone-dry
11 Jewels
20 Marathon terminus
22 Euripides tragedy
24 Nemo's creator
25 Science room
26 "Now I get it!"
27 Lair
29 Buckeyes' sch.
30 Sea, to Henri
31 Before
35 Adele's "— Has It"
36 Insignia
39 Nexus
40 Iso-
41 "The Thin Man" dog
43 Chaplin of "Game of Thrones"
45 Japanese noodle
46 Dispatch
47 Art colony in New Mexico
49 Patient's need, briefly

Answer to Previous Puzzle

W	A	R		G	A	P	E		O	H	I	O
I	L	E		R	I	O	T		N	I	C	K
T	I	A	M	A	R	I	A		F	L	E	A
		L	U	C	Y			A	I	L	E	Y
B	A	D	G	E		T	O	L	L			
A	L	E	S		T	U	N	A	M	E	L	T
R	E	A		T	O	M	E	S		N	E	A
T	E	L	L	M	A	M	A		P	R	I	M
			L	A	D	Y		E	L	I	A	S
C	S	P	A	N			A	L	E	C		
A	H	E	M		T	A	J	M	A	H	A	L
S	A	R	A		S	L	O	E		E	P	I
A	M	P	S		A	B	B	R		D	E	N

12-2 CRYPTOQUIP

R SLGBLBG Q YMRYCBE QEG QE BPP HLSF FN SEKREB XTOBLFQLCBA. R'KK KBA NST CESD DMRYM YQFB HRLXA.

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: IF MANY FOLKS DECIDE TO START SLEEPING ON CORDUROY PILLOWS, WOULD THAT MAKE HEAD LINES?

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: P equals G

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OPINION

Biden and Xi, clinching in the ring

By David Ignatius
The Washington Post

Think of the recent summit meeting between the Chinese and American presidents as two boxers clinching during a long bout. The Chinese leader wasn't throwing any punches, happily, but he might be saving his strength for later rounds.

China's President Xi Jinping has used the clinch metaphor to characterize the state of Sino-American relations, according to intelligence reports described by U.S. officials. And it's probably an apt summary of where the two superpowers stand now — in a tactical pause during what might be protracted competition.

The meeting between Xi and President Biden in San Francisco last month produced some modest gains.

Most important, the two leaders agreed on new military-to-military contact that could prevent unplanned incidents at sea or in the sky from becoming fatal combat. This interaction would include discussions between defense secretaries, military chiefs and operational commanders.

Xi got to deliver a pitch for investment in China to an audience of top U.S. business leaders. Biden won a Chinese promise to curb production of precursors for the drug fentanyl. Both sides stopped trading rhetorical blows and instead spoke about greater cooperation in areas of mutual interest.

There was a little trash talk, too, as the two presidents huddled. Biden told Xi that he shouldn't pay too much attention to public-opinion polls reporting his sagging popularity, according to one knowledgeable U.S. official, teasing the Chinese leader, "You'll be meeting with me in five years." Biden is also said to have warned China against interfering in next year's presidential election.

Biden also cautioned Xi against escalating his tactics in the South China Sea, according to the knowledgeable official. A Chinese coast guard vessel collided with a Philippine supply boat in October, and Biden stressed that the United States would keep its security commitments to the Philippines, the official said.

Xi's demeanor was calm and confident throughout the summit, the U.S. official said. Determined that the meeting go smoothly, Chinese officials bused in hundreds of flag-waving pro-China demonstrators to greet the visiting leader as he arrived at his hotel, according to the official.

For Xi, the clinch metaphor describes a modest tactical change in approach. China's economy is slowing, and he needs some time to regain his balance and momentum. The United States, meanwhile, has turned out to be a stronger and more resilient competitor than Xi expected. As Xi conceded in his speech to U.S. business leaders in San Francisco, "the United States is revitalizing its economy."

So, rather than punching itself out prematurely, China appears to be coasting for a few rounds to try to recover its strength. It wants the United States to join the pause, too.

Here's how Xi made the pitch in his speech to the business leaders: "If one sees the other side as a primary competitor … and a pacing threat, it will only lead to misinformed policymaking, misguided actions and unwanted results."

China experts see Xi's stance as the latest phase in Beijing's carefully calibrated public profile. For the decades of rapid modernization under Deng Xiaoping, China's approach was summed up in his famous phrase, "Hide your strength, bide your time." That caution encouraged an American transfer of trade and technology that helped make China an economic superpower.

When Xi became China's leader in 2012, he took a more aggressive approach — proclaiming China's ambition to become a global leader.

This new policy emulated "Wolf Warrior," the title of a Chinese movie celebrating the country's ability to project military power in Africa and other regions. Rather than "hide and bide," the Chinese over the past decade have embraced what became known as "Wolf Warrior diplomacy" as they pressed their interests abroad.

Now, after what many analysts saw as an overly aggressive drive for power that alienated many countries in Europe and Asia, Xi might have decided on a tactical pause. A clinch, as the U.S. official says the president has termed it in internal guidance for party members, is where he holds his American opponent close.

Xi proclaimed at the San Francisco summit that "Planet Earth is big enough for the two countries to succeed." Let's hope so. For now, the value of the San Francisco summit was to keep the long-running U.S.-Chinese competition inside the ring — with better consultation about the rules.

Trump gave Democrats a health care gift

By Francis Wilkinson
Bloomberg Opinion

Chronically low poll numbers for President Joe Biden. A brutal war in Gaza that's driven a wedge into the Democrats' coalition. A migration crisis at the southern border and an overwhelmed immigration court system.

Less than one year from Election Day 2024, supporters of rule of law and democratic institutions have plenty of cause for concern. Still, holiday lights twinkled a bit brighter when Donald Trump reminded everyone that his ineptitude remains a powerful advantage in democracy's favor.

In a Nov. 25 post on his infirm social network, Trump announced that Democrats were having a tough week and he wanted to help them out of a jam. Or at least he might as well have said that. "The cost of Obamacare is out of control, plus, it's not good Healthcare," Trump wrote. "I'm seriously looking at alternatives."

With that, Democrats moved in unison to change the subject from war (and the funding of it) to health care, an issue on which the party is relatively united and typically holds a double-digit polling advantage over Republicans. There are few topics Democrats would rather discuss.

There are also few topics that more effectively expose Trump's con. The former president first promised to deliver " something terrific " on health care in 2015. Indeed, the argument went, because Trump was the world's most successful and classiest businessman, he would be able to produce a health care plan to deliver vastly better results for dramatically lower costs. It was all so easy if you were a very stable genius.

Of course, anyone who knew anything about health care, or about Trump, understood that he was lying. Not a little bit — but completely. Eight years later, no such plan exists, or ever will. But Trump decided it was a good idea to remind everyone of his empty bluster along with his previous efforts to kill Obamacare, the health insurance program that tens of millions of Americans rely on. In 2017, Republicans came within one vote of repealing the Affordable Care Act and replacing it with a bucket of liberal tears. Trump was furious that President Barack Obama's signature initiative survived. Apparently, he still is.

"My predecessor once again called for cuts that could rip away health insurance for tens of millions of Americans," Biden said Monday. "They just don't give up."

On Tuesday, former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi followed up with another reminder, reciting a greatest hits of Democratic talking points from the Obamacare battles — no "pre-existing conditions" — combining them with newer points on prescription drugs and abortion. Trump is "coming for your health care," Pelosi said at a news conference. "The Affordable Care Act will be on the ballot."

Message discipline had been the special sauce of American political campaigns for decades before Trump came along. Polling and focus groups guided message development, and candidates who stuck to the script generally fared much better than those who didn't.

Trump upended all that, mixing stream of consciousness, demagogy, insults and random inanities on the campaign trail with lies and more lies. The news media went along for the ride, allowing Trump to renege on promises to produce everything from a health care plan to his wife Melania's mysterious (and never disclosed) immigration records.

Trump's lies are still working overtime; an entire political party is now devoted to their maintenance. But his lies about health care, in particular, combined with the cruelty of his efforts to take health insurance from millions, never carried the day. Unlike words such as "open border," which for most Americans conjures a place indistinct and far away, "health care" hits close to home.

After eight years of falsehoods and flailing, only the most addled cult members could believe that Trump has even bothered to learn anything about health insurance — let alone devised a policy to improve it.

Which is why you'll be hearing Democrats talk about health care every chance they get. It's also why anyone eager to keep authoritarians out of the White House ought to take heart. Trump's sloppy blunder won't be his last.

Francis Wilkinson is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering U.S. politics and policy.

SCOREBOARD

COLLEGE FOOTBALL

AP Top 25 schedule

Friday, Dec. 1

No. 3 Washington vs. No. 5 Oregon, Pac 12 Championship at Las Vegas

No. 20 Liberty vs. New Mexico St., Conference USA Championship at Lynchburg, Va.

Saturday, Dec. 2

No. 1 Georgia vs. No. 8 Alabama, SEC Championship at Atlanta

No. 2 Michigan vs. No. 18 Iowa, Big Ten Championship at Indianapolis

No. 4 Florida St. vs. No. 15 Louisville, ACC Championship at Charlotte, N.C.

No. 7 Texas vs. No. 19 Oklahoma St., Big 12 Championship at Arlington, Texas

No. 17 Tulane vs. No. 25 SMU, American Athletic Conference Championship at New Orleans

No. 23 Toledo vs. Miami (Ohio), MAC Championship at Detroit

Schedule

Saturday, Dec. 2

SOUTH

Troy (10-2) vs. Appalachian St. (8-4), Sun Belt Championship at Troy, Ala.

Florida A&M (10-1) vs. Prairie View (6-5), SWAC Championship at Tallahassee, Fla.

FAR WEST

UNLV (9-3) vs. Boise St. (7-5), Mountain West Championship at Las Vegas

FCS playoffs

Second Round
Saturday, Dec. 2

South Dakota St. (11-0) vs. Mercer (9-3)
Villanova (9-2) vs. Youngstown St. (8-4)
UAlbany (9-3) vs. Richmond (9-3)
Idaho (8-3) vs. Southern Ill. (8-4)
South Dakota (9-2) vs. Sacramento St. (8-4)
Montana St. (8-3) vs. North Dakota St. (9-3)
Furman (9-2) vs. Chattanooga (8-4)
Montana (10-1) vs. Delaware (9-3)

NCAA Division II playoffs

Quarterfinals
Saturday, Dec. 2

Slippery Rock vs. Kutztown
Lenoir-Rhyne vs. Valdosta St.
Harding vs. Grand Valley St.
Colo. Sch. of Mines vs. Central Wash.

NCAA Division III playoffs

Quarterfinals
Saturday, Dec. 2

Wis.-La Crosse vs. North Central (Ill.)
Wartburg vs. Wis.-Whitewater
Alma vs. Cortland
Johns Hopkins vs. Randolph-Macon

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

Wednesday's men's scores

EAST

Albany (NY) 86, Boston U. 72
CCSU 79, Army 51
Colgate 84, Binghamton 49
Columbia 69, Loyola (Md.) 57
Cornell 91, Monmouth (NJ) 87
Drexel 69, Lafayette 48
Duquesne 66, UC Irvine 62
Georgetown 69, Merrimack 67
Harvard 80, American 75
Le Moyne 92, Fredonia St. 54
Maine 72, Holy Cross 57
Marist 68, Iona 64
Mass.-Lowell 80, Stonehill 74
Navy 67, VMI 47
Princeton 85, Bucknell 71
Saint Joseph's 78, Villanova 65
Seton Hall 88, Northeastern 75
St. Francis (Pa.) 62, Lehigh 61
Temple 106, La Salle 99, 3OT
Vermont 64, Dartmouth 53
Yale 79, Stony Brook 71

SOUTH

Alabama A&M 85, Tennessee St. 83, OT
Albany St. (Ga.) 92, Florida A&M 85, 2OT
Appalachian St. 72, ETSU 61
Auburn 74, Virginia Tech 57
Boston College 80, Vanderbilt 62
Coastal Carolina 72, SC-Upstate 70, OT
Davidson 85, Charlotte 81
Florida Gulf Coast 68, FIU 65
George Mason 86, NJIT 68
Georgia 68, Florida St. 66
High Point 77, Morgan St. 59
Jacksonville 62, Campbell 48
James Madison 81, Buffalo 66
Lipscomb 82, Chattanooga 68
Louisville 73, Bellarmine 68
Morehead St. 61, Austin Peay 50
Murray St. 79, Bradley 72
N. Kentucky 77, Robert Morris 59
North Carolina 100, Tennessee 92
Old Dominion 69, Radford 68
Queens (NC) 83, Gardner-Webb 80
Stetson 94, Coastal Georgia 49
Tulane 98, Prairie View 77
Virginia 59, Texas A&M 47
W. Kentucky 101, Campbellsville 77
Wake Forest 82, Florida 71

MIDWEST

Belmont 90, N. Iowa 70
Drake 83, Valparaiso 65
Fort Wayne 75, Green Bay 71
Iowa 103, North Florida 78
Missouri St. 90, Evansville 78
Oakland 65, Detroit 50
Ohio St. 88, Cent. Michigan 61
Wichita St. 80, Richmond 68
Wright St. 103, IUPUI 74
Youngstown St. 94, Cleveland St. 69

SOUTHWEST

Arkansas 80, Duke 75
Dayton 65, SMU 63
Tarleton St. 68, Stephen F. Austin 66
Texas A&M Commerce 100, Dallas Christian 48
Texas A&M-CC 67, UTEP 63
Texas-Arlington 86, Abilene Christian 71

FAR WEST

Arizona St. 78, Sam Houston St. 61
CS Northridge 80, Pacific 69
Cal Baptist 91, S. Utah 66
Cal Poly 81, San Jose St. 77, OT
Colorado St. 88, Colorado 83
Denver 67, Idaho 65
Grand Canyon 79, Texas Rio Grande Valley 69
Loyola Marymount 90, Cent. Arkansas 63
Nevada 77, Montana 66
New Mexico 74, Louisiana Tech 65
San Diego 74, N. Colorado 72
Santa Clara 106, Menlo 69
Southern Cal 106, E. Washington 78
UC Santa Barbara 70, N. Arizona 59
Utah Valley St. 78, Seattle 72

Wednesday's women's scores

EAST

Brown 58, Bryant 53
Colgate 97, Keuka 22
Columbia 77, Providence 52
Cornell 58, Binghamton 57
Delaware 68, American 58
Fairfield 66, Sacred Heart 61, OT
Holy Cross 59, Stonehill 32
Lafayette 59, UMBC 53
Maryland 114, Niagara 44
Md.-Eastern Shore 69, Mount St. Mary's 52
NJIT 61, Fairleigh Dickinson 46
New Hampshire 51, Northeastern 41
Penn 79, La Salle 71
Penn St. 97, Radford 47
Pittsburgh 87, St. Francis (Pa.) 62
Princeton 75, Seton Hall 71, 2OT
Rutgers 82, Delaware St. 48
St. John's 71, Loyola (Md.) 49
Towson 80, Morgan St. 69

SOUTH

Alabama A&M 70, North Alabama 57
Belmont 72, Troy 68
Charlotte 65, Mercer 58
Chattanooga 49, Kennesaw St. 43
Davidson 64, Appalachian St. 41
East Carolina 75, Hampton 55
Florida 68, Georgia Tech 58
Florida Gulf Coast 108, Ave Maria 31
Furman 73, Gardner-Webb 66
Georgia Southern 81, FIU 69
Louisiana-Monroe 60, Louisiana Tech 52
Louisville 64, Mississippi 58
Miami 74, Mississippi St. 68
NC State 70, Vanderbilt 62
North Florida 68, Warner 51
Notre Dame 74, Tennessee 69
Presbyterian 76, NC Central 58
SC State 76, Queens (NC) 58
South Alabama 80, New Orleans 63
Tennessee Tech 84, Lincoln Memorial 57
UAB 88, MVSU 56
UNC-Greensboro 65, Coastal Carolina 59
UNC-Wilmington 66, Winthrop 58, OT
Wofford 63, UNC-Asheville 54

MIDWEST

Bellarmine 64, Evansville 58
Butler 67, Bradley 46
Cent. Arkansas 77, Lindenwood (Mo.) 64
Cleveland St. 72, Robert Morris 59
Illinois 89, CCSU 50
Iowa St. 85, St. Thomas (MN) 44
Kent St. 77, Coppin St. 40
Longwood 75, Ohio 72
Loyola Chicago 73, Northwestern 68
Marquette 88, Memphis 59
Michigan 103, SIU-Edwardsville 59
Minnesota 74, Norfolk St. 43
Nebraska 77, FAU 53
South Dakota 84, N. Iowa 65
W. Michigan 75, Valparaiso 71, OT
Wisconsin 75, N. Illinois 54

SOUTHWEST

Abilene Christian 94, Texas-Arlington 76
Middle Tennessee 70, Houston 45
Rice 74, Texas Southern 44
Stephen F. Austin 80, Tarleton St. 67
Texas 112, Oral Roberts 74
Texas Tech 60, UC Irvine 54

FAR WEST

Boise St. 70, UC Davis 53
Cal St.-Fullerton 71, San Jose St. 64
Gonzaga 82, E. Washington 80
Grand Canyon 63, Texas Rio Grande Valley 50
Idaho 70, Utah St. 43
Nevada 76, San Diego 63
Oregon St. 79, Weber St. 53
Portland St. 72, Fresno St. 61
Santa Clara 70, Sacramento St. 65
Seattle 58, Utah Valley St. 48
UNLV 85, N. Arizona 69
Washington St. 111, Texas A&M Commerce 50

PRO SOCCER

MLS playoffs

Semifinals
Saturday, Nov. 25
Eastern Conference

Columbus 2, Orlando City 0
Cincinnati 1, Philadelphia 0

Sunday, Nov. 26
Western Conference

Houston 1, Sporting Kansas City 0
Los Angeles FC 1, Seattle 0

Conference Finals
Dec. 2-3

Columbus vs. Cincinnati
Houston vs. Los Angeles FC

Championship
Saturday, Dec. 9

Conference Finals winners

PRO BASKETBALL

NBA

EASTERN CONFERENCE

Atlantic Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Boston	14	4	.778	—
Philadelphia	12	6	.667	2
New York	10	7	.588	3½
Brooklyn	9	8	.529	4½
Toronto	9	10	.474	5½

Southeast Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Orlando	13	5	.722	—
Miami	10	8	.556	3
Atlanta	8	9	.471	4½
Charlotte	5	11	.313	7
Washington	3	15	.167	10

Central Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Milwaukee	13	5	.722	—
Indiana	9	7	.563	3
Cleveland	10	8	.556	3
Chicago	5	14	.263	8½
Detroit	2	16	.111	11

WESTERN CONFERENCE

Southwest Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Dallas	11	6	.647	—
New Orleans	10	9	.526	2
Houston	8	8	.500	2½
Memphis	4	13	.235	7
San Antonio	3	14	.176	8

Northwest Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Minnesota	13	4	.765	—
Denver	13	6	.684	1
Oklahoma City	11	6	.647	2
Utah	6	12	.333	7½
Portland	5	12	.294	8

Pacific Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Phoenix	11	7	.611	—
Sacramento	10	7	.588	½
L.A. Lakers	11	8	.579	½
L.A. Clippers	8	9	.471	2½
Golden State	8	10	.444	3

Wednesday's games

L.A. Lakers 133, Detroit 107
Orlando 139, Washington 120
Toronto 112, Phoenix 105
Memphis 105, Utah 91
New Orleans 124, Philadelphia 114
Denver 134, Houston 124
L.A. Clippers 131, Sacramento 117

Thursday's games

Portland at Cleveland
Charlotte at Brooklyn
Detroit at New York
Indiana at Miami
Atlanta at San Antonio
L.A. Lakers at Oklahoma City
Milwaukee at Chicago
Utah at Minnesota
L.A. Clippers at Golden State

Friday's games

Washington at Orlando
Memphis at Dallas
New York at Toronto
Philadelphia at Boston
San Antonio at New Orleans
Denver at Phoenix

Saturday's games

Golden State at L.A. Clippers
Minnesota at Charlotte
Cleveland at Detroit
Orlando at Brooklyn
Atlanta at Milwaukee
Indiana at Miami
New Orleans at Chicago
Memphis at Phoenix
Oklahoma City at Dallas
Portland at Utah
Denver at Sacramento
Houston at L.A. Lakers

Sunday's games

No games scheduled

PRO FOOTBALL

NFL

American Conference

East

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Miami	8	3	0	.727	339	251
Buffalo	6	6	0	.500	328	227
N.Y. Jets	4	7	0	.364	163	238
New England	2	9	0	.182	148	248

South

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Jacksonville	8	3	0	.727	254	225
Houston	6	5	0	.545	259	232
Indianapolis	6	5	0	.545	269	268
Tennessee	4	7	0	.364	185	224

North

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Baltimore	9	3	0	.750	324	187
Cleveland	7	4	0	.636	239	209
Pittsburgh	7	4	0	.636	182	205
Cincinnati	5	6	0	.455	212	242

West

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Kansas City	8	3	0	.727	256	181
Denver	6	5	0	.545	246	280
Las Vegas	5	7	0	.417	202	256
L.A. Chargers	4	7	0	.364	269	258

National Conference

East

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Philadelphia	10	1	0	.909	310	246
Dallas	8	3	0	.727	347	185
N.Y. Giants	4	8	0	.333	159	292
Washington	4	8	0	.333	246	350

South

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Atlanta	5	6	0	.455	213	232
New Orleans	5	6	0	.455	229	222
Tampa Bay	4	7	0	.364	212	227
Carolina	1	10	0	.091	173	292

North

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Detroit	8	3	0	.727	294	258
Minnesota	6	6	0	.500	263	242
Green Bay	5	6	0	.455	231	224
Chicago	4	8	0	.333	242	296

West

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
San Francisco	8	3	0	.727	310	170
Seattle	6	5	0	.545	229	249
L.A. Rams	5	6	0	.455	232	234
Arizona	2	10	0	.167	206	321

Sunday, Nov. 26

Atlanta 24, New Orleans 15
Indianapolis 27, Tampa Bay 20
Jacksonville 24, Houston 21
N.Y. Giants 10, New England 7
Pittsburgh 16, Cincinnati 10
Tennessee 17, Carolina 10
Denver 29, Cleveland 12
L.A. Rams 37, Arizona 14
Kansas City 31, Las Vegas 17
Philadelphia 37, Buffalo 34, OT
Baltimore 20, L.A. Chargers 10

Monday, Nov. 27

Chicago 12, Minnesota 10

Thursday's game

Seattle at Dallas

Sunday's games

Arizona at Pittsburgh
Atlanta at N.Y. Jets
Denver at Houston
Detroit at New Orleans
Indianapolis at Tennessee
L.A. Chargers at New England
Miami at Washington
Carolina at Tampa Bay
Cleveland at L.A. Rams
San Francisco at Philadelphia
Kansas City at Green Bay

Open: Baltimore, Buffalo, Las Vegas, Chicago, Minnesota, N.Y. Giants

Monday's game

Cincinnati at Jacksonville

TENNIS

Andorra Open

Wednesday
At Poliesportiu d'Andorra
Andorra la Vella, Andorra
Purse: Euro 100,000
Surface: Hardcourt outdoor
Women's Singles
Round of 32

Katarzyna Kawa, Poland, def. Sarah Iliev, France, 6-4, 6-2.

Clara Tauson (2), Denmark, def. Victoria Jimenez Kasintseva, Andorra, 6-2, 6-4.

Round of 16

Erika Andreeva, Russia, def. Celine Naef, Switzerland, 2-6, 6-4, 6-4.

Alize Cornet (8), France, def. Nuria Parrizas Diaz, Spain, 6-1, 2-6, 6-1.

Heather Watson, Britain, def. Alina Charaeva, Russia, 6-2, 6-1.

Marina Bassols Ribera (6), Spain, def. Ekaterina Reyngold, Russia, 6-3, 6-2.

Argentina Open

Wednesday
At Buenos Aires Lawn Tennis Club
Buenos Aires
Purse: $115,000
Surface: Red clay
Women's Singles
Round of 16

Diane Parry (1), France, def. Julieta Estable, Argentina, 6-3, 6-3.

Polona Hercog, Slovenia, def. Valeriya Strakhova, Ukraine, 6-1, 1-6, 6-3.

Laura Pigossi (5), Brazil, def. Conny Perrin, Switzerland, 6-2, 6-3.

Elizabeth Mandlik (3), United States, def. Jamie Loeb, United States, 6-0, 7-5.

COLLEGE SOCCER

NCAA Men's Tournament

Quarterfinals
Saturday, Dec. 2

No. 2 Notre Dame vs. Indiana
No. 3 North Carolina vs. Oregon St.
No. 5 West Virginia vs. Loyola Marymount
No. 9 Clemson vs. No. 16 Stanford

Semifinals
Friday, Dec. 8
At Lynn Family Stadium
Louisville, Ky.

Notre Dame-Indiana winner vs. North Carolina-Oregon St. winner
West Virginia-Loyola Marymount winner vs. Clemson-Stanford winner

Championship
Monday, Dec. 11
At Lynn Family Stadium
Louisville, Ky.

Semifinal winners

DEALS

Wednesday's transactions

BASEBALL
Major League Baseball
American League

KANSAS CITY ROYALS — Agreed to terms with INF/OF Garrett Hampson on a one-year contract.

OAKLAND ATHLETICS — Agreed to terms with C Drew Lugbauer on a minor league contract.

FOOTBALL
National Football League

ARIZONA CARDINALS — Designated OL Elijah Wilkinson to return from injured reserve to practice.

ATLANTA FALCONS — Signed LB Frank Ginda to the practice squad.

CAROLINA PANTHERS — Signed G Gabe Jackson to the practice squad. Placed G Chandler Zavala on injured reserve.

DENVER BRONCOS — Designated WR Brandon Johnson from injured reserve.

DETROIT LIONS — Signed WR Tom Kennedy to the practice squad. Released WR Dylan Drummond from the practice squad. Designated QB Hendon Hooker to return from the non-football injury list to practice.

GREEN BAY PACKERS — Signed WR Bo Melton and RB James Robinson to the practice squad.

HOUSTON TEXANS — Promoted CB Desmond King and LB Denzel Perryman from the practice squad to the active roster. Waived CB Shaquill Griffin. Signed K Matt Ammendola and LB Garret Wallow to the practice squad. Released RB Gerrid Doaks from the practice squad. Placed OL Tytus Howard on injured reserve.

KANSAS CITY CHIEFS — Designated LB Nick Bolton to return from injured reserve to practice.

MIAMI DOLPHINS — Designated RB Christopher Brooks from injured reserve.

NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS — Signed QB Will Grier and WR Matthew Sexton to the practice squad.

NEW ORLEANS SAINTS — Signed K Austin Seibert and DB Shemar Jean-Charles to the practice squad.

NEW YORK JETS — Designated QB Aaron Rodgers, DB Justin Hardee and G Wes Schweitzer to return from injured reserve to practice.

TENNESSEE TITANS — Re-signed DL Jaleel Johnson.

HOCKEY
National Hockey League

BOSTON BRUINS — Recalled D Ian Mitchell from Providence (AHL).

BUFFALO SABRES — Recalled F Brandon Biro from Rochester (AHL). Reassigned C Jiri Kulich to Rochester.

CALGARY FLAMES — Recalled D Jordan Oesterle from Calgary (AHL).

DALLAS STARS — Reassigned D Lian Bichsel from Texas (AHL) to Rogle (Swedish Hockey League).

MINNESOTA WILD — Reassigned D David Spacek from Iowa (AHL) to Iowa (ECHL).

NEW JERSEY DEVILS — Recalled F Samuel Laberge from Utica (AHL).

NEW YORK RANGERS — Activated D Adam Fox from injured reserve.

OTTAWA TITANS — Reassigned G Leevi Merilainen from Belleville (AHL) to Allen (ECHL).

PITTSBURGH PENGUINS — Returned LW Alexander Nylander to Wilkes-Barre/Scranton (AHL). Reassigned LW Jordan Frasca from Wilkes-Barre/Scranton to Wheeling (ECHL).

ST. LOUIS BLUES — Reassigned G Will Cranley from Reading (ECHL) to Springfield (AHL).

SAN JOSE SHARKS — Reassigned G Georgi Romanov and Ds Gannon Laroque and Arten Guryev from San Jose (AHL) to Wichita (ECHL).

VANCOUVER CANUCKS — Recalled C Linus Karlsson and D Matt Irwin from Abbotsford (AHL). Returned D Akito Hirose to Abbotsford.

VEGAS GOLDEN KNIGHTS — Signed F Jordan Gustafson to a three-year, entry level contract.

SOCCER
Major League Soccer

MLS — Suspended FC Cincinnati D Matt Miazga for three matches and issued an undisclosed fine for his misconduct in a Nov. 4 match vs. New York Red Bulls.

ATLANTA UNITED — Re-signed D Efrain Morales to a one-year contract extension.

SAN JOSE EARTHQUAKES — Signed F Benji Kikanovic and D Paul Maine to two-year contracts.

National Women's Soccer League

UTAH ROYALS FC — Signed F Imani Dorsey to a two-year contract.

NHL/NFL

Kane could debut with Wings soon

By Stephen Whyno
Associated Press

After skating at Madison Square Garden on Wednesday morning, Patrick Kane would have loved to play his first game for the Detroit Red Wings at night against the New York Rangers.

Six months removed from an invasive operation only two other NHL players have come back from, Kane will give his surgically repaired right hip a little more time.

Kane

After signing a prorated $2.75 million contract for the rest of the season with the Red Wings, a more realistic possibility for his debut is Tuesday in his hometown of Buffalo against the Sabres — one of the several interested teams Kane had to choose from. Home games against San Jose on Dec. 7 and Ottawa on Dec. 9 are also candidates.

"We'll just take it day to day and keep getting better every day and then make a decision," Kane said on a video call with reporters Wednesday. "Get me up to speed, a few practices with the team, work on a few things in the gym and don't really rush into it."

The 35-year-old winger is roughly six months removed from undergoing hip resurfacing surgery. Kane said doctors cleared him for contact two months ago.

He feels significantly better than the last time he played: Game 7 of the Rangers' first-round series at New Jersey on May 1. Lateral movement is back after the nagging hip injury hampered him for quite some time.

"I'm in a good spot," Kane said. "The hip feels good and everything like that. So now I think we're just kind of easing into it and making sure I'm ready to go instead of just kind of throwing me into the fire."

A three-time Stanley Cup champion and 2016 NHL MVP with Chicago, Kane said former Blackhawks teammate Alex DeBrincat being with Detroit factored into his decision.

"Just the chemistry we've had on the ice the last couple of years in Chicago there (and) he's become one of my better friends around the league off the ice," Kane said of DeBrincat. "I really like kind of where they're going as far as the team and they're really building something that I think is going to have a lot of success here, so I'd like to be part of that."

Coach Derek Lalonde told reporters in New York that Kane could get a look on a line with DeBrincat and possibly captain Dylan Larkin.

NHL scoreboard

Eastern Conference

Atlantic Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Boston	21	14	4	3	31	71	55
Florida	22	13	7	2	28	64	57
Toronto	20	11	6	3	25	69	67
Detroit	21	11	7	3	25	76	63
Tampa Bay	23	10	8	5	25	80	81
Buffalo	22	10	10	2	22	64	71
Montreal	22	10	10	2	22	63	77
Ottawa	17	8	9	0	16	60	59

Metropolitan Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
N.Y. Rangers	21	16	4	1	33	70	52
Carolina	21	13	8	0	26	71	68
Washington	19	11	6	2	24	47	52
Philadelphia	22	11	10	1	23	65	62
N.Y. Islanders	21	8	7	6	22	56	67
New Jersey	20	10	9	1	21	72	74
Pittsburgh	21	10	10	1	21	65	55
Columbus	24	7	13	4	18	69	83

Western Conference

Central Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Colorado	21	15	6	0	30	80	59
Dallas	20	13	5	2	28	68	57
Winnipeg	21	12	7	2	26	71	61
St. Louis	21	11	9	1	23	61	65
Nashville	21	11	10	0	22	70	66
Arizona	21	10	9	2	22	68	64
Minnesota	20	6	10	4	16	60	78
Chicago	20	7	13	0	14	53	73

Pacific Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Vegas	23	14	5	4	32	74	57
Vancouver	23	15	7	1	31	91	57
Los Angeles	20	13	4	3	29	78	50
Calgary	22	9	10	3	21	64	75
Seattle	23	8	10	5	21	65	82
Anaheim	22	9	13	0	18	59	76
Edmonton	21	8	12	1	17	71	78
San Jose	22	5	15	2	12	36	90

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.

Tuesday's games

New Jersey 5, N.Y. Islanders 4
Toronto 2, Florida 1, SO
Carolina 4, Philadelphia 1
Minnesota 3, St. Louis 1
Nashville 3, Pittsburgh 2, OT
Dallas 2, Winnipeg 0
Chicago 4, Seattle 3
Arizona 3, Tampa Bay 1
Edmonton 5, Vegas 4, SO
Vancouver 3, Anaheim 1

Wednesday's games

Montreal 4, Columbus 2
N.Y. Rangers 3, Detroit 2
Washington 2, Los Angeles 1

Thursday's games

Chicago at Detroit
Florida at Montreal
New Jersey at Philadelphia
Pittsburgh at Tampa Bay
San Jose at Boston
Seattle at Toronto
N.Y. Islanders at Carolina
Buffalo at St. Louis
Edmonton at Winnipeg
Minnesota at Nashville
Colorado at Arizona
Dallas at Calgary
Vegas at Vancouver
Washington at Anaheim

Friday's games

Ottawa at Columbus
San Jose at New Jersey

Saturday's games

Tampa Bay at Dallas
Chicago at Winnipeg
N.Y. Rangers at Nashville
N.Y. Islanders at Florida
Boston at Toronto
Buffalo at Carolina
Detroit at Montreal
Philadelphia at Pittsburgh
Seattle at Ottawa
St. Louis at Arizona
Colorado at Anaheim
Vancouver at Calgary
Washington at Vegas

Sunday's games

Chicago at Minnesota
San Jose at N.Y. Rangers
Columbus at Boston
Nashville at Buffalo
Colorado at Los Angeles

Scoring leaders

Through Wednesday

	GP	G	A	PTS
Nikita Kucherov, TB	22	15	22	37
J.T. Miller, VAN	23	13	22	35
Quinn Hughes, VAN	23	8	25	33
Cale Makar, COL	21	6	26	32

Williams has persevered to be Rams' rising star

By Greg Beacham
Associated Press

THOUSAND OAKS, Calif. — Kyren Williams' NFL career is going the way he always imagined it, even if he needed a bit longer than he thought to seize this spotlight with the Los Angeles Rams.

The running back who grew up in St. Louis idolizing the Rams' Steven Jackson is now asserting himself as an heir to his hero with 599 yards rushing in just seven games in his second season. He has rebounded superbly from an injury-shortened rookie year, seizing a prominent role this fall and then returning from another injury last week with his biggest performance of all.

"It kind of continued the same pattern in my life," Williams said Wednesday. "Ever since high school, I've been that overlooked type of player, you know? Never able to have the shine right off the bat. I always had to work for everything. So for me, it was able to get through the storm, weather the storm and come out better because of it and get to where I'm at now. Now, I'm not looking back. I'm just going for it."

Williams was named the NFC's offensive player of the week after his do-everything performance in the Rams' 37-14 win at Arizona last Sunday. He racked up 143 yards rushing on just 16 carries and added six receptions for 61 yards and two touchdowns, catching every pass thrown his way by Matthew Stafford.

"It's definitely cool to be recognized," Williams said. "It's a blessing. But I want more of those, so I've got to keep on working."

The ups and downs of a relatively short NFL career have only fueled Williams, who is the engine driving the Rams (5-6) into the playoff race after they nearly fell all the way out during his recent absence. Los Angeles has won two straight heading into a key home game against Cleveland on Sunday, pitting Williams' offense against one of the league's top defenses.

Stafford has only played with one 1,000-yard rusher in his 15 NFL seasons — Reggie Bush in Detroit a decade ago — but the veteran quarterback is thrilled for the Rams to have a running back with Williams' star potential.

"Helps to hopefully keep our defense off the field when you're able to be efficient on some of the run-game stuff," Stafford said. "It obviously gives our coach and coordinator confidence to call his plays, and we're getting big (gains) out of it. The explosives were huge last week. (Williams and backup Royce Freeman) are getting it done in the run game and the pass game, so it's fun to watch, fun to be a part of. I think it fires up our guys up front and our guys on the perimeter. If they continue to block, good things are going to happen. Those backs are going to get to the second level."

Ross D. Franklin/AP

Rams running back Kyren Williams celebrates with fans after scoring a touchdown during the first half against the Cardinals last week. Williams was named the NFC's offensive player of the week.

Cleveland Browns (7-4)
at Los Angeles Rams (5-6)
AFN-Sports2
10:25 p.m. Sunday CET
6:25 a.m. Monday JKT

Williams' childhood in St. Louis coincided with Jackson's 11 seasons, during which he became the leading rusher in Rams franchise history. Williams imagined himself wearing the horned helmet for that whole time, and he was thrilled when the Rams drafted him out of Notre Dame.

But after the excitement of being chosen by the defending Super Bowl champions wore off a bit, Williams' rookie season was kind of a chore. He broke his foot in offseason workouts, and then he incurred a high ankle sprain on a kick return in Week 1, spending two months on injured reserve.

Williams eventually returned, but had just one game with more than seven carries while the Rams went 5-12. He came back last spring competing for snaps behind Cam Akers, who rushed for 786 yards in 2022.

But even before Akers' second major clash with the Rams' coaching staff led to his abrupt departure in Week 3, Williams had asserted himself.

Williams scored six total touchdowns and had his first 100-yard rushing game in the season's first four weeks, and then he really arrived in LA's first meeting with the Cardinals by producing a 158-yard performance, the Rams' biggest ground game in roughly three years.

Even more adversity lurked: Williams sprained his ankle late in that game and missed the next four, only returning last week. His mother, sister and extended family flew out to watch his latest breakout performance — and Williams smiles at the memory of his uncle's tears when he received Williams' jersey postgame.

Williams knows this grueling profession is about to get harder: The Browns will be fully aware of what he's been doing, and Williams is likely to see more attention than he's received in his short career.

"I would expect nothing less," Williams said. "We're in the NFL. We've got great coaches. They obviously have a great game plan and know what to scheme against, and we've got great players on offense. It's not going to be just me that they scheme against, but we've got other threats at the receiver options, which allows me to be able to probably get less attention, but I'm excited for whatever is to come."

NFL

JOHN LOCHER/AP

Las Vegas Raiders interim head coach Antonio Pierce talks with New York Jets quarterback Aaron Rodgers before the start of a game between the Raiders and Jets on Nov. 12 in Las Vegas.

Jets begin 21-day practice window for Rodgers' rehab

BY DENNIS WASZAK JR.
Associated Press

FLORHAM PARK, N.J. — Aaron Rodgers' improbable comeback from a torn Achilles tendon has taken the next step.

The New York Jets opened the 21-day practice window for the quarterback Wednesday — exactly 11 weeks after he had surgery — with Rodgers cleared for some football activities.

Coach Robert Saleh said the four-time NFL MVP, who turns 40 on Saturday, will be limited at practice — as he was listed on the team's injury report — and is not cleared for contact. Saleh said there's "no added risk" in taking this step, emphasizing it's not necessarily a signal that Rodgers will play again this season as much as it is the next part of the quarterback's rehabilitation process.

"Instead of throwing with staff members," Saleh said, "he's throwing with teammates."

At the end of the 21-day period, the Jets will have to make a decision whether to activate him or keep him on injured reserve for the rest of the season. That period will expire Dec. 20, four days before the Jets' home game against the Washington Commanders.

"We're not there yet," Saleh said. "A lot of guys coming off (injured reserve) are usually not ready to play football. There's usually still a little bit of a health concern there. So you use these 21-day windows to see where they're at.

"We're so far away from that. But the mindset for this is more of a progression in his rehab. He's been cleared for functional football activity. He's not cleared to fully play football."

During the early portion of practice open to reporters, Rodgers walked onto the field in his red No. 8 noncontact jersey during warmups and embraced left tackle Mekhi Becton in the trainers' area. Rodgers found his way to the quarterbacks group during individual drills, tossed some short passes and took a few dropbacks.

"Science rules," wide receiver Allen Lazard said with a laugh. "Being around him the time I've been around him, knowing his mindset — more so his stubbornness — just to kind of prove everyone else wrong, it's very on brand."

Rodgers tore his Achilles tendon four snaps into his debut with the Jets on Sept. 11 and had surgery two days later. The operation included a "speed bridge" procedure, which helps expedite the healing process. Rodgers has been progressing quickly in his rehabilitation and is still aiming to make an unprecedented quick return to the field.

"I think it's sooner than anybody (anticipated)," Saleh said. "I think it's a credit to him. I know we're getting caught up in trying to create a narrative around him, but the true narrative is he's old-school in the sense he is driven. Is there motivation to be the first to ever do it? Sure, but that's OK. That's his 'why' — that's why he's (doing it).

"He loves this organization, he wants to be with his teammates, he wants to be here."

But Rodgers acknowledged Tuesday during his weekly appearance on "The Pat McAfee Show" that the factors in him returning to play this season are twofold. The doctors must clear Rodgers — and the Jets must be in the AFC playoff hunt.

"It's always been, first, am I healthy?" Rodgers said. "Then, are we alive? Are we in it? Are we playing good enough to make a run? Can I step in and protect myself and play at the level that I'm capable of playing? But it's health first and are we alive for the playoffs, second."

The Jets (4-7) have lost four in a row and host the NFC South-leading Atlanta Falcons on Sunday. Tim Boyle will make his second start in a row at quarterback in place of the benched Zach Wilson, who took over when Rodgers went down.

Some fans, media and even medical professionals have wondered if Rodgers is perhaps rushing to come back too soon and risk re-injury. Running back Cam Akers, then with the Los Angeles Rams, set the benchmark for returns from a torn Achilles tendon during the 2021 season when he played just five months after being injured and helped the team during its run to the Super Bowl.

Rodgers could beat that by several weeks if he comes back this season.

"I promise Aaron is not going to do anything that puts himself in harm's way if he's not healthy to play," Saleh said. "Aaron is very, very smart. That's not something he's going to put himself at risk for. With that said, though, he is driven. He is achieving things that have never been achieved with regards to this injury and it's the progression with regard to rehab he's on."

49ers quiet headed into NFC title game rematch vs. Eagles

BY JOSH DUBOW
Associated Press

SANTA CLARA, Calif. — The San Francisco 49ers had plenty to say after they lost the NFC title game last season to the Philadelphia Eagles while playing much of the game without a functioning quarterback.

They are much quieter headed into the highly anticipated rematch on Sunday in Philadelphia, maintaining that the bitterness from not having a real chance last January had subsided and the focus was entirely on winning this year's game.

"People try to blow it up because of the weight of it. However, it's the biggest one just because it's the next one," linebacker Fred Warner said Wednesday. "There are a lot of implications down the line for this game. But is that going to help you focusing on those things going into this game? Not at all. You got to focus on playing smart and smart football and execute at a high level in order to go into somebody's house who is a 10-1 football team and one of the best teams in the league and get a win."

The Niners entered last season's NFC title game meeting on a 13-game winning streak and with high hopes of making it back to the Super Bowl.

But that chance was quickly extinguished on San Francisco's first drive of the game when Haason Reddick hit quarterback Brock Purdy so hard that Purdy tore a ligament in his throwing elbow. Backup Josh Johnson came in but struggled before leaving with a concussion early in the third quarter.

That forced the Niners to play most of the second half with Purdy at quarterback and unable to throw the ball more than a few yards.

The Eagles won the game easily, beating San Francisco 31-7 to advance to the Super Bowl where they lost to the Kansas City Chiefs.

San Francisco 49ers (8-3)
at Philadelphia Eagles (10-1)
AFN-Sports
10:25 p.m. Sunday CET
6:25 a.m. Monday JKT

"Last year is over with," defensive end Nick Bosa said. "Neither team finished the job so it's not like they're looking back and reminiscing on an NFC Championship win, either. We were both sad at the end of the year. We both have aspirations to win Super Bowls so it's a new year and this is a big step for both of us to get to that aspiration."

In the days after the game, Niners receiver Deebo Samuel called Eagles cornerback James Bradberry "trash" and Philadelphia his "most hated" opponent.

Teammate Brandon Aiyuk said the Eagles were "extremely lucky" to win and would get exposed in the Super Bowl against Kansas City.

Samuel said he had no regrets about anything he said last year, but maintained that the rematch had no special meaning.

"It's not about revenge," he said. "It's another game on the schedule. We're going to treat it like any other game."

Aiyuk said the bitterness from last season will have no impact on the game Sunday and the focus is on winning a game that could have a big impact on playoff seeding.

"We definitely know what happened last season — a lot of words going back and forth," he said. "But despite that, we got another opportunity (and) they have another opportunity to play football. I think most of the guys are excited for that."

CHRIS SZAGOLA/AP

San Francisco 49ers quarterback Brock Purdy walks off the field after losing the NFC Championship game against the Eagles on Jan. 29 in Philadelphia. The 49ers will seek revenge in their rematch Sunday.

NFL

Dolphins' Tagovailoa vows fewer turnovers during final stretch

BY ALANIS THAMES
Associated Press

MIAMI GARDENS, Fla. — After the Miami Dolphins dominated the New York Jets last week, Tua Tagovailoa complimented the work of the offense but stressed that they will need him to play better down the stretch of the season.

Tagovailoa's 3,177 yards passing are the fourth-most in the NFL. His 22 passing touchdowns trail only Josh Allen (24) and Dak Prescott (23). And he ranks near the top of the league in several other passing categories.

But his turnovers have mounted in recent weeks. Tagovailoa has 10 interceptions on the season, which is tied for the fourth-highest mark in the NFL, and he has turned the ball over four times in the past two games.

Tagovailoa threw interceptions on back-to-back drives at the end of the first half against the Jets. One of those was returned for a touchdown. The second gave the Jets the ball with 2 seconds remaining in the second quarter before safety Jevon Holland intercepted Tim Boyle's desperation heave and returned it 99 yards for a touchdown.

"I would say any quarterback in the league would probably get down on themselves that way I get down on myself when it comes to turnovers," Tagovailoa said. "Especially when your defense is playing well and you turn the ball over. None of us try to do that."

His turnovers didn't ultimately cost the Dolphins against the Jets (4-7) and the Las Vegas Raiders (5-7) the previous week, but they could prove detrimental as competition improves and the stakes of the games increase later in the season.

"For him, he can protect the ball better. He knows that," said coach

Miami Dolphins (8-3)
at Washington Commanders (4-8)
AFN-Sports2
7 p.m. Sunday CET
3 a.m. Monday JKT

Mike McDaniel. "There's literally no one on the planet that is more angry every time there is a turnover. And with that, he has to use it constructively and it can't be absolutely. It can't just be like, 'I can't throw picks.' What does that mean? They're going to happen."

Tagovailoa said some of the interceptions are a product of not being on the same page as his receivers. Others have simply been bad throws — he threw the ball behind receiver Tyreek Hill on an interception that was snagged by Jets cornerback D.J. Reed last week.

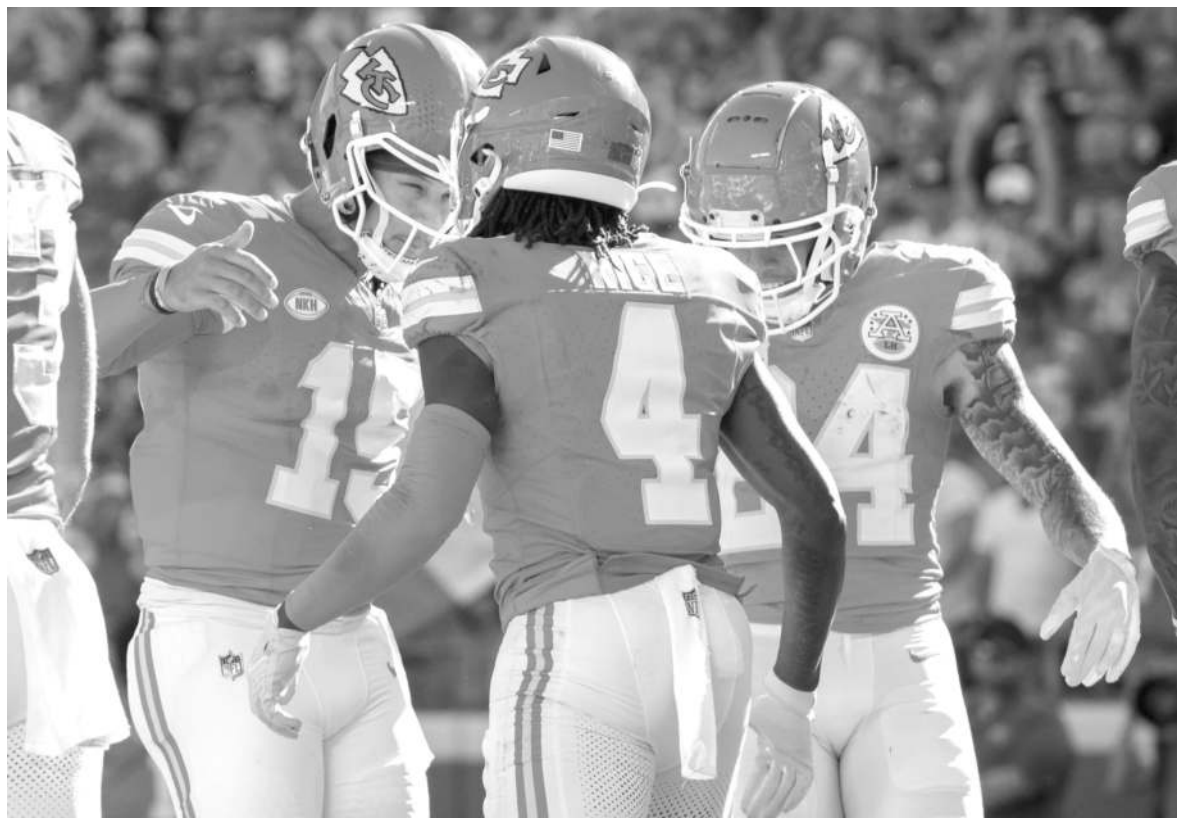
Tagovailoa is also finding the balance of taking risks in a high-octane offense while also protecting the ball. The Dolphins have a minus-5 turnover margin despite having the league's No. 1 offense.

"I think a lot of it has to do with situational ball, understanding what we're trying to get done, what we're trying to accomplish," Tagovailoa said.

"But then it also stresses the importance of the ball itself. Regardless of what we're trying to do. If we're trying to push the ball down the field, if it's not the exact look, live to see another down — throwing the ball away, checking it down, whatever it may be. As long as we're ending the drive with a kick, that's what we'd like to do and not turn the ball over."

ADAM HUNGER/AP

Miami Dolphins quarterback Tua Tagovailoa has 10 interceptions this season, which is tied for the fourth-highest mark in the NFL.



REED HOFFMANN/AP

Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes (15) and wide receiver Skyy Moore (24) congratulate wide receiver Rashee Rice on his touchdown against the Chicago Bears on Sept. 24 in Kansas City, Mo.

Chiefs rookie Rice learning how to be 'Patrick-friendly'

BY DAVE SKRETTA
Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Just about every Chiefs fan was clamoring at the NFL's trade deadline for general manager Brett Veach to swing a deal for some help at wide receiver, where Kansas City had been struggling to find someone to step up in the passing game.

The Chiefs did make a deal with the New York Jets for Mecole Hardman, but he's been ineffective or injured ever since returning to his old team, leaving Patrick Mahomes and the rest of the offense in no better position than they were.

Except for this: The someone the Chiefs needed to step up may already have been on the team.

Second-round pick Rashee Rice, who got off to a slow start in the complex system run by Chiefs coach Andy Reid, has steadily improved during the middle portion of the season. And Rice had his best game yet last Sunday in Las Vegas, when he had a game-high 10 targets, eight receptions and 107 yards, including a short throw that became a 39-yard touchdown catch.

It was the sixth time in seven games that Rice had caught at least four passes. He has TD grabs in two of the past three.

"He's been getting better every week," Reid acknowledged, "and he's working to be more 'Patrick-friendly.' There's a lot that goes into that when you say something like that, and a lot of it is just playing. Being willing to fit your game into the offense's game, and how Patrick sees things. He's done a nice job of being open that way."

Kansas City Chiefs (8-3)
at Green Bay Packers (5-6)
AFN-Sports
2:20 a.m. Monday CET
10:20 a.m. Monday JKT

What does "Patrick-friendly" mean?

Well, few quarterbacks in the NFL go off-script as successfully as the reigning league MVP, and many of his best throws and biggest highlights have been on sandlot-style plays. Opposing coaches often tell their defense that it is better to keep Mahomes in the pocket than let him run around given his propensity for conjuring up some off-schedule magic.

While that makes Mahomes a nightmare to defend, it can also make it hard on his wide receivers to get in sync: When do you cut off a route? When do you run to open space? When do you turn upfield or break outside or fade to the corner?

"When we're doing special teams and (Rice) is not in there," Reid said, "he goes over and works with Pat. They talk through things. Then they run routes. 'This is the look where I'm seeing you on this route against this coverage.' They spend time with each other there, and then off the field likewise, for meetings they keep an open communication there."

The Chiefs desperately needed someone in their otherwise struggling wide receiver group to step up. Some of them have been battling injuries, others have consistently failed to get open, and drops have been a problem across the board.

Rice had an early problem with drops, too, but he's been better at securing the catch over the past month.

And the result has been a noticeable uptick in production. Rice had a three-game stretch against the Broncos and Chargers were he had at least four grabs for 56 yards in each game, and he had four catches for 42 yards against the Eagles in their Super Bowl rematch.

The result heading into Week 13 on Sunday night in Green Bay has been 44 catches for 527 yards and five TDs; the Chiefs' next-most productive wide receiver, Justin Watson, has just 20 catches for 332 yards and two touchdowns.

"It's a complex offense," Mahomes admitted. "It's hard for young guys to do it. We kind of limit their roles and as the season goes on, we expand them more and more. I think he's done a great job with it. There are little things here and there that we continue to work on, but for the most part, he learns from his mistakes."

COLLEGE FOOTBALL

Army, Navy visit New England with Pats picking sides

By Jimmy Golen
Associated Press

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. — New England long-snapper Joe Cardona has the rare weekend off coming up — perfect timing for the Navy graduate to take in the Army-Navy game at the Patriots' home stadium.

"I've been very fortunate to play in a lot of big games here in New England. But, realistically, all of them pale in comparison to those Army-Navy games," Cardona said on Wednesday after popping up before practice to wish the current team good luck. "It's always a special opportunity for me to get to see these guys, get to see Navy play. But even more so, getting to share my home field with them and get to share New England with them because this is an area that's ready for this game, that's for sure."

Army and Navy will meet for the 124th time on Dec. 9 at Gillette Stadium, the home of the six-time Super Bowl champions — and two specific Patriots in particular. Cardona is a Navy graduate and still an active member of the Naval Reserves, and Patriots coach Bill Belichick has been a supporter of the Naval Academy after growing up on the Annapolis campus while his father, Steve, spent 34 years there as an assistant coach.

"Well, he was raised wrong," Army coach Jeff Monken said with a laugh. "Unfortunately, his dad got a job at Navy and he worked there a long time. And coach grew up there. Had his dad got a job at Army, I'm sure he'd be on the right side of the rivalry."

Monken, who spent five years as a Navy assistant, said he met Belichick when the Patriots coach stopped by in the offseason after one of the team's Super Bowl wins because he wanted to watch tape of the Army running game. A library on campus of books on football strategy and history is named after Steve Belichick.

"The Belichick name, it's affiliated with the Navy program. And when you hear 'Belichick' and 'Gillette Stadium,' you think of winning," Navy defensive lineman Jacob Busic said. "There's banners out there, the Super Bowl banners, the history that the Belichick family has with the Naval Academy and to be able to play in this stadium … there's no better place to play this football game."

Bill Belichick, whose current team is 2-9, declined to comment on the Army-Navy game, saying his team first had to worry about Sunday's game against the Los Angeles Chargers. The Patriots then have a Thursday night matchup in Pittsburgh that at least gives them the weekend off to attend the college game.

Cardona told the players at Wednesday's news conference that he was proud of them and reminded them that sailors and Marines stationed all around the world will be watching the game — rooting for Navy, but more importantly expecting the team to play hard. Busic said Cardona is himself a reminder that Navy athletes can reach "the big stage."

"That kind of play style, that mentality, carried him this far, and he made it here to the NFL," Busic said. "He's been in the Reserves. He's been serving in the offseason. And just he's pretty much the model for that."

Jimmy Golen/AP

Patriots long snapper Joe Cardona, right, a Navy graduate and active member of the Naval Reserves, greets Navy coach Brian Newberry, second from right, and Navy linebacker Will Harbour, left.

Charlie Neibergall/AP

Iowa linebacker Jay Higgins gets set for a play during the second half against Michigan State on Sept. 30 in Iowa City, Iowa. Higgins has the most tackles among Power 5 players with 141 in 12 games.

Iowa's Higgins has made his mark in the middle

By Eric Olson
Associated Press

Jay Higgins was never going to make anyone forget Jack Campbell. What he did instead was make a name for himself that, same as Campbell's, will be long remembered in Iowa Hawkeyes lore.

Higgins was the next man up at middle linebacker when the consensus All-American and Butkus Award winner left after last season and became a first-round NFL Draft pick.

Higgins has turned into a prodigious tackler just like his predecessor. He'll return to his hometown of Indianapolis for Saturday night's Big Ten championship game against No. 2 Michigan with 141 tackles in 12 games. That's most among Power Five players and 13 more than Campbell had in 13 games last season.

"It ain't surprising me," Campbell, now a starter for the Detroit Lions, said Wednesday. "I know he wanted to play at a young age. Who doesn't? Especially with the transfer portal, he could've left, but he stayed and it has paid off."

Campbell hardly came off the field in 2021 and '22, so Higgins excelled on special teams and took whatever playing time he could get at linebacker.

Any pent-up frustration from waiting his turn was unleashed at Kinnick Stadium when he made 16 tackles and broke up two passes in the opener against Utah State. A few weeks later he made a career-high 18 stops against Penn State,

Big Ten Championship
No. 18 Iowa (10-2)
at No. 2 Michigan (12-0)
AFN-Atlantic
2 a.m. Sunday CET
10 a.m. Sunday JKT

and he had six other games with at least 10 tackles.

"I'd say probably the most fun I've had at Iowa so far," Higgins said of his fourth season. "Obviously, I love my experience here. But when you're the guy that's just learning and you're in the system watching Jack Campbell and Seth Benson make all the plays and have all the fun, it gets a little challenging.

"Those memories in Kinnick when you're the one making plays, you know how much you sacrificed for the moment. It means a little more."

Higgins' season is the result of his never taking a day off when it would have been easy for him to so as a backup, defensive end Joe Evans said.

"When a guy is working his tail off like he has, and when he goes out there and he's making big play after big play and leads the Power Five in tackles, it's not shocking because I see all the work that he's been putting in," Evans said. "He means so much to this team."

Higgins, a member of The Associated Press midseason All-America second team and a semifinalist for the Butkus Award, has taken the same career path as many Iowa players.

Iowa was the only Power Five school to offer him a scholarship. Seven of the Mid-American Conference schools offered him, along with Tulane and Air Force.

Higgins was a consensus three-star recruit, but he only ranked 19th out of the 21 high school players who signed with the Hawkeyes in 2020, according to the 247Sports composite.

Campbell and another linebacker, Seth Benson, were Higgins' role models and his position coach, Seth Wallace, brought him along.

"Coach Wallace does such a great job, year in and year out, but ultimately it starts with Jay," Campbell said. "It starts with the kind of person he is — big on the details — and it carries over to the player he is, and he's having a heck of a year."

Coach Kirk Ferentz said he and the staff were confident Higgins would play well when he got his opportunity.

"I'm not sure any of us could have predicted he would play at the level he's playing right now," Ferentz said. "He replaced one of our best all-time players in Jack Campbell. I've always talked to our guys about if you want to get better, pay attention to people and know what they're doing. Jay was taking notes."

COLLEGE FOOTBALL

New: Alabama, Georgia remain on winning track

FROM PAGE 48

with six interceptions. He has run for 439 yards and 12 TDs. Milroe is third in passing efficiency and Beck eighth.

Georgia coach Kirby Smart compared Beck to "a bigger, physical version" of Baltimore Ravens quarterback Lamar Jackson.

"He is playing in a different speed than anybody else when you watch it," Smart said.

Most importantly, they've both won. And Milroe has done something even Young couldn't do last season: lead the Tide to the SEC title game.

First, he had to spend the South Florida game watching backups Tyler Buchner and Ty Simpson share the snaps. The offense sputtered badly in a 17-3 win.

Then Milroe was back, leading the Tide to a perfect SEC season and making their biggest play in the Iron Bowl.

Milroe's exuberant postgame celebration was also notable, when he yelled in part: "Give me the Heisman!" Milroe tried to downplay his words a couple of days later.

"That was an emotional moment, so things came out that was all through emotion," he said. "But the biggest thing was I was just so proud to be in the moment."

Beck and Milroe are considered long shots for the Heisman, but they're both at least in the conversation for getting to New York as a finalist. Like Bennett did last season and Young the year before.

Besides the similarities of replacing star passers, Beck and Milroe share another common ground. Beck initially committed to Alabama and switched to Georgia. Milroe had pledged to his home state Texas before flipping to 'Bama.

Now, Beck gets to face a team led by Saban, who could have been his own coach.

"I mean, that was a long time ago, but obviously a great coach, one of the greatest of all time," Beck said. "Just stern with it, sets a standard. It's a very similar program to Georgia and the things that we believe in, the ideals."

And the results.

DID YOU KNOW?

Alabama and Georgia met two years ago in the SEC championship game, with Alabama winning 41-24. A few weeks later, the same two teams met in the championship game of the College Football Playoff, with Georgia winning 33-18.

SOURCE: ESPN.com

MARCIO JOSE SANCHEZ/AP

Former Georgia quarterback Stetson Bennett, above, led the Bulldogs to the last two national championships. Now, with Carson Beck under center, they're chasing another.

MICHAEL THOMAS/AP

Texas' Xavier Worthy avoids a tackle by Texas Tech's Henry Teeter during a punt return last Friday in Austin, Texas. The Longhorns won 57-7 to lock up a berth in the Big 12 championship game.

No. 7 Texas sets sights on one last Big 12 title

BY JIM VERTUNO
Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas — Jahdae Barron can still feel the sting from sweat dripping into his eyes when he looked toward the south end zone of Darrell K Royal-Texas Memorial Stadium last summer and saw the years high on the wall: 1996, 2005 and 2009.

All signify Big 12 titles won by Texas. And in the 14 years since the last one? Nothing.

Sarkisian

For Barron and the Longhorns, it's time to add another.

"Throughout summer workouts and practice (and) when we warm up every day ... (coaches) tell us to face the side with all the national championships and Big 12," the senior defensive back said. "We've been looking at that, shoot, every day, in summer when it was 110 (degrees) and we were sweating and dying."

Texas can close out its 28th and final Big 12 season with championship year 2023 for the stadium wall on Saturday when the No. 7 Longhorns (11-1, No. 7 CFP) face No. 19 Oklahoma Sate (9-3, No. 18 CFP) in the Big 12 championship game in Arlington, Texas.

The Longhorns will leave the league for the Southeastern Conference next year and a bookend title to go with the league's first in 1996 would be quite the sendoff.

Back in 2009, when the Longhorns were coming out of a decade of 10-win seasons, the program seemed primed for a run of Big 12 titles. Instead, the Longhorns fired or hired four head coaches while reaching the title game just twice in that span.

Big 12 Championship
No. 19 Oklahoma State (9-3)
vs. No. 7 Texas (11-1)
AFN-Sports
6 p.m. Saturday CET
2 a.m. Sunday JKT

And just like his players, third-year Texas coach Steve Sarkisian has seen the numbers on the stadium wall every morning.

"I'm in (the stadium) every day, and my office looks right into it," Sarkisian said. "And to think in the last 27 years there's only been three conference championships and we're playing for one on Saturday where we can put our year up in that stadium forever — that means a lot. That's something that we don't take lightly."

Just two years ago, Texas was 5-7 in Sarkisian's first season in Austin.

There are many current Longhorns who remember the misery of that season.

"Battle wounds. Battle scars. Trauma forms bonds," senior linebacker Jaylon Ford said. "When you go through a 5-7 season like we went through, five straight losses ... You have to really look around and find brothers. The people that stayed, we had to wrap our arms around each other and push through. We made it through and formed our way to the top."

Texas started its final season in the Big 12 with Sarkisian and his players rallying around an unofficial "embrace the hate" motto, and the Longhorns knew they would have to punch their way through some tough environments.

The season got a huge early bounce with a big road win at Alabama, a future SEC opponent. That 34-24 victory turned the Longhorns into potential national championship contenders.

Texas survived some close games against Houston, TCU and Kansas State, and won two games without starting quarterback Quinn Ewers. Standout running back Jonathon Brooks was lost for the season three weeks ago with a knee injury.

Texas finally clinched a final Big 12 title game berth with a 57-7 romp over Texas Tech.

There are even bigger prizes on the horizon if it beats Oklahoma State on Saturday. Texas has been hovering just outside the top four spots in the College Football Playoff. The Longhorns would still need help to get in, but it's possible.

Lose Saturday, however, and the Big 12 title honors in the stadium stop at 2009.

Forever.

"We didn't come this far just to come this far," Sarkisian said. "There's more out there for us to accomplish."

COLLEGE FOOTBALL

FSU motivated going into ACC title game

Seminoles will look to 'finish for 13', add to 'Sod Cemetery'

BY MARK LONG
Associated Press

Kneeling in the south end zone at Ben Hill Griffin Stadium, Florida State running back Trey Benson tried to cut out a chunk of grass with scissors. It wasn't working on the orange-painted turf, so teammate Jared Verse stepped in to help.

Together, and despite a police officer trying to dissuade them from finishing the task, they found success with their bare hands. They ripped out a keepsake destined for the program's famed "Sod Cemetery" in Tallahassee.

It could be the first of several souvenirs for the fourth-ranked Seminoles (12-0) over the next month.

Nearly a year after several key players opted to stay in school and chase championships — Verse and star quarterback Jordan Travis led the way — FSU is on the verge of another one. The 'Noles will play No. 15 Louisville (10-2) in the Atlantic Coast Conference title game Saturday in Charlotte, N.C.

Florida State has a spot in the College Football Playoff on the line, and even with Travis now a spectator because of a gruesome left leg injury sustained in the team's home finale Nov. 18, players and coaches refuse to settle for anything less. They have even embraced a "finish for 13" mantra that is a shoutout to Travis' jersey number and all he has done for the program.

ACC Championship
No. 15 Louisville (10-2)
at No. 4 Florida State (12-0)
AFN-Sports
2 a.m. Sunday CET
10 a.m. Sunday JKT

"It means a lot," Verse said. "The whole season, 11 games, he was there every step of the way. … He's still there. It means so much for us to go out there and put on (a show) for him. We gave everything we had. I feel like everybody hit another mental gear, another physical gear, that we don't talk about enough. That's what we're capable of.

"After the game, you look him in the eyes and we're like, 'Hey, we did that for you.' He's smiling and just feels genuine joy. Even though he wasn't on the field with us, he was still there."

Travis really got FSU's special season started last December when he announced he would return for a sixth year, the last five in Tallahassee after beginning his college career at Louisville. Standout receiver Johnny Wilson made a similar announcement the following day and then Benson joined them two days later.

JOHN RAOUX/AP

Florida State linebacker Kalen DeLoach (4) celebrates with defensive lineman Patrick Payton after he intercepted a Florida pass the helped the Seminoles to their seventh undefeated regular season.

Verse waited until January to declare his intentions. A first-team All-ACC selection after leading Florida State with 14½ tackles for loss in 2022, including 7½ sacks, Verse turned down NFL millions to run it back with teammates.

All those guys surely helped coach Mike Norvell land stud transfers like receiver Keon Coleman (Michigan State), tight end Jaheim Bell (South Carolina), defensive tackle Braden Fiske (Western Michigan) and cornerback Fentrell Cypress II (Virginia).

The Seminoles have now won 18 consecutive games and capped their seventh undefeated regular season with a 24-15 victory against Florida in the Swamp. It gave Norvell's team a second "state championship" in as many years for beating both in-state rivals.

"It's just an awesome opportunity that I'm real thankful for," Fiske said. "That is why I came here. I came here to play in bigger games like this, and we're undefeated now. … It's unbelievable. Just got to keep this rolling."

Added Verse: "I've been defeated; I ain't never been undefeated."

Penix, Washington need offense to click again vs. Oregon

BY TIM BOOTH
Associated Press

SEATTLE — While he's had one big game after another, Rome Odunze can see not all is right with the offense for No. 3 Washington.

It hasn't looked quite right since Odunze caught the winning touchdown to beat Oregon in October — the same team the Huskies will see in the Pac-12 championship game on Friday.

"I think we need to clean a lot of things up," Odunze said. "In several different moments, we're not able to execute and move the ball. It comes down to our attitude and effort on every single play and they need to improve immediately."

Ask around and you'll get different answers from the Huskies about where things stand on the offensive side heading into a second meeting with the fifth-ranked Ducks.

Odunze expressed his worries following Washington's 24-21 win over Washington State on Saturday that completed the first 12-0 regular season in Pac-12 history even as the conference is ready to break apart. But it was also the second straight game and third in the past six that the Huskies were held under 25 points.

LINDSEY WASSON/AP

Washington quarterback Michael Penix Jr. has seen his completion percentage fall from 72.5 % to under 58% the past four games.

Quarterback Michael Penix Jr. was more dismissive of the concerns, while offensive coordinator Ryan Grubb and head coach Kalen DeBoer fell somewhere in the middle.

"I feel like we played good complementary football toward the end of the game, but for the offensive side of the ball, we've got to play better. And we will," Penix said after the Apple Cup. "I trust and believe in everybody on that side of the ball. We just look forward to the next opportunity. But at the same time, we understand that we've got to play better."

No matter the actual concern level among those involved, there's no debating that Washington hasn't carved up defenses with the ease it displayed leading up to the 36-33 win over Oregon on Oct. 14.

Pac-12 Championship
No. 5 Oregon (11-1)
vs. No. 3 Washington (12-0)
AFN-Sports
2 a.m. Saturday CET
10 a.m. Saturday JKT

The Huskies know the offense must get better in short order.

Penix put himself at the top of the Heisman Trophy list with his performance in the first meeting against Oregon, only to see his numbers slowly diminish in the following weeks. He threw for a season-low 162 yards against Oregon State and had only 204 yards passing against Washington State.

In four of his past five games, Penix's completion percentage has been under 58%. In the first five games of the season, his low was 72.5%. The Huskies have also been more turnover prone, with 10 of their 16 on the season coming in the final six games.

"It's statistical evidence that it hasn't been as effective and I know everybody worries about how much the ball is going down the field or not going down the field, but I think we also made a lot of those plays that got us some big wins," Grubb said.

He's right. Despite the decreased numbers, the Huskies have unquestionably been tested and to date overcome all those challenges with a lot of big plays in big moments. It's been Odunze in the middle of a lot of those.

His touchdown catch with 1:38 left against Oregon was the game-winner. He caught two TDs and made the critical grab on the final third down to clinch the win at Oregon State.

In the Apple Cup, Odunze had two more TD catches and was responsible for the biggest run of the game, taking a reverse 23 yards on fourth-and-1 to help set up the winning field goal on the final play.

"I feel like at this point we've proven that we're a resilient team and that we're willing to go through the adversity and grind out tough games," Odunze said.

SPORTS

Taking the next step in rehab

Rodgers continues recovery as Jets open 21-day practice window ›› NFL, Page 43

COLLEGE FOOTBALL

VASHA HUNT, LEFT, AND JOHN BAZEMORE, RIGHT/AP

Alabama's Jalen Milroe, left, and Georgia's Carson Beck, right, had to take over for quarterbacks who had accomplished some big feats at their respective programs.

New faces, old expectations

Alabama's Milroe, Georgia's Beck filling big shoes at powerhouse programs

BY JOHN ZENOR
Associated Press

Carson Beck and Jalen Milroe had to replace big-name quarterbacks at programs with national title-or-bust expectations.

No sweat, right?

Beck has kept No. 1 Georgia rolling after replacing two-time national champion quarterback Stetson Bennett. Milroe and No. 8 Alabama rebounded strongly from a rocky start in replacing No. 1 NFL Draft pick and 2021 Heisman Trophy winner Bryce Young.

Both quarterbacks have been good enough to help set up a meeting Saturday in the Southeastern Conference championship game, with playoff hopes potentially on the line. Milroe's own resurgence after a Week 3 benching for the South Florida game played a major role in helping the Crimson Tide rally from an early loss to No. 7 Texas to win 10 straight.

"I think his transformation at the quarterback position has helped us transform our entire offensive team," Alabama coach Nick Saban said. "The confidence that he's playing with, the confidence that our players have in him. I think we've done a pretty good job of trying to utilize the skill set that he has.

SEC Championship
No. 8 Alabama (11-1)
vs. No. 1 Georgia (12-0)
AFN-Atlantic
10 p.m. Saturday CET
6 a.m. Sunday JKT

"He's learned that the most important thing at his position is to distribute the ball. He's done a really, really good job of that."

That includes delivering one of the most improbable plays of the season. Milroe's fourth-and-31 touchdown pass to Isaiah Bond with 32 seconds left lifted Alabama to a 27-24 victory over Auburn in the Iron Bowl, preserving the Tide's still-shaky playoff chances.

"Absolutely insane," Beck said. "Just a crazy play."

Beck and the Bulldogs, meanwhile, have preserved a winning streak that has stretched to 29 games. His turning point may have come in the SEC opener against South Carolina, when Beck rallied Georgia from a 14-3 halftime deficit to win 24-14.

"I think our confidence kind of shot up from there," Beck said. "We've been able to pick up steam as the season has gone along."

Beck has thrown for 3,495 yards and 22 touchdowns against six interceptions, while completing 72.4% of his passes.

Milroe has thrown for 2,526 yards and 21 touchdowns, also

SEE NEW ON PAGE 46

Kane says he could make Detroit debut soon ›› NHL, Page 42

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