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# STARS AND STRIPES®

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K. KASSENS/U.S. Army

**Special Forces candidates assault enemy role players during a raid, as they take part in the final phase of field training known as Robin Sage, in central North Carolina, on Dec. 17. Recruiting shortfalls and flat Special Operations budgets have contributed to a smaller-than-ideal number of Special Forces hopefuls entering training courses, officials said.**

## Earning the Green Beret

### Special Forces seeks more hopefuls in spite of budget, recruit strain

BY COREY DICKSTEIN  
*Stars and Stripes*

FAYETTEVILLE, N.C. — The Army's 157 newest Special Forces soldiers for the first time donned their iconic Green Berets before a crowd of cheering family and friends packed into the city's Crown Theatre last month.

For those elite soldiers soon traveling to Special Forces operational detachments across the force, the moment highlighted their Jan. 23

graduation from the intensive, monthslong qualification course at the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School at nearby Fort Liberty. The time-honored graduation ceremony is known in the Special Forces community as the Regimental First Formation, marking the soldiers' entrance into the ranks of the Special Forces regiment and their right to wear the coveted green headgear and Special Forces tab that identify them as members

of that elite organization.

"The Green Beret at the end of the day is a piece of fabric that you wear on your head, but it symbolizes something much, much deeper," said Col. Dave Lucas, who commands the 4th Battalion, 1st Special Warfare Training Group, which runs the Special Forces Qualification Course for SWCS. "I'm sure they've tried on

SEE BERET ON PAGE 5

## Egypt urges against plan to remove Palestinians

BY SAMY MAGDY  
*Associated Press*

CAIRO — Israel says it has begun preparations for the departure of Palestinians from Gaza despite international rejection of President Donald Trump's plan to empty the territory of its population. Egypt has launched a diplomatic blitz behind the scenes against the proposal, warning it would put its peace deal with Israel at risk, officials said.

The Trump administration has already dialed back aspects of the proposal after it was widely rejected internationally, saying the relocation of Palestinians would be temporary. U.S. officials have provided few details about how or when the plan would be carried out.

In a social media post on Thursday, Trump said Israel would turn Gaza over to the United States after the war and that no U.S. soldiers would be needed for his plan to redevelop it.

The Palestinians have vehemently rejected Trump's proposal, fearing that Israel would never allow refugees to return. Egypt

SEE GAZA ON PAGE 12



ABDEL KAREEM HANA/AP

**A young Palestinian carries water along the destruction in Jabaliya, Gaza Strip, on Thursday.**

# BUSINESS/WEATHER

## Honeywell, one of last US conglomerates, to split up

Associated Press

Honeywell, one of the last remaining U.S. industrial conglomerates, will split into three independent companies, following in the footsteps of manufacturing giants like General Electric and Alcoa.

The company said Thursday that it will separate from its automation and aerospace technologies businesses.

Including plans announced earlier to spin off its advanced materials business, Honeywell will

consist of three smaller entities in hopes that they will each be more agile.

“The formation of three independent, industry-leading companies builds on the powerful foundation we have created, positioning each to pursue tailored growth strategies, and unlock significant value for shareholders and customers,” Honeywell Chairman and CEO Vimal Kapur said in a statement.

Honeywell had said in December that it was considering spin-

ning off its aerospace division. The public announcement arrived about one month after Elliott Investment Management revealed a stake of more than \$5 billion in the aerospace, automation and materials company.

Elliott had been pushing for the Charlotte, N.C., company to separate its automation and aerospace businesses.

The separation of the automation and aerospace technologies businesses is expected to be completed in the second half of 2026.

### EXCHANGE RATES

Military rates			
Euro costs (Feb. 7)	0.94	Switzerland (Franc)	0.9057
British pound (Feb. 7)	\$1.21	Thailand (Baht)	33.81
Japanese yen (Feb. 7)	149.00	Turkey (NewLira)	35.8931
South Korean won (Feb. 7)	1410.00		
Commercial rates			
Bahrain (Dinar)	0.3768		
Britain (Pound)	1.2392		
Canada (Dollar)	1.4347		
China (Yuan)	7.2895		
Denmark (Krone)	7.1991		
Egypt (Pound)	50.2930		
Euro	0.9651		
Hong Kong (Dollar)	7.7869		
Hungary (Forint)	391.39		
Israel (Shekel)	3.5531		
Japan (Yen)	152.11		
Kuwait (Dinar)	0.3085		
Norway (Krone)	11.2633		
Philippines (Peso)	58.07		
Poland (Zloty)	4.05		
Saudi Arabia (Riyal)	3.7504		
Singapore (Dollar)	1.3535		
South Korea (Won)	1449.28		

(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	7.50
Interest Rates Discount rate	4.50
Federal funds market rate	4.33
3-month bill	4.32
30-year bond	4.64

### WEATHER OUTLOOK

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## MILITARY

# A general's journey

## Korean immigrant returns to peninsula to lead US soldiers at Camp Walker in Daegu

By DAVID CHOI  
Stars and Stripes

DAEGU, South Korea — Jin Pak was 6 years old when he left South Korea alone, flying half-way around the world to reunite with parents he barely knew. They had immigrated to the United States soon after his birth, leaving his grandparents to raise him until they were ready for him to join them.

“Whenever I saw a plane, I’d say that I’m going on that plane and go to America,” he said in a recent interview at Camp Walker in Daegu.

Forty-six years later, the Army brigadier general is back in South Korea, leading the 19th Expeditionary Sustainment Command in Daegu.

A naturalized U.S. citizen who was commissioned at West Point, Pak first returned to his native country as a soldier in 2012 to command the 25th Transportation Battalion for three years. In June, he took over the sustainment command, which handles the Army’s logistical operations on the peninsula. He is responsible for approximately 5,600 soldiers and Defense Department employees.

Pak’s journey from a child immigrant to a one-star general in the U.S. Army is both typical and unique.

“I’m very proud of it because it’s an example of how ... America is also a place of opportunity,” he said. “I don’t know of many countries where an immigrant, not of that country’s ethnicity, could join their military and rise to the rank of general officer.”

Pak said his parents left South Korea for reasons that remain unclear to him.

“I’ve asked that question and they’re not very specific about it,” he said. “But I get the sense that they wanted to try something new. I know they were both very



LUIS GARCIA/Stars and Stripes

**Army Brig. Gen. Jin Pak, commander of the 19th Expeditionary Sustainment Command, shows some of the awards in his office in Daegu, South Korea, in October.**



Jin Pak

**Pak as a child living in South Korea.**

ambitious.”

Korean immigrants to the U.S. often left their children behind

temporarily, particularly in the decades following the 1950-53 Korean War, said Dae Young

Kim, a sociology professor at George Mason University in Virginia.

Many immigrants had limited funds and worked multiple jobs to make a living, Kim said in a video interview last month. Faced with child care costs and work demands, parents found alternative ways to raise their children.

“One option is to be able to bring your own parents to the U.S., and that’s something that some immigrants, including Korean immigrants, have done,” Kim said. “The other option is to send the child [away] so that the children can be taken care of until they reach a certain age and can be somewhat independent.”

Pak arrived in the U.S. in 1978 and moved into a one-bedroom

apartment in Elmhurst, Queens, with his parents and younger brother, who was born that same year. He recalled feeling “very out of place” and being bullied for not knowing English.

“My third-grade teacher reported me to my parents because she said I was causing a lot of fights,” he said. “But I was in fights; I wasn’t causing the fights. It was that kind of childhood for a while.”

Pak became a U.S. citizen in 1981. His naturalization certificate is the only official document with his birth date due to inadequate record-keeping in South Korea at the time, he said.

“I don’t have a birth certificate,” he said. “I only know I was born in 1972 because of my citizenship paperwork.”

Pak graduated from West Point in 1994. His father, a stoic man who “doesn’t show a lot of emotion,” was proud of his son attending the military academy, he said.

“He actually sent me handwritten letters asking me how I was doing, stuff that I would never have imagined in a million years he would do,” Pak said.

One of Pak’s fondest memories is of his father mailing him candy bars hidden inside a flashlight, a trick soon discovered by the school.

“I’ll never forget that,” he said, smiling.

Pak’s father attended his graduation, but that summer, he suffered a heart attack and fell into a coma. He died less than two years later.

“He saw me graduate, but he never saw anything else, like marriage and grandkids,” said Pak, now a father of two adult children. “I know he would be very proud and happy about it. I do regret that he hasn’t seen my career unfold because I knew he appreciated military service.”

## NATO jets intercept Russian aircraft flying near alliance territory

By JOHN VANDIVER  
Stars and Stripes

NATO scrambled two F-35s this week in the Arctic region, where jets intercepted Russian bombers and fighter planes flying near allied airspace, military officials said.

NATO’s quick reaction alert mission in the High North prompted two Royal Norwegian Air Force F-35s to take flight in search of two Russian Tu-95 Bear H bombers escorted by two Flanker-D fighters, Allied Air Command said Wednesday.

“The F-35 advanced capabilities allowed them to gather important information and ensure that the Russian aircraft did not

violate NATO airspace,” the NATO command statement said about the Tuesday encounter.

While NATO intercepts of Russian aircraft are not uncommon, the latest incident comes amid increased attention on Arctic military operations.

“A combination of military interests, technological advancements and climate changes point to an increasingly contested High North,” NATO’s Allied Air Command said. “The changing security environment will require careful navigation.”

NATO fighters regularly conduct air policing missions stretching from the Black Sea region to the Baltics and High

North.

Tuesday’s intercepts were launched from an air base in Norway. The alliance conducts a similar mission from a base in Iceland to monitor Russian military planes in the region.

An increased Russian and Chinese presence in the Arctic also has caught the eye of President Donald Trump, who has said that he wants the Danish territory of Greenland to come under American control.

“I don’t know what claim Denmark has to it, but it would be a very unfriendly act if they didn’t allow that to happen,” Trump told reporters Jan. 25. “Because that’s for protection of the free world.

It’s not for us; it’s for the free world.”

Greenland is part of the Danish realm and was ruled directly by Denmark from the early 18th century until home rule began on the island in 1979. In 2009, Greenland approved a referendum granting it autonomy in all matters except defense, security and foreign policy.

Denmark has reiterated that Greenland is not for sale, but Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen has said having more American troops based there would be a welcome development.

At a news conference last month, Trump declined to rule out using military or economic

coercion to take control of Greenland. He hasn’t said whether he would consider a larger troop presence an alternative to U.S. ownership.

The U.S. has long maintained a base in Greenland, where troops are involved in a ballistic missile early warning mission.

NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte, when asked Monday about the situation between the United States and Denmark, avoided taking a position.

“What I think is very useful is that President Trump alerted us to the fact that when it comes to the High North, there is a geopolitical and strategic issue at stake,” Rutte said.

## MILITARY

## Suspected Venezuelan gang members now at Gitmo

By CAITLYN BURCHETT  
Stars and Stripes

Ten suspected Venezuelan gang members were among the first to arrive Tuesday at Naval Base Guantanamo Bay as about 300 U.S. troops worked to expand the center's migrant capacity to hold thousands more deported migrants.

The 10 "high-threat" individuals are associated with the Tren de Aragua, a transnational criminal street gang, White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said Wednesday.

The flights departed from El Paso, Texas.

"Americans are safer every single day one of these criminals is arrested and deported from our country," Leavitt said.

The migrants are temporarily being housed in vacant detention facilities at the base in Cuba, the Department of Defense said. They eventually will be transported to their country of origin. According to Leavitt, Venezuela has agreed to accept the return of Tren de Aragua gang members.

The migrants arrived at Guantanamo Bay as more than 300 sailors, soldiers and Marines worked alongside Department of Homeland Security forces to expand the facility's capacity to hold 2,000 migrants.

Additional expansion phases are planned, according to U.S. Southern Command, the combatant command that oversees military operations in the region.

The Navy base has been used primarily for the last two decades to detain those associated with the

9/11 attacks. President Donald Trump has said the base has the capacity to hold as many as 30,000 migrants.

Wednesday, Leavitt said Mexico's President Claudia Sheinbaum agreed to supply 10,000 soldiers on the U.S.-Mexico border. Those soldiers, Leavitt said, will be tasked with preventing fentanyl and illegal migrants from "pouring into our country."

Additionally, El Salvador has agreed to book in Salvadoran prisoners illegal migrants of any nation-

ality who are slated for deportation from the U.S. The agreement, Leavitt said, is "unprecedented."

"Efforts to seal the border, halt the invasion and carry out the largest mass deportation campaign continue at lightning speed," she said.

To date, Leavitt said more than 8,000 migrants have been arrested since Jan. 20, when Trump took office. Of those, 461 have been released for various reasons, including medical conditions and lack of detention facilities.

## Panama disputes that Navy ships will transit canal for free

By ALISON BATH  
Stars and Stripes

U.S. Navy ships transiting the Panama Canal aren't entitled to a free ride just yet despite the State Department's announcement this week saying they would transit the waterway without paying fees, according to the canal's governing authority.

The Panama Canal Authority said Wednesday on an official social media account that it had not made any adjustments to the tolls or fees charged for canal use.

The authority also emphasized its sovereign governance of the passageway connecting the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.

The post on X did express a willingness "to establish a dialogue with the relevant officials of the United States regarding the transit of warships from said country."

The communication followed a State Department announcement the same day saying an agreement had been reached with Panama to allow U.S. government vessels free passage through the canal.

"This saves the U.S. government millions of dollars a year," the State Department said on X.

The dueling messages followed Secretary of State Marco Rubio's visit to Panama on Sunday and Monday, during which he met with Panamanian President Jose Raul Mulino and toured the canal,



JUSTIN HOVARTER/U.S. Navy

**The littoral combat ship USS Billings passes through the Panama Canal in September 2022. The Panama Canal Authority released a statement Wednesday contradicting a U.S. State Department announcement that the authority had agreed to waive fees for U.S. government vessels transiting the canal.**

among other activities.

During Rubio's visit, both governments agreed to study the feasibility of giving U.S. warships free passage, The Wall Street Journal reported on Thursday.

Navy use of the canal is infrequent, with about 40 vessels tran-

siting annually, excluding the service's aircraft carriers, which are too large. Allowing free access would reportedly save the U.S. about \$13 million each year, according to the WSJ report.

Ships pay an average of about \$750,000 per crossing, but tolls

can range from \$300,000 to \$1 million, the newspaper said.

Waiving the fees for Navy ships would require Panama to find a way around the Neutrality Treaty signed in September 1977, which bars preferential treatment among nations and calls for "equal

conditions of charges or transit."

Rubio also delivered a strong warning to Mulino that Panama must reduce Chinese influence over the canal area or face potential retaliation from the U.S., The Associated Press reported Sunday.

A Hong Kong-based company has operated two ports at either end of the canal since 1997.

In 2024, there were at least 9,944 transits across the canal, which serves about 170 countries, according to information on the authority's website.

President Donald Trump has threatened to take over the canal, citing what he said is undue influence from China and exorbitant fees charged to American shippers and the Navy. Panamanian officials have denied Trump's claims.

Under a treaty signed in 1904, Panama gave the U.S. the rights to build and operate the canal and control 5 miles of land on either side of the waterway.

The first ship transited the canal in 1914, and the U.S. unilaterally operated the waterway for decades until agreeing in the Panama Canal Treaty, also signed in September 1977, to gradually relinquish authority, according to the State Department.

Panama gained full control of it in December 1999.

## Spanish police arrest teen tied to cyberattacks on US military, NATO

By PHILLIP WALTER  
WELLMAN  
Stars and Stripes

Spanish police say they have arrested a hacker responsible for more than 40 cyberattacks against the U.S. military, NATO and other organizations.

The suspect admitted on dark web forums to hacking into military databases, Spain's national police said in a statement Wednesday. He was arrested Tuesday in the coastal city of Calp.

Police did not release the suspect's identity or his age, but mul-

iple Spanish news outlets identified him as an 18-year-old.

It wasn't immediately clear what risks, if any, the illegal activity posed to the U.S. military or other NATO allies.

Investigators are analyzing computer equipment seized from his home to determine the extent of his criminal involvement, police said.

Both the police and Spain's Civil Guard, which assisted in the operation, posted a video to X on Wednesday showing at least six officers entering a house. The footage included several hard

drives and USB devices, as well as a man being escorted into a police vehicle.

The suspect has more than 50 cryptocurrency accounts, suggesting extensive knowledge of blockchain technology, according to the police statement. He also used various pseudonyms online to avoid detection, the statement said.

One of the aliases was "Nato-hub," Spanish newspaper La Vanguardia reported Wednesday.

News outlet El Español described the suspect as "a young

computer expert who had just turned 18," adding that he had engaged in the hacking for the challenge rather than financial gain.

However, the teen reportedly sold some of the sensitive data he stole, which El Español said directly affected Spain's national security, citing National Police and Civil Guard agents.

Spain's defense and education ministries, the Civil Guard and several Spanish universities were also among the institutions the suspect is accused of infiltrating.

Spanish authorities launched an investigation in February 2024

after a business association in Madrid reported a data breach.

A December cyberattack against the Civil Guard accelerated the investigation and led to the arrest, the police statement said.

Homeland Security Investigations, the principal investigative arm of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, assisted with the case.

NATO did not immediately respond to requests for comment Thursday. U.S. Army Europe and Africa declined to offer further details, saying the case is ongoing.

## MILITARY

**Beret: 'Give it a shot because you never know,' commander says**

FROM PAGE 1

the berets at home and whatnot, but now they actually get to wear it. And that means something ... because of the trials that they've been through to earn it, but it really means something because of all the people who went before them and what those generations did to make it what it is."

The Army's Special Forces traces its lineage to the 1950s, and the iconic Green Beret was officially authorized for the elite soldiers in 1962 by then-President Kennedy. Green Berets have since become a critical special operations force tasked with conducting sensitive missions around the globe — often focused on working hand-in-hand with indigenous forces to fight with limited U.S. forces and resources. In the weeks after the al-Qaida attacks on 9/11, it was Green Berets who were first sent into Afghanistan on a mission to link with Afghan fighters to attack the Taliban in the opening days of Operation Enduring Freedom.

To enter the ranks of the Green Berets, soldiers must complete the grueling, three-week Special Forces Assessment and Selection course and then pass the Special Forces Qualification Course, or Q Course, which can range from some 50 weeks to almost two years of training, according to the service.

Though the Army in recent years has considered deep cuts to its special operations formations that expanded dramatically during the post-9/11 wars, Special Operations officials have said the demands for Green Berets have not declined, even as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have wound down. President Donald Trump's administration has not made public its plans for the future of special operations forces since his return to the White House last month, and officials at the Pentagon declined to comment on any impending changes to force structure.

Regardless of any changes to come, one of SWCS primary roles is to keep pushing qualified young men and women through the Special Forces training pipeline to ensure units have enough Green Berets to conduct missions, said Command Sgt. Maj. Lionel Strong, the senior enlisted leader for SWCS.

Strong, who earned his Green Beret in 2002 and has served with Special Forces units on numerous deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan, said in order to keep those units fully staffed, SWCS needs more soldiers attempting Special Forces training than have done so in recent years.

Recruiting shortfalls across the entire Army and flat Special Operations budgets that have failed to keep up with inflation have contributed to a smaller-than-ideal number of Special Forces hope-



PHOTOS BY COREY DICKSTEIN/Stars and Stripes

**New Special Forces soldiers don their Green Berets for the first time during their Special Forces Qualification Course graduation on Jan. 23, in Fayetteville, N.C.**

fuls entering training courses, officials said. Nonetheless, Strong said, the special warfare school has produced enough Green Berets to maintain a Special Forces community that is "healthy enough now to conduct the operations on behalf of the nation."

"That being said, we do have to put in some effort into identifying, recruiting and prepare the next generation of [Army Special Operations] soldiers," he said.

For Lucas, who earned his Green Beret in 2009 after serving previously in another Army special operations outfit, the 75th Ranger Regiment, the pitch to today's young soldiers to try out for Special Forces is simple: "Don't limit yourself. Give it a shot," he said.

"You never know until you try. I've met a lot of people over the years that ... were going to do this and going to do that, and I'd say, 'Don't look back and say that. Give it a shot because you never know,'" the colonel said. "The worst-case scenario is [you don't pass Special Forces training and] you're still in the Army, but you never know, it may work out, and you can find yourself having more fun than you ever anticipated."

**Making Green Berets**

Training to enter the Special Forces is difficult by design, according to Strong. It is meant to ensure Green Beret units are filled with elite, capable troops with the ability to adapt to difficult and stressful situations.

The first course, SFAS, is meant to weed out those who do not display the traits necessary to succeed in the Special Forces — high physical fitness levels, intelligence and personal character, Strong said.

"Your intelligence and your fit-



**Army Maj. Gen. Gil Ferguson, commander of the 1st Special Forces Command at Fort Liberty, N.C., hands a new Special Forces soldier his Green Beret at the graduation ceremony.**

ness, we have tools and resources to help with that, but the thing that I would say is foundational to us is character," the command sergeant major said. "We've got to know that a person we're bringing [into Special Forces] has the shared values, beliefs and behaviors with our organization and the Army."

The highly intensive, three-week SFAS course includes fitness tests, long marches carrying heavy loads, land navigation challenges, obstacle courses, and cognitive tests sometimes conducted with little-to-no sleep, according to the Army. SWCS officials declined to provide a recent estimate of the percentage of soldiers who successfully complete the SFAS course, but a 2019 study published by the U.S. Army Research Institute indicated only about 31% of SFAS participants were selected that year to move on to the Q Course.

The Q Course has a much higher success rate, Strong said, with some 80% to 90% completing it on

their first try.

Once accepted into the Q Course, soldiers enter the lengthy pipeline that turns them into experts in their chosen Special Forces craft, Lucas said. Those soldiers spend part of the course training with their comrades. In other parts, they split into unique courses to train them to conduct their selected specialty. Those Special Forces specialties include weapons, engineering, communications and combat medicine for enlisted soldiers. Officers and warrant officers train to learn their jobs in Special Forces in separate courses within the Q course.

During the course of about a year, Green Beret hopefuls learn small-unit tactics, how to use foreign weapons systems, train in irregular warfare techniques, learn foreign language skills, complete the Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape course, and operate in the two-week culmination exercise known as Robin Sage, in which Special Forces candidates test the skills that they learned

throughout the course.

When they have completed all that training, Lucas said, they have almost certainly proved themselves as capable, adaptable and creative soldiers ready to serve in the 12-man operational detachments that form the foundations of Special Forces units.

**'It won't be boring'**

As the latest group of new Green Berets — Q Course class 338 — gathered Jan. 23 inside Fayetteville's Crown Complex, where generations of Special Forces soldiers have first donned their earned headgear, Lucas told them he could not predict what their futures would hold.

"Nobody has any idea what's in store for them ahead," he said. "I don't know where their careers are going to take them, and neither do [they]. But I can promise you one thing, it won't be boring."

For Lucas, his 28 years in the Army have include assignments in Georgia, North Carolina, New York, Kentucky, Washington, D.C., and at least eight combat tours in Iraq, according to his official biography.

As a captain leading a Special Forces operational detachment from the Fort Campbell, Ky.-based 5th Special Forces Group on lengthy tours in Iraq have been among the highlights during his career, he said. The new Green Berets could find themselves almost anywhere in the world, as Special Forces teams continue to deploy to train or operate in countries across the globe.

"I've gotten to do things that I'd never, ever, ever thought I would do," Lucas said. "You're truly empowered here, like you are in very, very few other places ... across the Army."

For Strong, his 23 years in Special Forces have taken him across Afghanistan, the Middle East, Africa, South America and Asia. Like Lucas, he said he could not predict where the latest crop of Green Berets might serve, but he promised they would continue to be called upon for decades to come.

"At some point our nation might need to do something that is high risk, time constrained and politically sensitive, and if not one, maybe all three of those things at once, and generally, special operations forces are better suited to do those kinds of missions," he said.

"Special Forces — we're going to be there at every phase of the operations form shaping, to conflict and back ... [and] we're going to work by, with and through our partner forces ... building partnership capacity in those relationships, and we're probably going to have unconventional solutions to complex problems."

"If anything, the demand [for Green Berets] is going up."

## MILITARY

# Bill exempts spouses from return-to-office

By SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — House lawmakers introduced a bill Wednesday to exempt military spouses from President Donald Trump's return-to-office mandate, launching a bipartisan effort to retain telework and remote work arrangements for military families.

The bill would spare military spouses who work for the federal government from going back to in-person work as ordered by Trump on the day of his inauguration. Lawmakers argue the exemption

will keep experienced staff from leaving the federal workforce and help military families hold onto their jobs. The federal government employs over 16,000 military, veteran and surviving spouses, according to data provided by the White House in 2023.

Reps. Rob Wittman, R-Va., and Eugene Vindman, D-Va., said they introduced the bill after hearing from worried military families in Virginia, where many federal workers live.

One woman told Vindman, a former Army lieutenant colonel, that she is being forced to choose

between commuting 200 miles to her agency's office in Washington or leaving her job of 18 years. The woman's husband is an active-duty service member.

"No military family should have to make this choice," Vindman said. "That's why I'm introducing this bipartisan bill to guarantee that those serving our country in uniform can continue their mission, that our federal agencies retain experienced staff and that military families remain together."

A Jan. 27 memo issued by the Office of Personnel Management

and the Office of Management and Budget mentions military spouses who work remotely as an exemption to Trump's order, but it is not clear if that is being universally followed as agencies force employees into offices.

Wittman said a military spouse contacted his office because her family relies on dual incomes, and her ability to maintain consistent employment throughout military moves has been essential for her family's well-being. She said remote work has allowed her to maintain a federal career despite frequent relocations.

"Our military families make great sacrifices in support of their loved ones in the armed forces — for which we are forever grateful for — and should not come at the expense of employability, financial stability, or personal fulfillment," Wittman said. "Supporting the careers of military spouses is patriotic and just plain common sense."

Military spouses face long-term employment challenges due to the nature of military life, and their unemployment has hovered around 21% for years, according to Defense Department data.

## 'Dirt Boyz' practice making Yokota base's airfield more resilient

By SETH ROBSON  
*Stars and Stripes*

YOKOTA AIR BASE, Japan — More engineers trained to cut and pour concrete would make the Air Force's Indo-Pacific bases more resilient, according to an expert in rapid airfield repair.

Members of the 374th Civil Engineer Squadron — known as the "Dirt Boyz" — practiced quickly repairing concrete as they would a damaged runway Thursday morning at the home of U.S. Forces Japan in western Tokyo.

A team of 22 airmen can repair 18 craters in six hours — the sort of effort that might be needed to create a strip allowing planes to take off after an attack — a member of the squadron, Tech. Sgt. Ryan O'Keefe, said while keeping watch over the drill.

Potential adversaries in the region such as China and North Korea have potent missile forces that experts say are zeroed in on U.S. bases in Japan.

There's nothing that can be done to make concrete runways better able to withstand an enemy



**Krawczyk acts as a ground guide while wheel saws are used to remove a patch of damaged concrete.**

missile strike, O'Keefe said.

"The best way to make the runway more resilient is to have more Dirt Boyz there to fix it," he said, without specifying how many are already at Yokota.

In a 14-year career, O'Keefe has filled plenty of craters but one of his most memorable jobs involved repairing degraded concrete next to the passenger terminal at Irbil, Iraq, in 2020.

Successful attacks on U.S. air-



PHOTOS BY JEREMY STILLWAGNER/Stars and Stripes

**Air Force Staff Sgt. Lukasz Krawczyk uses a shovel to remove excess debris from the path of a wheel saw during a runway repair exercise at Yokota Air Base, Japan, on Thursday.**

fields have been few and far between in recent years.

However, a team of engineers from the Air Force's 1st Expeditionary Civil Engineer Group repaired a runway at Qayara Airfield West, Iraq, under hostile fire in 2016. The runway was damaged by Islamic State extremists who occupied the facility for two years.

During Thursday's practice, the engineers performed a choreographed routine to repair two holes, dug the previous day with jackhammers attached to excavators, in a parking lot not far from Yokota's runway.

Rapid airfield damage repair al-

lows engineers to quickly fill large numbers of small craters caused by an enemy attack.

It starts with airmen cleaning the area around a crater and surveying it before machines with massive rotating blades move in to cut a square around the damaged area.

Next, a giant concrete breaker smashes up the material that is to be removed. An excavator lifts out the debris before the hole is filled with quick-set concrete.

A heavy equipment operator involved in the Yokota training, Senior Airman Kody Kross, said the time it takes to repair damage de-

pends on the size of a crater but added: "The concrete sets in a couple of hours."

Kross estimates he's trained on rapid airfield repair every two weeks and helped fix 100 simulated craters.

"If everything goes smoothly it usually takes one to two hours," he said.

The rapid repair process works with craters under 20 feet in diameter, O'Keefe said.

For larger craters, the engineers use a bulldozer to fill the hole, then cover the surface with fiberglass reinforced matting, he said.

## US, France, Japan prep for rare 3-carrier drill in Philippine Sea

By ALEX WILSON  
*Stars and Stripes*

A flotilla of about 10 warships, including the USS Carl Vinson and the French aircraft carrier FS Charles de Gaulle, are set to train together Saturday in the Philippine Sea, according to the U.S. 7th Fleet.

Joining the two carriers for the exercise, dubbed Pacific Steller 2025, are at least eight escort ships and Japan's JS Kaga, a small-deck flattop called a helicopter carrier, the command announced Thursday in a news release.

A 7th Fleet spokeswoman, Lt. j.g. Sarah Merrill, confirmed the exercise will take place in the East Philippine Sea and said it's an opportunity to advance the three navies' ability to work together and improve maritime security.

"Cooperating with our allies and partners enhances our ability to deter conflict and maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific," she said.

The last multicarrier drill in the Indo-Pacific took place in August, with the USS Abraham Lincoln and the Italian aircraft carrier ITS Cavour training together, a first

for the U.S. and Italian navies in the region.

The Carl Vinson strike group includes the guided-missile cruiser USS Princeton and the guided-missile destroyers USS Sterett and USS William P. Lawrence.

The nuclear-powered Charles de Gaulle, currently engaged in its Clemenceau 25 deployment, is escorted by the destroyer FS Forbin, frigates FS Provence and FS Alsace, fleet oiler FS Jacques Chevallier and a nuclear-powered attack submarine, USNI News reported Jan. 31.

The Kaga supports a complement of helicopters.

In November, the Kaga completed trials for the first of two rounds of modifications that will allow it to carry the fifth-generation F-35B Lightning II, a short-takeoff and vertical-landing stealth fighter.

The training will take place three days after the guided-missile destroyer USS Benfold and a U.S. P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol and reconnaissance aircraft wrapped up an exercise with the Australian, Japanese and Philip-

pine navies on Wednesday near the Philippines.

The drills included the Australian guided-missile destroyer HMAS Hobart and a MH-60R Seahawk helicopter; the Philippine guided-missile frigate BRP Jose Rizal; and the Japanese destroyer JS Akizuki and an SH-60K helicopter, according to a 7th Fleet news release on Thursday.

The operation featured surface maneuvering, line-of-sight communication checks, subject matter expert exchanges and tactics training, Merrill said.

## MILITARY

# Cultural observances end at DODEA schools

## Trump's orders spur review of clubs, books

By JENNIFER H. SVAN  
Stars and Stripes

KAISERSLAUTERN, Germany — Cultural observances at Defense Department K-12 schools are out, and clubs, extracurricular activities and library books are all under review in response to executive orders from President Donald Trump, school officials said Thursday.

Change is expected at Department of Defense Education Activity, which operates 161 schools for the children of service members and other military personnel around the world. But morale remains strong and educators are working harder than ever, DODEA's director said during a visit to Germany on Wednesday.

"This is just what we do. Administrations change, and we continue," said Beth Schiavino-Narvaez. "And we'll always stay focused on our core mission of teaching and learning and student achievement and providing the best education possible to our students."

Schiavino-Narvaez talked with students and teachers at Kaiserslautern High School on Wednesday as part of a visit this week to four schools in Europe.

Schiavino-Narvaez, who's led DODEA schools since June, sat in on a guitar class and listened to students discuss William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" for a project in language arts.

"It's just such a vibrant school,"



JENNIFER H. SVAN/Stars and Stripes

**Beth Schiavino-Narvaez, director of Department of Defense Education Activity, visits Kaiserslautern High School in Germany on Wednesday.**

she said. "I'm so pleased to be able to offer so many different types of opportunities to students."

It's too early to know what will change under the new administration, Schiavino-Narvaez said. The school system has focused on implementing "college- and career-ready" standards during the past decade, she said, while bolstering teacher training and leadership development.

It's a formula that has pushed DODEA to tops in the nation in math and reading assessments for two consecutive testing cycles in 2022 and 2024, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

But schools have already been told they can't host celebrations or events for Black History Month and other cultural observances, DODEA spokesman Will Griffin said Thursday.

The changes stem from executive orders titled "Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism," "Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government" and "Ending Radical Indoctrination in K-12 Schooling."

The Pentagon on Jan. 31 banned all official monthly celebrations related to race and identity in the Defense Department effective immediately, under guidance titled "Identity Months Dead at DOD."

DODEA didn't issue a specific list of restricted occasions, but they typically follow the observance calendar issued by the Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute. That list is no longer on the agency's website.

No agencywide direction has been given about clubs or extracurricular activities while DODEA reviews its policies, but guidance is expected, Griffin said Thursday.

On Tuesday, the U.S. Military Academy disbanded 12 campus clubs primarily based on ethnic and gender affiliation as part of what it says is compliance with the effort to end government programs pertaining to diversity, equity and inclusion.

The shuttered groups included a club founded in 1976 for female cadets and professional organizations such as the National Society of Black Engineers.

One DODEA parent told Stars and Stripes in an email Thursday that her child was given a list of clubs that will no longer be allowed to organize at her school. The school also had removed "safe space" signs and told her daughter she could no longer play sports or use the bathroom of her choice.

Some of those changes appear to align with a Trump executive order Wednesday intended to ban transgender athletes from participating in girls' and women's sports.

Meanwhile, school information specialists, who fill the roles of librarians, have been directed to review books for indications of what an executive order called "gender ideology" or "discriminatory equity ideology."

Books that could fit those cate-

gories will be put off limits to students pending a more thorough evaluation, Griffin said Thursday. The review could extend to textbooks and other reading materials.

The agency is reviewing all DODEA-adopted instructional resources to ensure compliance with the applicable executive orders and Pentagon guidance, Griffin said.

Trump's executive order defines "discriminatory equity ideology" as "ideology that treats individuals as members of preferred or disfavored groups, rather than as individuals, and minimizes agency, merit, and capability in favor of immoral generalizations."

New Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth has voiced support for education grounded in patriotic principles and Christian theology. The 67,000-some children in DODEA schools fall under the direction of the Pentagon.

But Pentagon-driven changes in DODEA curricula and standards are "not typically the process," said Schiavino-Narvaez, who has more than 30 years of experience in education, including eight years with DODEA prior to becoming the director.

The agency follows a federal procurement system to buy high-quality instructional materials that align with its standards, she said.

DODEA would welcome the opportunity to meet with Hegseth, Schiavino-Narvaez said.

"Every chance we get to show off our schools, to showcase our schools to our military leaders at the Pentagon, we welcome that opportunity," she said.

# High PFAS levels found near air base on Okinawa

By BRIAN McELHINEY  
AND KEISHI KOJA  
Stars and Stripes

KADENA AIR BASE, Okinawa — Researchers found high concentrations of toxic "forever chemicals" in seawater offshore Okinawa in 2023, suggesting this critical U.S. installation may be the source, according to a recently released study.

A study by U.S. and Japanese scientists measured a total PFAS concentration of 164.3 parts per trillion in a single seawater sample taken in June 2023 near Kadena Marina, just north of the air base. The finding represents the highest total PFAS concentration among 61 surface water samples collected across Okinawa, including 46 coastal, 13 inland and two groundwater sites.

The study, conducted by the Okinawa Institute of Science and



KEISHI KOJA/Stars and Stripes

**Researchers found high levels of PFAS in waters around Kadena Marina near Kadena Air Base, Okinawa, pictured here on Wednesday.**

Technology and the University of Florida, was published Dec. 3 by the Royal Society of Chemistry.

Japan's Environment Ministry in December set a water quality standard of 50 parts per trillion for

PFOS and PFOA, component chemicals of PFAS. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency refers to them as "forever chemicals" because they persist in the environment.

PFAS exposure has been linked to an increased risk of certain tumors in the liver, testicles, breasts and pancreas, according to the American Cancer Society. The EPA has stated that no level of PFAS is safe in drinking water.

A common source of PFAS contamination was aqueous film-forming foam used by military firefighters at U.S. and Japanese bases in the country. Both militaries have phased out its use, and U.S. Forces Japan announced last year that it had incinerated its last stockpiles. PFAS is also found in water-repellent fabrics and non-stick cookware, among other consumer products.

The 2023 study did not collect samples from former or current U.S. military bases on Okinawa and cannot directly identify them as the source of contamination, said Timothy Ravasi, a marine science professor at the Okinawa institute who contributed to the study.

"But it's possible that there is a strong correlation there if you look at the map," he said by email Tuesday.

Another researcher, University of Florida associate professor John Bowden, said pinpointing specific PFAS sources on Okinawa, including potential U.S. military activities, is difficult, particularly in populated areas.

"Typically, at least in the United States, the wastewater treatment plants only remove about 10% or so PFAS from the effluent that goes back into our water," he said

by phone Wednesday.

The 2023 study measured PFOS and PFOA at 78.9 parts per trillion in the marina sample.

The 2023 study found the second-highest total PFAS concentration, 144.2 parts per trillion, in a groundwater sample from Ukka Gaa Spring near Marine Corps Camp Hansen. PFOS and PFOA concentrations there measured 76.2 parts per trillion.

A seawater sample south of Kadena Air Base contained a total PFAS level of 85.8 parts per trillion. The PFOS and PFOA concentrations in that sample, at 44.6 parts per trillion, were below Japan's safe water standard.

Bowden said he hopes to conduct further research on seasonal PFAS fluctuations and their potential impact on wildlife, fishing and recreation in more densely populated areas of the island.

## WAR IN UKRAINE

# Trump envoy to share plan to end war

BY ALBERTO NARDELLI,  
ANNMARIÉ HORDERN  
AND DARYNA KRASNOLUTSKA  
*Bloomberg News*

U.S. allies expect President Donald Trump's administration to present a long-awaited plan to end Russia's war on Ukraine at the Munich Security Conference in Germany next week, according to people familiar with the matter.

The blueprint would be presented to allies by Trump's special representative for Ukraine and Russia, Keith Kellogg, the people said on condition of anonymity. They declined to say how detailed they expected the discussions to be or what format they would take.

The proposal would be deli-

vered at the Feb. 14-16 conference in the Bavarian city a week before Russia's war hits the three-year mark. Kellogg and others have dropped hints in recent weeks of what Trump allies have referred to as "peace through strength."

Elements include potentially freezing the conflict and leaving territory occupied by Russian forces in limbo while providing Ukraine with security guarantees to ensure that Moscow can't attack again.

Later this month, Kellogg is expected to make his first trip to Kyiv and elsewhere in the European Union, according to people familiar with the matter. In Ukraine, he is expected to meet with Ukrai-

nian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

Meanwhile, the Ukrainian leader is planning to travel to several countries in the Gulf region after the Munich conference.

Spokespeople at the office of the Ukrainian President declined to comment. Kellogg will continue to engage allies to help fulfill Trump's promise to end the war, National Security Council spokesperson Brian Hughes said.

Ukrainian bonds, which have been gaining in most of the last three months on speculation of an eventual movement toward peace, added to those gains Wednesday. Dollar notes due in 2035 and 2036 were trading at the

strongest levels since they were issued last year.

Kellogg has signaled that the U.S. would like to see elections held in Ukraine after a ceasefire, while Trump has indicated that access to critical minerals in return for U.S. support could be part of a settlement. The retired general on Wednesday confirmed plans to attend the Munich gathering.

The U.S. president has also threatened Moscow with sanctions if it doesn't engage in talks.

Ukraine's top priority as an ultimate security guarantee is NATO membership, a prospect that Kyiv has acknowledged is unlikely in the short term. Zelenskyy said this week that he's open to elections af-

ter the war ends — and once martial law is lifted.

The Ukrainian president's top adviser, Andriy Yermak, spoke to U.S. national security adviser Michael Waltz this week, while Russian President Vladimir Putin's spokesman said that contacts between U.S. and Russian agencies were intensifying.

Both Putin and Zelenskyy signaled that their previous refusal to talk to each other has softened as Trump's plan approaches.

In an interview late Tuesday with television host Piers Morgan, Zelenskyy reiterated his readiness to talk to Putin to end the war, in the presence of Ukraine's partners.

## Ukraine considers postwar development

BY ILLIA NOVIKOV  
*Associated Press*

KYIV, Ukraine — Ukraine wants to collaborate with partner countries on postwar projects worth billions of dollars not just in mining rare earth elements but also in energy and construction sectors to help rebuild the country, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha said Wednesday.

Sybiha responded to comments by President Donald Trump who said Monday that he wanted to gain access to Ukraine's valuable rare earth materials as a condition for continuing support for its war against Russia.

Ukrainian officials have said Russia wants to get its hands on Ukraine's vast natural resources.

Kyiv intends to offer "guarantees of the presence of major businesses in Ukraine and the vested interests of our closest allies — the United States — in developing these (rare earth) deposits and ensuring their protection," the foreign minister said.

But cooperation should not be limited to rare earth materials, Sybiha said in a news conference alongside visiting U.K. Foreign Secretary David Lammy.

Ukraine has "huge potential" to become a guarantor of energy security in Europe by buying liquefied natural gas from the United States and storing it in its massive underground tanks for later distribution, he said.

Sybiha also said there was "joint interest" from Ukrainian and American businesses in the postwar reconstruction of Ukraine, estimated to cost more than \$400 billion. "This will be one of the largest projects of this century and, accordingly, one of the largest opportunities for our allies."

Meanwhile, Zelenskyy said in an interview broadcast Tuesday night that the war has killed 45,100 Ukrainian troops. The fighting al-



Ukrainian soldiers carry coffins of those who were killed on Feb. 1 by a Russian strike on residential buildings during a funeral ceremony in Poltava, Ukraine on Wednesday.

EVGENIY MALOLETKA/AP

so has injured close to 390,000 troops, he told Piers Morgan Uncensored on YouTube.

On Dec. 8, he said Ukraine had lost some 43,000 soldiers on the battlefield and 370,000 wounded.

Russia hasn't given its number of killed since September 2022, seven months after its all-out invasion.

If the U.S. stops sending vital military aid, that could also jeopardize European support, Zelenskyy said in the interview. "Without a doubt, we cannot do without this kind of (Western) support," he said.

Zelenskyy said Wednesday that the United States must be part of any Western troop deployment to safeguard a peace deal with Russia and shield against another invasion.

Sending only European troops would not be enough, he said.

"Because this is not just a matter of numbers, it is about sharing responsibility and ensuring security guarantees. This cannot be done without the United States of America," he said at a news conference with Lammy.

Ukrainian forces are slowly losing ground, especially in eastern areas, where they are being pushed backward.

Russia's Defense Ministry claimed Wednesday that Russian troops had captured the villages of Baranivka in the eastern Donetsk region and Novomylnsk in the northeastern Kharkiv region.

Baranivka's capture is part of Russia's effort to envelop Pokrovsk, a key road and rail hub whose loss would compromise a wider area of defense, while the seizure of Novomylnsk is part of Russia's onslaught toward Kupiansk, another important train

junction.

Ukraine keeps hitting the Russian military's rear areas and supply lines in an effort to disrupt the creeping advance.

Ukraine's Army General staff claimed Wednesday that Ukrainian forces struck an oil refinery in the Krasnodar region of Russia overnight, setting it on fire.

According to the General Staff, the oil refinery and petroleum product manufacturing plant supplies gasoline and diesel to the Russian army.

The governor of the Krasnodar region, Veniamin Kondratyev, claimed that fragments of a downed Ukrainian drone hit an oil tank at an oil depot in the village of Novominskaya early Wednesday, sparking a fire.

The fire was put out shortly after and there were no injuries, emergency officials said.

## Ukraine says its drones hit an airfield in south Russia

*Associated Press*

KYIV, Ukraine — Ukrainian forces struck an airfield in southern Russia that was being used to launch Iran-designed Shahed drones, Ukraine's General Staff claimed Thursday, as France said it had delivered a first batch of Mirage fighter jets to Ukraine.

The nighttime attack on the Primorsko-Akhtarsk airfield in Russia's Krasnodar region started a fire, the General Staff wrote on Facebook. The facility houses and fires drones and maintains aircraft used to attack Ukraine's Kherson and Zaporizhzhia border region.

It was not possible to independently verify the claim. The Russian Defense Ministry reported downing Ukrainian drones over Krasnodar, but it didn't say where or mention the airfield.

Ukraine has developed its own long-range drones as part of an effort to grow its domestic arms industry and become less dependent on Western help to fight its almost three-year war with Russia. The drones have at times reached deep into Russia, hitting oil refineries, weapons stores and airfields.

Meanwhile, French authorities said they had delivered the first fighter jets promised to Ukraine by President Emmanuel Macron last June. Ukraine has also received F-16s from other European countries, though Ukrainian officials have rarely mentioned them in official comments about the fighting. Russian forces fired 77 Shahed and other types of drones, as well as two ballistic Iskander-M missiles at Ukraine overnight, according to Ukraine's air force.

## NATION

# Trump blames 'obsolete' system for collision

By **JOSH FUNK**  
Associated Press

President Donald Trump on Thursday blamed last week's deadly collision of a passenger jet and Army helicopter on what he called an "obsolete" computer system used by U.S. air traffic controllers, and he vowed to replace it.

Trump said during an event that "a lot of mistakes happened" on Jan. 29 when an American Airlines flight out of Wichita, Kan., collided with an Army helicopter as the plane was about to land at Ronald Reagan National Airport near Washington, killing all 67 people on board the two aircraft.

In the immediate aftermath of the tragedy, Trump blamed diversity hiring programs for the crash. But on Thursday, he blamed the computer system used by the country's air traffic controllers.

"It's amazing that it happened," Trump said during a speech at the National Prayer Breakfast at the U.S. Capitol. "And I think that's going to be used for good. I think what is going to happen is we're all going to sit down and do a great computerized system for our control towers. Brand new — not pieced together, obsolete."

Trump said the U.S. spent billions of dollars trying to "renovate an old, broken system" instead of

investing in a new one. He said in his own private jet, he uses a system from another country when he lands because his pilot says the existing system is obsolete.

Federal officials have been raising concerns about an overtaxed and understaffed air traffic control system for years, especially after a series of close calls between planes at U.S. airports. Among the reasons they've cited for staffing shortages are uncompetitive pay, long shifts, intensive training and mandatory retirements.

Trump said that if the nation had a newer system, alarms would have sounded when the Black

Hawk helicopter, which was on a training exercise, reached the same altitude as the plane.

But an FAA report after the crash said that the controller did get an alert that the plane and helicopter were converging when they were still more than a mile apart.

The controller responded by asking the helicopter if it had the plane in sight and directed the helicopter to pass behind the plane. The helicopter responded that it did have the plane in sight.

An early focus of the investigation has been confirming the altitude of the plane and helicopter. The jet's flight recorder showed

its altitude as 325 feet, plus or minus 25 feet.

Data from the airport's air traffic control system suggests the helicopter was above its 200-foot flight ceiling. The screen the controller was looking at that night showed that based on radar and other data, the helicopter was at 300 feet, the NTSB said, noting that the figure would have been rounded to the nearest 100 feet.

To get more precise information, investigators need to be able to examine the wreckage of the still-submerged Black Hawk to verify the data. The helicopter isn't expected to be recovered until later this week.

# Trump to pressure IOC to ban transgender athletes

Associated Press

President Donald Trump is ready to take his fight against transgender athletes to the International Olympic Committee.

Trump said Wednesday during a signing ceremony for an executive order aimed at banning transgender athletes from women's sports that his administration wants the IOC to "change everything having to do with the Olympics and having to do with this absolutely ridiculous subject" ahead of the 2028 Summer Games in Los Angeles.

The order empowers the Secretary of State's office to pressure the IOC to amend standards governing Olympic sporting events "to promote fairness, safety and the best interests of female athletes by ensuring that eligibility for participation in women's sporting events is determined according to sex and not gender identity or testosterone reduction."

The order also calls for the Secretary of State and the Department of Homeland Security to "review and adjust, as needed, policies permitting admission to the United States of males seeking to participate in women's sports."

The IOC has allowed transgender athletes to participate at the Olympics since 2004. However, it wasn't until 2021 that the first openly transgender athletes competed under the rings.

Outgoing IOC President Thomas Bach said in December that Olympic organizers were "very confident" they could work with the Trump administration. The president initially backed Los Angeles during his first administration when the city bid for the 2024 Games ultimately awarded to Paris.

Officials with the LA28 organizing committee did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

LA28 organizing committee

chairman Casey Wasserman reportedly met with Trump in Florida last month before Trump's second term began, with Wasserman saying afterward both were looking forward to delivering a successful Games.

The IOC has largely stayed out of the discussion around transgender athletes, letting the international governing bodies for each sport set the parameters for gender participation.

The rules can run the gamut. Entities like World Aquatics have very strict guidelines, while World Triathlon rules are more liberal.

The IOC's stance could change considerably in the near future following Bach's retirement. Among the candidates to replace Bach is former track star Sebastian Coe, now the leader of World Athletics. Coe has been a strong proponent of limiting participation in female sports to cisgender women.



ALEX BRANDON/AP

**President Donald Trump signs an executive order barring transgender female athletes from competing in women's or girls' sporting events, in the White House on Wednesday.**

# Trump tells prayer breakfast he wants to root out 'anti-Christian bias'

By **AAMER MADHANI**  
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump said Thursday that he wants to root out "anti-Christian bias" in the U.S., announcing that he was forming a task force led by Attorney General Pam Bondi to investigate the "targeting" of Christians.

Speaking at two separate events in Washington surrounding the National Prayer Breakfast, Trump said that he would direct the task force to "immediately halt all forms of anti-Christian targeting and discrimination within the federal government, including at the DOJ, which was absolutely terrible, the IRS, the FBI — terrible — and other agencies."

Trump said Bondi would also work to "fully prosecute anti-

Christian violence and vandalism in our society and to move heaven and earth to defend the rights of Christians and religious believers nationwide."

The president's comments came after he joined the National Prayer Breakfast at the Capitol, a more than 70-year-old Washington tradition that brings together a bipartisan group of lawmakers for fellowship, and told lawmakers there that his relationship with religion had "changed" after a pair of failed assassination attempts last year, and he urged Americans to "bring God back" into their lives.

An hour after calling for "unity" on Capitol Hill, though, Trump struck a more partisan tone at the second event across town, announcing that, in addition to the

task force, he was forming a commission on religious liberty, criticizing the Biden administration for "persecution" of believers for prosecuting anti-abortion advocates.

And Trump took a victory lap over his early administration efforts to roll back diversity, equity and inclusion programs and to limit transgender participation in women's sports.

"I don't know if you've been watching, but we got rid of woke over the last two weeks," he said. "Woke is gone-zo."

Trump's new task force drew criticism from Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

The group's president and CEO, Rachel Laser, said "rather than protecting religious beliefs, this

task force will misuse religious freedom to justify bigotry, discrimination, and the subversion of our civil rights laws."

Trump said at the Capitol that he believes people "can't be happy without religion, without that belief. Let's bring religion back. Let's bring God back into our lives."

In 2023, the National Prayer Breakfast split into two dueling events, the one on Capitol Hill largely attended by lawmakers and government officials and a larger private event for thousands at a hotel ballroom.

The split occurred when lawmakers sought to distance themselves from the private religious group that for decades had overseen the bigger event, due to questions about its organization and

how it was funded.

Trump, at both venues, reflected on having a bullet coming within a hair's breadth of killing him at a campaign rally in Butler, Pa., last year, telling lawmakers and attendees, "It changed something in me, I feel."

"I feel even stronger," he continued. "I believed in God, but I feel, I feel much more strongly about it. Something happened."

Speaking later at a separate prayer breakfast sponsored by a private group at a hotel, he remarked, "it was God that saved me."

The Republican president, who identifies as a nondenominational Christian, called religious liberty "part of the bedrock of American life" and called for protecting it with "absolute devotion."

## NATION

# Judge blocks Trump incentives to resign

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A federal judge on Thursday temporarily blocked President Donald Trump's plan to push out federal workers by offering them financial incentives, the latest twist in a chaotic and distressing saga playing out for millions of government employees.

The ruling came hours before the midnight deadline for them to apply for the deferred resignation program. U.S. District Judge George O'Toole Jr. in Boston directed the administration to extend that deadline until after a court hearing he scheduled for Monday afternoon.

O'Toole did not express an opinion on the legality of the pro-

gram, which is being challenged by several labor unions, and said he would weigh arguments next week.

At the White House, press secretary Karoline Levitt said more than 40,000 federal workers have applied to leave in return for being paid until Sept. 30.

"We encourage federal workers in this city to accept the very generous offer," she said at about the same time as the judge's ruling came out. "They don't want to come into the office. If they want to rip the American people off, then they're welcome to take this buyout and we'll find highly qualified people" to replace them.

The deferred resignation program was orchestrated by Elon

Musk, the billionaire entrepreneur who is serving as a top adviser to Trump. It is part of the Republican president's goal of remaking the federal government, weakening what his allies describe as the "deep state" that undermined his first term.

Administration officials said they can save taxpayer money by presenting employees with "a valuable, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."

On Wednesday, the administration ramped up its pressure on employees to leave, sending a reminder that layoffs or furloughs could come next.

"The majority of federal agencies are likely to be downsized through restructurings, realign-

ments, and reductions in force," said the message from the Office of Personnel Management, which has been a nexus of Musk's efforts to downsize the government.

The email said anyone who remains will be expected to be "loyal" and "will be subject to enhanced standards of suitability and conduct as we move forward." Some employees could be reclassified to limit civil service protections as well.

"Employees who engage in unlawful behavior or other misconduct will be prioritized for appropriate investigation and discipline, including termination," the email said.

Democrats said workers shouldn't accept the deferred re-

signation program because it wasn't authorized by Congress, raising the risk they won't get paid.

"It's a scam and not a buyout," said Everett Kelley, president of the American Federation of Government Employees.

Kelley said he tells workers that "if it was me, I wouldn't do it."

An employee at the Department of Education, who spoke on condition of anonymity out of fear of retaliation, said the administration appeared desperate to get people to sign the agreement.

However, she said there were too many red flags, such as a clause waiving the right to sue if the government failed to honor its side of the deal.

## Attorney general orders review of federal cases against president

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — New Attorney General Pam Bondi on Wednesday ordered a review of the federal prosecution of Donald Trump as she unveiled a series of directives designed to overhaul a Justice Department the president claims is biased against conservatives.

Hours after she was sworn in at the White House, Bondi called for the creation of "weaponization working group" that will scrutinize the work of special counsel Jack Smith, who charged Trump in two criminal cases. The group will also review "unethical prosecutions" stemming from the Jan. 6, 2021, riot at the U.S. Capitol, among other things, according to the memo.

The memo satisfies the long-standing contention of Trump and his allies that the Justice Department under the Biden administration had become "weaponized" against conservatives, even though some of its most high-profile probes concerned the Democratic president and his son, and there's been no evidence to support the idea that the prosecutions against Trump were launched for a partisan purpose.

It was one of 14 directives signed by Bondi designed to roll back Biden administration policies and align the Justice Department with the priorities of a White House determined to exert control over federal law enforcement and purge agencies of career employees it views as disloyal.

Among other directives Bondi signed were orders to lift the moratorium on the federal death penalty and end federal grants



EVAN VUCCI/AP

**Pam Bondi is sworn in as Attorney General by Supreme Court Associate Justice Clarence Thomas, right, as President Donald Trump and John Wakefield look on at the White House on Wednesday.**

administered by the Justice Department for jurisdictions that "unlawfully interfere with federal law enforcement."

Bondi herself had foreshadowed the "weaponization" working group's creation by asserting at her confirmation hearing last month that the Justice Department had "targeted Donald Trump."

The Justice Department will provide quarterly reports to the White House on the progress of the review, which will look for instances where agencies' actions "appear to have been designed to achieve political objectives or other improper aims rather than pursuing justice," according to the memo.

In another memo, Bondi wrote that prosecutors could face firings if they refuse to sign onto briefs or appear in court to argue

on behalf of the administration, saying it's the department lawyers' job to "vigorously defend presidential policies and actions against legal challenges."

The flurry of activity signals a dramatic reshaping of the Justice Department under Bondi, a longtime Trump ally and former Florida attorney general who defended the president during his first impeachment trial against allegations that he abused the power of his office.

Democrats who opposed Bondi's confirmation have raised concerns about whether she would be able to lead a Justice Department free of influence from the White House given her close relationship with the president, who repeatedly suggested on the campaign trail that he would seek to use the justice system to exact revenge on his perceived enemies.

## Google is scrapping diversity hiring goals

Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — Google is scrapping some of its diversity hiring targets, joining a lengthening list of U.S. companies that have abandoned or scaled back their diversity, equity and inclusion programs.

The move, which was outlined in an email sent to Google employees on Wednesday, came in the wake of an executive order issued by President Donald Trump that was aimed in part at pressuring government contractors to scrap their DEI initiatives.

Like several other major tech companies, Google sells some of its technology and services to the federal government, including its rapidly growing cloud division that's a key piece of its push into artificial technology.

Google's parent company, Alphabet, also signaled the shift in its annual 10-K report it filed this week with the Securities and Exchange Commission. In it, Google removed a line included in previous annual reports saying that it's "committed to making diversity, equity, and inclusion part of everything we do and to growing a workforce that is representative of the users we serve."

Google generates most of Alphabet's annual revenue of \$350 billion and accounts for almost all of its worldwide workforce of 183,000.

"We're committed to creating a workplace where all our employees can succeed and have equal opportunities, and over the last year we've been reviewing our programs designed to help us get there," Google said in a statement to The Associated Press. "We've updated our 10-K lan-

guage to reflect this, and as a federal contractor, our teams are also evaluating changes required following recent court decisions and executive orders on this topic."

The change in language also comes slightly more than two weeks after Google CEO Sundar Pichai and other prominent technology executives — including Tesla CEO Elon Musk, Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, Apple CEO Tim Cook and Meta Platforms CEO Mark Zuckerberg — stood behind Trump during his inauguration.

Meta jettisoned its DEI program last month, shortly before the inauguration, while Amazon halted some of its DEI programs in December following Trump's election.

Many companies outside of the technology industry also have backed away from DEI. Those include Walt Disney Co., McDonald's, Ford, Walmart, Target, Lowe's and John Deere.

Trump's recent executive order threatens to impose financial sanctions on federal contractors deemed to have "illegal" DEI programs.

If the companies are found to be in violation, they could be subject to massive damages under the 1863 False Claims Act.

That law states that contractors that make false claims to the government could be liable for three times the government's damages.

The order also directed all federal agencies to choose the targets of up to nine investigations of publicly traded companies, large nonprofits and other institutions with DEI policies that constitute "illegal discrimination or preference."



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## WORLD

# US service member, 3 contractors killed in Philippines aircraft crash

Associated Press

MANILA, Philippines — One U.S. service member and three defense contractors were killed Thursday when an aircraft contracted by the U.S. military crashed in a rice field in the southern Philippines, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command said.

The aircraft was conducting a routine mission “providing intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance support at the request of our Philippine allies,” the command said in a statement. It said

the cause of the crash was under investigation.

The Civil Aviation Authority of the Philippines also confirmed the crash of a light plane in Maguindanao del Sur province.

The bodies of the four people were retrieved from the wreckage in Ampatuan town, said Ameer Jehad Tim Ambolodto, a safety officer of Maguindanao del Sur. Indo-Pacific Command said the names of the crew were being withheld pending family notifications.

Windy Beaty, a provincial di-

saster-mitigation officer, said she received reports that residents saw smoke coming from the aircraft and heard an explosion before it plummeted to the ground less than half a mile from a cluster of farmhouses.

Nobody was reported injured on or near the crash site, Beaty said.

U.S. forces have been deployed in a Philippine military camp in the country’s south for decades to help provide advise and training to Filipino forces battling Muslim militants.



SAM MALA/AP

A U.S. military-contracted plane crashed Thursday in the southern Philippines.

# Gaza: US officials walk back some of Trump’s comments about plans

FROM PAGE 1

has warned that an expulsion of Palestinians would destabilize the region and undermine its peace treaty with Israel, a cornerstone of stability and American influence for decades.

Saudi Arabia, another key U.S. ally, has also rejected any mass transfer of Palestinians and says it will not normalize relations with Israel — a key goal of the Trump administration — without the creation of a Palestinian state that includes Gaza.

Trump and Israeli officials have depicted the proposed relocation from war-ravaged Gaza as voluntary, but the Palestinians have universally expressed their determination to remain in their homeland.

Trump and Israeli officials have not said how they would respond if Palestinians refuse to leave. But Human Rights Watch and other groups say the plan, if implemented, would amount to “ethnic cleansing,” the forcible relocation of the civilian population of an ethnic group from a geographic area.

Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz said Thursday that he has ordered the military to make preparations to facilitate the emigra-

tion of large numbers of Palestinians from Gaza through land crossings as well as “special arrangements for exit by sea and air.”

There were no immediate signs of such preparations on the ground.

Trump said he wanted to “permanently” resettle most of Gaza’s population in other countries and for the United States to take charge of clearing debris and rebuilding Gaza as a “Riviera of the Middle East” for all people.

He did not rule out the deployment of U.S. troops there.

U.S. officials later appeared to walk it back, saying the relocation of Palestinians would be temporary and that Trump had not committed to putting American boots on the ground or spending American tax dollars in Gaza.

Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi has not publicly responded to Trump’s stunning proposal that most of Gaza’s population of 2.3 million Palestinians be relocated and the United States take charge of rebuilding the territory.

Israel’s 15-month campaign against the militant Hamas group had reduced large parts of Gaza to

rubble before a fragile ceasefire took hold last month.

But Egyptian officials, speaking Wednesday on condition of anonymity to discuss the closed-door talks, said Cairo has made clear to the Trump administration and Israel that it will resist any such proposal, and that the peace deal with Israel — which has stood for nearly half a century — is at risk.

One official said the message has been delivered to the Pentagon, the State Department and members of the U.S. Congress.

A second official said it has also been conveyed to Israel and its Western European allies, including Britain, France and Germany.

A Western diplomat in Cairo, also speaking anonymously because the discussions have not been made public, confirmed receiving the message from Egypt through multiple channels. The diplomat said Egypt was very serious and viewed the plan as a threat to its national security.

The diplomat said Egypt rejected similar proposals from the Biden administration and European countries early in the war, which was sparked by Hamas’ Oct. 7, 2023, attack into southern Israel.

The earlier proposals were

broached privately, while Trump announced his plan at a White House press conference alongside Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Hamas, which still rules most of Gaza, has repeatedly condemned Trump’s proposal.

On Thursday it said that any U.S. takeover of Gaza would be considered an occupation, implying that the militant group would respond with armed resistance. The group has yet to draw any connection between its objections to Trump’s proposal and the ongoing ceasefire.

It’s unclear if it will have any impact on the next release of Israeli hostages and Palestinian prisoners, set for Saturday.

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# Iran inaugurates drone-carrying warship

Associated Press

TEHRAN, Iran — Iran has inaugurated its first drone-carrier warship, saying the vessel is capable of operating in oceans far from its mainland, the official IRNA news agency reported Thursday.

The report said the vessel, manned by the paramilitary Revolutionary Guard’s navy, can carry several squadrons of drones as well as helicopters and cruise missiles.

Named Shahid Bagheri, the warship is capable of launching cruise missiles, IRNA said.

With a 180-meter-long runway

for drones, the vessel can travel up to 22,000 nautical miles without needing to refuel in ports.

The report said it was converted from a commercial ship and would increase Iran’s power of deterrence.

Footage broadcast by state TV on the inauguration showed at least four helicopters and three drones on the runway of the warship.

Chief of the Guard, Gen. Hossein Salami, said at the ceremony that the warship can travel “independently” in seas for up to one year.

Iran needs to increase its deterrence capacity to prevent war, he said, stressing that Iran doesn’t wish to wage war with any country.

“Iran is not considered a threat to any country, but we do not bow before threat by any power,” Salami said.

Chief of the Guard’s navy Adm. Ali Reza Tangsiri said it took more than two years to convert the new warship out of the commercial vessel.

Iran has long vowed to increase its naval presence on seas worldwide.

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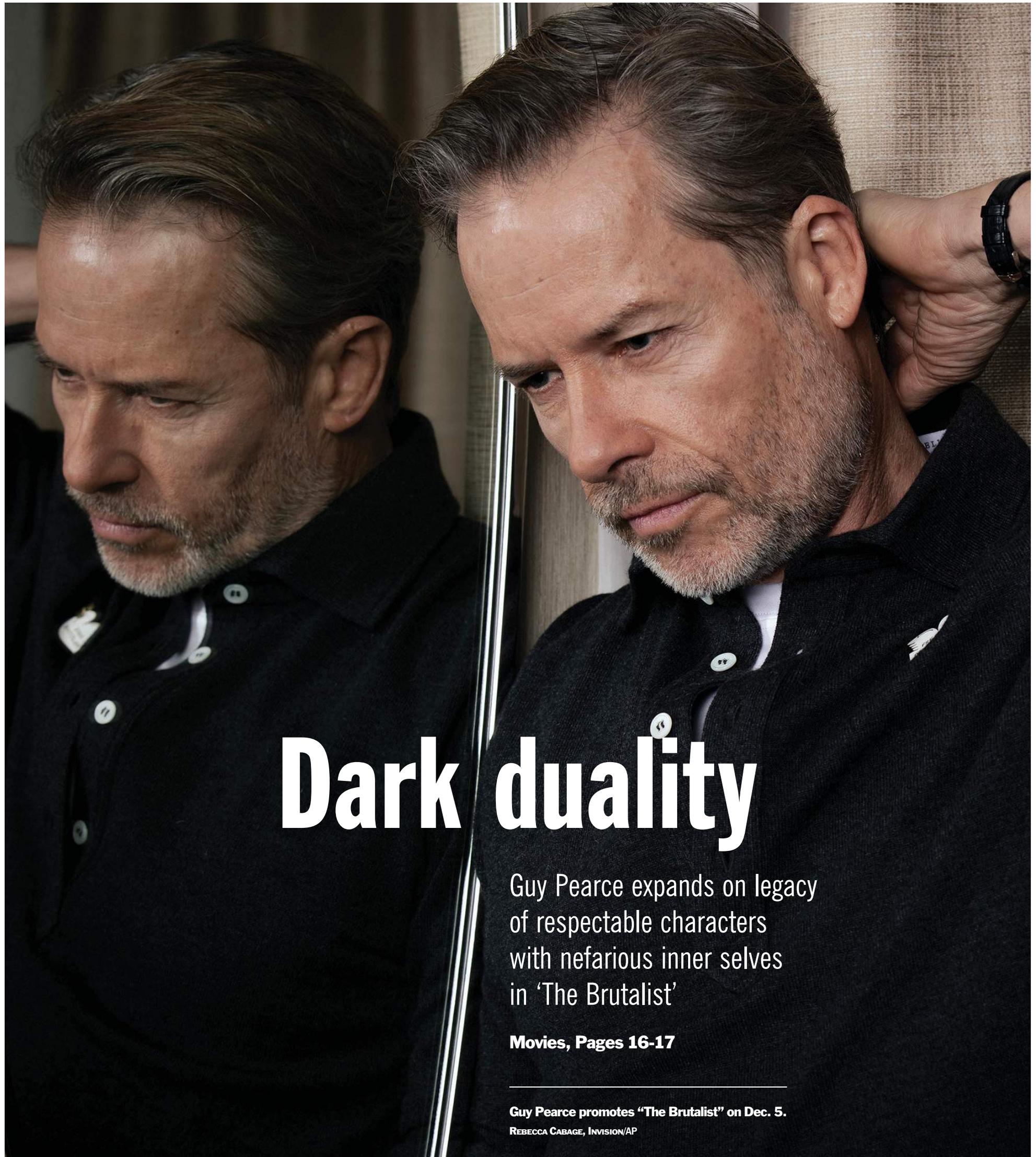
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# WEEKEND



Signs of change at Grammys  
Music, Pages 28-29



## Dark duality

Guy Pearce expands on legacy of respectable characters with nefarious inner selves in 'The Brutalist'

Movies, Pages 16-17

Guy Pearce promotes "The Brutalist" on Dec. 5.  
REBECCA CABAGE, INVISION/AP

## WEEKEND: GADGETS &amp; TECHNOLOGY

## Unrolling AI's 'historic breakthrough'

Tech used to generate image of ancient scroll from Vesuvius eruption

By JILL LAWLESS  
AND PAN PYLAS  
Associated Press

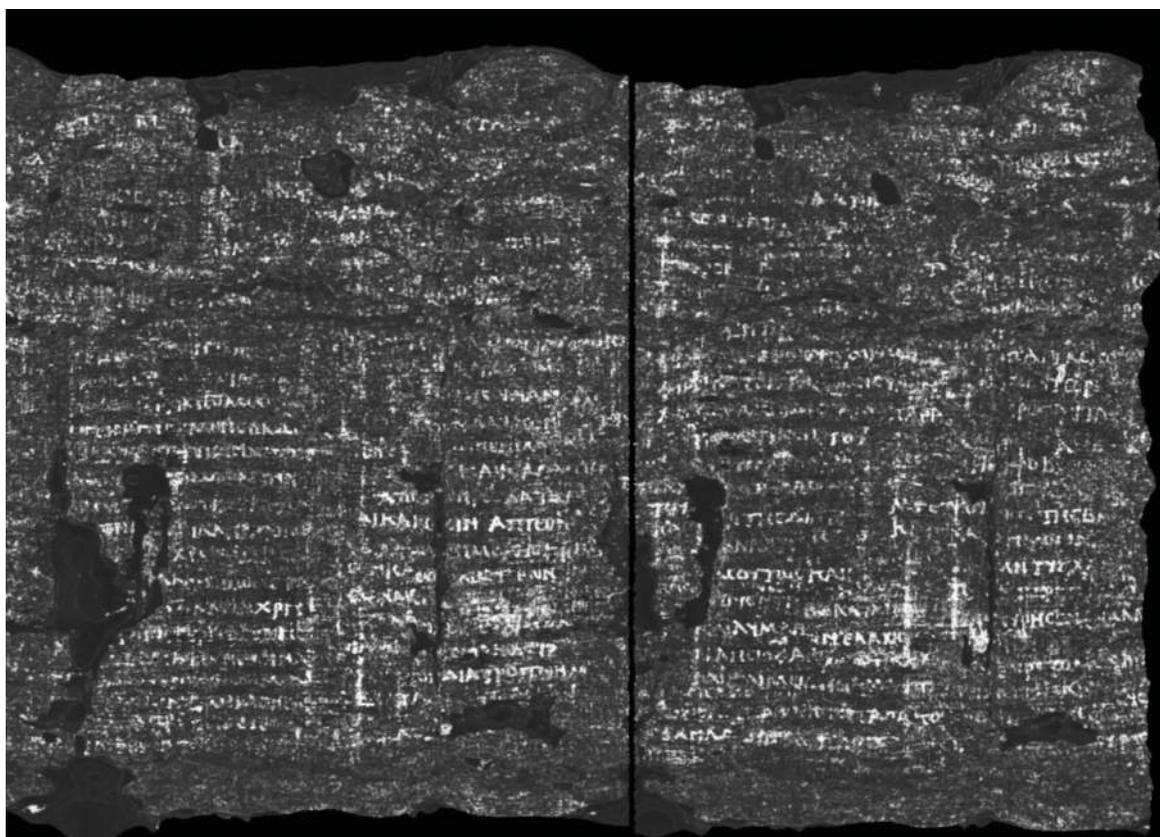
Scientists hope a mix of artificial intelligence and human expertise will help decipher ancient scrolls carbonized by a volcanic eruption 2,000 years ago.

Hundreds of papyrus scrolls were found in the 1750s amid the remains of a lavish villa in the Roman town of Herculaneum, which along with neighboring Pompeii was destroyed when Mount Vesuvius erupted in A.D. 79.

The library of what's called the Villa of the Papyri has the potential to add immeasurably to knowledge of ancient thought if the scrolls, which have been rolled up into the size of a candy bar, could be read.

The heat and volcanic ash from Vesuvius destroyed the town and preserved the scrolls, but in an unreadable state, turning them into charred fragile blocks that disintegrate if unrolled physically.

Scholars and scientists have worked for more than 250 years on ways to decipher the scrolls, most of which are held in the National Library of Naples.



VESUVIUS CHALLENGE/AP

An undated image of an X-ray scan of part of papyrus scroll PHerc.172 showing the word "disgust," one of hundreds of papyrus scrolls found amid the remains of a lavish villa in the Roman town of Herculaneum, which along with neighboring Pompeii was destroyed when Mount Vesuvius erupted in A.D. 79.

In 2023, several tech executives sponsored the "Vesuvius Challenge" competition, offering cash rewards for efforts to decipher the scrolls with machine learning, computer vision and geometry.

On Wednesday, the challenge

announced a "historic breakthrough," saying researchers had managed to generate the first image of the inside of one of the three scrolls held at Oxford University's Bodleian Library.

University of Kentucky computer scientist Brent Seales,

co-founder of the Vesuvius Challenge, said the organizers were "thrilled with the successful imaging of this scroll." He said it "contains more recoverable text than we have ever seen in a scanned Herculaneum scroll."

The scroll was scanned by

Diamond Light Source, a lab at Harwell, near Oxford, that uses a particle accelerator known as a synchrotron to create an intensely powerful X-ray.

Scientists then used AI to piece together the images, search for ink that reveals where there is writing and enhance the clarity of the text. The process led to a 3D image of the scroll that allowed experts to unroll it virtually, using a process called segmentation.

AI, as it stands, has its limits. Little of the text has been deciphered so far. One of the few words that has been made out is the ancient Greek word for "disgust."

Scholars are being encouraged to join in the effort to complete the text.

"We are still at the beginning of a long process," said Peter Toth, the Cornelia Starks Curator of Greek Collections at the Bodleian. "We need better images, and they are very positive and very, very confident that they can still improve the image quality and the legibility of the text."

Toth hopes that the technology can be made available locally so that the other two fragile scrolls won't have to be transported to Diamond's headquarters.

"Maybe there will be something which can be moved," he said. "And then don't forget that there are, like, a thousand more scrolls in Naples."

## New OneOdio headphones offer 75 hours of battery life

By GREGG ELLMAN  
Tribune News Service

OneOdio's new Focus A5 Hybrid over-the-head headphones include artificial intelligence-based Adaptive Noise Cancellation and an impressive 75-hour battery life.

The budget-friendly Bluetooth 5.4 headphones (\$69.99) have an ergonomic design with an adjustable headband. The advanced noise cancellation delivers intelligent sound isolation, adjusting in real-time to cancel ambient noise up to -45dB. This translates to superior clarity by automatically adapting to surrounding noise levels, eliminating many distractions.

The hands-free system combines external and internal microphones for crystal-clear calls on both ends. Each side has a 40mm driver under a soft padded earcup, which delivers a dynamic range with deep bass, vivid midrange and clear highs.

While using Focus A5 Hybrid's Transparency Mode, ambient sounds, such as car noise, sirens, etc., pass through the headphones into your ears, keeping you in tune with your surroundings. This mode gives you a layer of security when using the headphones in busy environments to

hear oncoming traffic or just having a conversation (although taking the headphones off would be easier).

The built-in 3.7V, 600mAh Li-ion polymer battery provides 75 hours of battery life with the ANC off or 45 hours with it on. A quick 10-minute charge (USB-C) yields 10 hours of playtime.

Online: oneodio.com; available in black, blue or white

The Shiftcam SnapGrip Creator Kit (\$129.99) is a complete, portable, modular hardware setup to give a smartphone the look and feel of a traditional camera.

The magnetic snap-on kit includes the SnapGrip, SnapPod and SnapLight to grip, snap, charge, shoot, dock and rotate your smartphone. Taking images is done with ease by clicking the wireless (Bluetooth) shutter button with your index finger.

Holding the smartphone with the SnapGrip is also more natural. It emulates the ergonomic design of a camera.

The magnetic connection incorporates MagSafe technology for a secure fit and safe charging. For non-MagSafe smartphones, an included MagSafe sticker can be adhered to the outer layer of the smart-



ONEODIO/TNS

The OneOdio Focus A5 Hybrid headphones have an ergonomic design with an adjustable headband.

phone or a case.

You can use your smartphone hand-held or with the kit's mini tripod to go hands-free and get the angle you desire. The attached ball head rotates 360 degrees. Adding the ring light, probably the best accessory, gives you four brightness levels for different lighting conditions.

Another bundle, the SnapGrip Creator Kit Plus, includes the Creator Kit and a neck strap for \$142.20. The SnapGrip Creator Kit Pro includes the Creator Kit and adds an accessory mount and mic for a discounted price of \$203.98.

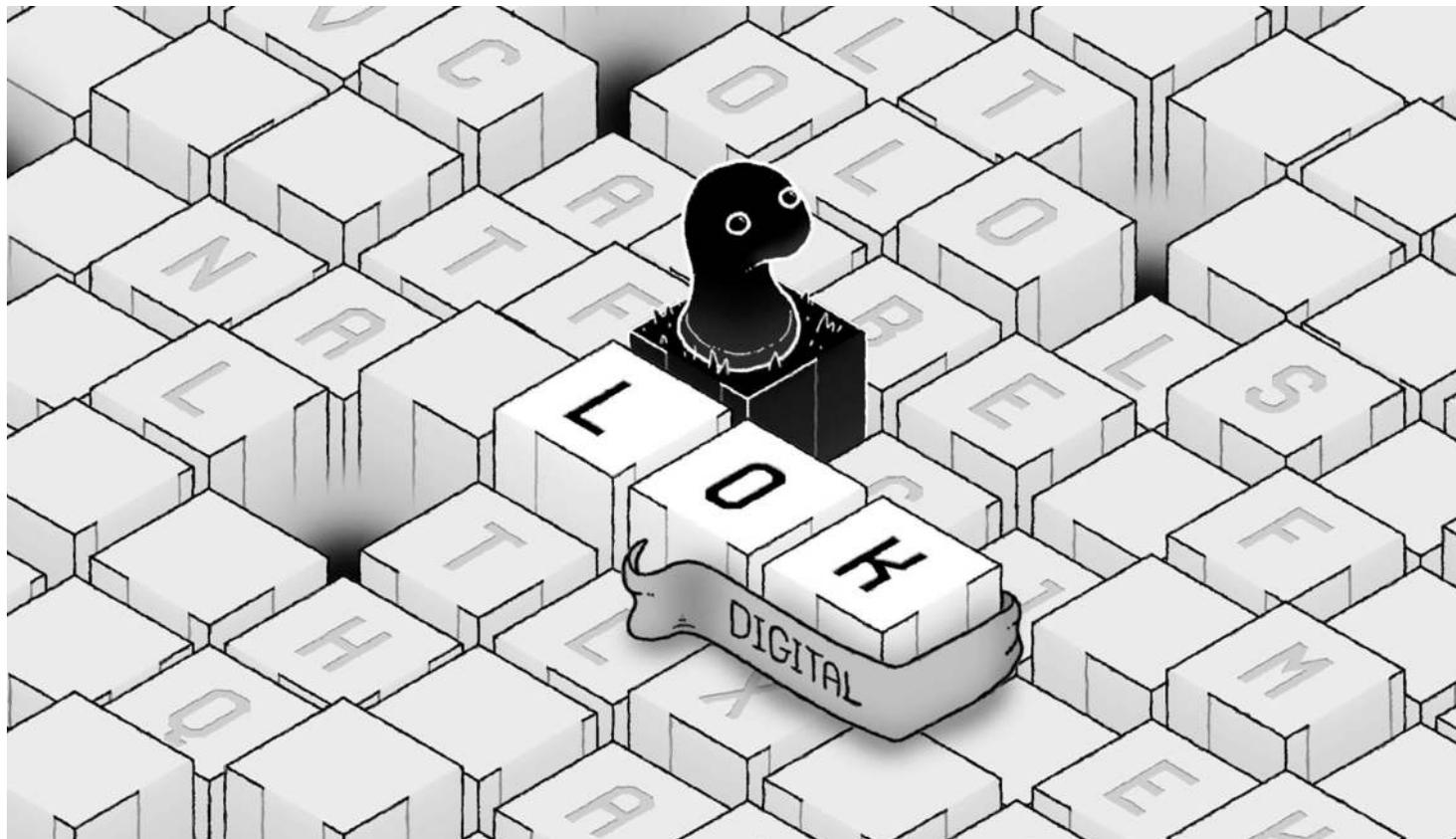
Online: shiftcam.com



SHIFTCAM/TNS

Shiftcam's SnapGrip Creator Kit includes a grip and tripod to make a smartphone more like a traditional camera.

## WEEKEND: VIDEO GAMES



DRAKNEK &amp; FRIENDS/TNS photos

Lok is based on a puzzle book that cleverly teaches players magical words that are used to clear puzzle spaces. The first word players learn is “Lok.” When they spell it out, they can color in those letter boxes and one additional letter block anywhere on the board.

# Learning the language of Lok

New game for iOS and Android feels like a word search at times, chess at others

By GIESON CACHO  
The Mercury News

Word games aren't the most popular genre among hardcore gamers, but they are one of the oldest forms of play and the most accessible. They've been a staple of newspapers, which feature crossword puzzles and word searches, and they have evolved in the digital space with the explosive success of Wordle.

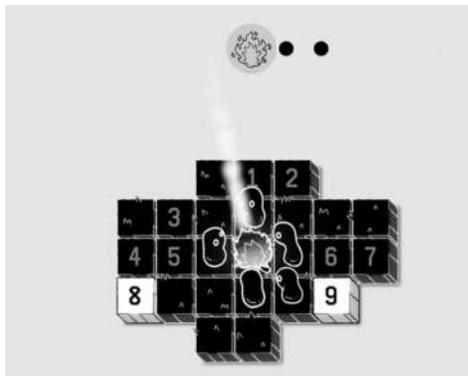
Although most word games are deceptively simple, they have room for depth. Blaz Urban Gracar and Ferran Ruiz Sala, two indie game developers, explore wider frontiers with their app game Lok. Based on the critically acclaimed puzzle book, the project introduces players to a mysterious language that uses a 26-letter Latin alphabet.

## How to play

The goal of each level is to color in all the letters by incorporating them into magical words. The first word players learn is “Lok,” and when they spell it out, they color in those letter boxes and one additional letter block anywhere on the board. By running through each word and its accompanying puzzles, players learn how those simple rules can be bent and twisted.

For example, if blocks are already colored in from a previous action, they act as bridges as long as the word flows in one direction. Those lessons become more important the further players advance in the campaign. They learn that the second word “Tlak” lets them color in two adjacent tiles, and another word, “Ta,” lets players fill in tiles of a one-letter type.

Meanwhile, “Be” gives players the opportunity to change a blank tile with any letter they choose while “Lolo” has the



The creatures in Lok huddle around a fire, and as players solve more puzzles, they see their world grow more modern.

ability to mark out tiles in a diagonal line.

## Increasing complexity

Lok starts off simple, but it grows more complex as the developers weave in more words and concepts. It especially grows harder when developers introduce “X,” which acts as a connector allowing players to switch directions while spelling a word. Fortunately, the letter X is never used up when incorporated to form a word.

The puzzle solving feels like a word search at times, and at other moments it's like a chess game where you have to attain checkmate in a limited number of moves. Players look through the puzzles for the right magic words and figure out how they interact and interlock for the next move. It involves planning and flexible thinking, but the fun is in the aha moment when players grind through trial and error for a solution or stumble upon a move they never considered before.

It's a glorious feeling akin to figuring out a crossword puzzle clue that has remained annoyingly elusive. It's like re-

moving a splinter in the mind.

Gracar and Sala, the developers, wrap their puzzle game in the conceit of learning a magical language and they fill it with cute characters to bring life into the proceedings. The idea is that the Lok-lings (I'll call the creatures that for the lack of a better word) can only live on blackened tiles and as players run through each word, they give them more real estate to expand and build their civilization.

## Uneven difficulty

Like much of the game, the hand-drawn imagery subtly conveys a narrative but there's no written story. And while the campaign stops hand-holding as players grow comfortable with the gameplay, but it does so to its detriment.

Lok has areas where the difficulty jumps or where the developers throw so much at players that it can be overwhelming. At times, it feels as though players are tossed to the wolves without a steady lesson to build their skills. Lok can be so frustrating at times that puzzle solvers will just walk away or watch a YouTube video for solutions.

The game has a hint system but it's bare-bones. The bigger issue is that the puzzle design, and the system of how concepts are taught, need more polish. Themed levels need to hammer home lessons and be better building blocks before the campaign throws more complex puzzles. It becomes so intimidating that players may not know where to start.

If they stick with it, Lok can be rewarding in the same way that completing a crossword is. It tests mental flexibility and could be the next addictive word game.

Platforms: Android, iOS  
Online: lok-digital.com

# New GTA among most anticipated titles of year

The Mercury News

The last time a new Grand Theft Auto game launched, Barack Obama was president and Bruce Willis was still filming “Die Hard” movies. Since then, fans have been clamoring for a new entry to the series, but the success of Grand Theft Auto V and its online component gave the title a ridiculously long tail that has spanned two console generations.

Suffice to say, plenty of pent-up demand has built for Grand Theft Auto VI. The upcoming title returns the franchise to the state of Leonida, Rockstar Games' version of Florida, and its main metropolis Vice City. Not much is known beyond the open-world games' two characters, Lucia, and her male partner, and some of the locales featured in the trailer.

As the hype train leaves the station in 2025, expect a slow drip of information and excitement to reach a fever pitch for what's likely to be the biggest game of the year. It has no release date other than fall of 2025.

Although that's the most anticipated title, there are plenty of other heavy hitters coming in 2025, including a slew of sequels such as Monster Hunter Wilds, Death Stranding 2: On the Beach and Metroid Prime 4: Beyond. Other notable titles include inZOI, which is an intriguing life simulation from Krafton that looks comparable to The Sims but with better visuals.

Lastly, gamers are expecting Nintendo to launch a successor to the Nintendo Switch. The portable console has been showing its age over the past few years. A new machine from Nintendo will be just as big as Grand Theft Auto VI and will likely be one of the most in-demand holiday gifts.

All of this means that 2025 is shaping up to be a strong year for video games, and it could potentially be the best since 2018.



ROCKSTAR GAMES/TNS

Plenty of pent-up demand has built for Grand Theft Auto VI, which is scheduled to be released in this fall.

## WEEKEND: MOVIES



REBECCA CABAGE, INVISION/AP

Guy Pearce poses for a portrait to promote his film "The Brutalist" on Dec. 5 in Los Angeles. He received his first Oscar nomination Jan. 23 for his performance in the film as mid-Atlantic tycoon Harrison Lee Van Buren.

# Good at being bad

Pearce's latest 2-faced concoction for Oscar-nominated 'The Brutalist' gives the movie its disquieting shiver

By JAKE COYLE  
Associated Press

Over the years, Guy Pearce has been good in most all things. But he's been particularly good at playing characters with a refined disposition who harbor darker impulses underneath.

That was true of his breakout performance in "L.A. Confidential" as a squeaky clean police detective whose ambitions outstrip his ethics. It was true of his dashing upper-class bachelor in "Mildred Pierce." And it's most definitely true of his mid-Atlantic tycoon in "The Brutalist."

"I'm really aware of how precarious we are as human beings," Pearce says. "Good people can do bad things and bad people can do good things. Moment to moment, we're trying to just get through the day. We're trying to be good. And we can do good things for ourselves and other people, but pretty easily we can be tipped off course."

That sense of duality has served Pearce's characters well, especially his men of class who turn out to have less of it than they seem. His Harrison Lee Van Buren in "The Brutalist" may be Pearce's most colossally two-faced concoction yet. If Brady Corbet's film, which was nominated for 10 Oscars on Jan. 23, is one of the best films of the year, it's Pearce's performance that gives the movie its disquieting shiver.

Pearce's Van Buren is a recognizable kind of villain: a well-bred aristocrat who, at first, is a benevolent benefactor to Adrien Brody's architect László Tóth. But what begins as a friendship — Tóth, a Holocaust survivor is nearly destitute when they meet — turns increasingly ugly, as Van Buren's patronage, warped by jealousy and privilege, turns into a creeping sense of ownership over Tóth. The psychodrama eventually boils over in a grim, climactic scene in which Van Buren pronounces Tóth "just a lady of the night."

"What was great to discuss with Brady is that he is actually a man of taste," said Pearce in a recent interview. "He's a man of class and a man of sophistication. He's not just a bull in a china shop. He's not just about greed, taking, taking, taking. It's probably as much of a curse as anything that he can recognize beauty and he can recognize other people's artistry."

For his performance, the 57-year-old Pearce on Jan. 23 landed his first Oscar nomination — a long-in-coming and perhaps overdue honor for the character actor of "Memento," "The Count of Monte Cristo" and "The King's Speech." For the Australian-born Pearce, such recognitions are as awkward as they are rewarding. He long ago decided Hollywood stardom wasn't for him.

"I get uncomfortable with that, to be honest," he says. "I'm really happy with doing a good performance. I can genuinely say within myself I've done a good job. Equally, I know when I've done a (bad) job. But I'm also well aware of how a performance can appear good purely because of the tone of the film. I might have done exactly the same performance in another movie with not such a good director, and people might have gone, 'That was full-on but whatever.' Whereas in this film, we are all better than we actually are because the film has integrity to it that elevates us all."

Like F. Murray Abraham's Salieri in "Amadeus," Pearce's Van Buren has quickly ascended the ranks of

SEE PEARCE ON PAGE 17

## WEEKEND: MOVIE REVIEW

## Concrete rewards

'The Brutalist' an epic, post-WWII architectural tale of American building, belonging that earns its weight

By Ty Burr

Special to the Washington Post

The title of "The Brutalist," Brady Corbet's big swing of an American epic, refers to many things. Any builder who works in the imposing minimalist school of post-World War II architecture known as brutalism. The movie's architect hero, László Tóth (Adrien Brody), a Hungarian Jew and Holocaust survivor who comes to the United States after the war and through force of personality battles to complete his vision of a masterpiece on a hill. Tóth's patron and opposite number is Harrison Lee Van Buren (Guy Pearce), an aristocratic Philadelphia businessman who represents everything the Land of Freedom means to Tóth, and everyone who wants to keep him out.

Clocking in at three hours and 35 minutes (which graciously includes a 15-minute intermission), "The Brutalist" might seem from the outside as forbidding as the colossi for which it's named — an entertainment poured in concrete. Yet it's a surprisingly fleet and involving saga, maybe not a masterpiece but a good, meaty, provocative story with complicated characters and tricks up its sleeve. Corbet is an actor turned writer-director who, at 36, has ambition to burn (and, as of Jan. 5, multiple Golden Globes on his shelf), but you can feel the movie love coursing through his veins.

Even better, he knows how to bring out the strengths in his collaborators, who include co-writer and life partner Mona Fastvold and the film's cast and crew. Having already won an Academy Award for Roman Polanski's 2002 war drama "The Pianist," Brody might seem in danger of forever being typecast as a woe-begone Mitteleuropean survivor, except that Tóth is anything but woe-begone. Emerging from the steerage of a steamship entering New York Harbor at the start of

"The Brutalist" — to an annunciation of horns courtesy of Daniel Blumberg's sweepingly innovative score — Tóth already has a perfectionist's gleam in his eye. He's an artist and an uncompromising one, which causes initial static with his cousin Attila (Alessandro Nivola), a happily Americanized furniture builder with a blond wife (Emma Laird) who's unsure about Tóth's designs for modernist chrome chairs and maybe for her.

The hero's true talents are realized when he and Attila are hired to refurbish Van Buren's home library as a surprise from his son Harry (Joe Alwyn), and Tóth delivers a stunning renovation in which the wall shelves open up like the gills of a fish or the wings of an angel. Van Buren is surprised, all right — and outraged until his new library gets raves as a triumph of design and he learns of Tóth's prewar work for the Bauhaus. A self-made success anxious to prove himself as "a forward-thinking man," Van Buren commissions Tóth to build an immense community center near his mansion in Doylestown, Pa., dedicated to his beloved late mother. And so the games begin.

"The Brutalist" piles a lot on its plate, but at bottom it's a story of an irresistible object — Tóth — meeting the immovable forces of American caste, capitalism, aesthetics and exclusion. The antisemitism of Van Buren's world isn't obvious, but it's always there like a background hum, even when the architect agrees to add a chapel to his building and comes up with an ingenious design that casts sunlight on the altar in the shape of a cross. Elsewhere, Tóth defends his vision in the face of budget trims, paid consultants, racists and other kibitzers with the arrogance of a true believer.

At first, he struggles alone, except for Gordon (Isaach de Bankolé), a friend from his first flophouse days in America and a partner in construction and the occasional



A24/TNS

Adrien Brody, center, depicts fictional Hungarian architect László Tóth, shown here struggling to complete a momentous commission, in "The Brutalist."

heroin jag — whatever horrors Tóth saw during the war, they've left him with a drug habit. After the film's intermission, he's joined by his wheelchair-using wife, Erzsébet (Felicity Jones), and their niece Zsófia (Raffey Cassidy), war refugees allowed at last to emigrate, and "The Brutalist" slowly tightens its stranglehold on Tóth's dreams.

This does not play out as an innocent sacrifice, because Tóth isn't an innocent and he's certainly nobody's pushover. The final hour of "The Brutalist" shows the wife, an Oxford-educated journalist, proving herself an ally in the face of a great crime while her husband is buffeted by betrayals and Van Buren shows the limits of his patronage and even humanity. Early in the movie, Van Buren's son makes sure to remind the architect, "We tolerate you," and the warning is a bear trap "The Brutalist" sets and leaves standing, waiting to snap shut.

Arguably miscast, Jones brings as much ferocity to her role as she can, but she's not quite the stricken dreadnought the script requires her to be. By contrast, Brody's Tóth has a spark of insolence and assurance that his beleaguered keyboard player in "The Pianist" never possessed,

and Pearce has never been better as a mid-20th-century Great Man with a smaller, meaner man inside him — a wreck of the F. Scott Fitzgerald.

More curiously, "The Brutalist" comes to a close not with the thunder appropriate to its length but with a muted settling of scores and a revelation regarding the architect's larger design that detonates more in the head than in the heart, though it lodges there, too. You finish the meal well-fed but wondering why there had to be so many courses and why they don't add up to a wholly memorable feast.

Maybe it's too early in his career for Corbet to reach for a ring this big and this brassy. Yet "The Brutalist" earns its weight in the telling, if not in cumulative impact or meaning. Struggling in one scene to explain why he became an architect, Tóth provides Van Buren with a manifesto for brutalism itself: "Is there a better description of a cube than that of its own construction?"

For Corbet, a film — this film — is its own reward. It offers more than enough rewards for us as well.

"The Brutalist" is rated R for strong sexual content, graphic nudity, rape, drug use and some language. Running time: 215 minutes (with intermission). Now at select on-base theaters.

## Pearce: Actor says he's more likely to understand a performance after it's over

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great cinema villains to artists. The character likewise has some basis in reality, albeit extrapolated from a much different time and place. Corbet and Mona Fastvold, who are married and wrote "The Brutalist" together, were fueled by their hardships with financiers on their previous film, 2018's "Vox Lux."

"We didn't have a Van Buren, but we certainly had our fill of complicated relationships with the people who hold the purse strings," Fastvold says. "There's a sense of: I have ownership of the project because I'm paying for it, and I almost have ownership of you."

Pearce has been around the movie business long enough to shake hands with plenty of wealthy men putting money toward a film production. But he says none of his own experiences went into "The Brutalist."

"There's always this slew of producers at a higher level than us who come and visit the set," Pearce says. "I'm polite and I go, 'Hi, nice to meet you. Thanks.' But I'm a little caught up with what I'm doing. Then three years later you'll meet someone who says, 'You know, I was a producer on "L.A. Confidential." Ah, were you?'"

Pearce, who lives in the Netherlands with his partner, actor Carice van Houten, and their son, has generally

kept much of Hollywood at arm's length. In conversation, he tends to be chipper and humble — more interested in talking Aussie rules football than the Oscar race.

"Any chance to have a kick, I'll have a kick," he says with smile.

Pearce tends to apply that youthful spirit to his acting as well. Pearce, who started performing in the mid-'80s on the long-running Australian soap opera "Neighbours," doesn't like to be precious about performing.

"If I'm hanging on to it all day, it's exhausting," Pearce says. "The thing that still exists for me is using our imagination, which is kind of a childlike venture. I think there's something valuable about that even as adults. I think you can be all ages at all times."

Pearce compares receiving the script from Corbet to "The Brutalist" to when Christopher Nolan approached him 25 years ago. Both times, he went back to watch the director's earlier films and quickly decided this was an opportunity to pounce at.

In digging into Van Buren, Pearce was guided less by real-life experience than the script. The hardest entry way to the character, he says, was the voice.

"Thankfully," Pearce says, "I'm friends with Danny Huston and he's got a wonderfully old-fashioned voice."

He and Corbet didn't speak much about the director's hardships on "Vox Lux."

"I know that it was troubled. Brady is going to have trouble on every film he makes, I reckon, because he is such a visionary," Pearce says. "I know on this there were producers trying to get him to cut the time down. Of course, all those producers now are going, 'I was with him all the way.'"

To a certain degree, Pearce says, he doesn't fully understand a performance while he's doing it. He's more likely to understand it fully afterward while watching. Take that "lady of the night scene." While filming, Pearce felt he was saying that line to put Tóth in his place.

"But when I watched it, I went: 'I'm just telling myself. I'm purely telling myself,'" he says. "There's something even more distasteful about it."

It's ironic, in a way, that Van Buren, a man bent on control, is played so indelibly by an actor who seeks to impose so little of it, himself.

"There's a performative element to Van Buren. He exhausts himself because he's trying to dominate, to be the one in charge, be Mr. Charming," Pearce says. "I don't think he can ever enter a room without being self-conscious. That's an exhausting way to be, I reckon."

## WEEKEND: MOVIE REVIEWS

# In 'Heart Eyes,' love and death intertwine

Holt, Gooding star in Ruben's fun and irreverent '90s-style seasonal slasher remixed as a rom-com

By KATIE WALSH  
Tribune News Service

Finally, a flick that can please every Valentine's Day movie-goer: those who hate the lovey-dovey holiday, those who adore it, those who want romance in their Valentine's Day movies and those who prefer their gushing more gory. Every section of that particular Venn diagram can come away satisfied from "Heart Eyes," a fun and irreverent seasonal slasher from director Josh Ruben.

Writers Christopher Landon and Michael Kennedy (who co-wrote with Phillip Murphy) are the brains behind some of the most entertaining high-concept horror flicks of the past few years, including the "Groundhog Day"-inspired "Happy Death Day" and the "Freaky Friday" riff "Freaky." They apply their genre mashup skills to "Heart Eyes," delivering a classic '90s-style slasher remixed as a rom-com, while paying homage to the greats.

Every good rom-com has to have killer chemistry at the center, from Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert in "It Happened One Night," to Cary Grant and Rosalind Russell in "His Girl Friday," to Meg Ryan and just about anyone. Fortunately, "Heart Eyes" has Mason Gooding and Olivia Holt, two veterans of recent teen horror hits (the "Scream" sequels for him;

"Totally Killer" for her). The pair have a crackling charm together, and while there's a certain winkiness to these kinds of self-referential genre exercises, they know to play it straight, both the flirtation and the fright.

Holt is Ally, Gooding is Jay; they meet over their very specific identical coffee order, and then later at a work meeting, discovering they've been pitted against each other on an advertising campaign for a jewelry designer (a hilarious Michaela Watkins in the funniest, and most outright comedic, role). Their bumbling, burgeoning connection is set against a series of slayings accredited to the "Heart Eyes Killer," a serial murderer who has targeted happy couples in various cities around the United States every Valentine's Day. Ally and Jay never assume they'll be targeted as they're not a couple — but HEK (and the audience) can plainly see the sizzle between them, and they team up to fight off the knife-wielding maniac (who sports a mask with glowing eye holes in the shape of hearts, like the emoji).

The film follows a classic screwball comedy formula — prickly rivals fall for each other over the course of a crazy adventure — with the kind of Scooby-Doo twist that usually comes at the end of a slasher movie, wherein the killer is un-



SONY PICTURES/TNS

Olivia Holt, left, and Mason Gooding are running from a serial killer in "Heart Eyes."

masked, and they would have gotten away with it too, if it weren't for those meddling kids, who happen to be falling in love.

There may be a few plot wrinkles, and the mystery isn't much to write home about. But that's not really what's important about "Heart Eyes," in which Gooding proves himself to be a very funny leading man, and Holt is a steely, yet vulnerable final girl. The lore isn't all that compelling, but their love story is.

While Ruben delivers some impressively bloody and innovative kills, "Heart Eyes" is a love letter to rom-coms, with references to "Clueless," "Romy and Michele's High School Reunion," the aforementioned "His Girl Friday" and many, many more, name-checked in a cheeky monologue by Ally's best friend Monica (Gigi Zumbado). It is also, weirdly, a love letter to the "Fast and the Furious" franchise, with Jordana Brewster and Devon Sawa (famously of "Final Destination")

playing a pair of detectives named Hobbs and Shaw.

"Heart Eyes" reminds us that stories of love and death have always been intertwined in the popular imagination. Ally's (misguided) Valentine's Day ad campaign features doomed love stories like "Romeo and Juliet," "Titanic" and "Bonnie and Clyde." There are elements of these famed love stories woven throughout "Heart Eyes," from the teamwork to the willingness to sacrifice oneself for your love's survival. Grand declarations and life-or-death pathos is just as much a part of these high-stakes narratives as the sparkling banter and longing looks.

Love and death are inextricably intertwined in a symbiotic relationship, and "Heart Eyes" makes that manifest, with wit, good cheer and plenty of blood.

"Heart Eyes" is rated R for strong violence and gore, language and some sexual content. Running time: 97 minutes. Now playing at select on-base theaters.

# Schumer-led baby-mad comedy 'Kinda Pregnant' is kinda good

By JAKE COYLE  
Associated Press

We have by now become accustomed to the lengths some movie characters will go to keep a good comedy lie going. But it's still a special kind of feat when Amy Schumer, playing a baby-mad single woman who fakes a baby bump in "Kinda Pregnant," is so desperate to maintain the fiction that she shoves a roast turkey up her dress.

You might be thinking: This is too ridiculous. The stuff, alone. But if we bought "Some Like It Hot" and "Mrs. Doubtfire," I see no reason to quibble with the setup of "Kinda Pregnant," a funny and often perceptive satire on motherhood, both real and pretend.

"Kinda Pregnant," which debuted Wednesday on Netflix, is a kinda throwback comedy. Like "The 40-Year-Old Virgin" and "Wedding Crashers," you can basically get the movie just from its title.

But like any good high-concept comedy, "Kinda Pregnant" is predominantly a far-fetched way for its star and co-writer, Schumer, to riff frankly on her chosen topic. Here, that's the wide gamut of pregnancy experience — the body changes, the gender reveal parties, the personal jealousies — all while mixing in a healthy amount of pseudo-pregnant pratfalls.

It's been a decade since Schumer was essentially launched as a movie star in the 2015 Judd Apatow-directed "Trainwreck." But "Kinda Pregnant," which Schumer wrote with Julie Paiva, almost as adeptly channels Schumer's comic voice — the one that made the sketch series "Inside Amy Schumer" so great.

The movie's opening flashes back to Lainey (Schumer)



NETFLIX/AP

Brianne Howey, left, and Amy Schumer appear in a scene from "Kinda Pregnant." In the film, Schumer plays a baby-mad woman who fakes her pregnancy.

as a child playing with dolls and imagining herself a mother-to-be. So committed is she to the role that Lainey, in mock-labor, screams at her friend and then politely apologizes: "Sorry, but the expectant mother often lashes out at her support system."

When Lainey's married best friend (Jillian Bell) divulges that she's pregnant, "Get rid of it!" blurts Lainey before apologizing. When Lainey goes clothes shopping with her, she absentmindedly tries on belly padding. The saleswoman is instantly nice to her, offering a burrito and a foot rub. "Who's the father?" she asks. "DoorDash," responds Lainey before adding, "driver."

Much of the fun in "Kinda Pregnant" is watching Lai-

ney come up with increasingly ridiculous lies as she tries to pull off the pregnant act. (After accidentally picking Thanksgiving as her time of inception, Lainey digs a deeper hole by suggesting it happened at "a Black Friday Eve sale.")

But the ruse becomes more difficult when she, during a pregnant workout class, meets a woman (Brianne Howey, refreshingly authentic) she genuinely likes and wants to be friends with. Even more complicated: Lainey starts falling for another guy she first meets at a coffee shop (Will Forte).

In a movie filled with funny people (others include Urzila Carlson as a guidance counselor, and Alex Moffat as a idiotic father-to-be), Forte is an especially good presence in "Kinda Pregnant." For a performer of such mad-cap absurdity, Forte fits in remarkably naturally in a more rom-com setting. He's also got a wonderfully ridiculous occupation, even by rom-com standards, driving a Zamboni in Central Park.

You can probably guess how "Kinda Pregnant" goes from here. Director Tyler Spindel, nephew to Adam Sandler (a producer on the film), doesn't do anything to advance the movie comedy, a languishing proposition in recent years with few big-screen exceptions. But he crucially gives his performers plenty of space to be themselves, and Lainey's desperate desire to have a family comes across as both over-the-top and genuine. If "Knocked Up" captured the comedy of getting unexpectedly pregnant, "Kinda Pregnant" embodies the pain of wishing you were.

"Kinda Pregnant" is rated R for sexual content, language throughout and drug use. Running time: 97 minutes. Now streaming on Netflix.

## WEEKEND: FOOD

# Getting the most out of your vegetables

Dietitians explain how to best preserve their nutritional value, offer a few easy but tasty recipes

BY ALBERT STUMM  
Associated Press

In Carlene Thomas' experience, two types of people ask her advice as a dietitian about the healthiest way to prepare vegetables.

Those looking to improve their diet are curious about how different cooking methods affect nutritional content. Others wonder how best to work more vegetables into their diet in general.

The simplest version of her answer to both groups is: The best vegetables are the ones you actually want to eat.

"A lot of people engage in aspirational vegetable shopping" without actually using them, said Thomas, of Leesburg, Va. In that case, "It doesn't matter how you cook them, because if they're going in the trash, they're not in your body."

That said, research shows different cooking methods do affect the nutritional content of produce, but it's not as simple as raw vs. steamed vs. roasted.

## Are raw vegetables healthier than cooked?

Not always. Prolonged exposure to high heat degrades many nutrients. But cooking not only softens the cellular walls in vegetables, making them easier to digest, it also changes their structure to increase what's called bioavailability — the body's ability to absorb the vegetables' nutrients, Thomas said.

The result is often more nutritious than raw food. Cooked tomatoes, for instance, release more of the cancer-fighting antioxidant lycopene than raw, she said, and cooked carrots have more beta-carotene that can be absorbed. Roasting pumpkins, carrots and sweet potatoes boosts carotenoids, the rich pigments that are antioxidants known to combat inflammation in the body.

## Which cooking methods are the healthiest?

Generally, the shorter the cooking time, the more nutrients are preserved. Partly because they take relatively little time, steaming and microwaving are considered the most nutritious methods (also because they require no fat to cook), said Amber Pankonin, a dietitian in Lincoln, Neb.

A close second is blanching — tossing vegetables into boiling water for a minute or two — but be careful not to leave them in the water long. Boiling vegetables, besides easily turning them to mush, runs the risk of losing water-soluble nutrients including vitamin C, B1 and folate.

"It's leaching into the water, and you're tossing out the water," Thomas said. "There goes all of the nutrients that you were hoping for."

## Is there no accounting for taste?

Even dietitians say there's no problem using a small amount of fat. Besides making vegetables more flavorful, a little cooking oil helps fat-soluble vitamins absorb in the body, Pankonin said.

That means more vitamin A from squash, carrots and sweet potatoes, more vitamin D from mushrooms, more vitamin E from bell peppers, leafy greens and asparagus and more vitamin K from greens, broccoli and onions.

For sauteing, Pankonin recommends starting over medium heat with a tablespoon of oil, though it depends on the pan. Use enough oil that the vegetables don't stick, but not so much that it pools.

For roasting, you'll likely need double the oil per pound of vegetables. Despite the longer cook time, roasting will still maintain some nutrients and will boost the flavor with caramelization of natural sugars.

"Flavor is king," Pankonin said. "I would much rather see people roasting their vegetables and enjoying them, versus dealing with the mushy vegetables they've boiled and boiled."



iStock

Generally, the shorter the cooking time for vegetables, the more nutrients that are preserved.



## Carlene Thomas' Twice-Baked Harissa Sweet Potatoes

Serves: 6  
Time: 1 hour, 10 minutes

### Ingredients

3 large sweet potatoes  
1 ½ tsp brown sugar  
1 Tbsp butter, melted  
2 tsp harissa  
Salt and pepper to taste  
2 tsp extra-virgin olive oil

### Directions

Wash potatoes and prick with a fork. In the oven preheated to 375 F, bake for 45 minutes, or until you can pierce with a fork. Remove and allow to cool slightly before cutting off the top third lengthwise. Scoop out the flesh using a large spoon (leave enough on the base so the skin holds its shape) and reserve bases.

In a stand mixer with whisk attachment, add the potato flesh, brown sugar, harissa, salt and pepper. Whip until fluffy. Scoop into the reserved potato skins and use a fork to create peaks.



Place potatoes on a baking sheet and brush skins with olive oil. Bake at 350 F for 25 minutes. Broil on high to brown if desired. Top with additional salt and harissa.

## Amber Pankonin's Sauteed Green Beans with Lemon, Garlic and Shallots

Serves: 4  
Time: 20 minutes

### Ingredients

12 oz trimmed fresh green beans  
1 Tbsp vegetable oil  
1 Tbsp minced shallot  
1 tsp minced garlic  
1 Tbsp lemon juice  
Kosher salt and black pepper

### Directions

Blanch green beans by placing in boiling water for 1 minute, drain and place in an ice water bath. In a saute pan, add the oil over medium high and cook the shallots for 30 to 45 seconds. Add the beans and cook for 2 to 3 minutes. Add the garlic and cook 1 to 2 minutes until the beans are tender. Season to taste with lemon juice, Kosher salt and black pepper.

## WEEKEND: TRAVEL

## Croatia's past lives on in today's Split

Lounging alongside the Adriatic Sea, on the famed Dalmatian Coast, Split is a bustling metropolis, serious port city, major transit hub and top sightseeing destination, all rolled into one. It hums with the vibrancy you'd expect from Croatia's second-largest city (after capital Zagreb), plus the seaside ambiance of sleepier coastal towns.

Split has all the trappings of a modern city. But a close look at the surviving facade of the Roman palace fronting its harbor reveals its ancient roots. In the fourth century AD, when the Roman emperor Diocletian retired, he built a vast residence for his golden years here in his native Dalmatia. When Rome fell, the palace was abandoned. Eventually, a medieval town sprouted from its abandoned shell. And, to this day, the maze of narrow alleys — literally Diocletian's hallways at one point — makes up the core of Split. Today's residents are actually living in a Roman emperor's palace.

Back in its heyday, the harborfront was Diocletian's back door. There was no embankment in front of the palace, so the water came right up to the door — sort of an emergency exit by boat. Just inside this gate, visitors can explore a labyrinth of cellars that once supported the palace. Rediscovered only in the last century, the cellars enabled archaeologists to derive the floor plan of some of the palace's long-gone upper sections.

From the cellars, a grand underground hallway leads outside to the Peristyle (Split's main square) and Diocletian's

vestibule, the dramatically domed entryway to the emperor's private rooms. These days, this grand space is often home to an all-male band of a cappella singers performing klapa — the quintessential Dalmatian folk music. These songs of seafaring life, of loves lost and loves found, stir the souls of Croatians and visitors alike.



Rick Steves

Overlooking the Peristyle, Diocletian's mausoleum once dominated the center of the palace complex. Much of the original Roman building survives, including the impressive dome, columns and capitals and fine carved reliefs. Diocletian was notorious for persecuting Christians. But a thousand years ago, his mausoleum was converted into the Cathedral of St. Dominus. And so, ironically, what Diocletian built to glorify his memory is used instead to remember his victims.

A few steps away is a temple dedicated to Jupiter. Roman emperors often made themselves a god. Diocletian was Jovius, son of the top god, Jupiter. People kissed his robe; he was like a deity on earth. About the time the mausoleum became a cathedral, the temple was converted into a baptistery, housing a huge 12th-century baptismal font large enough to immerse someone (as was the tradition).

Just outside Split's Old Town is a museum dedicated to Ivan Meštrović, Croatia's answer to Rodin. Meštrović's sculptures, which depict biblical, mythological, political and everyday themes, are every-



CAMERON HEWITT/Rick Steves' Europe

**The 200-foot-tall cathedral bell tower rises above Split's Old Town. Climbing the 183 steep steps to the top rewards you with sweeping views of the city.**

where in Croatia — in the streets, squares and museums. His work also appears in the United States — for example, he sculpted two Native American warriors on horseback in Chicago's Grant Park.

After diving into the city's ancient and artistic past, I enjoy dipping into modern-day Split. Matejuška has long been Split's working fishermen's harbor. The enclosed harbor area is filled with working fishing boats and colorful dinghies that bob in unison. At the opposite end of town, the lively open-air Green Market is where residents shop for produce and clothes.

The Marjan Peninsula, a huge, hilly and relatively undeveloped spit of parkland,

located right next to Split's Old Town, feels like a chunk of wilderness, a stone's throw from the big city. With out-of-the-way beaches and miles of hiking and biking trails, this is where residents relax.

At the end of the day, a highlight for me is simply people-watching. The sea of Croatian humanity laps at the walls of Diocletian's Palace along the pedestrian promenade known as the "Riva." Here, strolling locals enjoy life's simple pleasures in a city that so seamlessly weaves its past and present.

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## These cities provide opportunities to enjoy nature and culture

One of the first questions to come up in terms of vacation planning is the nature of the trip itself. Should it be an urban getaway, packed with museums, music and nightlife? Or perhaps an outdoor adventure? Fortunately, many European cities make fantastic bases for both kinds of experiences. Here are a few possibilities.

**Skiing:** Innsbruck, Austria, capital of the Tyrol region, perches alongside the River Inn, the backbone of an important trade route since time immemorial. Delights of its cobblestoned inner-city core include elegant Baroque



Karen Bradbury

buildings such as the Golden Roof and Court Church. The Alpine Zoo, home to the world's most extensive collection of animals native to the Alpine region, is a 30-minute walk away. Overlooking the medieval-meets-modern city that's home to some 130,000 residents is the Hafelekar Mountain, a 7,400-foot-high summit that's easily accessible from town. An eight-minute ride on the Hungerburgbahn funicular, followed by an ascent up the Seegrube lift, brings guests to the slopes of the Nordpark. The Olympia SkiWorld Innsbruck is the name given to a ski pass valid at nine nearby ski resorts offering more than 180 miles of trails. Its ski areas are easily reached with the free ski buses and shuttles found throughout the city. The ski pass can be purchased at the Innsbruck Tourist Information office at Burggraben 3. Online: [tinyurl.com/wt6dz8ms](http://tinyurl.com/wt6dz8ms)

**Swimming:** Basel, Switzerland, is known as a city of culture, art and architecture and home to numerous museums. Flowing through its heart are the milky green waters of the Rhine River, a local's favorite place for cooling off on hot summer days. Swimmers drifting along with the flow of the Rhine are often spotted towing a "Wickelfisch," a waterproof swim bag that keeps clothes



iStock

**The Alpine city of Innsbruck, Austria, has long been a destination for winter sports. Innsbruck is also known for its architecture, and is home to a wonderful zoo.**

and valuables dry. The bags are available for purchase at the Tourist Information point in the Stadtcasino at Barfuesserplatz at a cost of 20 Swiss Francs (about \$22). A popular place to enter the water is the riverbank next to the Museum Tinguely. While it's possible to swim any time the weather and river conditions allow for it, an official Rhine Swim takes place once a year; this is slated for Aug. 12 in 2025. Online: [tinyurl.com/3sa4ryhr](http://tinyurl.com/3sa4ryhr)

**Kayaking:** The city of Utrecht, Netherlands, offers a medieval core, 14th-century bell tower and the nearby De Haar Castle and gardens. The city just a half-hour's train ride from Amsterdam not only makes a great alternative base for exploring the Netherlands' capital; its tree-lined canals provide the perfect waters for a leisurely canoeing or kayaking day trip. Visitors can either opt for a guided

tour or rent their own watercraft from one of several outfitters. Online: [tinyurl.com/2499th55](http://tinyurl.com/2499th55)

**Hiking:** Marseille, a vast port city in the south of France, is a bustling melting pot of cultures and tastes, overlooked by the stunning Basilique Notre Dame de la Garde, a church built where a fortress once stood. After tasting the city's signature dish, bouillabaisse, and exploring the yacht-lined harbor of the Old Port, visitors can set off on a stunning coastal hike. Their destination is the calanques, unique limestone geological formations along the Mediterranean Sea. The Calanques National Park, a protected zone stretching more than 20 miles between Marseille and Cassis, offers 26 of these natural wonder beauty spots. Public buses from Marseille run frequently to many popular jumping-off points. Another option is to use one of the boat services operating from the Old Port. Online: [tinyurl.com/4amv8mpj](http://tinyurl.com/4amv8mpj)

**Beach days:** Málaga, Spain, in Andalusia in southern Spain, boasts of historical monuments such as the Alcazaba fortress and Gibralfaro Castle, coupled with numerous museums, including one dedicated to the city's native son Pablo Picasso. When temperatures soar, as they often do here, the city's 16 beaches offer much-needed relief. The busy urban beach of La Malagueta is just a 10-minute walk from the Old Town. Or, make your way along the less-crowded Playa Peñón del Cuervo (Raven Rock Beach), where a limestone rock cleaves the beach into two parts. For even more ambitious hiking, look to the Malaga Coastal Path, a series of trails and wooden walkways for hikers and bikers covering 112 miles of Malaga province's coastline along the sun-soaked Costa del Sol. The path, not yet completed, runs from Manilva to Nerja and passes through such well-known tourist hotspots as Estepona, Marbella, Fuengirola and Torremolinos. Online: [tinyurl.com/yk8bzszu](http://tinyurl.com/yk8bzszu)

## WEEKEND: TRAVEL



VIRGINIA MAYO/AP

Art conservators Jill Keppens, left, and Kayla Metelenis, right, work on sections of the 19.6-foot “Enthroned Madonna Adored by Saints,” painted by Flemish artist Peter Paul Rubens, at the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp, Belgium, Jan. 28. The restoration project is set to end in 2027.

# Big painting, bigger restoration project

Rubens' 19.6-foot-tall 'Enthroned Madonna Adored by Saints' in midst of physically demanding 2-year cleanup in Antwerp

BY RAF CASERT AND VIRGINIA MAYO  
Associated Press

**W**hen an iconic painting is in need of restoration, it is usually taken to a studio to be worked on in seclusion.

In the case of a massive Peter Paul Rubens masterpiece in Antwerp, the artist's Belgian hometown, the studio had to be taken to the painting. In the largest room of Antwerp's Royal Fine Arts Museum, the restorers have the eyes of visitors on their backs and — sometimes — criticism ringing in their ears.

At 19.6 feet, the “Enthroned Madonna Adored by Saints,” a lush swirl of flesh, fabric and drapes, stands taller than an adult giraffe. A team of six restorers is poring over it for a two-year cleanup, which is scheduled to end this fall. Compare that to Rubens himself, who could put paint to canvas on such a massive work in only a few weeks.

No wonder such panache, the grand gesture in a simple brushstroke, left all in awe — then and now. Rubens, perhaps Antwerp's most famous son, painted the work in 1628 in the studio of his house in the city.

“It's such a flamboyant painter that, yeah, we love it,” said Ellen Keppens, grasping for the proper effusive words. Together with her twin sister, Jill, Ellen is leading an international team of six women restorers.

On a recent morning, they were applying undertones to the Baroque masterpiece, sometimes crawling along the wood-paneled floor to apply a touch here or there. Later, they had to crouch under a metal staircase before heading up to the top corner for another dab of retouching there. Who ever said art restoration was not physical labor?

“Like our colleague says, she's become really good at yoga,” said Keppens of a team member. “You notice that you can bend in all kind of angles in front of a painting.” When a crick in her neck gets too bad, she can just walk to the computer desk next to the painting for some administrative work.

She'd better not look too far to her left down the room



KMSKA/AP

The “Enthroned Madonna Adored by Saints,” shown after varnish removal and initial filling, but prior to retouching.

known as the Rubens gallery. At the other end stands another iconic work of the master, equally daunting and gigantic, and also badly in need of restoration: “The Adoration of the Magi.”

Koen Bulckens, the curator of the Baroque section at the museum, knows the challenges ahead.

“We will use this studio now for the treatment of this work,” he said, looking at the Madonna, the brightness of the original paint revealed after the painstaking removal of aged varnish. Then, he said, comes “another work, which is the ‘Adoration of the Magi.’”

And the clock is ticking. “The project is set to end in 2027, which will be the 450th anniversary of Rubens' birth. So it will be a jubilee year,” Bulckens said.

As with so many centuries-old paintings, the biggest problems are old varnish and bad previous restorations.

“This work was covered by a very exceptionally, I must say, thick and yellow varnish which distorted on the one hand the colors, but on the other hand also the brushwork, which had become impossible to see,” Bulckens said.

In addition, two paintings hanging on either side of the Madonna had been cleaned 35 years ago, leaving the Rubens in the middle looking jaundiced.

“It was obvious how yellow it looked. You can play with the museum light to make it a bit bluer, but that was really not a definitive solution,” he said.

Removing the varnish, though, left the painted surface with a dull complexion. Restorers working in a studio know the removal is part of the process, and the final result will only look more splendid later. At the museum itself, some visitors were convinced the beloved painting was being ruined and, despite the ample “do not disturb” signs, let their concerns be known.

“Some absolutely we don't realize it. And then they think, like, was it a good idea? Yes, of course it was a good idea,” Keppens said. “We know what's going to happen next,” once new varnish and touches are applied.

“Sometimes you have a moment to explain to visitors, but often we are just working and, yeah, but then we hear the comments in the background, of course,” she said.

Standing up for the master — and for their own work — now comes naturally. After dealing with Rubens, month in and month out, “he is a very large part of our lives.”

## WEEKEND: QUICK TRIPS

# Slip slidin' away in Piancavallo

Ski resort town in Italy great for sledding and other winter activities

By **BRIAN ERICKSON**  
*Stars and Stripes*

**D**uring a day of sledding and throwing snowballs with my family in the ski resort town of Piancavallo, Italy, we followed up the boisterousness with a walk down a serene snow-covered trail.

The trees swayed in the light breeze and there was no sound except that of my feet breaking through the surface of the snow. The Dolomite Mountains getaway's blend of options is just what I needed for some winter relaxation.

We haven't seen a lot of snow here in the two years of my deployment to Aviano Air Base, so activities involving powder require a drive north, which was less than 30 minutes in our case.

The trip offers panoramic views of Aviano and the surrounding area as the elevation climbs. Most visitors hit the ski slopes, but my goal was to get some sledding action for the first time in more than five years.

I thought navigating to the right spot would be easy, but not so. Had it not been for the parking signs, I may have missed where we needed to go for the sledding area.

A temperature hovering around 33 degrees made conditions perfect for the recreation we had in mind. With a bit of snowmelt, the sledding runs were prevented from turning into luge tracks, and the soft powder was easily molded into snowballs and snowmen.

An area called Nevelandia has over 6 acres of fenced-off sledding hills varying in suitability for people of different ages. Note that any sleds brought from home must have hand brakes. On-site rentals are available if necessary.

As an alternative to paying 10 euros per person to enter Nevelandia, you can walk around the park area and head to the slopes of a bigger hillside that may have once been used for skiing and go sledding for free.

Sledding there is not limited to just the one area. You can climb higher to get more speed, but watch out for hazards. If you don't pay attention to your track, you could end up airborne after hitting a mound of snow on the way down or you could find yourself heading straight toward the tree line.

We picked the open area for the sledding. My children, ages 6 and 11, had a blast and can't wait to go back.

The crowds on the mountain were small enough that there was plenty of space for everyone to sled. Most of the families with little kids were inside Nevelandia.

Past the sledding hill are paths leading into the solitude of the woods. I set off down one of the unmarked trails, and in almost no time the yelling of sled riders faded away.

Although my forest jaunt lasted only 30 minutes or so, I could have walked for hours. But with the sun beginning to set,



## Piancavallo mountain resort area

**Tourist office address:** Via Collalto 1, Piancavallo, Italy

**Hours:** Tourist office is open daily, 8:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m.; 1-5:30 p.m.; and 8:30 p.m.-12 a.m. Nevelandia is open weekdays 10 a.m.-4 p.m. and weekends 9:30 a.m.-4 p.m.

**Cost:** Parking is free. Nevelandia admission is 7 euros per person Monday through Friday and 10 euros per person on weekends. Sled rental is 10 euros every day.

**Information:** Phone: +39 0434 655191, Online: [turismofvg.it](http://turismofvg.it)

Brian Erickson



**Liliansa Erickson, 11, slides down a hill in Piancavallo, Italy.**

we did not want to be caught in the dark, so we headed back into the open areas where people were.

We drove down the mountain before the temperature dipped too much, our alpine excursion all but complete.

It was so much fun that I am already looking forward to reliving the wintry wow moments all over again.

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PHOTOS BY BRIAN ERICKSON/Stars and Stripes

Visitors gather their sleds at the bottom of a hill in Piancavallo, Italy, on Dec. 31. The resort area in the Dolomite Mountains offers a range of winter recreation opportunities including sledding and skiing. You can go to a fenced-off paid area, below, Nevelandia, or the bigger, free hillside around the park.



The entrance sign to the Nevelandia sledding area in Piancavallo, Italy. Weekday admission costs 7 euros per person, and the entrance price rises to 10 euros per person on weekends. Any sleds brought from home must have hand brakes. On-site rentals are available, if necessary, for 10 euros.

## WEEKEND: FOOD &amp; DINING



PHOTOS BY LYDIA GORDON/Stars and Stripes

Though small, Hirschens Restaurant Wirtsstuben in Parsberg, Germany, offers ample seating. Reservations are recommended, but the service remains consistently reliable.

# Fine and filling dining

Hirschens Restaurant Wirtsstuben in Parsberg, near Hohenfels, offers upscale cuisine with a warm, rustic, cabin-like ambiance

BY LYDIA GORDON  
Stars and Stripes

On a recent Monday evening in the German town of Parsberg, a famished companion and I were searching without success for an open restaurant.

Our predicament prompted us to decide that the ever-reliable traditional German hotel restaurants were our best option. This resolve brought us to Hirschens Restaurant Wirtsstuben, less than 15 minutes from the U.S. Army garrison in Hohenfels.

Stepping through the automatic doors, we were enveloped by a warm, cabin-like ambiance. The entrance was adorned with chairs and desks displaying books, delicate deer figurines and bottles of wine, coupled with the soft glow of cozy lamplight.

That was the moment I realized this meal might be a tad more upscale than I had anticipated. Having arrived close to the beginning of dinner hours, we sat in the nearly empty restaurant at a table right near the bar.

The outdoorsy charm of the entrance seamlessly carried into the restaurant, where the decor featured an abundance of deer motifs and historical imagery.

Once we received our menus, we didn't waste any time deciding. I went for the classic German schnitzel, while my friend



## Hirschens Restaurant Wirtsstuben

**Address:** Marktstrasse 1a, Parsberg, Germany

**Hours:** Daily, 7-10:30 a.m.; 11:30 a.m.-2 p.m.; 5:30-9 p.m.

**Prices:** Breakfast buffet is 27 euros per person; evening appetizers range from 8 to 14 euros, and entrees cost between 18 and 35 euros. The pretzel cordon bleu costs 25 euros; schnitzel is 29 euros; and the steaks ranged around 35 euros.

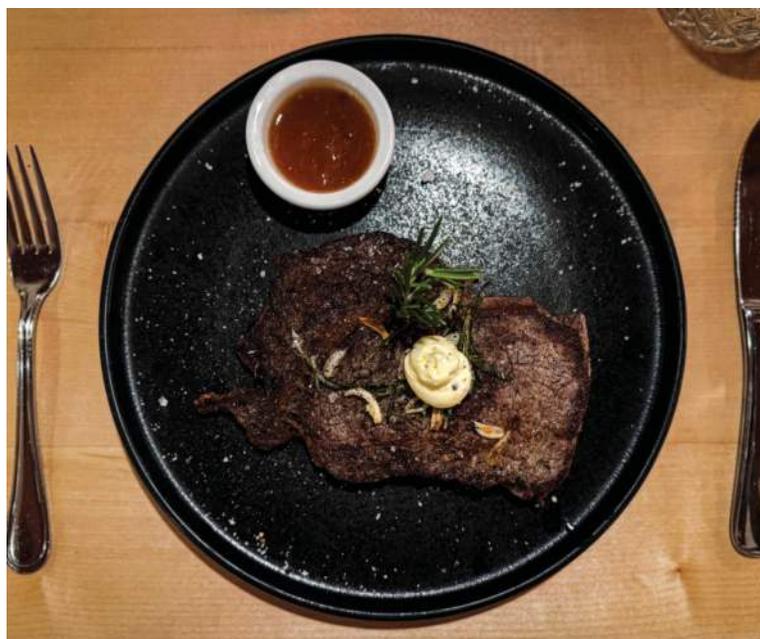
**Information:** Phone: +49 9492 6060; Online: [tinyurl.com/mr423v9s](http://tinyurl.com/mr423v9s)

Lydia Gordon

was instantly drawn to the pretzel cordon bleu.

Our rumbling stomachs were appeased by a plate of fresh bread paired with a fragrant herbal house butter. The bread had an interesting flavor I couldn't quite place, but it was satisfying nonetheless. The main dishes were served soon afterward.

My pork schnitzel was served as two generously sized, golden-brown fillets accompanied by cranberry sauce, potato salad and a side of fresh, marinated greens.



The rib-eye steak at Hirschens Restaurant Wirtsstuben in Parsberg is served with a flavorful sauce, blending savory and sweet.

The cranberry sauce added a nice sweetness that complemented the savory pork, while the potato salad, a true German classic, proved a magnificent companion to the main dish.

My friend, an unabashed lover of all things pretzel, was thoroughly delighted with her entree. The salty crust, schnitzel and creamy melted cheese encasing the veal were a splendid ingredient combination. The generous portion left her full, with enough to box up for later.

When I found myself back in



Deer figurines adorn the interior of Hirschens Restaurant Wirtsstuben in Parsberg. The restaurant is located in a hotel and serves traditional cuisine made with fresh, locally sourced ingredients.



The inviting bar at Hirschens Restaurant Wirtsstuben in Parsberg offers a quaint spot to enjoy a drink, surrounded by warm lighting and rustic charm. On the bar are jars of complimentary candies.



Every meal at Hirschens Restaurant Wirtsstuben in Parsberg begins with a selection of fresh bread and house-made herbal butter.

Once again, the meal did not disappoint. Both of our steaks were cooked medium-rare as requested and paired with a fruity sauce that offered a delightful balance of sweet and savory flavors.

Not quite ready to end the evening, I followed the European tradition of enjoying a postmeal cappuccino. The coffee was the perfect conclusion to yet another satisfying dinner.

Before leaving, I couldn't resist making a quick stop at the bar — not for a drink, but to grab a small packet of gummy worms from a vase of complimentary candies. It was a charming final treat to enjoy as I made my way across the street to my car.

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WEEKEND: QUICK TRIPS

# A paradise of powdery peaks

Snow sports mecca awaits NW of Tokyo

By **SETH ROBSON**  
*Stars and Stripes*

**S**nowcapped mountains surround Yuzawa, a skiing mecca in Japan's Niigata prefecture, about a three-hour drive from Tokyo.

There are a dozen ski resorts in and around Yuzawa, which can also be reached by bullet train from Tokyo Station in around 80 minutes.

It's one of the most accessible snow sports destinations for U.S. troops stationed in or near Japan's capital and a regular stop for base outdoor recreation day and weekend bus trips.

If you drive, make sure you have snow tires or chains, because the roads are often icy once you get into the mountains. Snow and ice mean checkpoints on the expressway where authorities make sure vehicles are equipped for the conditions.

If you're a beginner, there are numerous places to hone your skills in the vicinity of Yuzawa.

Naeba Ski Resort, which hosts the Fuji Rock festival in summer, has something for everyone including "magic carpet" ski lifts on relatively flat terrain, a play area for kids and a pair of gondolas servicing steeper slopes.

Gala Yuzawa ski area is particularly easy to get to since its lift terminates in a train station. It doesn't have very challenging slopes, but it has plenty of restaurants and fantastic views.

The same can be said of nearby resorts such as Kandatsu Snow Resort, which has an impressive terrain park where skiers and snowboarders practice tricks beside the central slope.

Expert skiers might want to head up to Kagura, which is linked to Naeba via the Drag-

ondola lift. The ski area regularly boasts some of the lightest, deepest snow in Japan.

There are several ways to get to Kagura, but the easiest is via the Mitsumata Ropeway. There's a small shop, changing rooms, food vendors and gear rental near the parking area, but it's not easily accessible from the slopes.

The prime terrain at Kagura is reached by traversing from the top of the quad chairlift to another two-seater. Up there, at 6,000 feet, there's no groomed snow, just a couple of vast bowls that include open hillsides and tree runs.

The top lift is only open until noon in January, so it pays to leave the parking area by 8 a.m. to get maximum time at the top. Ski tourers can hike through a gate that leads into the back-country. Avalanches are a risk, so safety equipment and traveling in a group are a must.

After a tough day on the hill, it's nice to relax at one of Yuzawa's many onsens or hot springs. There's a basic bathhouse at Mitsumata but at the bottom of the hill there are some more impressive facilities.

Hatsukaishi Onsen, near the Ishiuchi Maruyama ski area, has all the bells and whistles you would expect from a top-notch Japanese hot spring.

There are big indoor pools and outdoor baths with amazing views of the surrounding mountains. An often-snow-covered tree decorates one of the outdoor bathing areas.

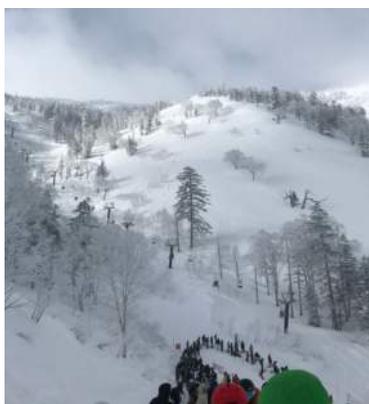
It's the perfect place to recover from a hard workout on the slopes, but don't get too drowsy if you plan to drive home that night.

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@SethRobson1



PHOTOS BY SETH ROBSON/Stars and Stripes

The view Jan. 18 above the Kagura ski area in Niigata prefecture, Japan, included a clear mountain vista.



Skiers and snowboarders line up for first tracks at Kagura.

### On the QT

**Directions:** From Tokyo, take the Kanetsu Expressway and exit at the Yuzawa interchange. Turn left for Kandatsu and Kagura ski areas, or right for Gala Yuzawa and Ishiuchi Maruyama. Parking at Mitsumata is 1,000 yen on weekends.  
**Times:** Ski lifts usually start at 8 a.m. with the last rides in the mid-afternoon, although hours are extended in February, and some areas offer night skiing.  
**Costs:** An adult day pass at Kagura has increased to 7,200 yen, or about \$49.50, this season. Elementary school children and younger ride for free. The ski area's website offers discounts including coupons that can be redeemed for a free lunch at restaurants on the slopes.

**Food:** Kagura has eight restaurants and food vendors. The Snowman Cafe serves Japanese and Western meals and has large windows with a view of the nearby slope. Wada Goya, at the top of the gondola, serves rice and noodles. A meal costs about 1500 yen.

**Information:** Online: [princehotels.co.jp/ski/kagura/winter](http://princehotels.co.jp/ski/kagura/winter)

Seth Robson



The top lift at Kagura ski area provides access to a couple of vast powder bowls that include open hillsides and tree runs.

## Who deserves a THANK YOU?

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# WEEKEND: FOOD & DINING

## Tokyo cantina a treat

### Mexican classics served with a hint of Japanese flavor

**BY JUAN KING**  
*Stars and Stripes*  
A little over an hour train ride into central Tokyo and a short walk will bring you to this authentic Mexican restaurant in Higashi-Nakano.

Kuma Cantina opened about six months ago and features a variety of traditional Mexican cuisine. The restaurant has a grown-up, nightlife vibe, but is still suitable for children.

The atmosphere is cozy in the dimly lit, two-story restaurant. There's seating for 30, including an outdoor dining table, and a cocktail bar.

English menus are available, and you cannot go wrong with the appetizers, which include authentic, crunchy tortilla chips with guacamole, salsa and bean dip.

Another tasty starter option is the crispy tacos ahogados, or fried chicken taquitos, that come three to a plate on tomatillo salsa, covered with red cabbage and a large scoop of lemon cream.

The adobo ribs, or Mexican barbecued pork, is available in a



JUAN KING/Stars and Stripes

Tacos ahogados from Kuma Cantina, a Mexican restaurant in Tokyo.

large platter meal for 4,268 yen (about \$27), which I shared with my son. It featured a tender pork rib with more meat than bone and is sure to fill you up.

The preparation would take a little time in order to achieve perfection, the server warned us, which turned out to be accurate. But the end result was worth the wait. The ribs were served with flour tortillas, sweet potato puree and coleslaw.

My wife and friends sampled pollo asado, or roast chicken, for 3,850 yen, with corn tortillas, rice and marinated tomatoes. We also had crab and shrimp enchiladas, a seafood medley wrapped in a flour tortilla.

I capped off my meal with tres leches, a traditional dessert made with a sponge cake, saturated with three types of milk and topped with blueberries and toasted coconut.

All the food was presented exceptionally well, service was excellent and there were no complaints from our table, just satisfied appetites.

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@juanking\_17



### Kuma Cantina

**Location:** 3-2-7 Higashinakano, 1F, Nakano Ward, Japan, 164-0003, Tokyo

**Directions:** A short walk from Higashi-Nakano Station.

**Hours:** Open 5 p.m.-11 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday; 10 a.m.-3 p.m. Sunday; closed Monday and Tuesday.

**Prices:** 4,000 to 5,000 yen for lunch and 6,000 to 8,000 yen for dinner.

**Information:** Make reservations online at [linktr.ee/kumacantina](http://linktr.ee/kumacantina) or call 03-5497-8998. Credit cards accepted.

Juan King



Appetizers at Kuma Cantina include authentic, crunchy tortilla chips with guacamole, salsa and bean dip.



Kuma Cantina recently opened in Tokyo and offers a variety of Mexican dishes. Some feature a Japanese twist.

## How much pasta in a serving? It's not necessarily 2 ounces

*The Washington Post*

Americans love pasta. Per the National Pasta Association, we consume 5.95 billion pounds per year, with the average American enjoying about 20 pounds annually. But how much is a serving?

Nutritional labels on packages of dried pasta list a serving as 2 ounces. It amounts to about 1 cup when cooked — and strikes plenty of people as stingy.

“That’s not an entree,” chef and cookbook author Adrienne Cheatham said. “I’m not going to get full off of that.”

The nutrition label serving size, in fact, might not mean what you think it does. “By law, serving sizes must be based on the amount of food people typically consume, rather than how much

they should consume,” the Food and Drug Administration states. “... The serving size is not a recommendation of how much to eat or drink.”

The serving size listed on food packaging is there to make sure consumers can fairly compare brands and to prevent manufacturers from trying to game the numbers to make a product look healthier than it might be.

Another important consideration is what the pasta is mixed with — a simple sauce, or are meat and vegetables included?

The shape of the pasta itself might also play a role. “I think smaller shapes, you can eat more,” chef and cookbook author Nini Nguyenshe said. “I don’t know why.”



## Who deserves a thank you?

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## WEEKEND: BOOKS

# Quiet courage

'The Unlikely War Hero' shines fresh light on smart survivor of Vietnam POW camp

BY SEAN MOORES  
Stars and Stripes

History and pop culture have trained us to celebrate battlefield heroics and other forms of physical courage. Those actions are undeniably admirable, and in the past decade many Vietnam veterans have received overdue valor medals or had existing awards upgraded.

Heroism also comes in other forms.

Doug Hegdahl, the subject of Marc Leepson's "The Unlikely War Hero: A Vietnam War POW's Story of Courage and Resilience in the Hanoi Hilton," engaged in quieter, more cerebral acts, but he was a hero of the Vietnam War just the same.

The average reader probably hasn't heard of Hegdahl. It's not because his story isn't fascinating. In short, a young man from tiny Clark, S.D., committed some of the most courageous non-combat actions of the war.

In the early hours of April 6, 1967, Hegdahl fell off the guided missile cruiser USS Canberra as it fired its 5- and 8-inch guns from the Gulf of Tonkin on North Vietnamese positions inland. The member of the deck crew went up to watch the guns fire, but he couldn't remember how he ended up in the water. Nobody saw the 20-year-old seaman apprentice go overboard. His shipmates did not know for hours that he was missing. His captain did not turn the warship around to look for him.

After treading water for hours, the exhausted Hegdahl was pulled from the South China Sea by fishermen. His rescue took a quick turn, however, when the fishermen turned the young sailor over to the North Vietnamese.

He ultimately ended up in the Hoa Lo prison camp. Most probably know the camp by the name mockingly given to it by American prisoners of war: the Hanoi Hilton.

Hegdahl was subjected to intense interrogation, and to torture when his answers failed to satisfy his captors. He quickly devised a strategy to confuse his interrogators and, hopefully, escape severe punishment.

"I had probably the most embarrassing capture in the entire Vietnam War," Hegdahl said during a 1997 interview cited in the book. "I found that my defense posture was just to play dumb. Let's face it, when you fall off your boat, you have a lot to

work with."

It worked. Although prison officials initially thought that Hegdahl was a spy (a suspicion shared by even some of his compatriots, among other theories), he quickly dissuaded them of the notion. He convinced them that he knew little valuable information, or little at all. It worked so well that he came to be known as "The Incredibly Stupid One" by his captors.

Hegdahl was anything but stupid.

The bumpkin act caused the North Vietnamese to pay Hegdahl little mind. He was the youngest and lowest-ranking man in the camp, which was full of experienced pilots and navigators. Since prison officials thought he was a simpleton, Hegdahl often was allowed unsupervised time to sweep the yard. He spent some of that time sabotaging camp vehicles. Once he even wandered out into the street, helping him to pinpoint the camp's location.

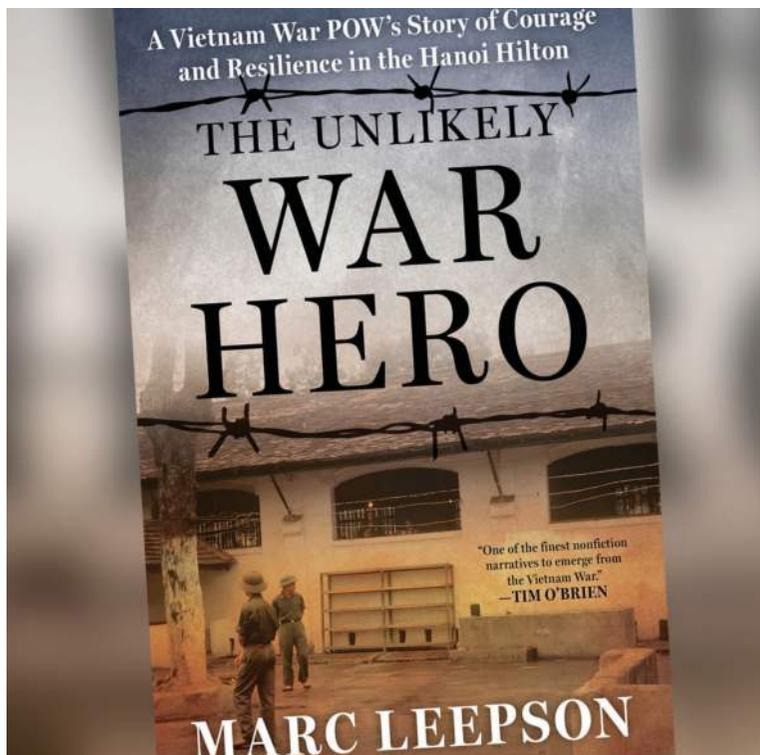
A few months into his captivity, Hegdahl was placed in a cell with a senior Naval officer, Lt. Cmdr. Richard Stratton, who became Hegdahl's closest friend

**The North Vietnamese released Hegdahl in August 1969, without a clue as to the storehouse of valuable intel locked in his mind. Information that gave hope to families of missing and imprisoned servicemen. Information that helped to change the conditions in the Hanoi Hilton.**

during his captivity and for decades after the war. Stratton recognized Hegdahl's smarts, and the need to use them.

Hegdahl's knack for memorization was a tremendous asset, and one that dovetailed with POW efforts underway at the Hanoi Hilton. Picking up on a practice already in place, he memorized the names of 254 prisoners. All the while, he played his subterfuge to the hilt. His captors treated him like the village idiot, while Hegdahl foiled their attempts to use him for propaganda purposes and banked vital information.

The North Vietnamese re-



Stackpole Books

**"The Unlikely War Hero: A Vietnam War POW's Story of Courage and Resilience in the Hanoi Hilton," by Marc Leepson, tells the little-known story of Doug Hegdahl.**

leased Hegdahl in August 1969, without a clue as to the storehouse of valuable intel locked in his mind. Information that gave hope to families of missing and imprisoned servicemen. Information that helped to change the conditions in the Hanoi Hilton.

Said Roger Shields, who served as Deputy Assistant Secretary for POW/MIA Affairs from 1971 to 1977: Hegdahl "saved many, many lives. I don't think there's any doubt about it."

Leepson, a Vietnam veteran,

compelling facet to the canon of Vietnam literature.

Leepson provides valuable context regarding life in the camp, such as how prisoners forbidden to communicate with one another did just that. He sketches the politics of the era — without bogging down the story — and the external forces, within the U.S. government and the anti-war movement, which affected life on the inside for the POWs.

Hegdahl, who has not spoken publicly about his captivity since around 2000, chose not to participate in the book, citing a desire to remain a private person. That's a shame, if only because Leepson likely could have drawn more insight or a new perspective out of him. But the book does not suffer for his absence. It is meticulously researched, and it makes expert use of interviews Hegdahl did in his first several years after returning to the U.S.

Leepson, who has written about a wide range of historical topics, uses varied sources to buttress the narrative but never weighs it down with footnotes or tangents. The writing is clean, generally conversational, and absent of excessive acronyms or jargon that might turn off many readers.

Hegdahl didn't face overwhelming odds on the battlefield. He didn't jump on a grenade to save his fellow servicemen. But what he did as a POW and as an advocate for fellow prisoners was no less heroic. It is a compelling story, told by a skilled storyteller. At the end of the book, Leepson makes a case for Hegdahl to receive the Navy and Marine Corps Medal (although Hegdahl has resisted such efforts). By the end of "The Unlikely War Hero," you'll wonder why it didn't happen decades ago.

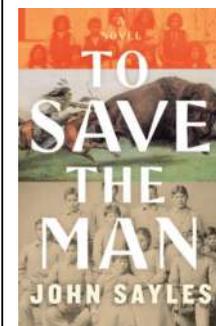
## Sayles' latest a powerful read

BY ZACK RUSKIN

Special to The Washington Post

Last month, after a yearlong investigation, The Washington Post reported that at least 3,104 students had died between 1828 and 1970 while attending Native American boarding schools — triple the figure that had been reported by the U.S. Interior Department a few months before. The scope of that loss can

be hard to fathom.



John Sayles' latest novel, "To Save the Man," is set at one such facility — the infamous Carlisle Indian Industrial

School. It takes its title from a statement made by U.S. Army officer Richard Henry Pratt, who founded the Pennsylvania institution in 1879 as a perverse way of preventing the ongoing slaughter of Native Americans. His solution? The swift assimilation of their younger members into the white man's world.

"To save the man," Pratt posits in Sayles' telling, "we must kill the Indian!"

He would certainly aid in accomplishing the latter.

In "To Save the Man," the harsh life of students at Carlisle is juxtaposed with events that culminate in the murder of Hunkpapa Lakota leader Sitting Bull and the Wounded Knee Massacre. In the process, the novel embraces the interplay between oppression and narrative reclamation that has long been a vital dynamic in Sayles' stories and films.

Taking place across Carlisle's 1890 fall semester, "To Save the Man" jumps between the perspectives of a fresh group of arrivals to the school, a few older students and a handful of Carlisle's instructors. Through the eyes of the students, in particular, Sayles conveys the cruelty of the culture shock thrust upon them.

We follow the students' exploits — all forced to answer to bastardizations of their true names — as they alternatively plot escapes, find forbidden romance and desperately work to avoid forgetting their mother tongues in a setting where only the English language is allowed.

It would have been easy for Sayles to paint the many villains who populate his novel with a single shade. But "To Save the Man" conveys the trauma inflicted upon the Native peoples without draining its most vile characters of their own humanity.

## WEEKEND: BOOKS

Q&amp;A

## Forever a storyteller

Roberts, who has written more than 250 books, discusses the 60th title in her 'In Death' series and the art of writing

BY SOPHIA ROSENBAUM  
Associated Press

**N**ora Roberts is so prolific she had to take up a pen name so her publisher could release more books by her each year.

"I'm a fast writer," Roberts, 74, told The Associated Press in a rare interview. She typically releases four books a year, and has for more than four decades.

It's not just about her speed. It's her range, too. She's written more than 250 books, from romantic one-offs and fantasy-themed trilogies to a police procedural series she's been writing for three decades. The 60th book of the "In Death" series, "Bonded in Death," is being released in February.

Roberts has left her mark on the literary world, and she has no plans to stop anytime soon. She talked about the art of writing, why she won't have the main characters in her "In Death" series have kids and her thoughts on the romance genre — including why she doesn't see herself as part of it anymore.

This interview has been edited for clarity and length:

**Associated Press: You write under two different names — Nora Roberts and J.D. Robb. Why?**

**Roberts:** I'm a fast writer.

I didn't like the idea of taking a pseudonym until my agent said to me one day, 'Nora, there's Pepsi, there's Diet Pepsi and there's caffeine-free Pepsi.' And that hit home. I drink Diet Pepsi and I've realized it's marketing and I could be two brands.

So I said I would do that if I could write something completely different.

**You're coming out with your 60th book in the "In Death" series. You've been writing two books per year for the series since 1995. What is your vision for the series at this point?**

I can't imagine ending it, and I still have ideas for where they're going next.

They're not just books about murders. They're about interaction and relationships and the evolution of characters.

**Do you have an ending in mind, or was there an ending that you had in mind at one point that you've gone past?**

I never had an endpoint. It just sort of happened that I got to 60 books. I'm very invested in these characters. So I like to tell their stories.

**You've said that if Roarke and Eve were ever to have a child, you would see that as the end of the series because their lives would be so changed by that. Is that true?**

That is an internet truth. Children change everything. How are they going to be out there in the middle of the night

chasing bad guys or working on a case or having that crazy sex?

**Speaking of the sex, that's a good transition to romance as a genre. It has evolved a lot in the last couple of years. Where do you see yourself in the pantheon of that genre?**

I don't at all. My roots are in romance and I have a lot of respect. But I don't write romance anymore. I do write relationships.

I've been writing for a really long time now, and the romance genre evolves and it changes. And it did when I was working in it, and it just got to a point where I didn't want to go where it was evolving. I wanted to go in a different direction. So my roots and foundation are there, and gratitude. But that's not what I'm doing now.

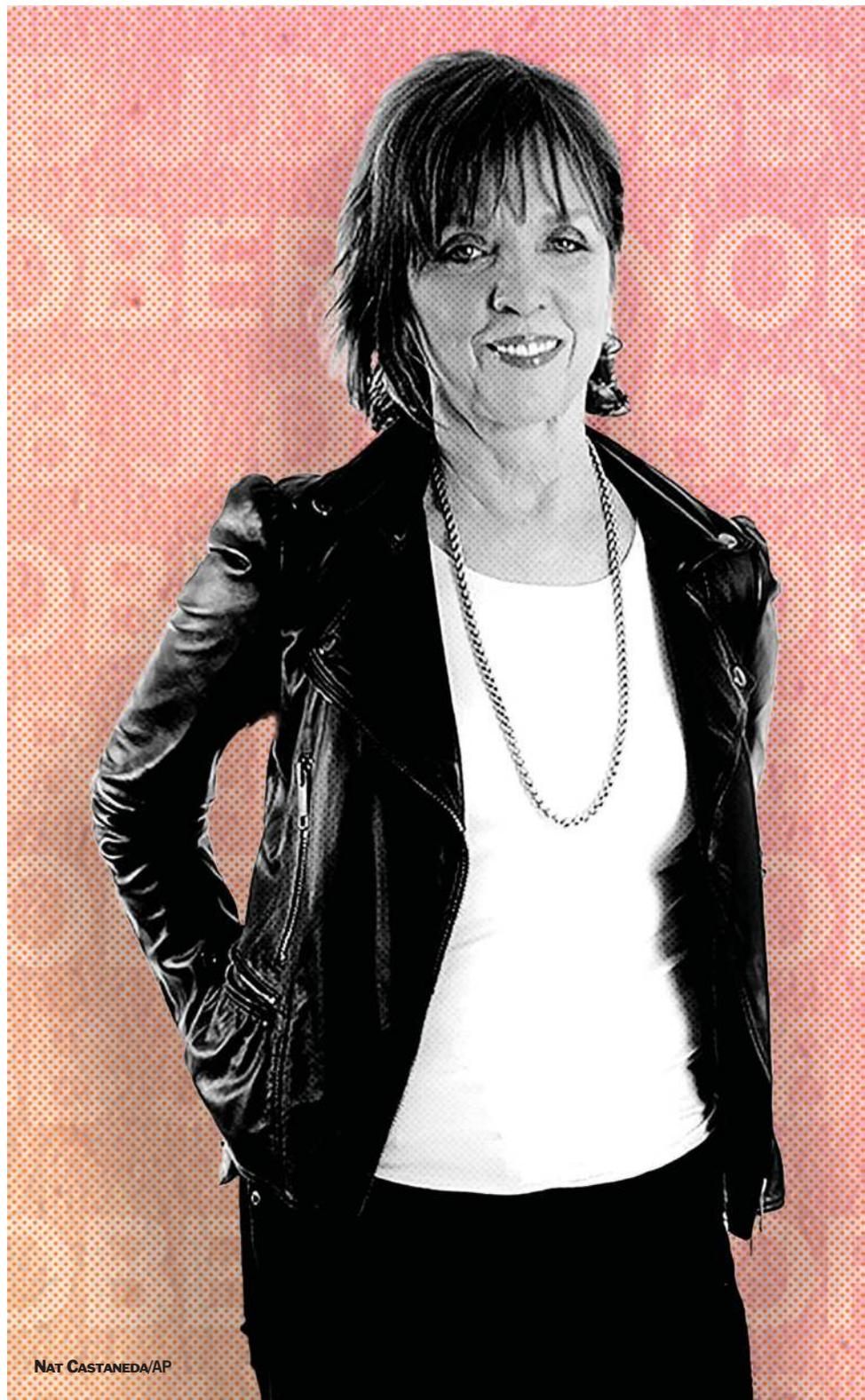
**How would you describe what you're doing now?**

I write novels. It's that simple — suspense, thrillers, fantasy.

**You like to write in trilogies. Even with "In Death," you sometimes write in threes. Why do you think that works narratively as a writer and for your audience?**

I think of it as one big book and three parts. Something has to happen that cannot be resolved until the last book. That's when good overcomes evil. Love conquers all and whatever. But you can't do that until book three. It's challenging and it's fun and I hope it's fun for the reader, too.

**How many hours do you spend writing**



NAT CASTANEDA/AP

**on an average day?**

Six to eight.

**What do you need around you when you write, or are you at a point where you could write just sitting on a rock in the water?**

I can write anywhere, anytime. I like the quiet. That's my favorite.

**For "In Death," how did you land on a futuristic police procedural?**

I really wanted to do something different, and I thought it would be fun to go into the future and imagine the world. It

could be exactly what I wanted it to be. I didn't have to build on someone else's or make up a little town.

**How would you like to be remembered?**

As a good storyteller.

**Are you thinking of retirement at all?**

Absolutely not.

**What is your biggest fear?**

Not having the next idea.

**Do you have a favorite book of all time?**

"To Kill a Mockingbird" is probably the most perfect novel I remember. I love "Catch-22." And "Jane Eyre."

## 'Hold Strong' sets a love story amid maritime horror of World War II

BY ROB MERRILL  
Associated Press

Eight decades after Japan formally surrendered to the Allies and ended World War II, "Hold Strong," a work of historical fiction by Robert Dugoni, written in partnership with academic researchers Jeff Langholz and Chris Crabtree, proves those horrors are still fertile storytelling ground.

"Hold Strong" is the story of Sam Carlson and Sarah Haber, young sweethearts in Eagle Grove, Minn. He joins the Army at the tail end of the Great Depression and quickly rises in rank to become a leader of men. Taken prisoner by the Japanese in 1942, he survives a series of atrocities, from the Bataan Death March in the Philippines to captivity in a Japanese "hell ship,"

the Arisan Maru. She's "the smartest girl in class," who is recruited while studying mathematics at Mankato State Teachers College to become a code breaker, eventually joining the WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service) and helping to turn the tide.

Sam and Sarah are fictional, but the events they find themselves in are not. Langholz and

Crabtree provide more than 100 pages that cite sources and detail the facts that ground the story.

"Hold Strong" is cinematic in its scope, telling Sam's story, then going back in time and recounting what Sarah was up to while Sam was overseas. It's well paced, with developed characters beyond Sam and Sarah.

There's Father Tom, whose unshakable faith keeps Sam alive

during his darkest moments, and Grace Moretti, who befriends Sarah in the Navy and tells her to use her mind "to get what you want."

The book really takes off in the final 150 or so pages, with submarines and secret codes and war-altering decisions made at a heavy cost. It's thrilling stuff, made all the more so by its grounding in history.

## WEEKEND: MUSIC

## ANALYSIS



CHRIS PIZZELLO, INVISION/AP

**Beyoncé, the most awarded and nominated artist in Grammys history, finally won album of the year for her country-and-then-some album, "Cowboy Carter."**



JORDAN STRAUSS, INVISION/AP

**Chappell Roan's breakout year was recognized with six Grammy nominations and a win for best new artist.**



RICHARD SHOTWELL, INVISION/AP

**Kendrick Lamar won Grammys for record of the year, best rap performance, best rap song, best music video and song of the year.**

# Finally, signs of a shift

Beyoncé and Kendrick Lamar led one of the best Grammys in years. Have the awards transformed?

By MARIA SHERMAN  
Associated Press

**T**he Grammy Awards have long been criticized over a lack of diversity, with a history of artists of color, women, and rap and R&B musicians being snubbed for top prizes. Sunday's edition suggests that something may have shifted.

Beyoncé, the most awarded and nominated artist in Grammys history, finally won album of the year for her country-and-then-some album, "Cowboy Carter," furthering her dedication to recentering Black art in popular culture. Kendrick Lamar took home two of the top four prizes of the night, celebrating hip-hop on a show that has historically neglected the genre. The Grammys placed young pop performers in the spotlight at the moment of their ascent, meeting the contemporary music moment.

The Recording Academy has made concerted efforts to

diversify in recent years. Could it be those strides have already paid off in a course correction? Or were the 2025 Grammys simply a one-off?

## A feud squashed

Recording Academy CEO Harvey Mason Jr. appeared onstage to address "some real criticism" facing the organization behind the Grammys.

"Artists were pretty vocal with their complaints," he said, reaching back to 2020: "The Weeknd called out the academy for lack of transparency in our awards. He went so far as to announce he was boycotting the Grammys."

Five years can make a world of difference. At the end of his speech, Mason introduced The Weeknd as a surprise performer, making his first appearance at the Grammys since 2017.

His return suggested approval of a new voting class — several presenters took care to note that the awards were

decided by more than 13,000 voting members.

Peter A. Berry, a music journalist with work in XXL and Complex, believes that reading might be too pat, though. "He performed to promote his new album," he said, referencing The Weeknd's "Hurry Up Tomorrow." That timing aligned with the Grammys' need to highlight its reform.

"I can't remove my cynical music industry lens," he says. "Time heals all wounds when you need promo."

## A more diverse voting body

Of the Recording Academy's current voting membership, 66% are men, 49% are white and 66% are over the age of 40. But the academy announced last year that 3,000 female voting members had been added since 2019. Two-thirds of the total voting body joined in the last five years.

SEE SHIFT ON PAGE 29

## WEEKEND: MUSIC

**Shift:** Women have made big strides in past two Grammys

FROM PAGE 28

In that same time, the academy has increased the number of members who identify as people of color by 63%, with 100% growth in Asian American and Pacific Islander voters, 90% growth in Black voters and 43% growth in Latino voters.

At the 2024 Grammys, women dominated the major categories and as a result, every televised competitive Grammy went to at least one woman. It appeared to reflect contemporary interest in female pop performers — Taylor Swift, Miley Cyrus, Victoria Monét and Karol G, among them. In 2025, that trend continued. Women received every single televised award on Sunday night with the exception of Lamar's and one shared between Lady Gaga and Bruno Mars.

"They got it right this year," Berry says. "Maybe it is that the voting committee changed."

**Nominees and winners reflect contemporary interest**

The nominations announced in November acknowledged the artists who led the conversation in 2024. Beyoncé was celebrated with 11 nominations, what Kinitra D. Brooks — an academic and author of "The Lemonade Reader" — says was the result of voters finally recognizing "this is clearly someone who deserves the respect of her peers."

Chappell Roan and Sabrina Carpenter, experiencing breakout years, received six nods each. The ubiquitous, discourse-dominating "Not Like Us" from Lamar and Charli xcx's "BRAT" also received recognition.

And that translated to awards. There were a number of first-time award winners, many women and people of color like Doechii, Carin León and Sierra Ferrell. In the relatively new songwriter of the year, non-classical category, Amy Allen became the first woman to take home the trophy.

**A move in the right direction for hip-hop**

"Not Like Us" was an early winner at the Grammys' Premiere Ceremony, receiving trophies for music video, rap song and rap performance. It marked Lamar's seventh time winning in that last category. But it was his presence during the main broadcast that really made a splash. One of the biggest global hits of 2024, his Drake diss track won song and record of the year — only the second hip-hop single to ever win record of the year. By the end of the night, "Not Like Us" had won all five awards for which it was nominated.

Lamar's recognitions arrived the year after Jay-Z criticized the Grammys for ignoring the rap legends before him — those who brought hip-hop to the preeminent music award show, only to have rap categories not make the official broadcast.

"We want you all to get it right," Jay-Z said last year. "At least get it close to right."

Berry describes Lamar's wins as "a layup," a celebration of one of the great rap records of recent history.

And though Lamar's wins meant more hip-hop on the broadcast, Berry says the Grammys' hip-hop picks tend to be predictable. He says there's a "cookie cutter" formula for the kind of rappers the Recording



RICHARD SHOTWELL, INVISION/AP

**Doechii poses in the press room with the award for best rap album for "Alligator Bites Never Heal" on Sunday in Los Angeles. Doechii was among the first-time Grammy winners this year.**

Academy recognizes.

"The more esoteric and abstract rap," as well as "the mid-level street rap," goes largely ignored, he says.

**Course-correcting the biggest blind spot**

Beyoncé's album of the year victory was widely thought long overdue. The superstar had four of her albums nominated in the category before winning on her fifth.

She seemingly alluded to it in her acceptance speech: "It's been many, many years," she said.

"I Am... Sasha Fierce" lost to Taylor Swift for "Fearless" in 2010. In 2015, her self-titled album "Beyoncé" lost to Beck's "Morning Phase," and Harry Styles' "Harry's House" beat "Renaissance" in 2023. Perhaps most infamously, though, was the loss of "Lemonade" to Adele's "25."

"I can't possibly accept this award. And I'm very humbled, and I'm very grateful and gracious, but my artist of my life is Beyoncé," Adele said in her 2017 acceptance speech, holding back tears.

In winning album of the year Sunday, Beyoncé became the first Black woman to win the top prize in the 21st century. The last

was Lauryn Hill with "The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill," 26 years ago. Before her were Natalie Cole and Whitney Houston, and the list ends there.

Brooks believes "Beyoncé reflects that Black women can be excellent and still ignored in very particular ways — because this is a top honor in her field."

Emily Lordi, a Vanderbilt University professor whose focus is African American literature and Black popular music, describes "Cowboy Carter" as "an album with a capital A — one that explicitly aims to restore the Black roots and routes of country, a genre long coded as white. It is the kind of historic intervention the academy could not fail to recognize — it was undeniable."

Berry points to the fact that the record's country influence may have aligned with the academy's traditionalist voters — but also appealed to those inspired by its break with convention.

"It is some cosmic justice being done," says Berry. "It might not be the best Bey album, but it was the best of the category."

Even Grammys' host Trevor Noah couldn't help but acknowledge the milestone: "We finally saw it happen, everyone," he said. That, we did.

## REVIEW

**Sarah Klang**

Beautiful Woman (Nettwerk)

In a clipped Nordic accent, Swedish indie folk singer Sarah Klang politely asked the soundboard operator at Nashville's Blue Room to turn up her microphone. The request, made recently during a rare U.S. performance in the intimate music space attached to Jack White's Third Man Records, seemed entirely unnecessary.

Her voice could fill every crevice of the room, even if she used no microphone at all. Live, just as on record, her tone pins you down and holds you the moment she opens her mouth.

On her fifth album, "Beautiful Woman," released Feb. 7, Klang worked for the first time with American producer Eric D. Johnson, known for his work with Bonny Light Horseman, the Fruit Bats and the Shins. It's a winning partnership that lands somewhere between folksy Americana and '90s jangle-pop, set apart not only by Klang's voice but also by her honesty.

"Practicing every night / How to dance in slow motion," she sings on the title cut. "Writing in my diary, goals for the new year / 16 and alone in my room."

Klang leans into the song's chorus with characteristic directness. "When I grow up," she sings, "I want to be a beautiful woman."

If wistfulness had its own voice, it might sound like her. Klang manages to convey pain even when she is singing about finding happiness, as she does on several cuts here. Few singers blend hope and sadness into such a rare mix of intensity: Billie Holiday, Hank Williams, Judy Garland, Patsy Cline, Amy Winehouse. The list isn't long.

On this album, Klang details body-shaming, motherhood and her own arduous journey in a world that holds women to impossible standards.

My path to Klang's music started with my 20-something daughter, who included some of Klang's earlier work on a couple of Spotify playlists. The first few times her songs came up, I inevitably asked: "Who is that? Where is she from?"

The answers are right here.

Her name is Sarah Klang. She comes from Sweden. And she has arrived.

— Scott Stroud  
Associated Press

## WEEKEND: TELEVISION

## No longer the same old story for Chestnut

CBS' new medical drama 'Watson' represents supporting actor's hoped-for ascension into ranks of leading men

BY GREG BRAXTON

Los Angeles Times

**F**or the record, Morris Chestnut is not a real doctor. He just plays one on TV.

To be precise, Chestnut has played multiple physicians in the past several years, scrubbing in as a trauma specialist in "Nurse Jackie" before moving on to pathology in Fox's "Rosewood."

The last doctor he played, Barrett Cain in Fox's "The Resident," is a standout. Viewers loathed him. Chestnut loved it.

"Cain was more concerned about the money a patient would make for the hospital than the patient's health," he said with a mischievous laugh. "Fans loved to hate me. They would approach me and say, 'You're so mean.' I really liked that."

Chestnut is putting his "bad doctor" days behind him, taking on a new specialty as a compassionate geneticist and internist in CBS' medical drama "Watson," a modern reboot of the Sherlock Holmes mythology. He plays Dr. John Watson, Holmes' partner, who becomes the head of an elite rare disorders clinic at a Pittsburgh hospital after Holmes is murdered.

Reworking the Watson character means more to Chestnut than just expanding his medical résumé. While he has enjoyed a fairly consistent career since his acclaimed debut in 1991's "Boyz N the Hood," Chestnut has mostly been featured in ensemble or supporting roles, many of them romantic vehicles showcasing his good looks and athletic build.

"Watson" represents his hoped-for ascension into the ranks of leading man.

"This is a significant milestone for me in a number of ways," he said. "I've had lead roles before, but as an actor, I feel I'm hitting my stride in terms of how I approach the work. The opportunity to play this character, and on CBS, is huge. And to play with the Sherlock Holmes mythology is something I never would have imagined."

The actor maintained that "Watson" is distinctive from other medical dramas.

"We are not just doctors; we are detectives," he said. "When patients come into our clinic, we don't solve the medical mystery right there. We go into their homes; we go into the streets. It's combining the medical aspect of Watson with the influence of Sherlock."

Making his way through a healthy breakfast at a Beverly Hills hotel, Chestnut was enthusiastic as he discussed the series. He looked much the same as he did in the first "The Best Man" feature in 1999 in which his portrayal of a muscular football star solidified his heartthrob status.

He credited his appearance to his aggressively healthy lifestyle: "It's a blessing from God. I've never made Hollywood my life. It's just a part of my life. It's a tough place — physically and emotionally. I've seen it eat people and spit them out. I go home and chill after work. I don't go to parties. That stuff can take a toll on your soul, body and mind."

Chestnut, who is also an executive producer of "Watson," was immediately excited when first presented with the pilot script from showrunner Craig Sweeny: "It was so strong. Had everything — action, emotion, wit. It left you with a cliff-hanger to see where things were going to go. After I met with Craig and learned where he wanted to take the show, I knew I had to sign on."

Yet he also is uncomfortably aware that not everyone is pleased with a Black actor taking on a role that has historically been portrayed by white men. The list of past Watsons include Nigel Bruce, Robert Duvall, Jude Law, John C. Reilly and Martin Freeman.

The move has already been met with gripes on social media, mirroring the criticism that greeted the casting of Halle Bailey in the live-action remake of "The Little Mermaid," the "Star Wars" franchise and other beloved prop-



SALLY MONTANA/CBS

**Morris Chestnut plays Dr. John Watson, Sherlock Holmes' partner, in CBS' "Watson." The compassionate geneticist and internist becomes the head of an elite rare disorders clinic at a Pittsburgh hospital after Holmes is murdered.**

erties that have embraced more cultural diversity.

"I'm reluctant to discuss it, particularly in the times we're living in," said Chestnut, his deep voice registering his disappointment. "I've seen some negative comments about me playing this character. And I really don't want to focus on that — I just hope people see the character in the mythology for who he is. I don't want to call attention to that."

Still, he acknowledged that his casting would have attracted less attention several years ago, when the Black Lives Matter movement sparked calls for more equity and inclusion in Hollywood.

Said Chestnut, "It would have been much more seamless, 100%. In these times, people like to point to certain things and bring a negative political spin to it. I'm glad that 'The Little Mermaid' and 'Wicked' are wildly successful. In my whole career, I've never made it about

things outside of my work. It is frustrating to have to deal with that. Hopefully we are all successful."

"Watson" is just one of several new doctor dramas checking into prime time this season. NBC's "Brilliant Minds," Fox's "Doc," Max's "The Pitt" and ABC's "Doctor Odyssey" have joined veterans "Grey's Anatomy" and "Chicago Med."

Assisting Watson in the clinic is a squad of young, accomplished doctors who are also investigating rare disorders. Complicating his personal life is his lingering affection for his ex-wife, Dr. Mary Morstan (Rochelle Aytes), who is also the hospital's medical director. And Watson is still being targeted by Holmes' nemesis, Moriarty.

"I'm most energized not only by the evolution of my

**SEE CHESTNUT ON PAGE 31**

## WEEKEND: TELEVISION

## REVIEW

## A warmer 'House'

'Watson' moves Holmes' sidekick into spotlight for medical drama with all the hallmarks of a typical CBS procedural

BY ROBERT LLOYD  
*Los Angeles Times*

When you create a character as perfect as Sherlock Holmes, as Arthur Conan Doyle did in 1887 — and not just a character but a whole situation, with a sidekick chronicler, Dr. Watson, a housekeeper and an address — you give the world an armature to build on, a template to play off. And so the world has built and played, across countless adaptations, pastiches, reimaginings, animations and updates. There may be no characters in English literature more widely recognized and well understood.

Television has done Holmes straight — the four period series starring Jeremy Brett, which ran from 1984 to 1994 and adapted 43 of 60 Holmes stories — and has brought the characters into the 21st century. Steven Moffat's contemporary "Sherlock" (2010-17), with Benedict Cumberbatch and Martin Freeman as Holmes and Watson, respectively, paid homage to the original stories more than it adapted them. "House" (2004-12), with Hugh Laurie, cast the master detective as a doctor in a medical drama; references to the original stories were obvious, explicit and part of the fun. And "Elementary," which aired on CBS from 2012 to 2019, pictured Holmes (Jonny Lee Miller) as a recovering drug addict attached to the NYPD, with Watson (Lucy Liu), a former surgeon, hired to keep him sober.

CBS has gone back to that well now with "Watson." Created by Craig Sweeny, who wrote for "Elementary," "Watson" moves Holmes' almost-as-famous physician friend into the spotlight. And what we get is, more or less, a warmer, fuzzier version of "House." The basics are substantially

the same — John Watson (Morris Chestnut), a clinical geneticist, leads a team of young doctors sleuthing their way to the heart of difficult cases, as he fences with an exasperated superior who, in this case, is Watson's almost ex-wife, Mary Morstan (Rochelle Aytes).

We meet him at Switzerland's Reichenbach Falls, running through the woods, shouting "Holmes!" as gunshots explode in the distance. Even those moderately familiar with the canon will know that this is where Holmes and his nemesis, Professor Moriarty, plunged to their apparent deaths in Conan Doyle's "The Final Problem"; but here, Watson jumps in after them. He awakens in a Swiss hospital sporting "a traumatic brain injury" and some memory loss, attended by an animated East End Londoner named Shinwell Johnson (Ritchie Coster) — a minor, somewhat criminal character pulled from "The Adventure of the Illustrious Client" and, in this telling, a sort of third partner in the Holmes gang.

Holmes, Johnson tells Watson once he has got some of his wits back, was apparently "loaded" ("had the bees and honey to look after us both," he says, using Cockney slang for money) and has funded a clinic for Watson to run, with a salary for Johnson to work as his aide. Six months later, we are in Pittsburgh and the Holmes Clinic is up and running, with 200 applications coming in a day. Sweeny has loaded his doctor with lots of extra business: He's still recovering from his fall, treating himself with surreptitiously acquired drugs, while working to cure his patients in sometimes unorthodox, unethical or illegal ways; he's dragging his feet on a divorce from Mary, who tired of him running off to London to play detective whenever



CBS

In "Watson," Dr. John Watson (Morris Chestnut) tells his crew of young experts and students at the Pittsburgh clinic he runs that "We're doctors and we're detectives."

Holmes called. And it is soon revealed — to us, not to him — that Moriarty lives, and has compromised Johnson in some way the series does not reveal in the five episodes out for review.

Like Gregory House, Watson has his crew of variably eager young experts/students/acolytes, each with a specialty. Identical twins Stephens and Adam Croft (both played by Peter Mark Kendall, quite seamlessly) are oh so far apart in character: Stephens is a study bug with no social life, the ant to Adam's easygoing grasshopper. (Adam is also dating Stephens' ex.) Sasha Lubbock (Inga Schlingmann), adopted from China by rich Texans, sports a wide Southern accent. They are there, Adam suggests, as examples of nature versus nurture: "Watson thinks the whole world is an experiment in genetic medicine; we're just part of it." And then there's Ingrid Derian (Eve Harlow), who is also acting as Holmes' neurologist, whom Adam classes as "a mystery."

"We're doctors and we're detectives," Watson tells them. "Mysteries are what

we do." There are throwaway references to the Baker Street Irregulars and the Red-Headed League. Watson pronounces Holmes' famous dictum that once you eliminate the impossible, what remains, however improbable, is the truth.

"Watson" has all the hallmarks of a CBS procedural. The network has a taste and a talent for a kind of light serious entertainment in which a likable cast of sometimes difficult characters solve a problem in an hour, while other, darker events percolate underneath. These reliably entertaining shows — "Matlock" and "Elsbeth" and "NCIS Wherever," also running now — can generate a good bit of tension while remaining pleasant on the whole, and though superficially deep can sometimes elicit a real emotional response. There's nothing like a life-and-death situation turning out "life" to moisten one's eyes, especially if you or a loved one has spent any time in the medical system, or feared the possibility.

"Watson" airs Mondays on AFN-Prime and streams on Paramount+.

## Chestnut: 'I just wanted the industry to recognize me, to see me'

## FROM PAGE 30

character, but of the other characters," Chestnut said. "The audience is really going to feel for them. The show is exciting and emotional."

The series marks the network's second Holmes reboot. "Elementary," which starred Jonny Lee Miller and Lucy Liu as the investigative duo, premiered in 2012 and had a solid seven-season run.

Sweeny, who was an executive producer on "Elementary," said Chestnut was one of the actors he was thinking about when he was writing the pilot for "Watson": "It was because of his empathy and intelligence. Everybody in the industry has nothing but glowing words for Morris as a person. He is one of the kindest and most respectful people I've ever

worked with, as well as a great leader."

He was also impressed by a few of the actor's previous portrayals of physicians.

Said Sweeny: "In writing a medical show, I'm going to task the actor with swimming in an ocean of medical jargon. It takes a commitment. With this show, we're committed to getting the science right with every medical twist and turn. Correct science has a lot of syllables. Morris is as committed to getting it right on his end as we are in the writing."

"Playing a doctor is very challenging, and playing a doctor in a one-hour series is even more challenging," Chestnut said. "The medical terminology is almost a different language. I have to know what I'm talking about. I can't change the words around

like I could in a regular role. The terms and diagnosis have to be accurate and on point. It puts a whole different layer to the performance."

It's a challenge he is grateful to take on, particularly at this point in his creative growth. In "Boyz n the Hood," late director John Singleton's landmark debut about young people living amid the dangers of gang life in South Los Angeles, Chestnut played Ricky Baker, a high school football star who hopes to go to college with a scholarship. Ricky meets a tragic end when he is gunned down by gang members.

"Aside from that film launching my career, it has helped me sustain my career," he said. "It's not only a great film, but people were rooting for me. People were emotionally connected to the

character, but the staying power while I was doing other projects connected people to me. I can't tell you how many people I talk to today who were not alive when the movie was released."

The other key highlight is "The Best Man," Malcolm D. Lee's romantic comedy about a group of college friends who have a joyous but rocky reunion when two of them decide to marry. That film bucked the trend of Black films at the time, which focused on turmoil in Black areas, by focusing on sophisticated, upscale Black characters.

Chestnut was among the cast members who would move on to major stardom, including Taye Diggs, Terrence Howard, Nia Long, Regina Hall and Melissa De Sousa.

The cast reunited for a sequel,

2013's "The Best Man Holiday," and the 2022 Peacock limited series "The Best Man: The Final Chapters."

In the franchise, Chestnut played another star football player, Lance Sullivan, who is emotionally distraught in "The Best Man Holiday" after learning that his wife, Mia (Monica Calhoun), is dying of cancer.

Once again, Chestnut said, "People were on an emotional journey with me. That also helped me sustain a career."

Those films and subsequent projects have positioned him for the spotlight in "Watson," he said.

"I am so honored they thought of me for this," he said. "I just wanted the industry to recognize me, to see me and say, 'I want that guy.'"

## WEEKEND: HEALTH &amp; FITNESS

# Pose proposal

A guide to finding the right yoga style for you

BY ALBERT STUMM  
Associated Press

To some people, the word “yoga” evokes ritualistic chanting, long breaths and slow movement. To others, it means contorting your body into ever more complicated positions until sweat drips onto the mat.

In reality, it can be both — with a lot of variation in between. It depends on the teacher, who could be trained in several of numerous yoga styles: hatha, vinyasa, Iyengar, ashtanga, yin and more.

Though all styles involve poses (asanas), they differ in significant ways. Even classes within the same style can range from calming to vigorous.

So what is the best type of class for a beginner?

“The best is the one that works for you,” said Tim Senesi, who has been teaching yoga in Orange County, Calif., for 22 years. “There are many different paths leading toward the same aim.”

Here’s a primer on some of the most popular styles, followed by a big caveat:

## Hatha/yin yoga styles

The term “yoga,” which is derived from the Sanskrit for “union,” actually encompasses an entire discipline that includes movement, meditation and life-style. Hatha, meaning “force,” technically is any kind of yoga class involving asanas. If you’ve ever heard of a sun salutation, for instance, that is a foundational sequence of 12 asanas that begin many types of classes.

When it comes to classes listed as hatha, however, they generally are gentler with more focus on breathing exercises (pranayama). Poses are held for a few breaths and students usually move more slowly. Hatha can be good for beginners who are looking to relax while improving flexibility and balance.

Another style, yin, is even more focused on recovery by working to stretch the muscles’ connective tissue. Students hold poses for five minutes or more, allowing the body to settle into a pose rather than pushing it.

## Vinyasa/ashtanga styles

A more vigorous, flowing form of yoga, vinyasa coordinates movement with breath over a

progression of asanas. Some higher-level vinyasa classes move at a pace of one movement per breath.

Often they will be called Flow or Power classes. They can be appropriate for people who are more athletic, but teachers still recommend that those students start with a beginner level.

“I wouldn’t really encourage them to start in a higher level vinyasa flow class because they’re not going to have the foundation to move safely through that,” said Anne Van Valkenburg, of Lanai, Hawaii, who has been training yoga teachers in a blend of styles for 18 years.

Another style, ashtanga, is similar except that it involves a set series of poses that students repeat day after day, often going at their own pace. As students get stronger, they advance to a higher series with more challenging poses, something akin to belt levels in martial arts.

## Iyengar style

This style involves the same poses as vinyasa but classes usually move at a slower pace — although they are not necessarily easier. The focus is more on precisely aligning parts of the body through small adjustments. Poses are held for longer and students rely more often on props including cushions, blocks or straps.

Iyengar is particularly good for people recovering from injuries, or for people who are already active but want to get the foundation of yoga before moving into different styles.

## A caveat about styles

These days, most teachers blend various styles in their classes, and many classes aren’t billed with these terms. The few words describing the class should give you an idea of what to expect, but don’t be afraid to ask questions at the studio or reach out to individual teachers.

Ideally, seek out a beginner series, but if you can’t find one that’s right, don’t worry. Most teachers are happy to have beginners in their classes and will make accommodations.

Most of all, commit to trying a few classes until you find the style or teacher that resonates with you.

“I feel sad when someone tries yoga once or twice and they’re like, ‘Eh, I don’t like it,’” Van Valkenburg said. “There’s just so much out there that you might be missing something that’s super beneficial for your life.”



Yogi Stephanie Rodriguez practices yoga on the Edge sky deck at 30 Hudson Yards in the borough of Manhattan in New York on May 24, 2023. Though they differ, all styles involve poses or asanas.

## WEEKEND: FAMILY

# The same difference

Girl with cleft lip finds bond with dog

BY SYDNEY PAGE  
The Washington Post

**A**t night before bed, Kynlee Rogers would often ask her mother: “Mom, why am I different?”

Born with a bilateral cleft lip, Kynlee, 10, began noticing her facial differences around age 6. Other kids noticed, too.

“They would make her feel different, and they would draw attention to her differences,” said her mother, Kimberly Rogers.

But last February, Kynlee asked her mother a new question: “Mom, do dogs have cleft lips?”

Rogers replied, “Of course they do,” and a lightbulb went on for the mother of five in Murray, Ky.

She started researching and found Cleft Rescue Unit, a nonprofit in Rochester, N.Y., that rescues young puppies with cleft palates, cleft lips and other medical needs. Rogers got in touch with Lindsay Weisman, founder and director of the organization.

“Our mission is to combine the two different cleft communities: the human community and the canine community,” said Weisman, who started the rescue in May 2023 as a division of New 2 U Rescue. “We get puppies from across the country.”

A cleft lip or palate — an opening in the upper lip or roof of the mouth — occurs in both humans and dogs as the mouth area forms in utero. It is caused by genetic or environmental factors, or both.

Weisman finds the dogs when breeders and animal hospitals reach out to her as they discover they have newborn puppies with cleft conditions or other special needs. Volunteer fosters, including Weisman, care for the puppies until they are healthy enough for adoption.

“If these puppies are not taken from their mothers, they will not live,” said Weisman, explaining that cleft puppies can’t nurse, so they need to be tube-fed.

Some of the dogs are adopted by families with children who have similar conditions as the pup, like Kynlee.

“They love that the puppies look like them,” Weisman said. “It’s really special.”

Weisman brings puppies to events and camps for kids with craniofacial differences. She met Rogers and her daughter at one of the camps in July in Nashville, and that’s when Kynlee was introduced to Tennessee, a 5-week-old Boston terrier with a cleft lip. It was love at first sight.

“Tennee is just like her,” said Rogers, adding that they happen to share the same birthday, June 4. “It just gives her something she can relate to. She’s not alone.”

Rogers adopted Tennessee in September, and the dog’s impact on her daughter’s life, she said, has been dramatic.

“Since we have gotten Tennee, she has not asked one question about why she’s different,” Rogers said, adding that the dog sleeps in Kynlee’s bed. “There’s just a bond. Tennee is her comforter.”

Elsie Garcia-Urbay’s son, Randy Urbay, 22, has had a similar experience with his rescue dog, Leo, whom they adopted from Cleft Rescue Unit in January 2024.

Randy Urbay has a condition called Apert syndrome, a rare genetic disorder that affects the shape of his head and face.



KIMBERLY ROGERS

**Kynlee Rogers, 10, with her dog, Tennessee. Both Kynlee and Tennessee were born with a cleft lip.**



Cleft Rescue Unit

**Kynlee brings Tennessee home from the airport in September.**



ELSIE GARCIA

**Leo has helped boost Randy Urbay’s confidence.**

Garcia-Urbay had wanted to get a dog for her son and stumbled upon a photo online of a cocker spaniel with a cleft lip.

“He was absolutely gorgeous,” said Garcia-Urbay, who lives in Miramar, Fla.

Garcia-Urbay reached out to Weisman to ask about adoption, and Weisman offered to fly with the dog from New York to Punta Gorda, Fla. Garcia-Urbay drove three hours to meet them there.

“When people look at Leo and they look at Randy, they see beyond the differences,” said Garcia-Urbay, adding that Leo has helped boost her son’s confidence so much that she is training the canine to be a therapy dog for other patients at Joe DiMaggio Children’s Hospital, where Garcia-Urbay is the craniofacial family advocate.

“He loves kids and loves people,” Garcia-Urbay said. “Leo’s purpose is for the kids to see him, and see that they’re not alone. ... He takes his job very seriously.”

Caring for puppies with special needs can be financially and emotionally draining. Dogs with cleft palates, in particular, often have other health issues. Weisman has partnered with two surgeons at the University of Rochester who perform pro bono operations on the cleft puppies, if needed.

Since many of the puppies have health complications, “we’re super restrictive with where we adopt the puppies,” Weisman said. Still, she said it is important that people in the craniofacial community, especially children, have the chance to mingle with the dogs.

“If someone isn’t able to adopt, I always offer them to come play with the puppies,” Weisman said.

## THE MEAT AND POTATOES OF LIFE

Lisa Smith Molinari



## Friendships are forged amid embarrassment

“Put Neosporin on it,” I advised my husband, Francis, who had jogged 17 miles that day, and chafed his inner thighs raw. We needed a quick solution, because he only had half an hour to pick up the babysitter so we could make our dinner reservation.

Francis wasn’t a runner, but he’d signed up to run the London Marathon the following week. We were stationed at JAC Molesworth, England, about 90 miles north of London. He and his workmate had been practicing a few days a week, but hadn’t jogged more than 10 miles until that day.

An experienced marathoner at work had told them, “as long as you can run 17 miles,” you can do the marathon. So, with only a week until the race, they planned their longest run ever, not knowing that novice marathoners who don’t lube up their chests and thighs with Vaseline will finish their runs with blood streaking down their T-shirts and shorts.

“But won’t the Neosporin soak through my khakis?” Francis asked in desperation while we dressed for dinner.

“Good point,” I said. “Wait! I have an idea!” I opened my dresser drawer and pulled out two circular nursing breast pads made to stick inside a bra. “Stick these on the insides of your khakis, so the Neosporin won’t soak through.” Genius!

I wasn’t about to miss our first outing since giving birth to our second child, Anna, who was barely two months old, over a little bit of chafing. Since Anna was still a newborn and nursing, she’d be coming along to our dinner. Still, I couldn’t wait to finally get out of the house.

I helped Francis remove the small adhesive strips on the back side of the nursing pads, and we carefully stuck them to the inside of his khakis. Francis grinned, impressed with his wife’s ingenuity, as he left for the babysitter’s house.

Our babysitters, Jacquie and Anitra, were sisters from a very proper American Air Force family that lived a couple of villages over from us. When Francis got back, Jacquie came into our house while Francis waited for me outside. I kissed Hayden goodbye, and carried Anna out to the minivan.

“You’re not gonna believe what happened!” Francis blurted as soon as I buckled Anna into her carseat. I listened, stunned, as Francis relayed his embarrassing tale.

Inside the Air Force family’s foyer, Francis was greeted by the babysitters’ father. While they waited for Jacquie to come downstairs, they chatted about work stuff, when suddenly, the father’s eyes darted to the floor, aghast.

Francis looked down to see that a blood-stained nursing pad had fallen out of his pant leg. The father’s eyes shot back from the pad to Francis’ face, demanding an explanation.

Francis feebly stuttered and giggled through the story of the 17-mile run, the chafing, the Neosporin, the khakis and his wife’s bright idea, which now seemed like a very, very bad idea. Humiliated, Francis scooped up the bloodied circle and stuffed it in his pocket before Jacquie descended the staircase.

Needless to say, the incident dominated our dinner conversation. Did Jacquie’s dad believe Francis’ chafing story? If not, how did he account for the nursing pad that fell out of Francis’ pants? Why would he trust his daughter with this man? How did he recount this story to his wife? Despite Francis’ extreme embarrassment, we laughed until we cried.

The next weekend, Francis finished the London Marathon unchafed, thanks to a thick coating of Vaseline. And recently, decades after that fateful night, Jacquie, Anitra and their families came to our house for a visit. We’d kept in touch through Christmas cards and social media, so when they were in our area, we planned to catch up.

As tends to happen with military friendships, we felt a closeness that belied the fact that we hadn’t actually seen each other in 26 years. Of course, we retold the story of the khakis and the nursing pad, and again laughed until we cried.

Read more at [themeatandpotatoesoflife.com](http://themeatandpotatoesoflife.com) and in Lisa’s book, “The Meat and Potatoes of Life: My True Lit Com.” Email: [meatandpotatoesoflife@gmail.com](mailto:meatandpotatoesoflife@gmail.com)

# WEEKEND: CROSSWORD AND COMICS

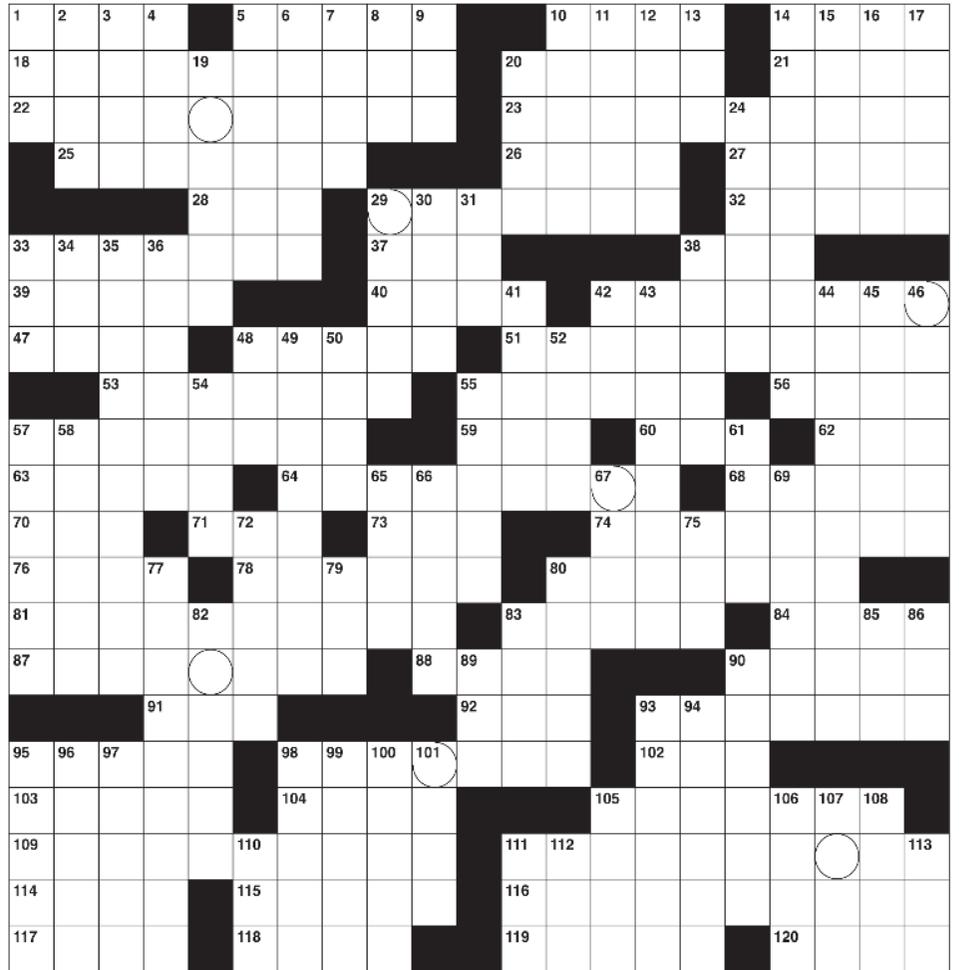
## NEW YORK TIMES CROSSWORD

### LETTER OPENERS

BY RICH PROULX / EDITED BY WILL SHORTZ

Rich Proulx (pronounced "proo") of Berkeley, Calif., works for the Food and Nutrition Service of the U.S.D.A. This is his ninth crossword for The Times since 2017, and his first Sunday. For this puzzle, he originally wanted the images to appear in circles in the grid, but those proved too small to make out. So he revamped the puzzle and placed them in the clues instead. — W.S.

- ACROSS**
- 1 "The weekend is almost here!"
  - 5 Pioneers of freeze-drying food
  - 10 Share from an illicit endeavor
  - 14 Polite term of address
  - 18 Lifted one's spirits?
  - 20 Riveting persona of W.W. II
  - 21 Frozen treat with a domed lid
  - 22 See 19-Down
  - 23 Place for a white picket fence and a mom-and-pop shop
  - 25 Aid for using Bluetooth
  - 26 Startle
  - 27 Flirt with
  - 28 Feel bad
  - 29 See 29-Down
  - 32 Highly capable
  - 33 Passion
  - 37 Water feature created by rising sea levels
  - 38 STEM part: Abbr.
  - 39 Sierra
  - 40 "What are the \_\_\_?"
  - 42 See 46-Down
  - 47 Awkward people to butt-dial, perhaps
  - 48 Circuit board device
  - 51 Vast, as an operation
  - 53 \_\_\_ Collins, author of "The Hunger Games"
  - 55 Helen of "The Queen"
  - 56 Futon component
  - 57 Was transfixed by, in a way
  - 59 Glass \_\_\_\_, spaghetti-like fish
  - 60 Give a darn?
  - 62 French aperitif
  - 63 Weapon with wires
  - 64 See 67-Down
  - 68 Justice Kagan
  - 70 Natural feature between México y Texas
  - 71 \_\_\_ Kosh B'gosh
  - 73 TV journalist Navarro
  - 74 Annual observance for breast cancer awareness
  - 76 Knee parts, in brief
  - 78 Auto mechanic's tool
  - 80 War room briefings, in military shorthand
  - 81 Gold Medal offering
  - 83 "Au contraire!"
  - 84 Cause of puddles in early spring, say
  - 87 See 82-Down
  - 88 Go a little one way or the other
  - 90 Gordon \_\_\_\_, engineer with a "law" predicting a doubling of transistors on microchips every two years
  - 91 Record label for the Backstreet Boys
  - 92 Tech company exec, for short
  - 93 In a corner
  - 95 Cause of some sleep issues
  - 98 See 101-Down
  - 102 "Ten-\_\_\_!"
  - 103 Show listlessness
  - 104 "See above," in footnotes
  - 105 Got online, say
  - 109 "Conclave" actress Isabella
  - 111 See 107-Down
  - 114 Saber alternative
  - 115 Worst time for a double fault
  - 116 Approaches furtively
  - 117 "Over here!"
  - 118 Hydroelectric projects
  - 119 "White & \_\_\_" (2006 Weird Al Yankovic parody)
  - 120 Structure that's set on fire
- DOWN**
- 1 Network owned by Showtime
  - 2 Mighty wind
  - 3 One might start as a seed
  - 4 "Have no \_\_\_ of perfection — you'll never reach it": Salvador Dali
  - 5 Just like that!
  - 6 Without regard to privacy
  - 7 Temporary residence
  - 8 Largest public sch. in the U.S., by enrollment
  - 9 P.S.T. part: Abbr.
  - 10 So far
  - 11 Safe harbors
  - 12 Poker pot
  - 13 Fair-hiring letters
  - 14 Storage devices made obsolete by MP3 players
  - 15 Sharp
  - 16 "The Boy Who Cried Wolf" author
  - 17 Intended
  - 19 **CIRCLED LETTER** + 
  - 20 Kashmiri king
  - 24 Off's
  - 29 **CIRCLED LETTER** + 
  - 30 Number two
  - 31 Bit
  - 33 Public house offering
  - 34 White House dog of the 1980s
  - 35 Helps, informally
  - 36 Guarantee
  - 38 Part of an act
  - 41 More crafty
  - 42 [Shivers]
  - 43 Visible signs of maturity
  - 44 Got down to business, in a way
  - 45 \_\_\_ Urquhart, co-host of the podcast "Morbid"
  - 46 **CIRCLED LETTER** + 
  - 48 Many a school chaperone
  - 49 Later
  - 50 Cognizant of
  - 52 Folk singer Guthrie
  - 54 Diddly-squat
  - 55 Hip-hop's \_\_\_ Thee Stallion
  - 57 They're for suckers
  - 58 Meditative martial art
  - 61 Common word with or without an apostrophe
  - 65 Meaty pasta sauce
  - 66 Ridge in metalworking
  - 67 **CIRCLED LETTER** + 
  - 69 Office folder?
  - 72 Vowel sound in "father"
  - 75 Dude
  - 77 Audiophile's system
  - 79 Cut (off)
  - 80 What "fitz-" or "-ovic" means, in names
  - 82 **CIRCLED LETTER** + 
  - 83 Innocent sort
  - 85 "Chances \_\_\_..."
  - 86 Became one
  - 89 Modern prefix with anxiety
  - 90 Salt's companions
  - 93 Theseus' need in the Labyrinth
  - 94 In an uncouth manner
  - 95 Marketing worker, informally
  - 96 Credit, informally
  - 97 Prominent features of elephant seals
  - 98 Comedian Radner
  - 99 A perfect storm, e.g.
  - 100 Planet whose day is longer than its year
  - 101 **CIRCLED LETTER** + 
  - 105 Done
  - 106 Extend one's military service
  - 107 **CIRCLED LETTER** + 
  - 108 Hard thing to find in a house of mirrors
  - 110 "Wee" fellow
  - 111 Channel with the onetime spinoff America's Store
  - 112 Suffix with emir
  - 113 S.F.-to-Napa dir.



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## FACES



Singer Ozzy Osbourne, shown in 2022, will reunite with all of the original members of Black Sabbath for the first time in 20 years for a show July 5 in Birmingham, England.

# Osbourne's Black Sabbath show to be 'greatest ever'

Heavy metal band to reunite for 1 night in July in Birmingham, England

BY PAN PYLAS  
Associated Press

Ozzy Osbourne will reunite with all of the original members of Black Sabbath for the first time in 20 years, in a gig that will be his last and that's being billed as the "greatest" heavy metal show ever, promoters said Wednesday.

The band, one of the most influential of all heavy metal bands, will headline "The Back to the Beginning" show on July 5 at Villa Park, home of the Aston Villa Football Club in Birmingham, England.

"It's my time to go back to the beginning ... time for me to give back to the place where I was born," Osbourne said in a statement. "How blessed am I to do it with the help of people whom I love. Birmingham is the true home of metal. Birmingham forever."

Osbourne, who was the band's frontman during its peak period in the 1970s and who was widely known as the "Prince of Darkness," will deliver his own short set before Sabbath bandmates Tony Iommi, Geezer Butler and Bill Ward join him for the first time in two decades.

The all-day event will also feature a host of major metal bands including Metallica, Slayer and Alice In Chains, with more names to be announced shortly.

"This will be the greatest heavy metal show ever," music director Tom Morello said.

In 2020, Osbourne revealed he had been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease and he paused touring in 2023 after extensive spinal surgery. He has struggled with health issues since 2003 following a near-fatal quad bike crash, injuries that were aggravated in 2019 when he fell at home.

Sabbath's story began in Birmingham in 1968 when the four original members were looking to escape a life of factory work. Their eponymous debut album in 1970 made the U.K. top 10 and paved the way for a string of hit albums, including 1971's "Master of Reality" and "Vol. 4" a year later. They went on to become one of the most influential and successful metal bands of all time, selling more than 75 million albums worldwide.

All profits from the July 5 show will go to charity. Tickets go on sale Feb. 14.

# Erivo of 'Wicked' gets Harvard Pudding Pot

BY MICHAEL CASEY  
Associated Press

Screaming fans lined the streets of Cambridge, Mass., in frigid conditions Wednesday to catch a glimpse of Cynthia Erivo, the "Wicked" star who was being celebrated as Harvard University's Hasty Pudding Theatricals Woman of the Year.

Erivo, bundled in a parka and donning her trademark long fingernails, blew kisses to the crowd and mouthed "I love you" as the car she and costumed members of the Hasty Pudding Theatricals were in slowly made its way through Cambridge.

"She's such an icon," said Onovughakpor Otitigbe, a 21-year-old Harvard student from New York.

"She's done so much for Black women, especially in theater," Otitigbe said. "As a Black woman in theater myself, it was just really amazing to finally see her in person ... Oh my gosh, I got so many selfies. Me and my friend, we were chasing her from the start to the end of the parade."

A few hours later, Erivo received her Pudding Pot award at a celebratory roast.



CHARLES KRUPA/AP

Two members of Harvard University's Hasty Pudding Theatricals give actress Cynthia Erivo a kiss Feb. 5.

She endured a string of comedians that made bad jokes about "Wicked" being long before they were forced off stage. Then she took part in a finger-painting contest, scratching out an abstract painting of what was supposed to be "Wicked" co-star Ariana Grande. She then belted out a few notes in a singing competition before receiving a blue Pudding Pot from members of the Blue Man Group. The real Pudding Pot followed.

Erivo told the crowd her whole day was "fantastic" and afterward told reporters that it was honor to be recognized by a theater group for her work.

## Long-lost silent film about Lincoln discovered

A 1915 movie about the life of Abraham Lincoln, previously thought lost forever, was found on Long Island, N.Y.

"The Heart of Lincoln," released by Universal, is a silent film about American life during the Civil War. It was directed by and stars Francis Ford — the brother of legendary director John Ford — as the 16th president.

The film was discovered by intern Dan Martin at Lauro's Historic Films Archive in Greenport while he was going through boxes of material donated to the archive.

The 65-minute movie had previously been listed by the Library of

Congress as one of 7,000 silent films thought to be lost forever. Many silent films were lost because they were printed on highly volatile nitrate film stock, according to Newsday.

Film archivist Eliot Kissileff told NBC New York he was able to digitize the 16-millimeter print.

"I guess it was just lucky the cans were sealed and had not decayed," Kissileff told the station.

"For someone going to school for film preservation, this is about the most rewarding outcome you can have sifting through those old film cans," intern Martin added.

New York Daily News

# Ariana Grande says making music saved her life

BY KARU F. DANIELS  
New York Daily News

Ariana Grande is opening up about the darkest time of her life, and how making music led her through it.

On the latest episode of The Hollywood Reporter's "Awards Chatter" podcast, the Oscar-nominated "Wicked" star said releasing two albums in less than six months was instrumental in helping her deal with grief, depression, anxiety and PTSD.

Grande's album "Sweetener" was released in August 2018 and was her first new music after the 2017 terrorist attack at her concert in Manchester, England. The sui-

cide bombing left 22 people dead and wounded hundreds of others.

In February 2019, she followed that up with her chart-topper "Thank U, Next," mere months after the overdose death of her ex-boyfriend Mac Miller and the end of her engagement to "SNL" funnyman Pete Davidson.

"I think I needed to be doing that," she said of throwing herself into that music. "I was doing so much therapy, and I was dealing with PTSD and all different kinds of grief and depression, and anxiety. I was, of course, treating it very seriously, but having music be a part of that remedy was absolutely contributing to saving my life."

According to Grande, her music label, Republic Records, tried to slow down the release of "Thank U, Next" immediately after "Sweetener," but she insisted on moving forward as "a means of survival."

"I just said, 'I don't really care about the formula. I don't want to play by the rules at this moment, because this is what I need for my soul,'" she recalled. "It felt really healing and freeing. It was just such a beautiful moment of connection."

Ariana Grande, shown Jan. 7, said releasing two albums in less than six months in 2018-'19 was therapeutic for her.

EVAN AGOSTINI, INVISION/AP



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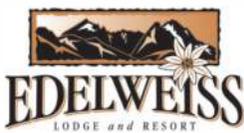
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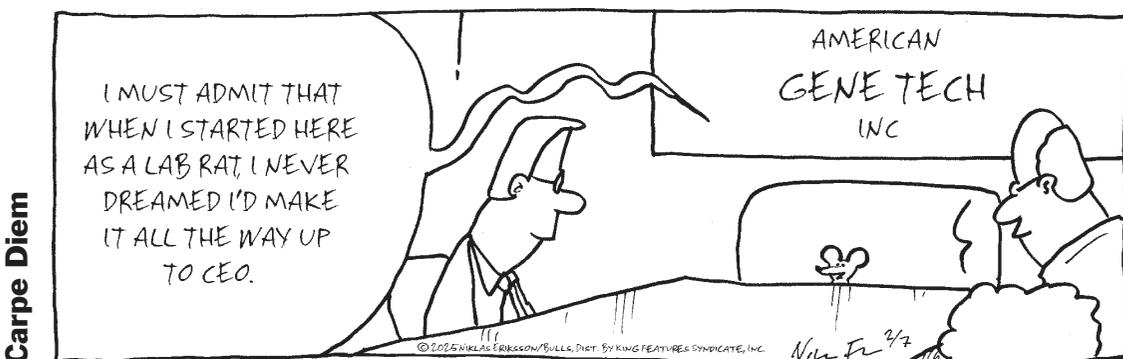
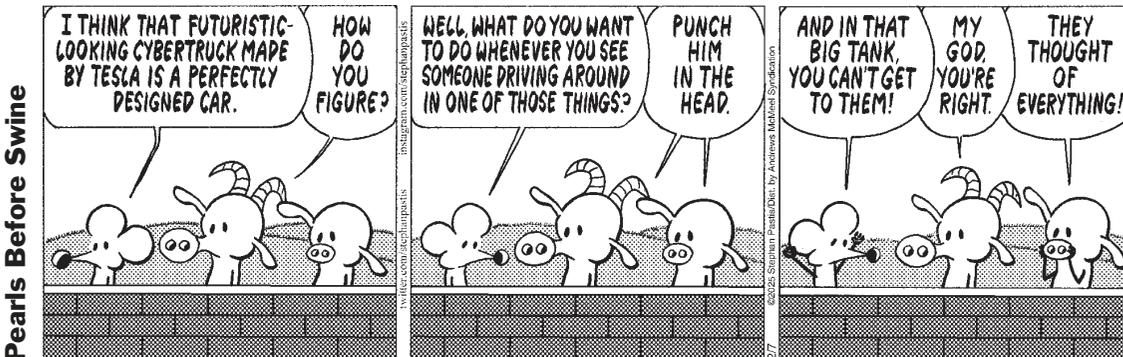
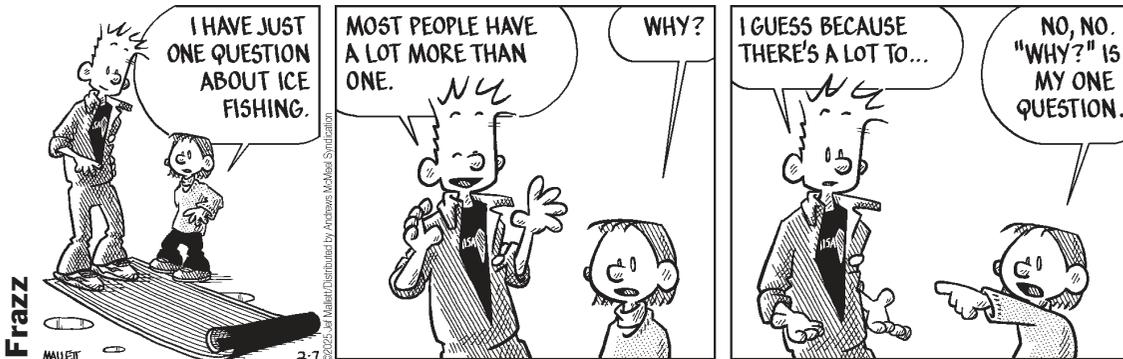
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Bizarro



Loose Parts



Eugene Sheffer Crossword

1	2	3	4	5		6	7	8		9	10	11
12						13				14		
15						16				17		
		18				19				20		
21	22			23				24				
25			26		27		28					
29				30			31			32	33	34
			35				36			37		
38	39	40					41		42		43	
44							45			46		
47					48				49		50	51
52					53				54			
55					56				57			

ACROSS

- 1 Ashley and Wynonna
- 6 Consumer protection agcy.
- 9 Catchall abbr.
- 12 Track star Bolt
- 13 Tic-tac-toe win
- 14 "The Matrix" character
- 15 Refuse an offer
- 16 Seattle suburb that's home to Microsoft
- 18 Credit rating publisher
- 20 Skin soother
- 21 Corp. money exec
- 23 Overly
- 24 Part of LGBTQ
- 25 Hit on the noggin
- 27 Japanese fish dish
- 29 Tranquil
- 31 Sort of dive
- 35 Police ID
- 37 Employ
- 38 Hairnet
- 41 Moray, for one
- 43 Past
- 44 Plane-related
- 45 Country song?
- 47 Archbishop Tutu
- 49 Stag
- 52 Altar affirmative
- 53 Reuben bread

- 54 More practical
- 55 Aachen article
- 56 Rowing need
- 57 Birch's kin

- 21 "60 Minutes" airer
- 22 Nemesis
- 24 Fill in — blank
- 26 Explosive sound
- 28 Bed cover
- 30 Wee bit
- 32 Tiara stone
- 33 Work unit
- 34 Old Olds
- 36 Census info
- 38 "Sexy" Beatles girl
- 39 "— say more?"
- 40 Director Welles
- 42 — apso (small dog)
- 45 Novelist Seton
- 46 Airline to Tel Aviv
- 48 Spanish gold
- 50 Born
- 51 Blunder

Answer to Previous Puzzle

T	U	F	T		T	L	C		S	F	P	D		
E	C	R	U		H	A	H		U	R	S	A		
E	L	A	L		E	T	A		B	E	A	R		
S	A	T	I	N	S				I	M	P	U	T	E
H	A	G	S		I	S	C	A	R	I	O	T		
I	S	U			A	T	O				A	D	O	
P	L	A	T	I	N	U	M			K	N	E	W	
T	I	D	I	E	R				D	E	E	D	E	D
A	S	I	A		I	C	I		P	E	D	I		
C	L	A	D		T	E	A		I	B	E	G		
T	A	N	S		Z	E	N		T	I	N	S		

2-7

CRYPTOQUIP

EKNX JKN GLGJNDA LDTSOSGX  
 EGT QWGUSXB JKN OWGASXNJ  
 SXNQJWU, KFE MSM SJ TFDXM?  
 AFDBK GXM ANNMU.  
 Yesterday's Cryptoquip: NOODLE DISHES MAY BE PREPARED IN SO MANY DIFFERENT STYLES. THERE ARE ENDLESS PASTA-BILITIES.  
 Today's Cryptoquip Clue: B equals G

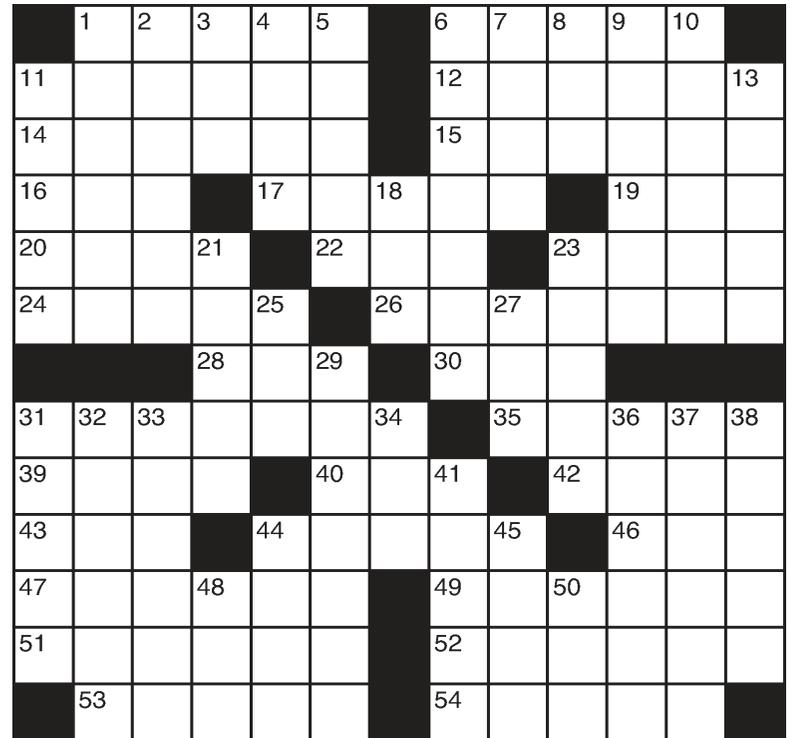
**Bizarro**



**Loose Parts**



**Eugene Sheffer Crossword**



**ACROSS**

- 1 Bath powders
- 6 Selected
- 11 Patronize, as a bistro
- 12 Cuts at an angle
- 14 Long-haired cat
- 15 Rise in defiance
- 16 Montmartre Mrs.
- 17 Wide
- 19 Big fuss
- 20 — ale
- 22 Rocker Nugent
- 23 Raced
- 24 Nosh at midnight
- 26 Bishop's district
- 28 Free (of)
- 30 Spanish gold
- 31 Pianist Arrau
- 35 Slowpoke
- 39 Fireplace shelves
- 40 Ump's call
- 42 Old U.S. gas brand
- 43 Balloon filler
- 44 Impetus
- 46 Weeding tool
- 47 Roma's land
- 49 Pub perches
- 51 Pay off
- 52 Digital greetings

**DOWN**

- 18 British ref. work
- 21 Beige shades
- 23 Tea biscuit
- 25 Tease
- 27 Choice words?
- 29 Museum display
- 31 Desk go-with
- 32 Hang around
- 33 Rub the wrong way
- 34 Gigi's "yes"
- 36 On the beach
- 37 Tristan's love
- 38 Windblown soil
- 41 Sports bar fixture
- 44 Food regimen
- 45 Engrave
- 48 Meadow
- 50 Rowing need

**Answer to Previous Puzzle**



**CRYPTOQUIP**

FCJNEWK XJQJIWOJ ZYWZ ZYJ  
VWX VSAI HSAKG OAKC GSHB  
ZS IJRAQJBWZJ ZYJEI XSGEJF:  
XJWZKJ RAENJ.

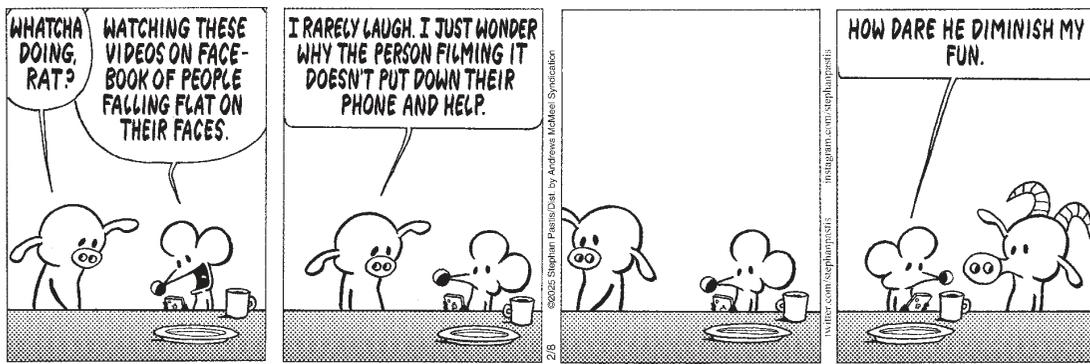
**Yesterday's Cryptoquip:** WHEN THE AMATEUR MUSICIAN WAS PLAYING THE CLARINET INEPTLY, HOW DID IT SOUND? ROUGH AND REEDY.

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: R equals J

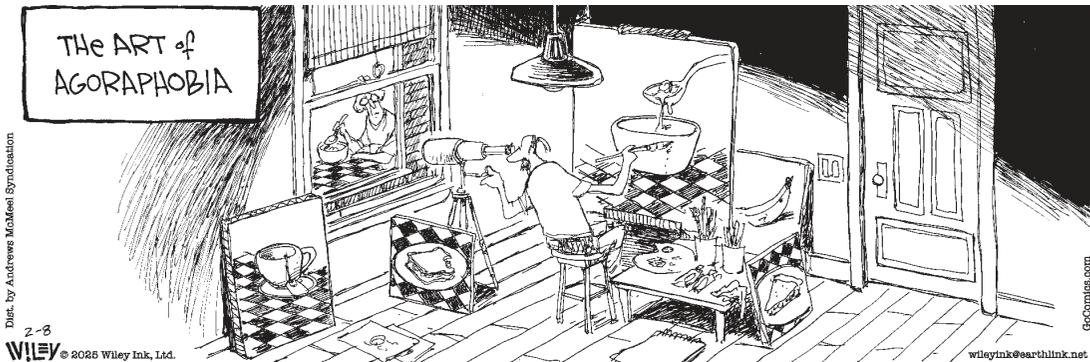
**Frazz**



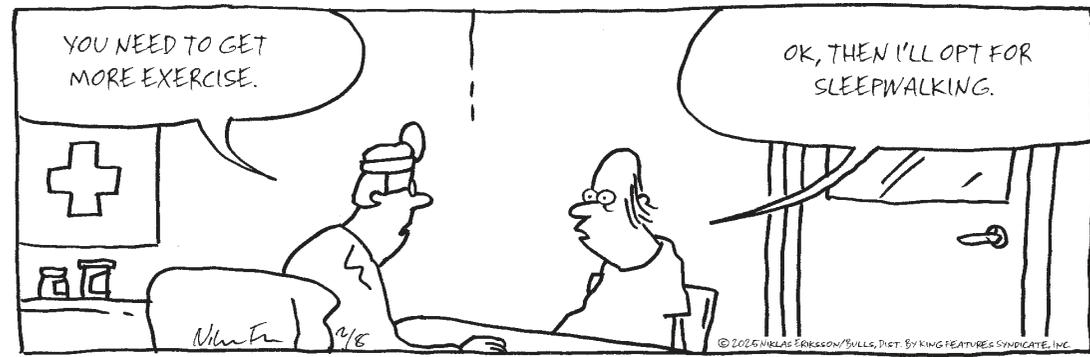
**Pearls Before Swine**



**Non Sequitur**



**Carpe Diem**



**Beetle Bailey**



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## Trump might not be the China hawk he once was

By GRAHAM ALLISON

Special to The Washington Post

In the 2024 election, more than 1,000 candidates competed for 435 seats in the House of Representatives, 100 seats in the Senate, and the presidency and vice presidency. In a year in which more than 80% of Republicans held a negative view of China, few, if any, of the contenders had anything positive to say about China — with one notable exception, and he said all of the following:

“I respect China.”

“I very much respect President Xi.”

“President Xi is brilliant. The press hates it when I call President Xi brilliant, but well, he’s a brilliant guy.”

“I want China to do great. I do.”

“I love China.”

Each of these statements was, of course, made by Donald Trump. Most other candidates followed their consultants’ scripts whenever China came up. Indeed, many of their lines were reruns from Trump’s 2016 campaign, when he accused China of “raping our country,” “ripping us off,” and “stealing our intellectual property,” in “the greatest theft in the history of the world.”

So, what happened in 2024? Why did Trump flip the script? Why did he repeatedly insist that he respects China and President Xi Jinping? Why did he say that he wants China to do well?

My hunch is that Trump actually believes much of what he said. He could well have a starkly different view than the current consensus among both mainstream Republicans and Democrats about how to deal with China — and specifically about how to deal with Xi. If I’m right, most of the current conversations and commentaries about what to expect in U.S. relations with China are ignoring a truth hiding in plain sight. The pre-

vailing view is that China policy in Trump II will essentially be a beefed-up version of Biden administration policy. But if Trump now engages Xi in a way that reflects what he said during the campaign, U.S. relations with China are not only likely to be significantly different from the past four years, they will also be far different from the views held by Marco Rubio, his secretary of state, and Michael Waltz, his national security adviser, two orthodox China hawks.

Certainly, the evidence since Nov. 5 suggests that Trump meant what he said. Immediately after his win, he not only invited Xi to be his special guest at the inauguration but assured him that he would have primacy of place among international guests. On Dec. 7, after meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and French President Emmanuel Macron on the sideline of the reopening of Notre Dame cathedral, Trump posted a tweet summarizing the conversation in which he included an odd line. About the prospects for peace in Ukraine, he wrote, “China can help.”

That’s interesting: Not the United Nations, not NATO, not the pope — but China. Reading between the lines in the official reports of the more recent phone calls between Trump and Xi, and then Xi and Vladimir Putin, it sounds to me as if Trump is trying to engage Xi as his partner in negotiating or imposing a ceasefire to bring the war in Ukraine to an end. While Biden let TikTok go dark for a day, Trump seems confident that he can negotiate a deal with Xi that will allow its 170 million American users to continue watching their favorite videos. There must be a big reward behind that gambit. And in this week’s first round of tariffs, while Trump imposed levies of 25% on America’s neighbors in Canada and Mexico before pausing them for a month, the tariffs

on China were 10%.

Of course, Trump is only one person. Moreover, his aspirations run contrary to almost all the other factors that will shape the key outcomes in this case. China is a rising power, challenging the U.S. position in almost every corner of the global chessboard. The “deadly currents” in both rivals’ domestic politics that Winston Churchill highlighted as the proximate cause of World War I are already vivid in both the United States and China. Finally, as the cliché goes, it takes two to tango: To what extent will Xi be prepared to engage with his counterpart in creating a relationship that is more cooperative than confrontational?

And yet, there are glimmers. Despite Trump’s announcement of 10% tariffs on Chinese products, Xi responded with a Chinese’s grace period for potential dealmaking and decided to not immediately penalize U.S. agricultural products, which compose the largest category of U.S. exports to China.

In 1969, when Richard M. Nixon became president and Henry Kissinger his national security adviser, the United States had no formal relations with the People’s Republic of China. When Nixon sent Kissinger to Beijing to explore what became his historic opening to China, most of the members of his administration, including his secretary of state, were kept in the dark. To hear even a faint echo of that fundamental strategic shift today remains, I admit, something of a stretch. Nonetheless, I am betting that by this time next year, we will all be surprised on the upside by what has happened in U.S.-China relations.

Graham Allison, the former director of Harvard’s Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, is the Douglas Dillon Professor of Government at Harvard Kennedy School.

## Rebels with a cause created a country with a heart

By FREDERIC J. FRANSEN

Tribune News Service

Two hundred fifty years ago this month, on Feb. 9, 1775, the British Parliament declared the Massachusetts Bay Colony to be in “rebellion.” This allowed British soldiers to shoot suspected rebels on sight, which encouraged further rebellion and the growing independence movement. The shooting war began two months later when fighting broke out at Concord and Lexington.

Seventy years ago, in 1955, Warner Brothers released the film “Rebel Without a Cause,” starring James Dean, Natalie Wood and Sal Mineo. The film — set in the world of teenage gangs, stolen cars and knife fights — revolves around Dean, playing a troubled 17-year-old “struggling to live with integrity” in a world of moral chaos, in the words of the late film critic Jay Carr.

The film was a huge success in the United States but censored in Great Britain and banned in New Zealand and Spain, where authorities worried that it would destroy the morals and habits of young people, alienating them from society.

The notion of the “alienated teenager,” causing trouble for trouble’s sake was somewhat novel when Dean and Wood appeared on the screen. Until the 1940s, there was no special focus on young people between the ages of 13 and 19 because most teenagers would either leave school (with or without a diploma) and

start working or engage in rigorous preparation for college. No one had the time or energy to rebel, and the word “teenager” had only recently become a marketing category.

In fact, attending high school in the first part of the 20th century was unusual; most young people finished eighth grade and then went to work. However, after World War II, with the widespread adoption of mandatory high school, Dean’s and Wood’s generation was forced to sit in classrooms, wishing they were elsewhere. Many responded to boredom with rebellion. Students without a purpose became rebels without a cause.

Contrast this with the American Founders. In 1775, many of America’s future Founding Fathers were hardly more than teenagers. John Marshall, who would later become chief justice of the United States, was 20; Alexander Hamilton, the first U.S. treasury secretary, 21; and James Madison, the “Father of the Constitution,” was a mere 25. In their teenage years, they learned how to defy an empire. They were leaders in a rebellion grounded not in ennu but in principles.

Eighteen months after being called out as rebels, American colonists declared their independence, claiming that the purpose of government was to protect the rights, that the government derived its “just powers” from the consent of the governed, and when that consent was withdrawn, the people could form a new government. The rights they were fighting over began with “life, liberty, and the pur-

suit of happiness.” The American rebels clearly had a cause.

The right to pursue happiness is a core American principle. It informs our special kind of individualism and our big heart and explains why we generously give people second chances, have among the world’s most lenient bankruptcy laws, and are far more tolerant in many ways than most other countries.

Americans also understand and even tolerate when a few rules are broken in the pursuit of their happiness. In many countries, speeding is monitored by remote cameras. In the United States, only a few states allow them, and they are often controversial.

If the juvenile delinquents in “Rebel Without a Cause” had rebelled in the name of some principle, they probably would have been understood (and the film much less successful). The problem is the senselessness of their rebellion, which, if anything, was contributing to their unhappiness. By contrast, the American rebels of 1775-1776 aimed to restore essential liberties that they believed were a God-given birthright. They were rebelling against the authority of Parliament to govern them without representation, demanding instead the right to self-government. They sought to be treated as adults and the United States to be treated as a grown-up nation.

Frederic J. Fransen is president of Huntington (W.Va.) Junior College and CEO of Certell Inc. He wrote this for [InsideSources.com](http://InsideSources.com).

# SCOREBOARD/COLLEGE BASKETBALL

## COLLEGE BASKETBALL

### Wednesday's men's scores

#### EAST

Army 68, Holy Cross 65  
 Boston U. 87, Navy 65  
 Bucknell 71, American 49  
 Butler 84, Seton Hall 54  
 Creighton 80, Providence 69  
 Duke 83, Syracuse 54  
 Fordham 80, Rhode Island 79  
 George Mason 53, George Washington 50  
 Louisville 84, Boston College 58  
 Loyola (Md.) 71, Lafayette 58  
 Marshall 77, Arkansas St. 72  
 Robert Morris 71, Detroit 56  
 Rutgers 82, Illinois 73

#### SOUTH

Appalachian St. 60, Southern Miss. 58  
 Chattanooga 79, Wofford 70  
 Cincinnati 93, UCF 83  
 ETSU 62, VMI 55  
 Furman 84, W. Carolina 75, OT  
 Georgia 81, LSU 62  
 Georgia Southern 83, Louisiana-Lafayette 82  
 Georgia St. 97, Louisiana-Monroe 64  
 High Point 78, Radford 75  
 James Madison 64, Troy 61  
 Lipscomb 76, West Georgia 67  
 Memphis 83, Tulsa 71  
 N. Kentucky 85, Cleveland St. 75  
 North Alabama 74, Austin Peay 64  
 Old Dominion 75, Texas St. 64  
 Presbyterian 75, SC-Upstate 64  
 Rice 73, East Carolina 60  
 Richmond 73, Duquesne 68  
 SMU 81, Virginia Tech 75  
 Samford 100, Mercer 79  
 South Alabama 84, Coastal Carolina 59  
 Tennessee 85, Missouri 81  
 UNC-Greensboro 76, The Citadel 61  
 Winthrop 83, Charleston Southern 65

#### MIDWEST

Belmont 80, Bradley 77  
 Fort Wayne 87, Wright St. 64  
 Illinois St. 81, Ill.-Chicago 79  
 Indiana St. 80, Valparaiso 62  
 Michigan 80, Oregon 76  
 Milwaukee 84, IU Indianapolis 80, OT  
 N. Iowa 66, Missouri St. 61  
 S. Illinois 68, Evansville 59  
 Villanova 59, DePaul 49

#### SOUTHWEST

Arkansas 78, Texas 70  
 Queens (NC) 63, Cent. Arkansas 47  
 TCU 65, West Virginia 60  
 Tulane 61, UTA 60

#### FAR WEST

California 74, NC State 62  
 Nebraska 86, Washington 72  
 New Mexico 87, Colorado St. 65  
 Utah 72, Colorado 59  
 Wake Forest 79, Stanford 73

### Men's Top 25 schedule

#### Saturday's games

No. 1 Auburn (20-1) vs. No. 6 Florida (18-3)  
 No. 2 Duke (19-2) at Clemson (18-4)  
 No. 3 Alabama (19-3) at Arkansas (13-8)  
 No. 4 Tennessee (18-4) at Oklahoma (16-5)  
 No. 5 Houston (17-4) at Colorado (9-12)  
 No. 8 Iowa St. (17-4) vs. TCU (11-10)

## DEALS

### Wednesday's transactions

#### BASEBALL

##### Major League Baseball American League

**ATHLETICS** — Sent RHP Anthony Maldonado and C Kyle McCann outright to Las Vegas (PCL).

**BALTIMORE ORIOLES** — Agreed to terms with INF Terrin Vavra on a minor league contract.

**HOUSTON ASTROS** — Agreed to terms with OF Ben Gamel on a one-year contract.

**NEW YORK YANKEES** — Claimed off waivers INF Braden Shewmake from Kansas City and RHP Owen White from Cincinnati. Agreed to terms with RHPs Colten Brewer, Carlos Carrasco, Geoff Hartlieb, Wilking Rodriguez, Cristian Hernandez and Erick Leal, OFs Ismael Munguia and Brennan Davis, LHP Brandon Leibrandt and INF/OFs Pablo Reyes, Dominic Smith and Andrew Velazquez on minor league contracts. Designated RHP Allan Winans for assignment.

**TEXAS RANGERS** — Agreed to terms with RHP Matt Festa on a minor league contract.

#### National League

**ATLANTA BRAVES** — Agreed to terms with RHP Tyler LaPorte on a minor league contract.

**NEW YORK METS** — Named Luis Rivera manager of St. Lucie, Lino Diaz manager of Florida Complex League Mets and J.C. Rodriguez manager of Dominican Summer League Mets Orange. Sent RHP Dylan Covey and 3B Luis De Los Santos outright to Syracuse (IL).

#### BASKETBALL

##### National Basketball Association

**OKLAHOMA CITY THUNDER** — Received F Daniel Theis and a 2031 second-round pick from New Orleans in exchange for cash considerations.

**SACRAMENTO KINGS** — Received C Jonas Valanciunas from Washington in exchange for G Sidy Cissoko and draft considerations.

**WASHINGTON WIZARDS** — Recalled G Patrick Baldwin, Jr. from the Capital City Go-Go of the G League.

#### FOOTBALL

##### National Football League

No. 9 Michigan St. (18-3) vs. Oregon (16-6)  
 No. 10 Texas A&M (17-5) at No. 15 Missouri (17-4)  
 No. 11 Marquette (18-4) at Creighton (16-6)  
 No. 13 Texas Tech (17-4) at No. 20 Arizona (15-6)  
 No. 14 Kentucky (15-6) vs. South Carolina (10-12)  
 No. 16 Kansas (15-6) at Kansas St. (10-11)  
 No. 21 Wisconsin (17-5) at Iowa (13-8)  
 No. 22 Miss. (16-6) at Georgia (15-7)  
 No. 23 Illinois (15-7) at Minnesota (11-11)  
 No. 24 Michigan (16-5) at Indiana (14-8)  
 No. 25 Mississippi (16-6) at LSU (12-9)

### Wednesday's women's scores

#### EAST

Rhode Island 59, Duquesne 57  
 Richmond 72, La Salle 53  
 Saint Joseph's 69, Saint Louis 49  
 Temple 74, Memphis 66  
 Toledo 58, Buffalo 55  
 UMass 81, St. Bonaventure 54  
 Washington 82, Penn St. 71  
 West Virginia 76, Kansas 43

#### SOUTH

Appalachian St. 73, Louisiana-Monroe 71  
 Davidson 68, Loyola Chicago 51  
 East Carolina 61, UAB 56  
 Gardner-Webb 79, UNC-Asheville 72  
 George Mason 66, VCU 48  
 Georgia Southern 49, Southern Miss. 42  
 James Madison 76, South Alabama 62  
 Lipscomb 92, West Georgia 75  
 Louisiana-Lafayette 92, Marshall 88, OT  
 Presbyterian 68, SC-Upstate 51  
 Radford 65, High Point 48  
 Troy 83, Old Dominion 80  
 Tulsa 81, Charlotte 53  
 Winthrop 54, Charleston Southern 47

#### MIDWEST

Ball St. 71, Bowling Green 51  
 Cent. Michigan 75, Ohio 48  
 Creighton 72, Seton Hall 56  
 Georgetown 63, Xavier 36  
 IUPUI 80, Wright St. 68  
 Iowa St. 72, Cincinnati 52  
 Kansas St. 59, TCU 50  
 Marquette 57, St. John's 55  
 Miami (Ohio) 68, E. Michigan 45  
 N. Illinois 73, Kent St. 69  
 S. Dakota St. 66, North Dakota 45  
 Southern Cal 86, Wisconsin 64  
 St. Thomas (MN) 75, Omaha 62  
 Villanova 63, Butler 59  
 W. Michigan 70, Akron 64  
 Wichita St. 54, FAU 44

#### SOUTHWEST

Arkansas St. 86, Georgia St. 50  
 Baylor 92, Houston 47  
 Coastal Carolina 68, Texas St. 60  
 Tulane 78, Rice 67  
 Utah 70, Texas Tech 64

#### FAR WEST

Air Force 78, San Jose St. 54  
 BYU 73, UCF 66  
 Colorado 56, Arizona 47  
 Nevada 69, Boise St. 61  
 San Diego St. 61, Fresno St. 57  
 UCLA 65, Ohio St. 52  
 UMKC 73, Denver 65  
 UNLV 89, Utah St. 51

**CINCINNATI BENGALS** — Signed CB Jan Davis to a reserve/futures contract.

**LOS ANGELES RAMS** — Hired Drew Wilkins as defensive pass rush coordinator.

**TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS** — Hired Charlie Strong as defensive line coach.

#### HOCKEY

##### National Hockey League

**ANAHEIM DUCKS** — Reassigned D Jeremie Biakabutuka to San Diego (AHL) from Tulsa (ECHL).

**CALGARY FLAMES** — Recalled Ilya D Solovoyov from Calgary (AHL).

**CHICAGO BLACKHAWKS** — Reinstated C Craig Smith from injured reserve. Sent Artyom Levshunov to Rockford (AHL). Reassigned C Colton Dach to Rockford.

**COLUMBUS BLUE JACKETS** — Sent C Dylan Gambrell to Cleveland (AHL).

**DALLAS STARS** — Reassigned G Ben Kraus to Texas (AHL) from Idaho (ECHL).

**DETROIT RED WINGS** — Reassigned C Dominik Shine to Grand Rapids (AHL).

**MINNESOTA WILD** — Claimed F Vinnie Hinostroza off waivers from Nashville. Placed F Jakub Lauko on injured reserve.

**NEW YORK ISLANDERS** — Loaned G Tristan Lennox to Bridgeport (AHL).

**PITTSBURGH PENGUINS** — Sent RW Jesse Puljujarvi to Wilkes-Barre/Scranton (AHL).

**ST. LOUIS BLUES** — Recalled LW MacKenzie MacEachern from Springfield (AHL).

**VANCOUVER CANUCKS** — Recalled Nils Aman from Abbotsford (AHL). Sent Linus Karlsson to Abbotsford. Signed D Marcus Pettersson to a six-year contract extension.

#### SOCCER

##### Major League Soccer

**CF MONTREAL** — Signed F Owen Graham-Roache to a two-year contract via homegrown that includes 2027, 2028 and 2029 club options.

**ORLANDO CITY SC** — Signed M Marco Pasalic to a three-year contract.

**PHILADELPHIA UNION** — Signed M Jovan Lukic to a two-year contract.

**SAN DIEGO FC** — Acquired \$175,000 in 2025 general allocation money from Inter Miami CF in exchange for a 2025 international roster slot.

#### National Women's Soccer League

**GOTHAM FC** — Signed F Midge Purce to a one-year contract.

# UConn hopes it has turned corner after difficult stretch

By JIM FULLER

Associated Press

STORRS, Conn. — There might not be a team happier to see January in the rear-view mirror than two-time defending national champion UConn.

On the way to a second straight title during the 2023-24 season, not only did the Huskies go undefeated in January, but they never trailed by double digits in those eight games.

What a difference a year makes. With four starters selected in the 2024 NBA Draft and an injury sidelining talented freshman Liam McNeeley, UConn had to battle its way through every game in January. The No. 19 Huskies needed overtime to win at home against a Butler team with one Big East win. Just over a week later, the Huskies figured to have an easier team when a DePaul team that recently snapped a 39-game regular-season conference losing streak came to Connecticut. The Huskies had to overcome a 14-point deficit before winning by 11.

That game was part of a stretch when the Huskies trailed by at least 10 points four times in seven games. Even the five wins in January were a bit of a grind.

“It is stressful to play at UConn,” coach Dan Hurley said. “When you are not as good as we have been, it is uncharted territory for Alex (Karaban), Samson (Johnson), Hassan (Diarra), Solo (Ball), Jaylin (Stewart) and Jayden (Ross). They are not used to playing as many games like this, they are used to dominance. I think even the new guys — Tarris (Reed Jr.) and Aidan (Mahaney), it is a different kind of pressure when you play at a place like UConn.”

A turning point for UConn seemed to come late in the first half and the second half of the Jan. 29 game against DePaul. The Huskies used that momentum to look like a team that came into the season as one of the favorites to win the national title by winning at Marquette a few days later.

“It helped us tremendously,” Ball said. “The more we got to be together and work as one, it turned the game around. We had a big



MORRY GASH/AP

**UConn's Alex Karaban tries to get past Marquette's David Joplin during Saturday's game. The Huskies played much better in upsetting the Golden Eagles after a sluggish January.**

turnaround, we were down (14) in the first half and we ended up turning it around and winning by 11. The last 26 minutes were UConn basketball.”

More “UConn basketball” was on display when the Huskies went on the road and won against a top-10 Marquette team in its first game in February. Even that game showed some of the flaws of this year’s UConn team.

The Huskies committed 25 turnovers and allowed Marquette to grab 17 offensive rebounds. Led by a career-high 25 points from Ball, the Huskies shot 59% in the game and 63% on 3-pointers en route to the 77-69 victory.

“It was a testament to the shooting numbers,” Hurley said. “There was a stretch in the second half when we weren’t desperate enough or urgent enough. It has been the story of the season. These are things that we haven’t done this year that our past teams have done.”

“I am proud of the win but we don’t play with that tenacity that our past teams have played with. We got bailed out by Solo had a crazy shooting night and Alex hit a late shot-clock (shot).”

Hurley thought it was going to be a struggle following the departures of Stephon Castle, Donovan Clingan, Tristen Newton and Cam

Spencer. However, he didn’t think the journey would be quite this bumpy.

“What we are trying to do is incredibly hard,” Hurley said. “The former national champs that went back-to-back, they returned their whole team or at least all the stars from their team. What we did last year going back-to-back with only returning two starters, nobody had done that before. Now we are trying to do something that has never been done before, it is not going to be easy.”

The good news is that McNeeley could be back when UConn hosts No. 12 St. John’s on Friday night.

“When Liam was on the court, we were playing to a top-12 level,” Hurley said. “His absence has caused a lot of problems for this team that this team can’t overcome at this point. We just have to find a way to battle until we get whole again.”

With nearly a week off since the Marquette game, ailing point guard Diarra and McNeeley should be among the UConn players who will benefit additional recovery time.

UConn went 3-5 in January during the 2022-23 season and turned things around in time to win the national title. Time will tell if the Huskies can follow that script once again.



**No. 16 Kansas (15-6) at Kansas St. (10-11)**  
 AFN-Sports  
 Saturday 8 p.m. CET  
 Sunday 4 a.m. JKT

**No. 6 Florida (18-3) at No. 1 Auburn (20-1)**  
 AFN-Atlantic  
 Saturday 10 p.m. CET  
 Sunday 6 a.m. JKT

**No. 2 Duke (19-2) at Clemson (18-4)**  
 AFN-Sports  
 Sunday 12:30 a.m. CET  
 Sunday 8:30 a.m. JKT

## NBA

# Source: Heat trade Butler to Warriors

BY TIM REYNOLDS  
Associated Press

Jimmy Butler got what he wanted. He's being traded out of Miami and got a new contract in the process.

The Heat and Golden State Warriors have agreed on a deal that sends Butler to the Bay Area, a person with knowledge of the talks said Wednesday. Butler helped carry Miami to the NBA Finals twice, long before a hostile breakup that saw him suspended three times by the team in January.

Golden State is making it happen by moving Andrew Wiggins, Dennis Schroder, Kyle Anderson, Lindy Waters and first-round draft compensation out in the deal, said the person, who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because the trade had not gotten league approval.

Wiggins and Anderson are headed to Miami, though it's unclear if Anderson will be staying with the Heat. Schroder is getting moved to Utah — where the Warriors, coincidentally, were Wednesday night — and Josh Richardson is heading from Miami to Detroit along with Waters. Also on the move: P.J. Tucker, who was just traded to Utah and now is set to return to the Heat, where he played in 2021-22.

"My brother, man. I'm going to miss him, for sure," said Miami forward Nikola Jovic, who looked up to Butler. "I think a lot of guys here will. He's someone who did a lot for this franchise."

The Heat will get a protected first-rounder from Golden State; for now, that is a pick in this year's draft though that could change based on final terms. And ESPN reported that Butler has already agreed on a two-year extension with the Warriors, one that would be worth around \$113 million.

"I'm really happy that he got what he wanted," Jovic said.



JEFF CHIU/AP

**Jimmy Butler's time in Miami has come to a close after an ugly breakup, as the Heat reportedly reached a deal to send him to Golden State where he will join Stephen Curry, left, and the Warriors.**

"That bag's kinda really big."

Mark down March 25: Golden State at Miami, the first time Butler could play again in South Florida.

The Warriors become Butler's fifth team, after stints the Bulls, Timberwolves, 76ers and Heat. His arrivals were celebrated in all four cities, and his departures weren't exactly smooth in any of them.

With Golden State, he joins Stephen Curry and Draymond Green — two players who were part of all four recent Warriors championship teams and have hopes of getting back to title contention again.

Golden State had a closed-door meeting in the locker room Wednesday as news of the trade

was getting out; coach Steve Kerr met with the team during the period that the room is typically open to reporters before games. The Warriors wound up falling to the Jazz 131-128.

"Our guys were in the locker room getting ready to play and all of a sudden we're saying goodbye," Kerr said.

Butler's breakup with Miami brewed for months. The primary issue was money; he was eligible for the two-year, \$113 million extension and the Heat never offered it, largely because he missed about 25% of the team's games in his Miami tenure.

The relationship was broken beyond repair at the end. When Butler said he didn't expect to find

on-court joy with the Heat again in early January, he was suspended for seven games as the last straw on a list of what the team called detrimental conduct.

It kept getting worse: Butler was suspended three times in January alone, the second a two-game ban for missing a team flight, the last an indefinite one that followed him leaving shootaround early after learning he wasn't going to start a Jan. 27 game against Orlando. That was the end.

"There was a lot said by everybody, except for me, to tell you the truth," Butler said after his first game back following the first suspension. "We'll let people keep talking. ... The whole truth will come out."

## Scoreboard

### Eastern Conference

#### Atlantic Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Boston	36	15	.706	—
New York	34	17	.667	2
Philadelphia	20	30	.400	15½
Brooklyn	17	34	.333	19
Toronto	16	35	.314	20

#### Southeast Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Miami	25	24	.510	—
Orlando	25	27	.481	1½
Atlanta	23	28	.451	3
Charlotte	12	36	.250	12½
Washington	9	41	.180	16½

#### Central Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Cleveland	41	10	.804	—
Indiana	28	21	.571	12
Milwaukee	27	22	.551	13
Detroit	25	26	.490	16
Chicago	22	30	.423	19½

### Western Conference

#### Southwest Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Memphis	35	16	.686	—
Houston	32	18	.640	2½
Dallas	26	25	.510	9
San Antonio	22	26	.458	11½
New Orleans	12	39	.235	23

#### Northwest Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Oklahoma City	40	9	.816	—
Denver	32	19	.627	9
Minnesota	28	23	.549	13
Portland	22	29	.431	19
Utah	12	37	.245	28

#### Pacific Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
L.A. Lakers	29	19	.604	—
L.A. Clippers	28	22	.560	2
Sacramento	25	25	.500	5
Phoenix	25	25	.500	5
Golden State	25	25	.500	5

#### Wednesday's games

Milwaukee 112, Charlotte 102  
San Antonio 126, Atlanta 125  
Cleveland 118, Detroit 115  
Washington 119, Brooklyn 102  
Memphis 138, Toronto 107  
Miami 108, Philadelphia 101  
Minnesota 127, Chicago 108  
Denver 144, New Orleans 119  
Utah 131, Golden State 128  
Oklahoma City 140, Phoenix 109  
Orlando 130, Sacramento 111

#### Thursday's games

Dallas at Boston  
Houston at Minnesota  
Orlando at Denver  
Golden State at L.A. Lakers  
Sacramento at Portland  
Indiana at L.A. Clippers

#### Friday's games

Cleveland at Washington  
San Antonio at Charlotte  
Miami at Brooklyn  
Milwaukee at Atlanta  
Philadelphia at Detroit  
Toronto at Oklahoma City  
Utah at Phoenix

# Lakers reportedly get Williams from Hornets for Knecht, Reddish

BY GREG BEACHAM AND STEVE REED  
Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — The Los Angeles Lakers are acquiring center Mark Williams from the Charlotte Hornets in a trade for rookie Dalton Knecht, Cam Reddish and draft considerations, a person with knowledge of the deal told The Associated Press.

The person spoke on the condition of anonymity Wednesday night because the latest trade by the busy Lakers hasn't been finalized.

The Hornets are also getting Los Angeles' first-round pick in 2031 and a first-round pick swap in 2030 in exchange for Williams, one of the NBA's most intriguing young centers.

Williams is another major addition in the Lakers' thorough roster overhaul, which has been highlighted by their acquisition of Luka Doncic from the Dallas Mavericks last Saturday in a blockbuster trade for Anthony Davis.



Williams

Los Angeles has dramatically revamped their nucleus since Christmas, assembling a roster that could be a championship contender this season with Doncic and 40-year-old LeBron James.

Williams fills an obvious need for the Lakers, who were briefly left with Jaxson Hayes as their only veteran center following Davis' departure and Christian Wood's long-term injury absence.

The 7-foot-2 Williams has spent three mostly injury-plagued seasons with Charlotte, managing to play in just 84 games mostly due to back problems.

When healthy, he's shown potential.

The Duke product has averaged 16 points, 9.8 rebounds and 1.2 blocks per game this sea-



Knecht

son in 22 games and has excelled in pick-and-roll situations when he's had a chance to play alongside LaMelo Ball.

Williams, who knows LA coach JJ Redick as a fellow Duke product, should fit well with Doncic as a target

for his playmaking skills in lobs and pick-and-rolls. He'll also have to be a key defensive player for the Lakers, whose defense was built heavily around Davis' peerless rim protection.

Charlotte, meanwhile, is clearly building for the long term under new owners Gabe Plotkin and Rick Schnall while collecting assets.

The Hornets now own their first-round pick in the next seven years, as well as a top-14 protected first-round pick in 2027 from Miami (unprotected in 2028), a top-two protected



Reddish

pick from Dallas in 2027, the right to swap first rounders with Los Angeles in 2030 and the Lakers' unprotected first round pick in 2031.

Knecht was LA's first-round pick last summer, and the outside shooting specialist has averaged 9.4 points and 3.1 rebounds per game as a rookie. He started 12 games and even had a 37-point performance while hitting a record-tying nine 3-pointers in November, but he has received less playing time in the new year.

Reddish is averaging 3.3 points per game in his second season with the Lakers. He started 26 games for Los Angeles last season under coach Darvin Ham, but has played much less under Redick.

# NHL/MLB

## NHL scoreboard

Eastern Conference							
Atlantic Division							
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Florida	55	32	20	3	67	184	162
Toronto	53	32	19	2	66	165	153
Ottawa	54	29	21	4	62	156	146
Detroit	54	28	21	5	61	157	165
Tampa Bay	52	28	20	4	60	181	146
Boston	56	27	23	6	60	154	178
Montreal	54	25	24	5	55	160	185
Buffalo	53	22	26	5	49	167	179
Metropolitan Division							
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Washington	53	35	11	7	77	188	132
Carolina	54	32	18	4	68	176	149
New Jersey	55	30	19	6	66	170	139
Columbus	54	26	21	7	59	179	179
N.Y. Islanders	53	25	21	7	57	146	152
N.Y. Rangers	53	26	23	4	56	159	162
Pittsburgh	55	22	24	9	53	159	196
Philadelphia	55	23	25	7	53	156	186
Western Conference							
Central Division							
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Winnipeg	55	38	14	3	79	198	131
Dallas	53	34	18	1	69	170	131
Minnesota	54	31	19	4	66	155	155
Colorado	55	31	22	2	64	177	168
Utah	53	22	22	9	53	147	157
St. Louis	54	24	25	5	53	146	163
Nashville	52	18	27	7	43	136	169
Chicago	53	16	31	6	38	138	183
Pacific Division							
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Edmonton	54	34	16	4	72	178	147
Vegas	54	31	17	6	68	178	151
Los Angeles	51	28	17	6	62	145	130
Vancouver	53	24	18	11	59	151	164
Calgary	53	26	20	7	59	144	158
Anaheim	53	23	24	6	52	135	164
Seattle	55	23	28	4	50	165	178
San Jose	55	15	34	6	36	144	206

**Note:** Two points for a win, one point for overtime loss. Top three teams in each division and two wild cards per conference advance to playoffs.

### Wednesday's games

N.Y. Rangers 3, Boston 2  
Edmonton 4, Chicago 3, OT  
Los Angeles 6, Montreal 3

### Thursday's games

Ottawa at Tampa Bay  
Utah at Columbus  
Vegas at New Jersey  
Washington at Philadelphia  
Carolina at Minnesota  
Florida at St. Louis  
Colorado at Calgary  
Toronto at Seattle  
Vancouver at San Jose

### Friday's games

Pittsburgh at N.Y. Rangers  
N.Y. Islanders at Winnipeg  
Nashville at Chicago  
Colorado at Edmonton  
Dallas at Los Angeles

# Ovechkin's influence stretches far

## Capitals star was role model for youth everywhere, and now some are playing with him

By **STEPHEN WHYNO**  
*Associated Press*

**L**ogan Cooley was born in Pittsburgh just 17 months before Sidney Crosby debuted in the NHL and his hometown Penguins won multiple Stanley Cup championships during his childhood.

Cooley admired Crosby, but he grew up a Washington Capitals fan for a very specific reason: Alex Ovechkin.

"That's the real one," said Cooley, who's now playing for the Utah Hockey Club. "He was my favorite player growing up."

Cooley is not alone. Ovechkin has for two decades been a role model for kids watching hockey all around the world, from his homeland in Russia to the U.S. and Canada, thanks to his powerful slap shot and physical style of play, his familiar yellow skate laces and tinted visor, and that gap-toothed smile. He is one of the most recognizable faces of the sport.

Now closing in on Wayne Gretzky's career goals record, the 39-year-old Ovechkin is now playing against many of those youngsters who grew up watching his highlights and hoping they could be like the "Great 8."

"I had Ovechkin jerseys, and everyone did. Who didn't?" U.S.-born defenseman Brock Faber of the Minnesota Wild said. "Everyone always wanted to be Ovi. ... When he was younger in his career and the yellow laces and just the style and swag he brought to the game, being so loved around the league, it's one of the coolest things in the world to play against guys like him."

The admiration starts at home, from players who were years or decades from putting on skates when Ovechkin was born in Moscow on Sept. 17, 1985. Ivan Miroschnichenko, Washington's first-round pick in 2022 who has been a teammate for 40 NHL games, said: "He's a big, Russian man. He's a legend."

That legend started early. Dmitry Kulikov of the Florida Panthers recently played in his 1,000th regular-season NHL game and is just five years younger than Ovechkin, but he recalls the buzz beginning in the '90s.

"When I was growing up, he was obviously just starting off a few years before me and he was already talked about being great back then," Kulikov said. "Obviously when he came over here, he proved it with his style of play and his goal-scoring ability, how unique of a player he is and how good he was going to be."



JOHN LOCHER/AP

**A powerful slap shot and physical style of play, his familiar yellow skate laces and tinted visor, and that gap-toothed smile all have contributed to Capitals left wing Alex Ovechkin being one of the most recognizable faces of the sport over the course of the 2000s.**

How unique? Ovechkin is not only second to Gretzky with 878 goals and holds the record for the most on the power play and most shots, but his 3,701 hits rank third among all players over the past 20 seasons. During that time, he won the Calder Trophy as rookie of the year, the Hart three times as league MVP and the Conn Smythe in 2018 as playoff MVP after leading the Capitals to their first Stanley Cup title.

Slightly younger but still with more than 750 games in North America, Winnipeg winger and fellow Russian Vladislav Namestnikov considers Ovechkin a part of multiple iterations of his career.

"I just grew up watching him, an idol growing up," Namestnikov said. "Our generation, he opened up the doors for everyone else."

Wyatt Johnston was still in diapers growing up in Toronto when Ovechkin and Crosby — picked No. 1 in the NHL draft a year apart — became hockey's biggest stars.

"They've dominated the league for as long as I've lived," said Johnston, who entered NHL with Dallas in 2022. "(Ovechkin) was a really fun player to watch, just how dynamic he is. He's one of those guys that I think him and Sid are maybe on a different level of me being kind

of starstruck when I've seen them just kind of growing up, and they were dominating the league for my whole life."

Faber credited Ovechkin and Crosby for paving the way for so many players. And that doesn't just include from places like the U.S. and Canada. Florida defenseman Niko Mikkola grew up in the outskirts of Oulu, Finland, across the Gulf of Bothnia from Sweden and was locked in to that rivalry.

"Obviously you know those two big names were Crosby and Ovechkin," Mikkola said. "You followed those guys, obviously, and you see in headlines those guys are usually there. The highlights, also, you see how they score goals."

Now teammates with Mikkola with the Panthers, Nate Schmidt still considers himself lucky to play his first four NHL seasons alongside Ovechkin with Washington. That's full circle for a kid who grew up in Minnesota playing minor and high school hockey watching Ovechkin wide-eyed at what he could do.

"It's hard not to," Schmidt said. "Being his teammate and seeing what he does in practice and games firsthand gives you a different appreciation for what he is as a player."

# Source: Alonso stays with Mets on \$54M, 2-year deal

By **RONALD BLUM**  
*Associated Press*

**NEW YORK** — First baseman Pete Alonso is staying with the New York Mets, agreeing to a \$54 million, two-year contract, a person familiar with the deal told The Associated Press.

The person spoke on condition of anonymity Wednesday night because the agreement, first reported by The New York Post, was subject to a successful physical.

Alonso gets a \$10 million signing bonus and gets salaries of \$20 million this year and \$24 million in 2026. He can opt out after the 2025 season to become a free agent again.

New York also offered a \$71 million, three-year deal with salaries of \$27 million in 2025 and \$22 million in each of the following two seasons, with the ability to opt out after each of the first two years, the person said.

Alonso, who turned 30 on Dec. 7, lingered on the market longer than other top players. Among other free-agent first basemen, Christian Walker agreed to a \$60 million, three-year contract with Houston, and Paul Goldschmidt (New York Yankees) and Carlos Santana (Cleveland) accepted one-year agreements.

Mets owner Steve Cohen expressed frustration last month, saying the negotiating was more difficult than the talks that led to a record \$765 million, 15-year contract with Juan Soto, who like Alonso is represented by agent Scott Boras.

"I don't like the structures that are being presented to us," Steve Cohen said. "It's highly asymmetric against us and I feel strongly about it. I will never say no. You know, there's always a possibility."

"But the reality is that we're moving for-

ward and we continue to bring in players. And as we continue to bring in players, the reality is, it becomes harder to fit Pete into what is a very expensive group of players that we already have."

Under his previous agency, Alonso turned down a \$158 million, seven-year offer in 2023 that would have covered 2024-30. He switched representation to Boras after the 2023 season and agreed to a \$20.5 million, one-year deal that avoided arbitration.

Alonso hit 226 homers over six seasons with New York and became a four-time All-Star, but his strikeouts steadily increased to a career high 172 last year while his OPS has dropped to a career-low .788.

Nicknamed the Polar Bear, Alonso became a Citi Field fan favorite as a home-grown member of the Mets.

He was NL Rookie of the Year in 2019, when he hit .260 with a major league-high 53 homers — a rookie record — and 120 RBIs. He had a career-high 131 RBIs in 2022.

Alonso batted a career-low .217 in 2023 while hitting 46 homers and driving in 118 runs and hit .240 with 34 homers and 88 RBIs this year. His three-run, ninth-inning home run off Devin Williams lifted New York over Milwaukee in the decisive third game of its NL Wild Card Series.

After losing to the Los Angeles Dodgers in the NL Championship Series, the Mets added Soto and right-handers Frankie Montas, Clay Holmes and Griffin Canning along with left-hander A.J. Minter, and resigned left-hander Sean Manaea, right-hander Ryne Stanek and outfielder Jesse Winker.

## OLYMPICS

# One venue remains uncertain year out from Winter Games

By **ANDREW DAMPF**  
Associated Press

**CORTINA D'AMPEZZO, Italy** — In Sochi, workers were still hammering away in the media village and shower water ran yellow when journalists from around the world arrived for the 2014 Winter Games.

The chaotic preparations for the 2016 Summer Games in Rio de Janeiro were labeled the “worst” ever by a vice president of the International Olympic Committee.

The next Olympics, though, might set an unofficial record for running late on preparations.

That's because the century-old sliding center being completely rebuilt for the 2026 Milan-Cortina Winter Games is pushing the deadline so tight that the IOC has gone so far as to demand a Plan B option that would require moving bobsled, luge and skeleton events all the way to Lake Placid, N.Y., if the track in Italy isn't finished in time.

Thursday marked exactly one year to go before the Feb. 6, 2026 opening ceremony at the San Siro stadium, and the track in Cortina is still a half-completed construction site.

The IOC has set a deadline for the end of next month for pre-certification of the Cortina track, and

nobody is saying for sure if it will pass the test.

But Fabio Saldini, the Italian government commissioner in charge of the \$123 million project, told The Associated Press during a recent visit that almost 70% of the track was completed — even if it was tough to tell inside the muddy and chaotic construction site.

With 180 people working from 6 a.m. to 1 a.m. every day to build the sliding center, the first ice is slated to be laid down on the track at the start of March.

“We have huge support from the construction firms, the government and (Infrastructure and Transport Minister Matteo) Salvini,” Saldini said. “With everyone's support, we will be able to finish in time.”

Construction began less than a year ago and no sliding track has been built in such a short timeframe. An official test event is slated for October, a step that has taken on more importance since the death of Georgian luger Nodar Kumaritashvili in a training crash hours before the start of the opening ceremony for the 2010 Vancouver Games.

## Lake Placid had no cost

The IOC would have preferred to use an active track in nearby



GIOVANNI AULETTA/AP

**Construction work takes place at the Cortina Sliding Center, venue for the bobsled, luge and skeleton disciplines at the Milan Cortina 2026 Winter Olympics, in Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italy, on Jan. 16.**

Austria or Switzerland instead of rebuilding the Cortina venue, which had been closed since 2008. But it let the local organizing committee select the Plan B option.

“We chose Lake Placid because it was the only place where they offered us the track without requiring us to make any investments,” Milan-Cortina CEO Andrea Varnier told AP. “But we're counting on holding the sliding sports here in Cortina.”

Added organizing committee president Giovanni Malagò about the Lake Placid backup plan: “It's just a formality. There's no substance to it.”

Environmental groups have protested over climate damage due to the Cortina track's reconstruction.

“There were 800 trees cut down,” Saldini said. “But they were not all 100 years old, like some people said. And we're going to plant 10,000 trees when we're done.”

## Move would be big change

General ticket sales for the games are about to start following a pre-registration process that drew in more than 350,000 requests — 70% of them from abroad from more than 210 countries.

Sliding is one of the Games' most inexpensive attractions with luge events going for as low as \$42 and bobsled for a maximum of \$104.

But what happens for ticket holders if the sliding track in Cortina isn't ready and events are moved to Lake Placid?

“It will be a whole different experience,” said Paul Caine, the president of hospitality package provider On Location, about the prospect of moving from glitzy Cortina to upstate New York.

Caine noted that while “nobody wanted to go to Tahiti” for surfing events in French Polynesia during last year's Paris Games, hospitality packages were sold for the sailing competitions in Marseille, which is located in southern France — 3½ hours by train from Paris.

On Location has received requests for hospitality packages from 62 countries so far, with ice hockey, biathlon and figure skating the most popular sports.

Private boxes for the opening ceremony at the iconic San Siro soccer stadium have already sold out.

## Long history of hosting

These are the first Games to fully embrace cost-cutting reforms installed by IOC President Thomas Bach and use mostly existing venues — which has meant scattering the Games all over northern Italy.

Alpine skiing will be divided between Cortina (for the women's events) and Bormio (for the men) — which are separated by a 5½-

hour drive. Livigno will host freestyle skiing and snowboarding, biathlon will be in Anterselva, Nordic events will be in Val di Fiemme and ice sports in Milan.

“It's very complicated due to the big distances and also because of all the different representatives in each region,” Varnier said. “We have great relationships with everyone but everybody has their own way and style of doing things, so we need to adapt to them. That's the spirit of these Games: We adapt to the different territories and not vice versa.”

One reason that the organizing committee is adapting to each and every venue is that most of these places have a long history of hosting World Cup races and world championships.

For example, Bormio hosted the Alpine skiing worlds in 1985 and 2005; Cortina hosted the skiing worlds in 2021 and has been the site of more than 100 World Cup ski races; Anterselva has hosted six biathlon worlds dating back to 1975; Val di Fiemme has hosted three Nordic worlds.

Still, none of that does any good for an athlete like Ester Ledecka, the Czech wonder who claimed golds in both Alpine skiing and snowboarding at the 2018 Pyeongchang Games. In 2026, two of Ledecka's races will be held on the same day in resorts hours apart — meaning she'll likely have to choose one over the other.



LUCA BRUNO/AP

**IOC President Thomas Bach, left, and Italian National Olympic Committee president Giovanni Malagò attend the 'One Year To Go' ceremony for the 2026 Milano-Cortina Winter Olympics in Milan on Thursday.**

## SUPER BOWL LIX

# Role players often crucial for champions

By **JOSH DUBOW**  
Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — The Super Bowl matchup between Philadelphia and Kansas City isn't lacking for star power.

Patrick Mahomes and Travis Kelce are among the most recognized players in the NFL thanks to their stellar play, numerous commercials and Kelce's pop-star girlfriend, and the Chiefs have become perhaps the league's most visible franchise thanks to their recent dynastic run.

The Eagles have also been mainstays near the top of the NFL these past few seasons, with big-name players like Saquon Barkley, Jalen Hurts and A.J. Brown generating plenty of headlines.

But if history is any indication, some lesser-known players could have a big impact on the Super Bowl on Sunday. Mecole Hardman caught the winning TD pass for Kansas City in overtime in last year's win over San Francisco, and it was Kadarius Toney who had a TD catch and long punt return that proved crucial in beating Philadelphia two years ago.

That's been the case over the history of the Super Bowl, whether it was unheralded MVPs like Larry Brown, Dexter Jackson or Malcolm Smith; Jack Squirek's pick-6 for the Raiders in Super Bowl 18 against Washington; Timmy Smith's 204 yards rushing in his first career start for Washington against Denver in Super Bowl 22; or David Tyree's helmet catch that helped the Giants spoil the Patriots' bid for a perfect season in Super Bowl 42.

Here are a few players who could fill that role Sunday:

## Eagles DT Milton Williams

While Jalen Carter garners much of the attention when it comes to the Eagles' defensive interior, Williams has had a strong fourth season in the NFL and should have the chance to take advantage of a very favorable matchup. He had a career-high five sacks in the regular season and has six pressures in the first two playoff games, according to Pro Football Focus.

Williams should get the chance to line up against the Chiefs' weakest offensive lineman with Mike Caliendo playing left guard after All-Pro Joe Thuney moved outside to tackle late in the season.

## Chiefs DE Michael Danna

Chris Jones is the star of Kansas City's defensive line, but Danna played a big role in the AFC title game against Buffalo. He had five pressures on 16 pass rushes against the Bills, according to NFL NextGen Stats, for his most productive game ever as a pass rusher. He also forced a fumble on his one sack and may need another big game Sunday for the Chiefs to slow down the Eagles.

## Eagles RB Kenneth Gainwell

Barkley gets the focus of the opposing defenses, but that could provide an opportunity for one of his backups to deliver. Gainwell had 181 yards rushing in three playoff games two years ago and had a 44-yard kickoff return in the divisional round against the Rams.



CHRIS SZAGOLA/AP

**Eagles running back Kenneth Gainwell has been overshadowed by Saquon Barkley's historic season at times, but has still provided key playoff performances for Philadelphia in recent years, including this one.**

Gainwell could play the role of Corey Clement, who came out of nowhere to star in Philadelphia's win in Super Bowl 52 against New England with 100 yards receiving and a touchdown.

## Chiefs S Chamarri Conner

The second-year safety had nine tackles and a forced fumble in the AFC title game against Buffalo and will be needed Sunday to make sure Barkley doesn't get many big runs. Conner has been strong against the run with his

stop rate of 12% on run plays ranking best among all defensive backs with 100 snaps this season, according to NextGen stats.

Conner is also a strong blitzing with 11 pressures on 36 rushes, according to NextGen stats.

## Eagles S Reed Blankenship

Blankenship has 24 tackles, one forced fumble and one fumble recovery so far in the playoffs, and seems to have a knack for big plays. He had four interceptions in the regular season, with three

coming at key times in the second half to help preserve wins.

## Chiefs TE Noah Gray

With defenses keyed on Kelce, Gray has found room to operate in the middle of the field when Kansas City uses multiple tight ends. He set career highs this season with 40 catches for 437 yards and five TDs and could be needed again — especially in the red zone — if the Eagles use multiple defenders to take away Kelce.



REED HOFFMANN/AP

**Chiefs tight end Noah Gray set career highs this season with 40 catches for 437 yards and five touchdowns.**

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# SUPER BOWL LIX

## Test: Despite chance at history, Chiefs focused on one win

FROM PAGE 48

It's a rematch from two years ago when Hurts nearly led the Eagles to a championship only to watch Mahomes snatch it away by rallying Kansas City to a 38-35 win on Harrison Butker's 27-yard field goal with 8 seconds left.

Mahomes lifted the Chiefs to an overtime win against San Francisco in another Super Bowl rematch last year. Now, they're poised for a three-peat, a word coach Andy Reid doesn't use much.

"I think the only time I've heard him say it is to the media whenever y'all ask him about it," Mahomes said. "He's very locked in on just, 'How can we be great with our cadence today at practice?' so that's just the stuff that Coach Reid focuses on."

Reid won more games than any coach in franchise history during his 14 seasons in Philadelphia but couldn't win the big one, going 1-4 in NFC Championship Games and losing a Super Bowl to the Patriots. He went right to Kansas City after the Eagles fired him following the 2012 season and has built a dynasty thanks to Mahomes, Kelce, Chris Jones and others.

"You don't have time to think about all that," Reid said of the three-peat. "You're focused in on the job at hand here and that's playing against a great Eagles team."

Jones, the three-time All-Pro defensive tackle, echoed his coach's viewpoint.

"We don't talk about no three-peat," Jones said. "I think that's what we're here for. We understand that. We understand there's one more game until the offseason and we can do whatever we want to do. Our main focus is making sure we're prepared for the Eagles."

No matter what the Chiefs say, everyone else is talking about it. No team has done it in the Super Bowl era, though the Green Bay Packers won an NFL championship in 1965 and followed by winning the first two Super Bowls. Kelce even started all the three-peat talk on stage last year when he



Philadelphia Eagles quarterback Jalen Hurts, left, and Kansas City Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes shake hands following a game on Nov. 20, 2023, in Kansas City, Mo. Hurts and Mahomes will face off in the Super Bowl for the second time in three years.

AP

said the team's goal was to win three.

"This is gonna be our biggest test yet," Kelce said. "They got a lot of great players but the biggest thing is they play great together. You could see their communication. You could see the accountability they have, especially in the secondary. It's not gonna make my job any easier."

These Eagles are different from the group that fell just short against Kansas City in Arizona two years ago.

They have the NFL's most dynamic player in the backfield. Barkley rushed for

2,447 yards with seven TDs of 60-plus yards in the regular season and playoffs.

"The goal has always been to win it, not just to get here," Barkley said.

Losing to the Chiefs two years ago only motivated Hurts even more. He's determined to hoist a Lombardi Trophy and even had a photo of him walking off the field with Kansas City's red and yellow confetti falling around him as the background on his phone.

"It's had a great driving force," Hurts said of that loss. "It lit a flame, lit a fire in me, and to have this opportunity again is ex-

actly what you work for."

Hurts, Barkley, A.J. Brown, DeVonta Smith and a dominant offensive line present a major challenge for Chiefs defensive coordinator Steve Spagnuolo.

The Eagles also have the league's No. 1-ranked defense, featuring eight new starters from 2022 and defensive coordinator Vic Fangio.

All-Pro linebacker Zack Baun and rookie cornerbacks Quinyon Mitchell and Cooper DeJean plus the emergence of defensive tackle Jalen Carter and edge rusher Nolan Smith has transformed a defensive unit that fell apart last season.

"We're fortunate to have Steve Spagnuolo, but I tell you that Vic is one of those guys," Reid said. "He's just one of those really creative defensive minds that survived a long time in this league. He's been time-tested, and he has the trust of his players."

If the Chiefs win, Reid and Mahomes will be one step closer to Bill Belichick and Tom Brady. They're halfway to the six Belichick and Brady won together in New England and Mahomes is still four away from Brady's seven rings.

"I'm trying to be the greatest Patrick Mahomes that I can be. That's obviously a goal of anyone's — to be the greatest at their profession — but in order to do that, you have to be the greatest that you can be every single day," Mahomes said.

"Whenever I'm done with football, if I leave everything out there — the way that I feel like I have so far — as far as effort and mentality, I'll be happy with the results."

A win for Kansas City also would give Kelce his fourth ring, the same number of Grammy Awards his pop-star girlfriend has won for best album. Overall, Kelce has 18 playoff wins and Swift has 14 Grammys.

"She's up there being the superstar that she is and never taking no for an answer and always working her tail off. I better match that energy for sure," Kelce said.

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# SUPER BOWL LIX



DERIK HAMILTON/AP

Eagles linebacker Zack Baun had a breakout season in Philadelphia after several underwhelming years with the Saints, and is now back in New Orleans with a chance to secure a Super Bowl victory.

## Ex-Saint Baun has chance at title in NOLA with Eagles

BY DAN GELSTON  
Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — Jason Kelce stood on stage during a taping of his late-night talk show when he spotted his former boss and Eagles general manager Howie Roseman hanging out in the balcony.

Kelce turned the cameo into a Q&A and asked what every fan in Philadelphia — heck, everyone around the NFL — really wanted to know: “Did you know Zack Baun was going to be this good?”

Roseman, who built the franchise’s first Super Bowl championship team in 2017, took a flier on Baun and signed him to a modest \$3.5 million, one-year deal in the offseason after four mostly forgettable years with the New Orleans Saints.

The goal was that Baun would be serviceable on his prove-it deal and maybe play decent enough to find a fit on the defense, perhaps even play some special teams.

The Eagles’ payoff on Roseman’s gamble? Baun blossomed into a first-team All-Pro under Vic Fangio, and now the linebacker is set to enjoy a professional homecoming in New Orleans, this time trying to help Philadelphia beat the Kansas City Chiefs in the Super Bowl.

So, c’mon Howie, did you really know?

“I went to him after he made first-team All-Pro, and I went to him and I congratulated him, and I said, ‘Man, you deserve this,’” Roseman said. “And he said, ‘Be honest, did you think there was any shot at this?’

“I said, ‘(heck) no,’” Roseman said to roaring laughter.

Hey, who can blame him? The 28-year-old Baun’s signing was barely

a blip on the offseason transactions wire compared to more ballyhooed deals with running back Saquon Barkley — a smashing success — and linebacker Bryce Huff — a \$51 million bust. The Saints took Baun in the third round of the 2020 draft and he did little to distinguish himself for a team well out of the NFL spotlight, with a combined 12 starts and 88 tackles over four seasons.

In his first season with the Eagles, Baun is a finalist for the AP NFL Defensive Player of the Year award.

New Orleans let him walk, but the Super Bowl is far from any type of revenge game for Baun to show up in his old stadium and show his former team and fans what they missed.

He took the fall for his shortcomings with the Saints.

“Kind of getting in my own way,” Baun said. “I had great coaches, it was a great scheme. But I kind of blame myself for getting in my own way. I think just the new environment, the new coaching staff, the new people around me kind of gave me a new opportunity and a new perspective on my career.”

Baun got out of his head and into a fresh start in Philadelphia.

In New Orleans, Baun was primarily an edge defender who failed to crack the starting lineup and played only a handful of snaps each game. The Eagles moved him to inside linebacker and he instantly found new life under Fangio’s scheme that forced him into being a run stopper and pass rusher on the blitz. He had 151 total tackles, including 93 solo.

Take this assessment of Baun’s career from Fangio in May:

“He really didn’t play a whole lot of defense there, but he was inside some, more outside,” he said. “We think he can play inside, and I have not seen anything so far that says otherwise.”

Consider him a fast learner.

Baun was a smash hit straight out of the gate with 15 tackles in a season-opening win against Green Bay. He even sealed the 34-29 win with a sack on the last play of the game.

He was a bit overshadowed in that one by the other new free agent in town. That Barkley guy scored three touchdowns.

Like Barkley, Baun never slowed down.

He had had 11 tackles and a sack in a win over Carolina. He forced a fumble in the third that set up a score, one of five turnovers for Philadelphia, and had two tackles for losses in December against Washington. In the Eagles’ playoff win over Green Bay, Baun was the first Philadelphia linebacker with an interception in a playoff game since DeMeco Ryans in 2014.

Baun went from a bargain-bin afterthought with the Saints to a free-agent All-Pro linebacker in hot demand this offseason, sure to parlay his career year into long-term financial security.

Baun could potentially end two tenures in New Orleans. But that’s a worry for another day for him — one he hopes comes with a Super Bowl ring.

“I don’t really want to get into the free agency,” he said. “We’re here for the Super Bowl. I’m focused on this team right now and I am where my feet are.”

## Chiefs DC Spagnuolo has created complex playbook over years

BY DAVE SKRETTA  
Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — Every once in a while, when an unsuspecting offense is least expecting it, Kansas City Chiefs safety Justin Reid will inch his way toward the line of scrimmage, then take off like a thunderbolt toward the quarterback the moment the ball is snapped.

It looks so simple, the way Reid blitzes, as if all he’s doing is timing up the QB’s cadence.

Turns out, it is far more complicated.

The timing is a big part of it, of course, but so is the way defensive linemen tie up the offensive line. The way the rest of the defensive backfield disguises coverage. The way pass rushers stunt or otherwise provide pressure on the quarterback from the outside, making him move to the exact point on the field where Reid expects to meet him.

The mad scientist pulling all those strings is Steve Spagnuolo, the Kansas City defensive coordinator whose job in helping the Chiefs get back to the Super Bowl had him interviewing with several clubs last week for another shot at being a head coach.

“He’s incredible,” Reid said ahead of Sunday’s Super Bowl rematch with the Philadelphia Eagles. “My first year here, like, the amount of pressures and cover-zeros and simulated pressures — the sheer volume of it was a little bit like, ‘Wow, this is really deep.’ But as you get a ton of reps at it and start to get a feel for the defense, you’re almost hungry for it. Like, ‘Let’s put in more, put in something else nobody has ever seen.’”

Hard to believe there is something left to invent.

But that deep, complicated de-

fensive playbook and all those exotic blitzes that “Spags” has developed over the years are a big reason why Kansas City is back facing Philadelphia on the NFL’s biggest stage.

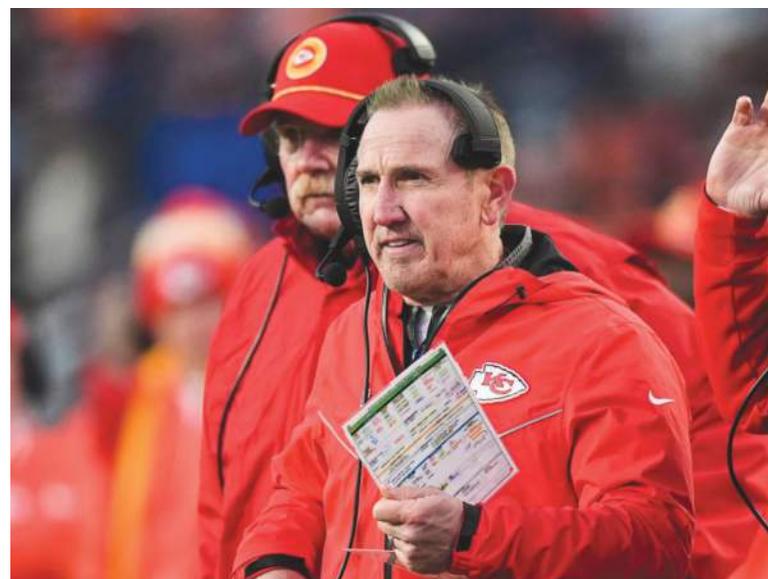
“I love this defense, man. Spags, we’ve always trusted him and everybody that plays under him,” Chiefs tight end Travis Kelce said. “They’re so sound and they play their tails off, and they throw their heart out there on the field every single week.”

In the early years of its dynastic run, the Kansas City defense was a liability, and it was up to Patrick Mahomes and the rest of a high-powered offense to bail it out. But that changed when Spagnuolo arrived, and general manager Brett Veach began investing free-agent money and draft capital into upgrades on that side of the ball. The result has been a defense among the NFL’s best in scoring the past few years, and one that was particularly good against the run this season.

That could prove pivotal as the Chiefs try to slow down Eagles running back Saquon Barkley in the big game.

And when it comes to slowing down the passing attack, well, that’s where blitzes come into play. They can come from any level of the defense, at any point in time, and the only thing they have in common is the frequency in which they succeed.

“He doesn’t do it every down,” Kansas City coach Andy Reid said. “Sometimes you get the stigma of being a ‘blitz guy.’ It’s when he does it and how he knows the protections or the run scheme, you know, for the run blitzes. How he understands the scheme and when to go about using it. I think that’s what makes him so unique and why they’re so successful.”



DAVID ZALUBOWSKI/AP

Chiefs defensive coordinator Steve Spagnuolo has helped Kansas City to three titles in recent years and is now tasked with stopping Saquon Barkley and the Philadelphia Eagles in an attempt at a history three-peat.

# SPORTS

■ More coverage of Super Bowl LIX on Pages 45-47



**Kansas City Chiefs (17-2)  
vs. Philadelphia Eagles (17-3)**  
AFN-Sports  
12:30 a.m. CET; 8:30 a.m. JKT

**Clockwise, from front: Eagles QB Jalen Hurts and RB Saquon Barkley, Chiefs TE Travis Kelce and QB Patrick Mahomes.**

AP photos

## 'Biggest test yet'

### Chiefs' quest for three-peat faces toughest challenge against Eagles

By **ROB MAADDI**  
*Associated Press*

NEW ORLEANS — Patrick Mahomes, Travis Kelce and the Kansas City Chiefs are pursuing history and a few of Taylor Swift's records.

Saquon Barkley, Jalen Hurts and the Philadelphia Eagles stand in their way.

The Chiefs (17-2) will try to become the first team to win three straight Super Bowls when they face the Eagles (17-3) on Sunday in the Superdome.

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# Ovechkin's influence stretches around world » NHL, Page 43

