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EUROPE
& PACIFIC

WEEKEND

EDITION

MUSIC

The War and Treaty to perform for troops at Korea, Guam bases

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US military grounds all Ospreys after crash

By TARA COPP
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The military announced late Wednesday it was grounding all of its Osprey V-22 helicopters, one week after eight Air Force Special Operations Command service members died in a crash off the coast of Japan.

The Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps took the extraordinary step of grounding hundreds of aircraft after a preliminary investigation of last week's crash indicated that a materiel failure — that something went wrong with the aircraft — and not a mistake by the crew led to the deaths.

The crash raised new questions about the safety of the Osprey, which has been involved in multiple fatal accidents over its relatively short time in service. Japan grounded its fleet of 14 Ospreys after the crash.

Lt. Gen. Tony Bauernfeind, head of Air Force Special Operations Command, directed the standdown “to mitigate risk while the investigation continues,” the command said in a statement. “Preliminary investigation information indicates a potential materiel failure caused the mishap, but the underlying cause of the failure is unknown at this time.”

In a separate notice, Naval Air Systems Command said it was grounding all Ospreys. The command is responsible for the Marine Corps and Navy variants of the aircraft.

The Air Force said it was unknown how long the aircraft would be grounded. It said the standdown was expected to re-

SEE OSPREY ON PAGE 6



PHOTOS BY COREY DICKSTEIN/Stars and Stripes

Jay Tenison, a former Army tanker who served in Iraq, enters an M1A2 Abrams tank at Fort Moore, Ga., on Tuesday before firing the tank's main gun as his dying wish. Tenison was diagnosed in 2022 with terminal stomach cancer.

Parting shot

Iraq War veteran with terminal cancer fires tank for last time

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

FORT MOORE, Ga. — The first blast of the M1A2 Abrams tank's cannon sent a 120 mm round exploding into a small, green target in the distance on a remote training range at the Army base.

Inside the tank's turret, the shot sent shockwaves through Jay Tenison's body — something the Iraq

War veteran had not felt in nearly two decades. For just a few minutes on Tuesday, he said firing that tank transported him back to his youthful Army days and back to a time long before a terminal cancer diagnosis would dominate his life.

“I was not prepared for the first boom when I fired my first round, but that's every bit of what I re-



An M1A2 Abrams tank fires at Fort Moore.

membered from before, just as awesome — the thunder of doom,” Tenison, 39, said shortly after firing the tank's gun at Fort Moore, the former Fort Benning, where Army officials worked for weeks to grant him his dying wish of shooting a tank one last time. “I

was a little bit nervous going into it ... I just wanted to make sure I did a good job engaging those targets and getting weapons fired on the right locations and killing targets.

“It felt wonderful ... knowing I

SEE SHOT ON PAGE 6

BUSINESS/WEATHER

EUROPE GAS PRICES

Country	Super E10	Super unleaded	Super plus	Diesel	Azores	..	..	\$4.397	..
Germany	\$3.640	\$4.200	\$4.547	\$4.501	Change in price	..	..	-1.9 cents	..
Netherlands	..	\$4.407	\$4.677	\$4.881	Turkey	..	..	\$4.213	\$4.783*
U.K.	..	\$2.691	\$2.945	\$2.551	Change in price	..	..	-1.9 cents	-23.5 cents

Fuel prices are updated daily. These prices are effective Dec. 8. The change in price is from Dec. 1.

PACIFIC GAS PRICES

Country	Super E10	Super unleaded	Super plus	Diesel	South Korea	\$3.309	..	\$4.219	\$4.179
Japan	..	\$4.189	..	\$4.139	Change in price	-1.0 cent	..	-2.0 cents	-5.0 cents
Okinawa	\$3.279	..	..	\$4.139	Guam	\$3.339**	\$3.899	\$4.249	..
Change in price	-1.0 cents	..	..	-6.0 cents	Change in price	-1.0 cent	-1.0 cent	-2.0 cents	..

*DieselEFD **Midgrade For the week of Dec. 9-15

EXCHANGE RATES

Military rates		Commercial rates	
Euro costs (Dec. 8)	\$1.05	Bahrain(Dinar)	.3769
British pound (Dec. 8)	\$1.29	Britain (Pound)	1.2548
Japanese yen (Dec. 8)	144.00	Canada (Dollar)	1.3612
South Korean won (Dec. 8)	1287.00	China(Yuan)	7.1347
		Denmark (Krone)	6.9226
		Egypt (Pound)	30.9511
		Euro	.9285
		Hong Kong (Dollar)	7.8142
		Hungary (Forint)	354.23
		Israel (Shekel)	3.7017
		Japan (Yen)	144.51
		Kuwait(Dinar)	.3083
		Norway (Krone)	10.9259
		Philippines (Peso)	55.36
		Poland (Zloty)	4.02
		Saudi Arabia (Riyal)	3.7506
		Singapore (Dollar)	1.3403
		South Korea (Won)	1317.52

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

INTEREST RATES

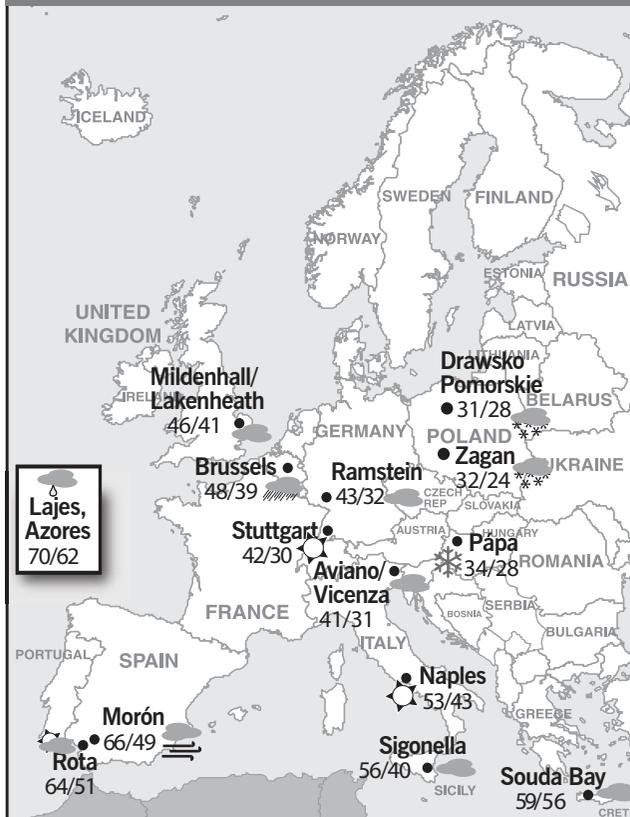
Prime rate	8.50
Interest Rates Discount rate	6.00
Federal funds market rate	5.25
3-month bill	5.42
30-year bond	4.22

WEATHER OUTLOOK

FRIDAY IN THE MIDDLE EAST



FRIDAY IN EUROPE



SATURDAY IN THE PACIFIC



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

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MILITARY

Report lists military health care system issues

Long wait times, understaffed facilities, lack of access among problems service members face

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

The U.S. military community must navigate hurdles to access health care, both at home and abroad, according to a recent report from the Defense Department's Office of the Inspector General.

Among the issues plaguing the military health care system are long wait times for appointments, understaffed facilities and a general lack of access to care, all of which are contributing to complaints and concerns, the Nov. 29 report said.

It recommends that the Defense Health Agency, which oversees all military treatment facilities, conduct a survey of health care providers and patients and use the results to help develop and implement a plan to "bring those provider networks into compliance" with Defense Department requirements.

For its report, the IG collected information from DHA, service audit agencies and inspectors general from the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps.

The results identified health care access issues in a variety of military communities, including Pearl Harbor, Hawaii; Lemoore, Calif.; Oak Harbor, Wash.; and Pensacola, Fla.

Smaller military treatment facilities "often only service active duty service members, and send all other beneficiaries, such as family members and retirees, to the TRICARE provider network," according to data provided by the



ALEX WILSON/Stars and Stripes

Active-duty troops and Defense Department civilians alike are have issues accessing health care at military treatment facilities world wide, according to a recent DOD Inspector General report.

attorneys general.

Additional data showed that some TRICARE networks "are not robust or adequate to meet this need and beneficiaries may have difficulty obtaining network care," the IG's report said.

Citing Naval Health Clinic Pearl Harbor in Hawaii as an example, the IG said the clinic accepts only active-duty service members and offers only limited specialty care.

Other patients are turned away and sent to the TRICARE network at large; however, the network in Hawaii has limited facilities when compared to places such as San Diego.

Specialty services in Hawaii also have appointment wait times

that exceed DOD's 28-day standard. Gastroenterology services, for example, take an average of 49 days and urology services can take an average of 67 days.

The IG also identified significant health care access issues for overseas military communities, specifically in Japan.

Problems there include the necessity of translation services, the lack of certain U.S. prescription medicines and the fact that medical services may not be available at all.

"Japanese medical facilities routinely and lawfully turn away patients when limited by medical staff, translation support, or when advanced payment cannot be secured, resulting in denial of care,"

the report said.

U.S. insurance is often incompatible with Japan's medical system or not accepted by Japanese doctors, the report said. Upfront payment is often required, making health care "cost prohibitive for some civilians."

The issues aren't just an inconvenience, they're causing some DOD civilians to leave their jobs altogether.

Within a six-month period this year, at least eight Air Force civilian employees requested their tour in Japan be shortened due to health care access concerns, service officials told the IG.

Another three declined job offers and two chose to relocate all together.

At the Department of Defense Education Activity, which manages base schools, at least 15 Japan-based teachers resigned from positions during the 2022-23 school year, the report said. They cited access to health care as their reason.

In October, the Federal Education Association — a Washington, D.C.-based teachers union that represents DODEA employees — told Stars and Stripes that "a majority of our members in Japan are planning to retire or seek employment elsewhere because of the lack of on-base health care."

FEA represents more than 600 DODEA employees in Japan, spokesman Gary Hritz told Stars and Stripes by email Oct. 11.

Because of these concerns, the IG is asking DHA's director, Army Lt. Gen. Telita Crosland, to conduct surveys at installations worldwide to learn about the concerns of patients and providers alike. Crosland did not provide a response to the recommendations prior to its publication, the report said, despite already receiving an extension to the IG's original deadline.

The IG is asking Crosland to respond by Dec. 29 with details on her planned course of actions or alternative recommendations.

A spokesperson for DHA, headquartered in Virginia, did not immediately respond to Stars and Stripes' request for comment Thursday.

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N. Korea calls US stealth bomber 'very serious' nuclear threat

By DAVID CHOI
Stars and Stripes

CAMP HUMPHREYS, South Korea — An Air Force stealth bomber that took its maiden flight last month is a "very serious" nuclear threat that demonstrates Washington's willingness to carry out preemptive strikes, a North Korean newspaper reported Thursday.

The state-run Rodong Shinmun article described the B-21 Raider as having the capability to launch

"an unexpected nuclear strike anywhere" and is an example of the United States placing its "nuclear preemptive strike tactics into practice."

"In this instance, anyone can easily guess what it means for the U.S. to conduct a test flight of a new generation of stealth strategic bombers," the report said.

The B-21 took its first test flight Nov. 10 in Palmdale, Calif. The sixth-generation nuclear-capable bomber developed by Northrop Grumman was designed to replace the B-1 Lancers and B-2 Spirits in the fleet, according to the Air Force's website.

The aircraft was in development for over 30 years and is named after the Doolittle Raid, a World War II bombing mission led by Lt. Col. James Doolittle that struck Japanese industrial targets on April 18, 1942.

The Defense Department's policy maintains that "the fundamen-

tal role of U.S. nuclear weapons is to deter nuclear attack," according to its 2022 Nuclear Posture Review.

"The U.S. would only consider the use of nuclear weapons in extreme circumstances to defend the vital interests of the United States or its allies and partners," the review states.

North Korea codified its "irreversible" and non-negotiable nuclear weapons program in September 2022. The law included a provision for a preemptive use of nuclear weapons and broadly says the regime may conduct a nuclear strike if its leaders or nuclear operations are threatened by hostile forces.

American bombers have appeared on and over the Korean Peninsula throughout the year.

On Oct. 17, a nuclear-capable B-52H Stratofortress became the first bomber of its type to land on South Korean soil in at least 30 years. Five days later, the bomber



U.S. Air Force

The B-21 Raider is unveiled in Palmdale, Calif., in 2022.

flew alongside fighter jets from South Korea and Japan, marking the first aerial drill between the three nations.

AB-52H flew alongside U.S. F-16 Fighting Falcons and South Korean F-15K Slam Eagles during an escort drill over the peninsula on July 13, a day after North Korea fired a solid-fueled intercontinental ballistic missile.

Washington, Seoul and Tokyo have pledged to continue working together to deter Pyongyang from conducting nuclear and ballistic missile tests.

The communist regime has fired 22 ballistic missiles in 15 days of testing so far this year.

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Correction

A Dec. 7 op-ed should've said two Heritage Foundation scholars who had signed a manifesto rejecting the market-skeptical tendencies on the new, Trump-era right asked to have their names removed. They did not leave the organization.

MILITARY

US troops in Niger soak up village culture

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

The counterterrorism drones are grounded but the camels aren't at the U.S. Air Force's remote base in Niger, where troops still get a taste of the local culture despite a July coup that has ruined their military mission.

On the southern edge of the Sahara Desert, U.S. service members mingled over the weekend with vendors from the town of Agadez, home to the military's western Africa hub known as Base 201.

Traditional African clothing and artwork were among the items for sale at the women's bazaar, which gave a group of female vendors from Agadez the chance to sell their homemade products to troops on base.

Saturday's feel-good gathering, which included camel rides for the troops and raised \$11,350 for the surrounding community, contrasts with the otherwise fraught conditions for the U.S. in Niger.

The coup that ousted President Mohamed Bazoum a few months ago also brought an end to cooperation with the Nigerien military, which was a linchpin to American counterterrorism strategy in the region. The circumstance also raises the question of how long the U.S. can afford to sit on a base that has no op-

erational value.

Since the coup, the U.S. has moved some personnel out of Niger while concentrating its remaining force at the base in Agadez.

For now, those troops are hunkered down because all collaboration with Niger on military missions has stopped, in accordance with U.S. rules that prohibit partnership with military juntas.

The situation amounts to a major blow for the Pentagon's counterterrorism efforts in the region, where Islamic militants have been making steady gains in recent years.

In September, U.S. Air Forces Europe and Africa's Gen. James Hecker said the military was looking for alternatives to Base 201, which the Defense Department spent more than \$100 million to develop.

But he didn't specify where else U.S. troops could go or how long the Air Force was willing to wait out things in Agadez.

U.S. officials have urged Niger's military to restore the elected government to power, but there have been no indications that will happen anytime soon.

In the meantime, it's camel rides for the troops.

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PHOTOS BY ROSE GUDEX/U.S. Air Force

A U.S. service member browses handmade items Saturday at the women's bazaar at Base 201 in Agadez, Niger. The bazaar brought in \$11,350 to support the local economy.



A vendor discusses an item for sale with a U.S. airman at the bazaar.



A U.S. airman rides a camel during the women's bazaar at Base 201.

Navy spy plane passes over Taiwan Strait with Chinese jets in tow

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — A U.S. Navy P-8A Poseidon flew through the Taiwan Strait on Wednesday, prompting China to scramble fighter jets to monitor its passage.

The maritime patrol and reconnaissance aircraft flew southwest from the East China Sea to the South China Sea around 12:30 p.m., as part of a routine transit, U.S. 7th Fleet spokeswoman Lt. j.g. Sarah Merrill said by email Thursday.

"U.S. Navy ships and aircraft routinely use the Taiwan Strait to

transit between the two [seas] and have done so for many years," she wrote.

The Poseidon's trip was not in response to any particular event, but such transits do "demonstrate the U.S. commitment to a stable, free and open Indo-Pacific, and confirm that the U.S. Navy flies, sails and operates anywhere international law allows," Merrill added.

China, however, said the trip was "publicly hyped" and said it took steps to track the aircraft by organizing "fighter planes to monitor the passage" of the Poseidon, Chinese army Col. Shi Yi

wrote Wednesday on an official Weibo social media account.

"Troops in the theater remain on high alert at all times and resolutely safeguard national sovereignty and security as well as regional peace and stability," the post said.

Beijing considers Taiwan, a functional democracy, as a breakaway province that must be reunified with the mainland, by force if necessary. China routinely criticizes U.S. operations in the strait.

Chinese forces hailed the aircraft, Merrill said, but all communications "were consistent with

international norms and did not impact the operation."

The U.S. regularly sends warships, typically destroyers, through the strait. Less frequently, aircraft such as the Poseidon fly through the 110-mile-wide waterway that separates China from Taiwan.

The guided-missile destroyer USS Rafael Peralta, along with the Canadian patrol frigate HMCS Ottawa, made a trip through the strait on Nov. 2.

China's army similarly claimed the joint transit was "publicly hyped" at the time.

China on Nov. 30 said U.S.

weapons sales to Taipei are "turning Taiwan into a weapons depot and a powder keg," The Associated Press reported that day.

The U.S. maintains unofficial and nondiplomatic ties with Taiwan, while abiding by the One China policy.

However, the U.S. is also bound by the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act stipulating it will provide enough defense weapons and support so that the island can maintain a "sufficient self-defense capability."

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MILITARY

Senate hearing includes call to confirm promotions

By **DOUG G. WARE**
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Leading members of the Senate Armed Services Committee said Wednesday that senators should not leave for the holiday break next week until all military nominations stalled in the upper chamber are confirmed.

The senators challenged their colleagues during a hearing of the committee's sub-panel on personnel after Sen. Tommy Tuberville, R-Ala., blocked hundreds of nominations for 10 months to protest a Pentagon policy that reimburses troops who travel to receive reproductive care, such as abortions. The policy was put in place after many Republican states passed laws heavily restricting or banning the procedure.

Tuberville on Tuesday finally agreed to lift his hold on about 425 promotions for officers of three-star rank or lower. His blockade continues, however, for about a dozen four-star generals.

"It was a grave mistake for one senator to hold our military promotion system hostage over his personal disagreement with the Department of Defense policy," said Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., the personnel subcommittee chairwoman. "We need our commanders in the Pacific to deter China and our service vice chiefs."

"The Senate should not go home for the holidays until we confirm the remaining



CARLOS BONGIOANNI/Stars and Stripes

Sen. Tommy Tuberville, R-Ala., attends a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on July 12 in Washington.

nominees," she added.

Sen. Rick Scott, R-Fla., who has been supportive of Tuberville and his 10-month blockade, agreed.

"It's resolved except for the four-stars, and I hope what will happen is we'll go through this process quickly," he said. "Some people have some concerns, so let's go through them, let's do cloture, let's get a vote on it as we get this done as quickly as possible and I agree with [Warren]. If we can get it done before we go off on the holidays, we should."

The House and Senate are scheduled for a break that will start Dec. 15 and not return until January.

The hearing on Wednesday was held to examine the ongoing recruiting challenges for the service branches. For 2023, only the Marine Corps and Space Force met their small recruiting goals. The Army, Navy and Air Force, which sought to sign far more recruits, all failed to meet their targets for the year. The Air Force hoped to sign almost 27,000 active-duty recruits but came up about 2,700 short, Brig. Gen. Christopher Amrhein, commander of Air Force Recruiting Service, said a few weeks ago. The Army hoped for 65,000 recruits and missed by about 10,000, while the Navy aimed for almost 38,000 new active-duty sailors and missed by about 7,500.

"If we were assigning grades, those two services got an A. The Air Force earned a B+, the Army got a B- and the Navy a C+," Warren said. "For years now, the military has failed to connect with young people who we need to keep this country safe."

Recruiting commanders at the hearing told the committee that there are various challenges in recruiting troops, including a disconnect between the military and younger Americans and modern challenges such as social media and effects from the coronavirus pandemic. The officers said they also face service-specific challenges.

"Educating the public about what our Navy does, both in conflict and in peacetime, would be helpful," said Rear Adm. Alexis

Walker, who leads Navy Recruiting Command.

"Not everybody is fit to be a Marine," added Maj. Gen. William Bowers, who leads Marine Corps Recruiting Command. "We are not for everybody. We are looking for a select few young men and women of character who are attracted to the ethos and core values of being part of something bigger than themselves."

Maj. Gen. Johnny Davis, who leads Army Recruiting Command, said his service offers so many different mission specialties that it can sometimes be overwhelming for potential recruits, which is something the Air Force is also seeing. Amrhein said some young recruits think every Air Force job involves flying planes.

"We also have medical professionals, civil engineers, doctors, maintainers to be able to generate airpower. Making sure everyone understands there are 200 Air Force specialty codes, jobs, is a key component and, I think, a very big challenge," he said.

The Navy has said its recruiting target for 2024 is about 43,000 active-duty sailors. The Air Force wants to recruit more than 26,000. The goals for the Army and Marine Corps have not yet been announced, but the Army has already said its new target will be lower than last year's.

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MILITARY

Shot: Former tank crewman remembers 'thunder of doom'

FROM PAGE 1

had a large amount of success.”

Tenison went nine-for-nine in hitting his targets, calling his return to an Abrams tank gunner position “like riding a bike.”

“Everything is still in the same position it was before,” he said. “It’s an awesome, very functional and capable machine.”

Tenison, who is from Phoenix, served as a tank crewman on active duty from 2004 to 2008, according to the Army. He last shot a tank in 2005, while stationed in Germany with 1st Armored Division’s 1st Brigade, hitting all but one target with a tank nicknamed Bulletproof. But, as his unit prepared for a deployment to Iraq, Tenison said his days in a tank were short-lived. In 2006, he deployed, spending months fighting in volatile parts of Iraq including Tal Afar and Ramadi. After returning to Germany, Tenison served his final year on active duty at Fort Irwin, Calif., as part of the National Training Center’s opposing force, the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment.

After leaving active duty in 2008 as a specialist, he spent five years in the Army Reserve as an engineer while earning bachelor’s and master’s degrees in electrical engineering, he said.

But it was his days in a tank that proved the most significant from his time in the Army. When he was diagnosed last year with terminal, Stage IV stomach cancer, nearly a year after first experiencing pain after eating, he sat down to consider what he wanted to do with the remaining months of his life.

“I realized I really wanted to do

tank gunnery,” he said. “I just really wanted to shoot a tank again.”

He turned to a popular social media chatroom for soldiers and Army veterans on Reddit — asking the Army page in October 2022 if there was a way that anyone could make his dying wish come true.

“I have 12-18 months left to live, according to my oncologist. My weight is slowly dropping, my hair is slowly falling out, and my strength is leaving me,” Tenison wrote. “Before I depart this land of the living, I’d love to feel the thunder of doom inside an Abrams [tank]. Can anybody help this former tanker?”

The response was overwhelming. Hundreds of veterans and current service members chimed in with well wishes and advice on how to make it happen. Despite some solid leads, one year later, Tenison still did not have a date to shoot a tank.

He posted again in October, telling the Army webpage that his doctors had given him about three to six months left, and he still wanted to shoot a tank more than anything.

“I’m not looking for sympathy here,” Tenison wrote. “I’m looking for help.”

And help came.

Officials at Fort Moore got word of Tenison’s request, and they did everything they could to make it happen, said Col. Ryan Kranc, who commands the Army post’s 316th Cavalry Brigade, which trains tankers.

Kranc, who watched Tenison shoot the tank on Tuesday, said they operated under orders to

“make this happen no matter what,” though it had never been done previously.

“I think for a lot of us whose lives have been touched by cancer, this really spoke to us,” he said. “There was a lot of effort and outreach by a lot of different people. I think it was a fantastic team effort. We often call this the ultimate team sport, and I think what you saw today was a giant touchdown by the entire team.”

After getting to know Tenison on Monday, when the veteran arrived at Fort Moore to run through a tank simulator, Kranc said he was not surprised he was able to hit every target during live fire.

“He’s a quick learner and there’s a bit of muscle memory with it,” he said.

After the shoot, Kranc inducted Tenison into the Order of St. George, an honor for high achieving tankers and cavalry scouts. St. George has long been known as the patron saint of mounted warfare, he said.

Tenison said Tuesday would go down as one of his favorite memories. He said the experience helped him remember the things that he loved about being a tanker — the feel of the trigger and the blast and the smell of a spent round.

“That’s a smell I haven’t smelled in a long time,” he said holding one of the shells from a round that he had fired. “I love that smell.”

Tenison planned to include footage of the tank shoot in a video that he is making for his 6- and 8-year-old daughters to watch when they are older. He hopes they will be



COREY DICKSTEIN/Stars and Stripes

Jay Tenison, a former Army tanker who served in Iraq and was diagnosed in 2022 with terminal cancer, holds a shell he shot from an M1A2 Abrams tank at Fort Moore, Ga., on Tuesday.

proud of his military service, he said.

“I’m going to tell them that this was every bit about me being a part of the military even though I left” years ago, he said. “I hope I can explain to them that this, today, was a huge thing, and it shows what can happen when a community supports itself.”

With the tank shoot crossed of

his list, Tenison said he was down to two other items skydiving and piloting an ultralight airplane.

“This was something that has left me really awestruck and inspired,” he said. “I feel like I owe a huge debt of gratitude to everybody that made it happen.”

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Osprey: Length of grounding uncertain

FROM PAGE 1

main in place until the investigation determined the cause of the Japan crash and made recommendations to allow the fleet to return to operations.

In Japan, where U.S. military Ospreys had a non-fatal crash once and a number of incidents, the latest accident has rekindled safety concerns just as the Japanese government builds a new base for its fleet of Ospreys.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirokazu Matsuno told reporters in Tokyo the government has already formally requested that the U.S. military ensure the safety of Ospreys before their flights, but that Tokyo will seek further information from the U.S. side because it also affects the safety of Japan’s own Osprey fleet.

The U.S.-made Osprey is a hy-

brid aircraft that takes off and lands like a helicopter but can rotate its propellers forward and cruise much faster, like an airplane, during flight.

Its unique design has been a factor in multiple incidents. While the investigation into last week’s crash has only just begun, it renewed attention on the aircraft’s safety record, particularly on a mechanical problem with the clutch that has troubled the program for more than a decade. There also have been questions as to whether all parts of the Osprey have been manufactured according to safety specifications.

In August, the Marines found that a fatal 2022 Osprey crash was caused by a clutch failure, but the root cause was still unknown. In its report on the crash, the Marines forewarned that future inci-

dents “are impossible to prevent” without improvements to flight control system software, drivetrain component material strength, and robust inspection requirements.

Air Force Special Operations Command has 51 Ospreys, the U.S. Marine Corps flies as many as 400 and U.S. Navy operates 27.

The Osprey is still a relatively young aircraft in the military’s fleet — the first Ospreys only became operational in 2007 after decades of testing. But more than 50 troops have died either flight testing the Osprey or conducting training flights in the aircraft, including 20 deaths in four crashes over the past 20 months.

An Osprey accident in August in Australia killed three Marines. That accident also is still under investigation.

MILITARY

Army employee indicted in theft of \$100M from 4-H fund

By J.P. LAWRENCE
Stars and Stripes

An Army civilian employee in Texas is accused in a federal indictment of stealing more than \$100 million from a fund meant to help military children.

Janet Yamanaka Mello, 57, was indicted Wednesday in a San Antonio district court on 10 total criminal counts including mail fraud, engaging in a monetary transaction using criminal proceeds and aggravated identity theft.

Federal prosecutors say Mello

used her position as a financial program manager for Child, Youth and School services at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio to steer 4-H Military Partnership Grant program funds into a shell company she controlled.

The grant program helps military children participate in projects with 4-H, which is a traditionally farming-focused network of youth organizations administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Mello founded Child Health and Youth Lifelong Development in

2016 in order to take grant money from the program, the indictment alleged.

Prosecutors said her business didn't provide services to military members and their families, as Mello said it would.

The \$100 million in grant funds awarded to the business over the past six years instead went toward

high-end jewelry, clothing, vehicles and real estate, prosecutors said.

Mello also is accused of repeatedly falsifying the digital signature of one of her supervisors, the indictment said.

Each of the five fraud charges carries a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison, with the four

spending charges carrying a maximum sentence of 10 years each, and the aggravated identity theft charge mandating at least two years.

Mello is scheduled for an initial court appearance Dec. 14.

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Clandestine online ops now need senior officials' OK

By ELLEN NAKASHIMA
AND DAVID DiMOLFETTA
The Washington Post

Following a controversy over the Pentagon's use of clandestine information operations, the U.S. military has eliminated dozens of false online personas it created in recent years and has curtailed the use of such operations overseas, according to senior defense officials.

Clandestine online operations now require signoff by senior Pentagon officials, the CIA and the State Department, according to the officials, who spoke Monday on the condition of anonymity because of the matter's sensitivity.

The new policy follows a review and pause initiated last year by the undersecretary of defense for policy, Colin Kahl, who stepped down in July. His review, first reported by The Washington Post, was prompted by an outcry following the publication of an August 2022 report by internet researchers Graphika and Stanford Internet Observatory. The researchers revealed takedowns by platforms including Facebook and Twitter — now called X — of more than 150 bogus personas and media sites, and suggested that the accounts might have been created by the U.S. military.

In the wake of the review, "new levels of oversight — to include coordination within the interagency — is now being applied to the department's MISO activities," said a Pentagon spokesperson, Lisa Lawrence, referring to military information support operations, the Pentagon's term for psychological or information operations.

The Post confirmed with U.S. officials last year that many of the accounts examined by the researchers were indeed used by the U.S. military, and in particular U.S. Central Command, whose area of operations includes the Middle East, North Africa, and Central and South Asia.

Some of the accounts taken down included a made-up Persian-language media site that shared content reposted from the U.S.-funded

Voice of America Farsi and Radio Free Europe. One fake account posted an inflammatory tweet claiming that relatives of deceased Afghan refugees had reported bodies being returned from Iran with missing organs. The tweet linked to a video that was part of an article posted on a U.S.-military affiliated website.

Combatant commands continue to undertake information operations online using identifiable U.S. military accounts. But the practice of deploying sham accounts to attempt to influence overseas audiences has been dramatically reduced, senior Pentagon officials said. "It's nowhere near the volume it was previously now that there's oversight and greater scrutiny given to all of them," said one official.

The operations by CENTCOM, which had taken place within the past several years, did not gain much traction, according to Graphika and Stanford Internet Observatory. The campaigns involved posts, for instance, that advanced anti-Russia narratives and cited the Kremlin's "imperialist" war in Ukraine and warning of the conflict's direct impact on Central Asian countries.

The researchers concluded that the military's overt accounts actually attracted more followers. Such overt, attributed activity forms the bulk of MISO.

Indeed, said the Pentagon officials, military psychological operations "should not go away but we just need to make sure it's being done judiciously and lawfully."

In July, the Defense Department issued an updated information operations strategy, which did not address clandestine activity. In general, it said that "a coherent" information operations strategy "requires a clear understanding of the drivers that shape" audiences' perceptions and that the intelligence community must "gain a better grasp on the motivations that drive behaviors." Only once that is done can "informational power... be effectively applied."



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MILITARY

VA sees sexual trauma, homeless link

Housing program finds many female vets noted abuse during service

By LINDA F. HERSEY
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Nearly 45% of female veterans in homeless programs offered by the Department of Veterans Affairs in fiscal 2023 had documented histories of sexual trauma in the military.

The finding aligns with growing evidence that “sexual assaults and threatening sexual harassment” factor into a rising rate of homelessness among female veterans, according to Terrence Hayes, VA press secretary.

“Many [military sexual trauma] survivors struggle with readjustment issues and disruptions in core areas of functioning and well-being, including difficulties like homelessness,” he said. “Experts point out that many [military sexual trauma] survivors suffer in silence, feel alone in their experience, and have trouble coping.”

Homelessness among female veterans rose by 10% from 2020 to 2022 as the overall number of veterans experiencing homelessness declined, according to the Department of Housing and Urban Development, which provides an annual report on homelessness to Congress.

“Women veterans deal with unique challenges such as having and caring for children, facing the risk of domestic violence, managing financial independence and ensuring employability. These factors can greatly affect their housing stability and increase the likelihood of homelessness,” said Dr. Charles Weber, a psychiatrist and retired Army lieutenant colonel.

“Untreated or under-treated [post-traumatic stress disorder]



JAIMEE FREEMAN/U.S. Air Force

Nearly 45% of female veterans in homeless programs offered by the Department of Veterans Affairs in fiscal 2023 had documented histories of sexual trauma in the military, according to VA officials.

and military sexual trauma can increase the risk for depression, suicide, substance use and the ability to maintain stable employment or relationships,” said Weber, founder of Family Care Centers, which specializes in mental health treatment for military families and first responders.

Women represent 10% of the veteran population, yet they are the fast-growing group in the veteran population, according to the VA. Their numbers are projected to reach 20% of the veteran population by 2040.

Yet female veterans might not readily identify themselves as former members of the armed forces when seeking housing and other services, which can disqualify them for assistance, Hayes said.

It also is common for female veterans not to disclose an immediate need for housing out of fear

they will lose custody of their dependent children, he said.

“Effective strategies to overcome these barriers include employing women veterans as peer support specialists in housing programs to develop rapport and engender trust, and clarifying state and local laws during outreach encounters,” Hayes said.

Depending on where they reside, female veterans with minor children might have difficulty accessing emergency shelter or transitional housing in their communities due to a lack of availability.

“Women also tend to make lower wages than men and have more barriers to full participation in the labor market,” Hayes said.

Women are more likely to serve as primary caregiver for their children than male veterans.

“Women shoulder more of the

costs of child-rearing, particularly as single parents,” Hayes said.

The VA’s supportive services for veteran families will provide emergency housing assistance for up to two months in a two-year period.

The housing assistance is essential to ensuring that female veterans do not fall into homelessness, Hayes said.

Women who moved into permanent housing after homelessness often have successful outcomes, according to the VA.

Statistics show 12% of the 38,847 veterans who secured permanent housing through the VA in fiscal 2023 were women.

Yet they represented only 8.3% of the 1,450 veterans who returned to homelessness after receiving VA assistance.

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Sailor pleads guilty in child sex video case

By ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

A Navy sailor who once was the executive officer of a littoral combat ship pleaded guilty this week to sharing child sexual abuse videos and mishandling classified documents, according to the Justice Department.

Cmdr. Gregory E. McLean, 39, of Jacksonville, Fla., pleaded guilty Wednesday to one count of distributing videos depicting child sexual assault and one count of unlawful retention of classified national defense information, the DOJ said in a statement the same day.

McLean faces up to 20 years in prison for the child exploitation offense and up to 10 years for the classified information conviction, the statement said. A sentencing date has not been set.

McLean held a top secret security clearance and was USS Minneapolis-

Saint Paul’s second-in-command from its pre-commissioning until being relieved of his duties on Nov. 15, 2021, according to a Sept. 21, 2022, report from the Jacksonville Florida Times-Union.

After receiving a tip, Rhode Island state police determined that McLean had used a messaging app to distribute videos depicting sexual abuse of young children, the Justice Department said.

A subsequent Naval Criminal Investigative Service probe revealed other instances in which he did the same thing.

That investigation led to a search of McLean’s home in 2021 and seizure of several electronic devices and storage media.

Authorities found files depicting child sexual abuse and a flash drive on the kitchen counter containing 200 classified documents, according to the statement.

Two of those documents involved national defense information related to the combat aircraft and naval capabilities of foreign governments, the DOJ said.

The investigation also showed that McLean was aware of how to properly handle and protect classified documents, and knew that his home was not an authorized location to store national defense information, according to the statement.



McLean

Spouse indicted on murder charges in death of son

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

The wife of a Fort Eisenhower soldier was indicted on two counts of murder by a federal grand jury in Georgia on Wednesday after she admitted to killing her infant son with a knife to help get the child to “God and Jesus,” according to court documents.

April Evalyn Short, 30, is charged with premeditated murder and felony murder in the Nov. 15 death of the 11-month-old boy, according to Jill Steinberg, U.S. attorney for the southern district of Georgia. Short lived in a home on Fort Eisenhower where her

husband, Staff Sgt. James Short, was assigned as an Army drill sergeant.

On the morning that the boy was killed, at about 8:01 a.m., James Short received a text message from his wife that referenced God and said, “The days of darkness are upon us,” according to court documents. He tried unsuccessfully to reach her for the next 15 minutes, then rushed home where his wife was barricaded in the primary bedroom with the couple’s three children. The other children are ages 11 and 6.

The drill sergeant could not get into the room, so he called 911.

Police officers arrived within five minutes, and April Short exited the room with the two older children and attempted to flee in a vehicle, according to court documents. One police officer attempted to stop her and was partially in the vehicle as the woman began driving away with her children in the back seat. The officer drew his weapon, and she stopped driving.

Police arrested April Short and began to look for the infant. He was found in the bathroom bleeding from his neck and wrapped in a shower curtain. He was taken to Dwight D. Eisenhower Army Medical Center at the base and

pronounced dead at 9:34 a.m.

The other children told police that their mother cut the baby’s neck so he could “be with Jesus and God.” She also threatened to cut the 6-year-old if the child didn’t stop crying, according to court documents.

April Short told investigators she knew what she did and that it was “wrong” and “evil.”

U.S. Marshals took custody of Short on Nov. 30 from Jefferson County Detention Center, according to jail records.

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WAR IN UKRAINE



CHEYENNE LEWIS/U.S. Air Force

AIM-9M Sidewinder missiles are included in the Pentagon's latest round of military aid to Ukraine.

US sends \$175M aid package that includes missiles, artillery shells

By DOUG G. WARE

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon announced a new round of military aid to Ukraine on Wednesday worth close to \$200 million that includes mostly rockets and artillery shells and other needed equipment, U.S. officials said.

“Security assistance for Ukraine is a smart investment in our national security,” the Pentagon said in a statement. “It helps to prevent a larger war in the region and deter potential aggression elsewhere.”

The \$175 million in military aid is being provided through presidential drawdown authority, which allows the United States to take the weapons directly from Pentagon shelves on an emergency basis. The funding for the aid was previously authorized for fiscal 2023.

The new aid includes air-defense weapons such as Sidewinder and Sparrow missiles, more ammunition for High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems, 155 mm

and 105 mm artillery shells, Javelin and AT-4 anti-armor systems and more than 4 million rounds of small-arms ammunition, according to the Defense Department.

The aid is the second round that the United States has pledged to Ukraine in the past two weeks and comes as Congress debates funding for fiscal 2024 and a \$105 billion supplemental aid request that would provide more help for Ukraine, Israel and the U.S. defense industry. The military is operating under a continuing resolution that will fund the Pentagon until Feb. 2.

“The United States has provided Ukraine with the capabilities it needs to achieve significant military victories and successfully retake more than 50% of its sovereign territory that Russia seized in its invasion,” the Pentagon said. “Our security assistance packages help Ukraine protect its civilians, cities and infrastructure from Russia’s brutal aerial attacks.”

Since Russia invaded Ukraine in early 2022, the United States

has committed roughly \$44 billion in weapons and equipment to Ukraine.

Included in the \$175 million in military aid for Ukraine announced Wednesday:

- AIM-9M and AIM-7 missiles for air defense.
- Additional ammunition for High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems.
- 155 mm and 105 mm artillery rounds.
- High-speed, anti-radiation missiles.
- Tube-launched, optically tracked, wire-guided missiles.
- Javelin and AT-4 anti-armor systems.
- More than 4 million rounds of small-arms ammunition.
- Vehicles to tow and haul equipment.
- Demolitions munitions for obstacle clearing.
- Equipment to protect critical national infrastructure.
- Spare parts, maintenance, and other ancillary equipment.

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\$110B aid effort falters in Senate

But Biden signals he’s willing to make a deal on border security

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — As Senate Republicans blocked the advance of tens of billions of dollars in military and economic assistance for Ukraine on Wednesday, President Joe Biden berated their tactics as “stunning” and dangerous. Yet he also signaled an openness to what GOP lawmakers ultimately want: border policy changes.

Biden at the White House warned of dire consequences for Kyiv — and a “gift” to Russia’s Vladimir Putin — if Congress fails to pass a \$110 billion package of wartime funding for Ukraine and Israel as well as other national security priorities. Hours later, Senate Republicans defiantly voted to stop the package from advancing, something that they had threatened to do all week.

“They’re willing to literally kneecap Ukraine on the battlefield and damage our national security in the process,” Biden said.

But even as he lashed Republicans for their stance, Biden stressed that he is willing to “make significant compromises on the border,” if that’s what it takes to get the package through Congress.

That statement has raised at least some hope that progress can be made in the days ahead as the Senate grinds through negotiations on border security, one of the most fraught issues in American politics. Biden’s remarks Wednesday were his clearest overture yet to Republicans and came at a critical time, with a path through Congress for the emergency funds rapidly disappearing and America’s support for multiple allies in doubt.

The president’s statement came hours after he huddled vir-

tually with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and leaders of the Group of Seven advanced democracies, which have staunchly supported Ukraine against Russia’s invasion.

“We need to fix the broken border system. It is broken,” Biden said, adding that he’s “ready to change policy as well.” He did not name specific policy proposals and accused Republicans of wanting a political issue more than bipartisan compromise.

Sen. James Lankford, the Oklahoma Republican who has been leading Senate negotiations over border policy, was encouraged by what he heard, saying it seemed like the president is “ready to be able to sit down and talk.”

Senators of both parties acknowledged they will need to move quickly if a deal is to be struck. Congress is scheduled to be in Washington for just a handful more days before the end of the year. The White House, meanwhile, has sounded the alarm about what would happen if they don’t approve more funding soon, saying Ukraine’s military would be stalled, or even overrun.

“When deadlines come, everybody’s undivided attention is there and we realize: ‘OK. Now it’s time to actually solve this,’” Lankford said.

Democrats involved in the negotiations also said a direct hand from the president, as well as from Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell, could be helpful.

So far, McConnell, while an ardent supporter of Ukraine aid, has sided with Republicans who are holding firm against the security package unless it includes changes to America’s border policies.

UN: Russia intensifies ‘unacceptable’ attacks on energy facilities

Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS — Intensifying Russian attacks on Ukraine’s energy facilities are worsening humanitarian conditions across the war-torn country, where heavy snow and freezing temperatures have already arrived, U.N. officials said Wednesday.

Assistant Secretary-General Miroslav Jenca told the U.N. Security Council that Russia’s continuing daily attacks on Ukraine’s critical civilian infrastructure have resulted in civilian casualties, and Moscow

recently escalated its barrages in populated areas including the capital, Kyiv.

“All attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure must stop immediately,” he said. “They are prohibited under international humanitarian law and are simply unacceptable.”

Jenca also raised the risks to all four of Ukraine’s nuclear power plants.

The Zaporizhzhia plant, which is Europe’s largest, suffered its eighth complete off-site power outage

since the invasion on Saturday, according to the International Atomic Energy Agency, Jenca said. And IAEA staff at the Khmelnytsky plant in western Ukraine reported hearing several explosions close by on Nov. 29.

Ramesh Rajasingham, the U.N. humanitarian coordinator, told the council “the deaths, injuries and level of destruction of vital civilian infrastructure is staggering.”

“Many people have been left without access to heat, electricity and water, particularly in the east

and south,” he said. “Amid freezing temperatures, this damage is particularly threatening the survival of the most vulnerable — among them the elderly and those with disabilities.”

After more than 21 months of fighting since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Rajasingham said, “millions of children, women and men are now faced with the prospect of yet another winter of severe hardship amid the impact of increased attacks on hospitals, electricity transmission systems, and

gas and water supplies.”

U.S. deputy ambassador Robert Wood reminded the council that last winter “Russia sought to destroy Ukraine’s energy infrastructure and deprive people of heat and electricity at the coldest time of the year.”

Russia’s deputy U.N. ambassador Dmitry Polyansky accused Western nations of calling the council meeting on the humanitarian situation in Ukraine without anything extraordinary happening in order “to spew anti-Russian invective.”

NATION

Haley on the defensive in 4th GOP debate

Associated Press

TUSCALOOSA, Ala. — Four Republican presidential candidates were given several opportunities Wednesday to criticize former President Donald Trump, who was absent from the debate again. But they mostly targeted each other, with former United Nations Ambassador Nikki Haley taking the brunt of the attacks as she gets more interest from donors and voters.

With just over a month before the 2024 primary calendar begins, the debate demonstrated how firm Trump's grip remains on the party.

But the focus on Haley reflected how other candidates perceive her as a threat to their chances of taking on Trump directly. Aside from former New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, most of the candidates have spent more time in debates going after each other than taking aim at Trump, reflecting the former president's popularity among Republicans and what many see as diminishing returns in attacking him.

The last scheduled debate before Iowa's GOP caucuses on Jan. 15 may have limited impact on the race, airing on a lesser-known television network, NewsNation, from a state Republican presidential candidates have carried since 1980.

Trump remains dominant in national and early-state polls. And after holding counter-programming rallies during the first three debates, he didn't bother this time and instead went to a closed-door fundraiser. His campaign posted an ad during the debate focusing on President Joe Biden as both parties head toward a potential rematch of the 2020 election Trump lost.

Christie repeatedly tore into Trump on Wednesday and challenged Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis to answer directly if he believed Trump was fit or unfit to be president again. The crowd at the University of Alabama booed him at one point as he attacked Trump.

"His conduct is unacceptable. He's unfit. And be careful of what you're going to get," warned Christie, who has been alone among leading Republicans in his focus on the race's clear front-runner.



GERALD HERBERT/AP

Republican presidential candidates former New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie talks with former U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley during a break at a Republican presidential primary debate hosted by NewsNation on Wednesday in Tuscaloosa, Ala.

"There is no bigger issue in this race than Donald Trump," he said earlier.

DeSantis suggested Trump, who is 77, is too old for the job.

"Over a four-year period, it is not a job for someone that's pushing 80," DeSantis said. "We need someone who's younger."

Biotech entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy again raised his hand as a candidate who would support Trump even if he were convicted in any of the four felony indictments he faces. Ramaswamy accused his other opponents of bowing to Trump for years to secure political posts or financial gain, but the closest the 38-year-old ever came to criticizing Trump was to call for a new generation of leadership.

Haley stood silently during the extended discussion, and neither the moderators nor her rivals asked for her opinion.

The debate's brief focus on Trump was a reprieve for Haley, who spent most of the debate on the defensive.

DeSantis accused Haley of backing down from media criticism and Ramaswamy suggested she was too close to corporate interests as she gets new attention from donors. He touted his own willingness to pick high-profile fights with his critics and went after Haley just moments into the debate, reflecting the rivalry between the two candidates reflected in dueling early-state television ads.

They also tussled over China, long an animating issue for conservatives worried about Beijing's influence. Later in the debate, Haley credited Trump for taking a hard line with Beijing on trade but said he was too passive on other fronts, including allowing China to capture American technology for its own military use and purchase American farmland.

Interrupting Haley, DeSantis accused her of allowing Chinese investment in South Carolina when she was governor and suggested her corporate donors would never allow her to be tough on Beijing.

"First of all, he's mad because those Wall

Street donors used to support him and now they support me," Haley retorted before accusing DeSantis of being soft on Chinese investment in Florida.

Ramaswamy, always the most eager to deliver personal barbs on the debate stage, turned a foreign policy discussion into another attack on Haley, seemingly trolling her to name provinces in Ukraine and suggesting she does not understand the country. As he kept piling on, Christie stepped in to declare Haley "a smart, accomplished woman" and dismiss Ramaswamy as "the most obnoxious blowhard in America."

With Trump absent, the atmosphere around the debate lacked some of the buzz sometimes associated with such affairs, especially in ostensibly open primaries. Less than two hours to go before the opening salvo, the media room, which is normally the practice hall for the University of Alabama's Million Dollar Band, was barely half full. The television and radio platforms around the periphery — the spin room, in debate parlance — were noticeably quiet, lacking the high-profile surrogates or campaign staffers who might normally be appearing live on cable news or talk radio to pitch on their candidates' behalf.

Outside Moody Music Hall on campus, more buzz came from state high school football championship games being played in Bryant-Denny Stadium.

The debate may have been hard to find for many prospective viewers. It aired on NewsNation, a cable network still trying to build its audience after taking over WGN America three years ago. NewsNation's Elizabeth Vargas moderated alongside Megyn Kelly, a former Fox News anchor who now hosts a popular podcast, and Eliana Johnson of the conservative news site Washington Free Beacon.

The field of invited candidates has shrunk in half since eight were on the stage at the first debate in Milwaukee in August, as the Republican National Committee tightened the criteria to reach the stage each time. For Tuesday, candidates had to get at least 6% in multiple polls and amass 80,000 unique donors.

At tribal summit, Biden says he's working to 'move forward'

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden told Native American nations gathered for a summit Wednesday that his administration was working to heal the wrongs of the past as he signed an executive order that seeks to make it easier for Indigenous peoples to access federal funding, and have greater autonomy over how to spend it.

Biden also threw his support behind a request to allow Haudenosaunee Confederacy to compete under its own flag in the 2028 Olympics in lacrosse, a sport they invented.

Historically, federal policies attacked Native people's rights to self-governance and caused lasting economic damage. Biden said the actions at the summit were "key steps" that would help usher in a new era of tribal sovereignty.

"A new era grounded in dignity and respect that recognizes your fundamental rights to govern and grow on your own terms," he said.

"It's hard work to heal the wrongs of the past and change the course, and move forward," Biden said.

Yurok Tribal Council Member Phillip Williams described Biden's speech as inspirational.

"It felt like our highest official in the land acknowledges the crimes of the past," he said. "His contribution to society is to help to heal the tribal nations."

Biden signed the order as members of his administration and tribal nation leaders stood behind him on stage at the Department of the Interior. The order in part creates a clearinghouse for Native American and Alaska native tribes to find and access grants and it requests that federal agencies ensure that



EVAN VUCCI/AP

President Joe Biden speaks before signing an executive order at the White House Tribal Nations Summit at the Department of the Interior on Wednesday in Washington.

funding is accessible and equitable. It also gives them more authority over how to spend the money.

That news was welcomed by Navajo Nation President Buu Nygren, who said the funding they get from

the federal government to help the hundreds of thousands of people on their reservation that extends across Arizona, Utah and New Mexico, can be difficult to spend.

"There's so much policies and things that are attached to it and requirements that are attached to it that sometimes it's just overwhelming to try to get it done," he said.

Tyson Johnston, self-governance executive director for the Quinault Indian Nation in northwest Washington state, who is responsible for coordinating the relocation of their villages in the face of dangerous sea level rise, highlighted the importance of this type of autonomy when it comes to climate change.

In July, the Biden administration announced \$120 million in grant funding for tribes in the U.S. to boost their resiliency to climate change.

NATION



ERIN HOOLEY/AP

An eight-week-old sea otter rescued from Seldovia, Alaska, peeks out of his enclosure at Shedd Aquarium on Wednesday in Chicago.

Sea otter pup found in Alaska has a new home at Chicago aquarium

Associated Press

CHICAGO — An 8-week-old arrival from Alaska chirps loudly before devouring ice chips in the nursery at Chicago's Shedd Aquarium.

He is Pup EL2306 — proper name to be determined — a northern sea otter who was found alone and malnourished in the remote town of Seldovia in October and taken to the Alaska SeaLife Center in Seward.

Shedd, one of only a few facilities in the United States with the resources to care for rescued otters, was contacted by the SeaLife Cen-

ter and the aquarium's otter team made the cross-country journey with the fluffy brown marine mammal who arrived in Chicago at the end of November.

"Caring for a little otter pup is just like caring for an infant," including round-the-clock feeding, said Lana Gonzalez, a manager of penguins and otter at Shedd. "He also needs to get groomed. Sea otters have a very dense coat — there's anywhere from a 700,000 to a million hairs per square inch, and that's what they use to keep themselves warm. They don't have a

thick layer of blubber or fat like other marine mammals do, so taking care of that coat is very important."

An otter mother would typically teach her offspring to groom. The aquarium team acts in her place to encourage the pup's healthy development.

The pup will remain in Shedd's Regenstein Sea Otter Nursery for a few months, building bonds with the staff, and he will eventually be introduced to the otter habitat and the five other otters at the aquarium.

Drugmakers told patents at risk over high prices

BY AMANDA SEITZ
AND ZEKE MILLER
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Biden administration is putting pharmaceutical companies on notice, warning them that if the price of certain drugs is too high, the government might cancel their patent protection and allow rivals to make their own versions.

Under a plan announced Thursday, the government would consider overriding the patent for high-priced drugs that have been developed with the help of taxpayer money and letting competitors make them in hopes of driving down the cost.

In a 15-second video released on YouTube on Wednesday night, President Joe Biden promised the move would lower prices.

"Today, we're taking a very important step toward ending price gouging so you don't have to pay more for the medicine you need," he said.

The administration did not immediately release details about how the process will work and how it will deem a drug costly enough to act. White House officials would not name drugs that might potentially be targeted.

There will be a 60-day public

comment period. If the plan is enacted, drugmakers are almost certain to challenge it in court.

It's the latest health policy pitch from a White House gearing up to make its efforts to tackle drug prices a central theme in next year's reelection campaign. Biden frequently talks about the \$35 cap on insulin for Medicare enrollees that went into effect this year, as well as a plan for government officials to negotiate some drug prices paid by Medicare for the first time in history.

The federal government, however, has never taken such a move against patents, a step called "march-in rights." But some Democratic lawmakers, including Sens. Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts and Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota, has in recent years lobbied the Health and Human Services agency to do so with certain drugs.

The conditions for how those "march-in rights" would be used have long been debated. Pharmaceutical companies have pushed back on the idea that prices alone are enough for Washington to act against a drug's patent. The process proposed by the administration would clarify that the drug's patent could be in jeopardy if its price is out of reach for Americans, White House officials said.

Ex-Army officer killed parents and 4 others in trail of violence

Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas — A Texas man killed his parents and four others and wounded two police officers in a daylong trail of violence stretching from San Antonio to Austin, authorities said Wednesday.

Shane James, 34, of San Antonio, was charged with two counts of capital murder after separate attacks in Austin and San Antonio that began Tuesday morning and ended with James crashing his car that evening during a police pursuit.

James has a history of mental health problems and a prior arrest on charges of assaulting family members, authorities said.

His parents, Phyllis James, 55, and Shane James Sr. 56, were found dead in their home in the San Antonio area, Bexar County Sheriff Javier Salazar said at a news conference. Four more people were found dead in two homes in Austin, more than 80 miles away, officials said.

The Austin victims were not im-

mediately identified. James would be charged with murder or capital murder in his parents' deaths as well, Salazar said.

A cyclist in Austin also was shot and wounded, and two police officers were recovering from gunshots, including one who was shot in the leg outside of a high school, Austin interim Police Chief Robin Henderson said.



James

Henderson said it was unclear what, if any, relationship the man had to the victims in the Austin area.

Online jail records did not indicate whether James has an attorney and several people listed as his relatives in public records did not immediately respond to phone messages Wednesday.

James is a former U.S. Army infantry officer who served from February 2013 to August 2015, ac-

ording to Lt. Col. Ruth Castro, Army spokesperson. He had no deployments and his last rank was first lieutenant.

James was arrested in January 2022 on charges of misdemeanor assault of his parents and a sibling and taken to jail. Two weeks later, the family told a victim advocates liaison that he had mental health problems and asked that he be released from jail, Salazar said.

James cut off his ankle monitor the day after he was released, prompting a misdemeanor probation violation warrant, Salazar said. Cutting off an ankle monitor has since been upgraded to a felony.

Deputies went to the parents' house in August when James was reported to be naked in the yard and behaving strangely. They went into the home but did not arrest James because he had barricaded himself in a bedroom, Salazar said. Deputies are limited in their use of forced entry on a misdemeanor warrant, the sheriff

said.

The deputies told the father to call them when James came out and they would come back to arrest him, but the father never called, Salazar added.

"It's always possible we could have done more, had they been able to safely put hands on him," Salazar said. "They were making every effort to avoid a violent confrontation with an unarmed man. That is a no-win situation for them."

Austin police said authorities

did not determine the attacks there were connected until the final one at a home, which happened more than eight hours after a school police officer was shot and wounded in a high school parking lot on the other side of the city.

James' parents were found dead after his arrest. Deputies who went to their residence saw water coming out of the home and forced their way inside, Salazar said. He said the deaths appeared to have occurred before the shootings in Austin.

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MIDEAST

UN: No safe places in Gaza as Israel hits southern cities

BY NAJIB JOBAIN AND KAREEM CHEHAYEB
Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip — Israeli forces struck the southern Gaza town of Rafah twice, residents said Thursday, sowing fear in one of the last places where civilians have sought refuge after Israel widened its offensive against Hamas to areas already packed with displaced people.

United Nations officials say there are no safe places in Gaza. Heavy fighting in and around the southern city of Khan Younis has displaced tens of thousands of people and cut off most of Gaza from deliveries of food, water and other vital aid. More than 80% of the territory's population has already fled their homes.

Two months into the war, the grinding offensive has set off renewed alarms internationally, with U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres using a rarely exercised power to warn the Security Council of an impending "humanitarian catastrophe" and urging members to demand a cease-fire.

The United States has called on Israel to limit civilian deaths and displacement, saying too many Palestinians were killed when it obliterated much of Gaza City and the north. But the U.S. has also pledged unwavering support for Israel and appears likely to block any U.N. effort to halt the fighting.

Israel says it must crush Hamas' military capabilities and remove it from power following the Oct. 7 attack that ignited the war. Troops have pushed into Khan Younis, Gaza's second-largest city, which Israeli officials have portrayed as Hamas' center of gravity — something they previously said was in Gaza City and its Shifa Hospital.

Israel has ordered the evacuation of some two dozen southern neighborhoods, rather than the entire region as it did in the north, which the military says shows increased concern for civilians.

But the areas where Palestinians can seek safety are rapidly receding. With northern and central Gaza largely isolated and cut off from aid, Palestinians are heading south to Rafah and other areas along the border with Egypt, where family homes are packed tight and makeshift shelters are overflowing.

Even there, safety has proven elusive, as Israel continues to strike what it says are Hamas targets across the coastal enclave.

A strike late Wednesday leveled a home in Rafah, sending a wave of wounded streaming into a nearby

hospital. Eyad al-Hobi, who witnessed the attack, said around 20 people were killed, including women and children. Another house was hit early Thursday, residents said.

"We live in fear every moment, for our children, ourselves, our families," said Dalia Abu Samhadeh, now living in Rafah with her family after fleeing Khan Younis. "We live with the anxiety of expulsion."

On the other side of the border, Egypt has deployed thousands of troops and erected earthen barriers to prevent any mass influx of refugees. It says an influx would undermine its decades-old peace treaty with Israel, and it doubts Israel will let them back into Gaza.

The military accused militants of firing rockets from open areas near Rafah in the humanitarian zone. It released footage of a strike Wednesday on what it said were launchers positioned outside the town and a few hundred yards from a U.N. warehouse.

The U.N. says some 1.87 million people — over 80% of the population of 2.3 million — have already fled their homes, many of them displaced multiple times.

Israel's campaign has killed more than 17,100 people in Gaza — 70% of them women and children — and wounded more than 46,000, according to the territory's Health Ministry, which says many others are trapped under rubble. The ministry does not differentiate between civilian and combatant deaths.

Doctors Without Borders, the international aid group, said another 115 bodies arrived at the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital in the central town of Deir al-Balah in a 24-hour period.

"The hospital is full, the morgue is full," the group said on X, formerly Twitter.

The military said Thursday that it struck dozens of militant targets in Khan Younis, including a tunnel shaft from which fighters had launched an attack. It said two of the attackers were killed.

Hamas and other militants killed about 1,200 people, mostly civilians, in the Oct. 7 attack that triggered the war, and took some 240 people hostage. An estimated 138 hostages remain in Gaza, mostly soldiers and civilian men, after 105 were freed during a cease-fire in late November.

Israel's military says 87 of its soldiers have been killed in the Gaza ground offensive. It also says some 5,000 militants have been killed, without saying how it arrived at its count.

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WEEKEND



Some holiday films bloody, not bright

Movies, Page 15



Michael Trotter Jr., left, and Tanya Trotter of The War and Treaty

GEORGE WALKER IV/AP

Feeling the love

Musical married couple The War and Treaty heads to bases in South Korea and Guam

Music, Pages 28-29

WEEKEND: GADGETS & TECHNOLOGY



PepsiCo

A Smooth Technology employee tests out Doritos Silent. Although the Doritos Silent software was designed for Doritos, it can work with other crunchy foods such as chips, crackers and vegetables.

Silencing the crunch

Doritos software removes sound of chewing from PC voice chat, calls

BY SYDNEY PAGE
The Washington Post

The noise of someone chomping on chips can be irritating, especially if it's directly in your ear, on, say, a voice chat or a Zoom call.

Voices — and crunching — are amplified when people are using headsets, which are often worn by gamers, many of whom spend hours at a time playing multiplayer video games.

So the chip brand Doritos created Doritos Silent, a crunch cancellation software that removes the sound of chewing from voice chat, Zoom or any call that uses headphones. But it was really created for gamers.

"It works on anything that accepts a microphone," said Dylan Fashbaugh, lead developer at Brooklyn-based Smooth Technology, which worked with Doritos to create the free app that launched last month.

It can be used on any PC, and the company says it will eventually be expanded to other devices.

Fashbaugh has been a gamer for about 20 years, and said he is familiar with the annoyance of fellow gamers chewing loudly on chips.

"Crunch is one of the most distracting features that could throw someone off their game," said Mustafa Shamseldin, chief marketing officer of international foods at PepsiCo, which owns Doritos.

Doritos surveyed more than 3,000 people — including in China, India, Portugal, Britain and the United States — and found that gamers like to snack while playing, but they also think the sounds of other people snacking is distracting.

Of the 200 people surveyed in the United States, 90% snack while gaming, and the majority said chips make the most bothersome noise when another gamer is eating them.

Research also showed that the crunch of Doritos is part of what people like about them, said Fernando Kahane — the head of global marketing for the chip brand.

"There is something about the crunch that has to do with it, funnily enough," he said.

Many people crave crunchy foods because they are more stimulating to eat than soft foods, which is why chips are a go-to snack.

"That's one of the reasons Doritos is so popular

with gamers," Kahane said.

Knowing the crunch was a draw for the eater and a drawback for the listener, they came up with a workaround for what they call a "pain point."

"Instead of having to launch new Doritos, we could actually solve that pain point with a technology," Kahane said.

The prospect of making a less crispy Doritos chip surfaced several years ago, and was widely mocked.

In 2018, the former chief executive of PepsiCo claimed Doritos was developing a "chip for women," which was intended to be a low-crunch alternative, with reduced orange finger dust. There was backlash online, and PepsiCo later said it was a misunderstanding, and it was not, in fact, releasing a specific Doritos product for women.

To address the crunch issue in the gaming community, Doritos turned to technology.

"That's always been a distraction for me," Fashbaugh said of the chomping in his headphones. "I'll lose my focus when one person starts eating. That sound of crunching can just take you out of the experience, but you still want to enjoy your snack because realistically, snacking and gaming go hand-in-hand."

He and his team began the process by researching and testing out various noise cancellation techniques. Then, "we got a lot of people to crunch Doritos into a microphone," Fashbaugh said.

About 500 people were recorded munching on Doritos, and those recordings were used to simulate 5,000 different crunch sounds.

"Then, we took sounds of lots of us talking and other people talking, and mixed those together with the crunch sounds so we could generate an AI that could learn the sound of crunching and voicing," Fashbaugh said. "We needed to make something that could really separate the sounds of voices and crunches."

While the artificial intelligence software is "trained exclusively on Doritos," he said, it actually works on some other crunch sounds, including different types of chips, crackers and raw vegetables.

"I think it's going to have an impact," said Fashbaugh, adding that it was designed to keep voice chat clear.

GADGETS

MiCreator Studio, Motion 300 offer big audio in small form

BY GREGG ELLMAN
Tribune News Service

Austrian Audio's recently launched MiCreator Studio pocket-sized microphone delivers pro-quality audio. The \$199 plug-and-play microphone is easy to set up and use for any type of recording, including the exciting test I tried recently.

The flexible and directional condenser microphone has a solid build with an all-metal housing. It can be aimed in almost any direction and records from the front and back. There's a thread on the bottom for attaching it to compatible mounts, such as a mic boom or platform stand, although the MiCreator Studio stands up fine on its own with non-split padding on the bottom.

Onboard controls on the front include a volume knob and a high/low/mute microphone sensitivity switch. Austrian Audio states the low gain setting can handle up to 130 decibels SPL. Controls on the back include a high/low button and 3.5 mm ports for in/out.

My test was interesting: Since the mic is so portable, I connected it to my laptop and placed it by my front door, where my two dogs love to sit in the sun and bark to no end at people walking by. The audio file was as clear as it could be. Listening to it on my stereo system, you would have thought the dogs were barking live if you didn't know it was a recording.

The MiCreator Studio also proved itself during a recent Zoom call. I used a MacBook Pro with the MiCreator Studio, but with the right cables, it can be used with other laptops (Mac or PC), iPads and smartphones.

For more advanced recordings, where multiple microphones are needed, a satellite MiCreator microphone (\$99) can be connected to the main MiCreator Studio, which will function as the home base microphone. The combination of the two allows for multi-tracking and stereo recordings.



AUSTRIAN AUDIO/TNS

The Austrian Audio MiCreator Studio microphone records from both the front and back.

The MiCreator Studio mic comes with two red faceplates (in addition to the black ones) for the front and back, a connection cable, a USB-C cable, a can MCTA thread adapter and a soft carrying pouch. The satellite mic has faceplates, the MCTA thread adapter and connection cables.

Online: austrian.audio/microphones

Soundcore's new **Motion 300 portable Bluetooth 5.3 speaker** is solid, with excellent sound for its size and all the features needed to rock on the go. So many similar speakers are available, but this one has everything you need. And it's only \$79.99!

The brick-sized Motion 300 has a pair of 15 mm speakers behind its metallic grill and 30 watts of broadcast power. It's built with rounded corners, enabling it to lay flat or stand on either side. Soundcore made the Motion 300 so that its equalizer automatically adjusts to the direction and orientation of the speaker.

The wireless Hi-Res sound was evident at all volume levels in all types of music and sporting events. In fact, it was my audio choice for the last game of the World Series. A detachable carrying strap makes the portable speaker even more convenient.

The internal 4900 mAh USB-C rechargeable battery gives the speaker 13 hours of playback time, which can vary based on the volume level. It has an IPX7 rating, so it's ready for the beach, pool and unexpected rain showers.

Among the buttons for controlling the Motion 300 is a bass up button to quickly increase or decrease the amount of bass available. The Soundcore app (Android and iOS) works well for personalizing the sound and other features. The Motion 300 also works as a hands-free speakerphone with a built-in microphone.

If authentic stereo sound is needed, purchase a second Motion 300 Bluetooth 5.3 speaker: Two can be paired to achieve surround sound.

Online: us.soundcore.com



SOUNDCORE/TNS

The Soundcore Motion 300 automatically adjusts the sound based on the speaker's direction and orientation.

WEEKEND: MOVIES

Christmas not always jolly

'Silent Night,' 'It's a Wonderful Knife' crews discuss the new holiday horror flicks

By PETER LARSEN
The Orange County Register

In "Silent Night," the new holiday movie from action auteur John Woo, a grief-stricken, revenge-minded father hunts down the gang members who shot his child on Christmas Eve. In "It's a Wonderful Knife," the teen heroine wishes at Christmas that she'd never been born, and discovers that a serial killer she'd killed in her real life is still very much alive in her alternative timeline.

Yep, it's time for a new slate of Christmas-themed horror films and action movies in theaters or streaming at home. And while it's not exactly a new trend — the holiday slasher flick "Black Christmas" is almost 50 years old — it definitely feels like it's a vibrant one.

In addition to "Silent Night" and "It's a Wonderful Knife," this year's frights include "The Sacrifice Game," "A Creature Was Stirring" and "Santa Isn't Real." They almost makes the old argument over "Die Hard" — Christmas movie or not? — seem quaint. (For the record, "Die Hard" is a Christmas movie, and so is "Lethal Weapon," and "Gremlins" and "Home Alone," all of them some combination of action, horror and comedy.) So let's look at what "Silent Night" and "It's a Wonderful Knife" have wrapped in shiny packages for you this year, and celebrate the fact that there's something other than the romances on the Hallmark Channel to send shivers up your back.

'It's a Wonderful Knife'

When screenwriter Michael Kennedy sat down to brainstorm ideas for a Christmas slasher movie, he first thought to look to the past. It worked with "Freaky," his horror-fied adaptation of the classic comedy "Freaky Friday," so why not the holidays, too?

"And immediately I thought of 'It's a Wonderful Life,'" Kennedy says of director Frank Capra's 1947 holiday classic with Jimmy Stewart as George Bailey. "Just because I do love that movie. It makes me cry every time I watch it still."

"It's a Wonderful Knife," the horror comedy that Kennedy wrote and produced, might make the late Jimmy Stewart himself weep, if for different reasons. But to fans of offbeat, alternative holiday fare, it sticks the landing.

Jane Widdop stars as Winnie Carruthers who, despite vanquishing the serial killer on the loose in her quaint small town one Christmas, ends up wishing she, like George Bailey, had never been born. When her wish is granted, she realizes the folly of her ways. In this timeline, the serial killer is still slashing victims.

With Justin Long as the town's ne'er-do-well mayor, Joel McHale as his beleaguered assistant and Winnie's father, and Jess McLeod as Winnie's friend Bertie, the story unfolds in a mix of horror and heart that pays homage to its inspiration.

"It's not like a beat-for-beat remake of 'It's a Wonderful Life,' by any means," Director Tyler MacIntyre says. "It's just using that high concept as a jumping-off point. I have a lot of respect for Frank Capra and what that film has become in terms of a cultural icon."

"Doing a spin on that, I think, is part of the fun of it. It's not a spoof of it. It's just another fun way of sort of framing it in the more macabre form that we want to have."

"We have these horrific, fun scenes, but at the same time, there are some opportunities for satire in there, particularly of other Christmas fare, like Hallmark films and more traditional holiday films."

Both MacIntyre and Kennedy are longtime fans of holiday action and horror movies.

"For me, it was the original 'Black Christmas,'" Kennedy says. "I love the 1974 'Black Christmas.' I loved finding out that it was the same guy that directed 'A Christmas Story' that made that movie. That was when I really got obsessed with horror movies in my teen years."

"It scared the (bleep) out of me. It was like, 'Oh, Christmas is so dark, and Christmas is disturbing.' It was kind of an eye-opener of, like, sure, there's a serial killer and it's a little bit heightened, but it's also a little bit like, Christmas isn't this jolly season for everyone."

For MacIntyre, alternative holiday films started show-

ing up in many different places once he started looking as a young movie fan.

"I know 'Die Hard' gets a lot of press for being the Christmas action movie, but so is 'Lethal Weapon.' That's a Christmas movie," MacIntyre says. "I really liked 'Gremlins' — and how pitch-black is that Phoebe Cates monologue in the middle of that?"

"And then putting together that the guy who wrote 'Gremlins' also directed 'Home Alone' — Chris Columbus just loves Christmas. Those are great movies that are completely separate from each other and both involve Christmas in a very fundamental way."

"I don't think it's any mystery that some of these things get paired together," MacIntyre says of the mixing-and-matching of genre movies with holiday fare. "Because I do think there's something inherently just very satisfying juxtaposing such cheery kind of holiday imagery with things that are a little darker."

'Silent Night'

Director John Woo's "Silent Night" opens with actor Joel Kinnaman in a reindeer Christmas sweater, racing on foot after the street gang members whose stray bullets hit and killed his young son on Christmas Eve.

He catches them, which was his goal, and ends up shot through the neck, which was not the plan. As he recovers, his voice lost to the injury, he begins to plan his revenge, targeting Christmas Eve one year later as the day he'll take the gang down, and by down, we mean 6 feet under.

Woo, who made his name in Hong Kong action films such as "A Better Tomorrow" and "The Killer," before jumping to Hollywood for movies such as "Face/Off" and "Mission: Impossible 2," says he was attracted to the film because of what it didn't have: dialogue.

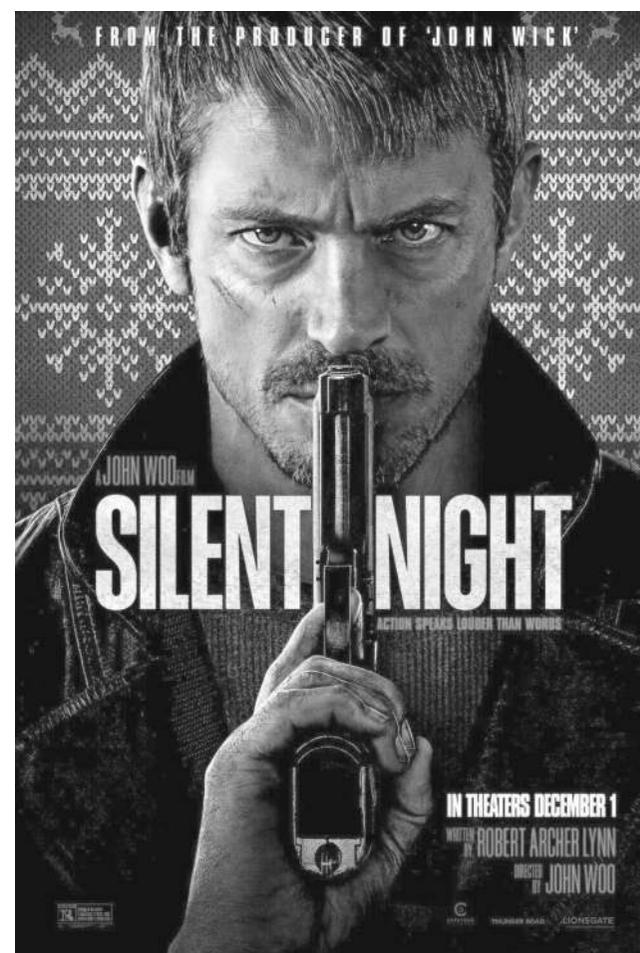
"I thought it was really well written," Woo says. "And by the time I saw there was no dialogue, I thought, 'Oh, OK, yeah.'"

"For me, it was a good opportunity for me because I don't like much dialogue in the movie. I hate using the dialogue to explain images, to explain how actors feel."

Because Brian Godlock (Kinnaman) no longer can talk, he texts with his wife Saya (Catalina Sandino Moreno) and police detective Dennis Vassel (Scott Mescudi, better known as the hip-hop artist Kid Cudi). The gangsters led by Playa (Harold Torres) are also text-loving criminals, so the only words heard in the movie are ambient conversations on police broadcasts or car radios.

Woo says the absence of dialogue was one of the ways in which "Silent Night" differs from many of his previous movies.

"It allowed me to use special features," he says of the different approach he took to the visual look of his film. "I



use the visual, the sound to tell the story. And then it [began] feeling more direct and allowed the audience to look at the expressions on the actors' faces."

In place of the highly stylized action sequences for which he's famed — his shootouts have been described as "bullet ballets" — Woo says he wanted to emphasize the realism of his characters, ordinary people who suffered a terrible loss.

Even the fight scenes were crafted with realism in mind, he says.

As for the Christmas setting of the film, Woo says he thought it helped the movie give people an option for exciting, holiday-themed entertainment in theaters.

"I think it's a good idea," he says. "You know, 'Die Hard' also had Christmas, and of course it was a great movie and people love it."

"They want to see a good movie. They want to see something exciting."

WEEKEND: MOVIES



CHRIS PIZZELLO, INVISION/AP

Eddie Murphy, left, and Tracee Ellis Ross, center, cast members in “Candy Cane Lane,” and the film’s director Reginald Hudlin pose together Nov. 29 at the Four Seasons Hotel in Los Angeles. It is the actors’ first film together, but Murphy and Hudlin also worked together on “Boomerang” in 1992.

Hopeful for a timeless Christmas classic

Murphy, Ross want their new film, ‘Candy Cane Lane,’ to put you in the holiday spirit for years to come

BY GARY GERARD HAMILTON
Associated Press

Eddie Murphy has fond childhood memories of gathering with his family in Brooklyn and being wrapped in the wonder of the season as they watched classic holiday movies. Now, his Christmas wish is that his new film, “Candy Cane Lane,” will create similar memories for others.

“That was in the front of my mind when we chose this script ... we want to do something that’s going to be around forever,” Murphy said. “When I was growing up, we used to watch ‘It’s a Wonderful Life’ and ‘How the Grinch Stole Christmas’ and ‘Rudolph’s Shiny New Year’... I think we made a movie like that, that people will watch over and over again.”

The Prime Video release follows Chris Carver (Murphy) who’s obsessed with winning his neighborhood’s annual Christmas decorating contest. Stumbling upon a mysterious store, he unwittingly strikes a deal with a well-intentioned but slightly mischievous elf named Pepper (Jillian Bell) who brings the 12 days of Christmas to life. That turns into a holiday headache for the town and puts Carver at risk of being transformed into a miniature ornament.

“There is the element of magic in the movie, that imagination that children have and all the fantasy of it,” said Tracee Ellis Ross, the “black-ish” and “Girlfriends” star who plays Murphy’s wife. “I’m excited to watch kids watch the movie.”

Ross and Murphy are so dynamic on screen, it’s hard to believe the two actors never worked together before — let



Prime Video

In “Candy Cane Lane,” Ross’ Carol provides levity to her husband (Murphy)’s extreme Christmas competitiveness.

alone met. Ross’ Carol is the ultimate spousal teammate, providing levity to her husband’s extreme Christmas competitiveness.

“She’s a comedian and a great actress and all that came together. And she improvises ... you don’t even expect to click with an actor,” said the 62-year-old Oscar nominee. Chuckling, he added, “Most of the time, you have a working relationship and there is no clicking — but there’s a great deal of clicking on this one.”

The film also stars Thaddeus J. Mixson, Ken Marino and David Alan Grier, along with an ensemble that includes Nick Offerman, Robin Thede and Chris Redd, whose figurine characters are past victims of Pepper’s antics.

The film was written by Kelley Younger, whose family grew up on Candy Cane Lane in El Segundo, Calif. — a neighborhood known for competitive holiday decorating. While there are plenty of feel-good moments in the story, the movie is also packed with action scenes.

“I wanted a movie that had everything I like in it. I love

Christmas movies. I love Christmas music. I love the colors. But I also love action movies ... So, I said, why not put everything you like into one movie?” explained director Reginald Hudlin, whose 1990 flick “House Party” starring Kid ‘n Play was added to the National Film Registry last year. “Christmas movies are surprisingly elastic.”

“Candy Cane Lane” is Murphy’s first holiday film and his first reunion with Hudlin since their 1992 classic “Boomerang.” The uber-popular romantic comedy helped Murphy expand beyond comedy-first roles and action films, allowing him to flourish in new Hollywood territory as a debonair ladies man.

“I love that ‘Boomerang’ has the legs that it has. I love that it still works,” said Murphy of the film, which also starred Halle Berry, Robin Givens, Martin Lawrence and Grier. “I love that all the people that were in it went off and did amazing things and yeah, I’m proud of that film.”

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Murphy planned a return to his stand-up comedy roots, but as the global health crisis upended much of the world, he pivoted to making movies again. He recently wrapped shooting “Beverly Hills Cop: Axel Foley,” the fourth installment of his blockbuster franchise, nearly 30 years after the last chapter.

“It’s not something that I would rule out and say I would never do,” Murphy said about stand-up.

But what Murphy and Ross are aiming to do is give friends and loved ones yet another reason to spend time together during not just this holiday season, but future ones as well.

“That is the hope, that we’ve made a timeless classic,” Ross said.

Murphy, a father of 10 and a grandfather, echoes Ross’ sentiments: “Christmas movies have a built-in audience — your family’s all together and they want to look at something that they can all watch together ... if you do a good job, you watch them forever.”

WEEKEND: MOVIE REVIEWS

From comfort to catastrophe

Netflix's 'Leave the World Behind' a terrific blend of apocalyptic disaster, psychological thriller and satire

BY MARK KENNEDY
Associated Press

Imagine that it's close to midnight and there's a knock at the door of your luxurious weekend rental home. A man is standing there, calmly apologizing. He says it's his home and that he and his daughter need your help. He's also dressed immaculately in a tux.

What would you do? Did the tux make a difference? Would the man's race?

That early scene is when Netflix's "Leave the World Behind" really kicks into gear and never slackens as this terrific, apocalyptic, psychological thriller races to its conclusion, exploring race, affluence and responsibility along the way.

The luxurious home becomes a castle of sorts as the outside world crumbles. The man who says he's the owner tries to explain why he's turned up. "Under the circumstances, we thought you'd understand," he says. But understanding is in short supply here.

Adapted from Rumaan Alam's acclaimed novel, the movie is set against an end-of-days disaster in which technology — Wi-Fi, TV, phones, internet — has gone silent due to a cyberattack and there's been a massive blackout.

Well-to-do Amanda (a tart Julia Roberts) and her Atlantic magazine-quoting husband Clay (a hangdog Ethan Hawke) must work with the even-more-well-off G.H. (a calmly sophisticated Mahershala



NETFLIX/AP

From left: Myha'la, Mahershala Ali, Ethan Hawke and Julia Roberts star in "Leave the World Behind," about an end-of-days disaster involving a cyberattack and blackout.

Ali) and his savvy daughter Ruth (a superb Myha'la). The racial divide easily swamps their joint class affiliation.

Also along for the disaster are the children of Amanda and Clay, a "Friends"-obsessed daughter (a soulful Farrah Mackenzie, who even wears her hair in a "Rachel" hairdo) and her older, slightly bratty brother (Charlie Evans).

It's a story brilliantly adapted and di-

rected by Sam Esmail, showrunner of "Mr. Robot," who has made "Leave the World Behind" into a homage of Alfred Hitchcock, complete with the image of a man trying to outrun a crashing plane and the master's discordant loud music. Esmail, who manages to make a group of deer appear sinister, even makes a Hitchcockian cameo as a corpse on a beach.

The director paces the deepening dread

flawlessly and there are visual delights throughout, like when the family starts off on their adventure with their car exiting at "Point Comfort." The camera often swirls and soars through glass cracks or holes in roofs like an uneasy bird, or parks itself at strange angles.

The mysterious catastrophe — ships beach themselves, driverless cars crash like lemmings — sloughs away any pretense at civility, leaving the adults and children to turn on each other. Amanda, in particular, reveals a dark side and her husband — before the disaster, a can't-we-all-get-along bro — abandons a hysterical survivor by the side of the road. Community is shattered, guns come out and protect-at-all-costs is the motto of the day.

The acting is first-rate and it needs to be — this is a drama of manners and secrets, and each sigh or glance reveals so much. We haven't seen a nasty Roberts character in a while, and Ali balances sophistication and slyness artfully. Together, they have some of the film's best scenes.

But a warning of sorts: It's best to click play on your remote knowing that the movie is more a satire than a true action-survival movie — the open-ended ending may divide viewers. Click anyway because the journey never drags. And don't be surprised if there's a jump in sales of survival tools this holiday season.

"Leave the World Behind" is rated R for some sexual content, brief bloody images, language and drug use. Running time: 141 minutes. Now streaming on Netflix.

Murphy's 'Candy Cane Lane' a mixed bag of a holiday film

BY MICHAEL ORDOÑA
Los Angeles Times

Eddie Murphy's new holiday comedy, "Candy Cane Lane," won't join the ranks of Christmas classics, but it's not quite a lump of coal, either. Murphy plays Chris Carver, happy dad to a beautiful family in picturesque El Segundo, Calif.

When Chris suffers a reversal of fortune, he becomes desperate to win the neighborhood holiday-house decorating contest. He and his youngest daughter stumble across a mysterious Christmas-fare pop-up store in which an even more mysterious salesperson ("22 Jump Street's" Jillian Bell, savoring the sinister) offers them the ultimate decoration: a towering, mechanical tree whose rotating ornaments depict the 12 days of Christmas. She has Chris sign a suspiciously long receipt without telling him the cost of his impossibly perfect purchase. What could go wrong?

Well, a lot, it turns out, as Chris finds himself desperate to complete a magical quest or be trans-

formed forever into a tiny figurine in a Dickensian nightmare. This Prime Video offering assembles a glorious cast: Murphy's the star, but he's a touch subdued in his largely straight-man role — not a bad thing. The stretch in which Chris is depressed is some of the comic superstar's most real-feeling screen acting. The kids (Geneya Walton, Thaddeus J. Mixson, Madison Thomas) are talented. Chris Redd steals his scenes as a cursed figurine who has been without intimate companionship for too long.

But it's Tracee Ellis Ross, notorious comic sniper that she is, who finds the funny where most might have missed it, as Chris' wife, Carol. The subtle shades of her delivery and the precision of her finely tuned takes make the most of her moments. (Her performance arrives just as she delivers another absolutely pitch-perfect turn in "American Fiction," coming in a couple of weeks.)

"Candy Cane" reunites Mur-

phy with his "Boomerang" director Reginald Hudlin and producer (and frequent collaborator) Brian Grazer, so you know it's at least going to be slickly assembled. "Bohemian Rhapsody" cinematographer Newton Thomas Sigel paints the tale in warm tones throughout.

But the sled is so weighed down by exposition, not even magic reindeer can get it off the ground. There's no room for character: Chris' only distinguishable trait is that he's a dedicated wood carver (his name is Chris Carver, after all), but even that goes poof up the chimney the instant he has a chance to purchase the gaudiest Christmas monstrosity he can. It would be one thing if the lesson were that his lovingly designed handicrafts proved more rewarding than the magic mountain of self-adulation represented by the "12 Days" tree, but nope. His woodworkings quickly cease to be a thing in the movie.

The script has some memorable lines ("What's Christmas



PRIME/TNS

Eddie Murphy plays a more subdued character than many fans are used to seeing from the comedian in "Candy Cane Lane."

without a little terror?"; "Make them suffer as only the French can"). But it also has a deadening clockwork quality. There's the usual heavy-footed deployment of the "comedy! comedy!" score to cue us to laugh or have feelings. The only thing more numerous than the Christmas references (the family members' names are Carol, Holly, Joy and Nick) are the cliches, down to a Tarantino slo-mo walk for no reason. There's a musical interlude shoehorned in and gag payoffs that viewers will see coming from miles off.

But if you're firing up "Candy Cane Lane," you're not doing it because you're craving a hard-hitting exposé of the commercialization of the holiday, or even the story of a man realizing what's most important in life. (Hint: It rhymes with schmamily.) You want to see Eddie Murphy surrounded by some Christmas-themed silliness. And on that score, it's fine enough, but destined for gifting.

"Candy Cane Lane" is rated PG for language throughout and some suggestive references. Running time: 117 minutes. Now streaming on Prime Video.

WEEKEND: MOVIE REVIEWS

A monster movie with a giant heart

‘Godzilla Minus One’ makes regular people the heroes

BY LUCAS TREVOR
The Washington Post

The creature-feature title notwithstanding, “Godzilla Minus One” could easily be mistaken for a 1950s romantic melodrama. On one level, it’s the story of a Japanese couple raising a small child in the aftermath of World War II. Koichi (Ryunosuke Kamiki), a former kamikaze pilot who survived only because he abandoned his mission, feels shame for his cowardice and wants to make up for his mistake. Noriko (Minami Hamabe) is his nontraditional partner; they sleep in separate beds but have a strong emotional bond. Together, they live in bombed-out Tokyo — across the street from their sometimes babysitter and frequent parenting adviser — with the baby girl Noriko has taken in after promising a dying woman she would take care of her child. There’s not enough work, the roof leaks and Koichi has what today would be called PTSD.

Oh, and there’s a 200-foot-tall lizard terrorizing the country.

In this reboot of the 1954 “Godzilla,” filmmaker Takashi Yamazaki — juggling the jobs of writer, director and visual effects supervisor — mixes the tried-and-true beats of a modern blockbuster with the emotional and political tone of the original film. The result is nothing short of magical: a feast for the eyes, an entertain-

ing epic in every sense of the word.

The film begins late at night, during the final days of the war at an isolated airstrip that is suddenly attacked by a mysterious creature. While many modern Godzilla adaptations lean into size and spectacle, Yamazaki prefers suspense, shooting from below to return the titular creature, or kaiju, to its horror roots. This Godzilla is, for the first time in a long while, genuinely terrifying. Only later does Yamazaki show the rampage from a wider angle. The spectacle returns, but with an added edge: Godzilla is not a boxer going toe to toe in a ring with another kaiju, but certain death slowly inching toward you.

While the recent American Godzilla films (part of a monster-verse that includes King Kong and other so-called titans) have their strengths, their focus on science fiction, advanced tech and backstories involving ancient civilization has eliminated some of the human emotion of the original film. Here, it’s up to ordinary people, not other monsters, to stop Godzilla. This ups the emotional stakes.

Monster movies live and die by such investment of feeling — and it’s there that “Minus One” thrives. The first hour features little of the titular reptile, instead focusing on the connection between Koichi and Noriko. They grow in fondness for each other amid the wreckage of their country.



Toho Studios

Ryunosuke Kamiki, left, and Minami Hamabe nurture a surprisingly tender relationship for a monster movie amid a war-torn country in “Godzilla Minus One.”

The first half of the film does most of the heavy lifting, establishing the intense sentiment that is essential for the second half. Even after Godzilla returns, the film’s tender core is carefully nurtured.

That’s not to say the spectacle isn’t also effective. The scenes of urban devastation are expertly choreographed and gorgeously shot (by Kozo Shibasaki).

The Godzilla franchise had — and still has — deeply political implications. The 1954 film critiqued the Atomic Age and the effect of nuclear weapons on the planet broadly (and on Japan more specifically). That implication remains valid, with sequences in Tokyo eerily evocative of

photographs of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Layered on top of that is criticism of Japan’s imperial government and the military’s policy of self-sacrifice, underscored by Koichi’s refusal to “die honorably.”

The final act features some of the best blockbuster filmmaking in years.

“Top Gun: Maverick” showed us there’s still an audience for movies that combine concise and creative action with emotionally resonant characters. “Godzilla Minus One” is another reminder — and quite possibly the better movie of the two.

“Godzilla Minus One” is rated PG-13 for creature violence and action. In Japanese with subtitles. Running time: 125 minutes. Now playing in select movie theaters.

‘The Boy and the Heron’ another masterpiece from Miyazaki

BY KATIE WALSH
Tribune News Service

In 2013, legendary Japanese animator Hayao Miyazaki claimed he was retiring after the release of his film “The Wind Rises,” which was nominated for an Academy Award for best animated feature. It’s a common refrain for Miyazaki, who said he was retiring after “Princess Mononoke” and the Oscar-winning “Spirited Away.” But he has yet to stick with retirement, as evidenced by the release of his first film in a decade, the enchanting “The Boy and the Heron.”

Based on the 1937 book “How Do You Live?” by Genzaburo Yoshino, which was given to Miyazaki in his youth by his mother, “The Boy and the Heron” is a deeply personal project from the animation auteur. Like his other work, it is a fantastical and wildly imaginative film that straddles the spirit and human worlds, with a story rooted in deeply relatable emotion, threaded with an enduring sense of hope for the future despite the harshness of everyday reality.

Set in the waning days of World War II in a rural village outside Tokyo, “The Boy and the Heron” follows the story of Mahito, a young boy grieving the loss of his mother, who has been killed in a fire. He and his father move away from the city, to a village where his father runs a factory producing military aircraft, and where Mahito meets his new stepmother — his mother’s sister, Natsuko. Mahito gets to know his strange new home, where seven grannies cluck and fret over him and the pregnant Natsuko and a pesky gray heron won’t leave him alone.

The magical heron — with terrifyingly huge human teeth and a bulbous nose protruding from its beak —



STUDIO GHIBLI, GKIDS/AP

Mahito Maki is led to a magical underworld by a strange man-like heron in “The Boy and the Heron.”

promises to take Mahito to his mother. But it’s not until the ailing Natsuko wanders into the forest that Mahito dares to enter the mysterious, crumbling tower on the property with the heron man as his guide. Inside, they encounter a wizened Great-Uncle and sink into a strange underworld, a parallel universe of sorts.

Determined to find and save Natsuko, Mahito encounters all kinds of thrilling characters and creatures in the underworld, including the brave and powerful fisherwoman Kiriko, who hauls up a giant catch to feed the Warawara, bulbous white spirits that eat and float into the sky to be born as people on the other side. He befriends Himi, a fire maiden, and tangles with an army of hungry,

human-sized parakeets. As bizarre and wild as it is in this alternate world, everyone he meets seemingly has a tether to people and animals in his own life, and through his adventures, Mahito learns not only about himself, but those around him, and those who he has lost.

There is a timeless quality to the unique beauty and style of “The Boy and the Heron,” rendered with the hand-drawn animation of Miyazaki and the artists at his Studio Ghibli. It’s a process that lends itself to the humanity of their work, which is derived from careful observation. The attention to detail in the backgrounds and to small gestures all adds up to the sense of connection we feel with the characters and their journeys.

But at the core of this hero’s journey there is also a profound existential question posed by the Great-Uncle, the keeper of the magical tower, where he keeps the universe in balance. He’s seeking a successor, and he poses a question to Mahito that resonates within its historical setting and in our own present existence: Who will be a steward for our world? Who can make sure the world remains beautiful and not an abomination?

In post-war Japan, during Miyazaki’s childhood, the world felt precarious, and it still feels precarious today. What can we impart to future generations? Can we trust them to keep the balance of the universe? These big questions drive the meaning and the purpose of “The Boy and the Heron,” yet another masterpiece from Miyazaki that helps us to see the beauty of life around us and contemplate the future of the universe more profoundly. Thank goodness retirement doesn’t agree with him.

“The Boy and the Heron” is rated PG-13 for some violent content/bloody images and smoking. Running time: 124 minutes. Now playing in select movie theaters.

WEEKEND: TRAVEL

Lean in to Pisa

An easy day trip from Florence, and famous solely as the home to a tipsy tower, most of Pisa is ignored by its hordes of visitors. But if you have time for more than a touristy quickie, stick around to savor Pisa's rich architectural heritage and fun college-town energy.

Understandably, every first-time visitor heads straight to the Leaning Tower of Pisa, one of the most iconic structures in the world. It stands — sort of — near the town's other biggies, Pisa's cathedral and baptistery. This creamy white threesome floats regally over a piazza largely covered in a lush lawn. Each time I stand there, I like to pretend I'm arriving in Pisa as a sailor in the 11th century, when the sea came to just outside the surrounding walls and Pisa's cathedral was the biggest church in the world. To see this ensemble of gleaming white marble spread out before you is impressive no matter when and how you get here. Even choked with street-market stands probably then and certainly now, the square still lives up to its name: the Field of Miracles.

Soon after construction of the bell tower began in 1173, some-

one said, "Is it just me, or does that look crooked?" The builders carried on anyway, using every trick imaginable to stop the slant. But the top of the 200-foot tower nevertheless wound up tilted off its base by 15 feet.



Rick Steves

In 1990, the tower was deemed dangerous, and the city sealed it up and spent the next decade straightening it by about six inches. All that work turned the clock back a few centuries, and the tower now leans about as much as it did when Galileo reputedly conducted his gravity experiments from the tower 400 years ago.

Climbing to the top of the tower is an unforgettable experience, offering great views ... and vertigo. Since only 50 people can ascend every 15 minutes, you reserve a time slot when you buy your ticket (it's smart to book ahead online). If you show up in Pisa without a reservation, go straight to the ticket office on arrival. (If you'll be seeing both the town and the Field of Miracles, plan on a six-hour stop. If you're just blitzing the Field of Miracles and have already



CAMERON HEWITT/Rick Steves' Europe

For more than seven centuries, visitors have come to marvel at Pisa's cathedral.

booked a tower-climb time, your visit will still take at least three hours.)

With its ornate facade glittering in the sun, Pisa's huge and richly decorated cathedral is artistically more important than the tower. The highlight of its interior, Giovanni Pisano's exquisitely carved pulpit, is almost overwhelmingly dense with figures depicting the story of Jesus' life. Next to the cathedral, the baptistery features acoustics so remarkable that echoes last long enough to let you sing three-part harmony — solo.

For most visitors, the Pisan thrill ends here. But when I'm in Pisa, I take time to escape the tourist crowds with a stroll through town.

Pisa straddles the Arno River, just six miles from the coast. Centuries ago, Pisa was a major trading power, rivaling Venice and Genoa for control of the seas. Long lines of elegant mansions line the riverfront at the heart of town, reminiscent of Venice's Grand Canal.

After its port silted up, Pisa was left high and dry, and eventually entered a period of steady

decline ... leaving its grand landmarks as reminders of past glory.

For many, the lack of tourists outside the Field of Miracles is both a surprise and a relief. Nearly half of Pisa's 100,000 residents are students, keeping the city lively. Pisa's university, one of Europe's oldest, was where Galileo studied the solar system and Andrea Bocelli attended law school before embarking on his musical career.

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Lights and luminaries counteract Continent's cold evenings

Miserable weather and all-too-early darkness might be good arguments for staying home throughout much of December, but not all Europe slumbers at this time. Shake off those winter doldrums with an outing promising the soul-warming effect of candlelight, the mysticism of saintly worship or the remembrance of heroic deeds.

Milan, Italy: Oh Bej! Oh Bej! Christmas market

Through Dec. 10, Milan's residents will be feting their patron saint Ambrogio, a theologian and statesman who served as Bishop of Milan from 374 to 397, in much the way they've been doing it over the past centuries. Festivities center around the Castello Sforzesco and surrounding area, the heart of which is the Oh Bej! Oh Bej! Christmas market. Here, shoppers will find the usual bric a-brac and sweet treats along with a vast range of gourmet products. Typical purchases here include long strings of smoked chestnuts or sweet breads including Panettone, and the drink of choice is vin brulé, mulled wine.



Karen Bradbury

Those after more upscale and unusual handicrafts will want to make their way to the indoor event venue Fiera Milano Rho, where the annual Artigiano in Fiera runs through Dec. 10. Here, artisans from around the world present their products and tell their backstories, bringing their own cultures and traditions to the fore. Dance and music shows, culinary treats and the promotion of destinations and touristic offerings make the fair a global meeting place with local flair. Opening hours are 10 a.m.-10:30 p.m., and entry is free. Online: tinyurl.com/2r4bt4jx

Sweden and Italy: The glorification of Santa Lucia

Santa Lucia, sometimes translated as Saint Lucy, was an early Christian martyr born in Syracuse on the island of Sicily. She was put to death in the town of her birth in 304 after a rejected suitor accused her of being a Chris-



Gouda tourist board

On Dec. 15, the Dutch town of Gouda will turn off its lights in the city's center to celebrate Gouda by Candlelight.

tian. Medieval legend holds that prior to her execution, her eyes were gouged out and her throat cut with a sword, making her a seemingly patron saint for the blind and those suffering from throat infections, among others.

Today, Santa Lucia is still celebrated with particular fervor throughout Scandinavia as well as in Syracuse, her place of birth. On Dec. 13 of each year, churches throughout Sweden select a young girl to represent the saint. Dressed in a long white gown and wearing a crown of lit candles on her head, her appearance is perfectly timed to bring light and hope to the darkest days of the year.

In the Sicilian city of Siracusa, the Feast of Saint Lucy stretches across several days. On Jan. 13, a grand procession parades a gem-embellished silver statue of the saint through the city streets upon the shoulders of 60 men. On Dec. 20, following a grand burst of fireworks, the relics of the saint are returned to the cathedral for safekeeping. Online: tinyurl.com/4vwhasnp

Gouda, Netherlands: A city bathed in candlelight

Gouda by Candlelight is an annual, single-day event in which the town's charming city center relies on the light of thousands of candles to light the way. On Dec. 15, the windows of the Town Hall and dozens of other stately properties will be illuminated solely by flickering flames. The entire town gets into the holiday spirit with concerts, shows, street artists and late-night museum and gallery openings. Between 7 p.m. and 8 p.m., the lights of the city's Christmas tree will be switched on. Online: tinyurl.com/k88sxx2n

Bastogne, Belgium: Remember the Battle of the Bulge

Despite the ever-dwindling number of those who witnessed the events preceding the end of World War II, Bastogne remembers. The 79th anniversary of the Battle of the Bulge will be commemorated on the weekend of Dec. 15-17 in keeping with long-established traditions.

Much of the weekend's jam-packed program unfolds in the vicinity of The Bastogne War Museum, where the agenda includes meetings with war veterans. A large military encampment set up outside the museum allows visitors to see how soldiers and civilians would have spent their days during the times of war. This year's program includes a book signing by U.S. WWII veterans from 10 a.m.-1 p.m. Dec. 16, and a military parade at 3 p.m. Dec. 17. The annual throwing of the nuts from the balcony of the Town Hall takes place at 3:30 p.m. Dec. 16. Online: tinyurl.com/yk7jmewb

Innsbruck, Austria: Christkind Parade

On Dec. 17, the Christmas figure known as the Christkind will be whisked along the Maria-Theresien-Street. Some 500 local children get into act, along with marching bands, shepherds, angels, sheep and others. Festivities culminate with the Christkind's arrival at the square in front of the Tirol Provincial Theater, where a rendition of "Silent Night" will ring out. The parade sets forth at 5 p.m. Entry is free. Online: tinyurl.com/bdfsx537

WEEKEND: TRAVEL



PHOTOS BY KRISTEN DE GROOT/AP

A home in the village of Monsanto, Portugal, where residents built their abodes in and around massive boulders.

Beyond the boulders

Writer recounts how she and her husband took Portugal's roads less traveled from Lisbon to Porto to Monsanto to Evora in the fall

BY KRISTEN DE GROOT
Associated Press

As we steered our rented hatchback up the narrow gravel road behind the walled city of Óbidos, we had the sinking feeling that Google Maps' idea of the best route to the popular tourist destination wasn't the standard way there, and certainly not the most direct.

The dusty, tan path was winding past apple, pear and sour cherry orchards, which then transformed into vineyards, then back again to orchards as we climbed. The gap-toothed ram-parts loomed in the distance to our right and ahead, a stereotype of a castle that a child would draw: vertical rectangle, horizontal line, vertical rectangle, horizontal line. A dog barked from somewhere down the hillside, and as we reached the walls of the old city, our car wheels started to spin out.

"Well, you wanted to get off the

beaten path," my husband said. "You're here."

We parked the car on the side of the road, observed only by an orange cat, and entered Óbidos literally through the back door. Were we doing something wrong? Would our car get towed? The answer was no, and no. What did happen was we found ourselves at the top of the walled city, near a few raptor handlers sitting with their owls, hawks and falcons under a wooden structure, and remarkably few other tourists.

The goal for our very first trip to Portugal was to find smaller cities, mountain villages and activities that wouldn't mean standing in long lines with other tourists.

Our digital navigator led us down ancient Roman roads, footpaths and narrow cobbled city streets as we explored a more or less scalene triangle-shaped portion of Portugal this fall, traveling from Lisbon to

Porto to Monsanto to Evora and back to Lisbon.

Famous brandy

Choosing to stay inland before heading to the island of Berlenga led us to Lourinhã, where we stayed in a converted ancient windmill and discovered the region's famous brandy. As the only visitors to the facility that day, we were treated to a private tour of Adegas Cooperativas da Lourinhã, one of only three demarcated brandy regions in Europe, the others being Armagnac and Cognac. The English-language guide and her school-age son gave us a spin around the aging barrels, and the women in the packaging department let us dip bottles of what they call aguardiente into red wax to seal them.

We next ventured via ferry to the island of Berlenga, about 6.2 miles off the fishing village of Peniche. It's a pink chunk of granite jutting out of the tur-



Visitors to the island of Berlenga soak in the sun, sights, sparkling sangria and Sagres beer on the patio of restaurant Mesa da Ilha on Sept. 14. The island is about 6 miles off the fishing village of Peniche.

quoise-to-emerald-green waters of the Atlantic, home to a vast array of seabirds.

Most visitors come in the morning and leave in the early evening, but we decided to over-night there. The handful of rooms available offer exquisite views of the water, with schools of fish visible even from high above — a dreamy sunset viewing spot.

Raucous birdsong

After swimming in the bracing water at the main beach, where a snorkeler showed an octopus to a group of screeching 20-something Dutch men, we enjoyed a sparkling sangria and Sagres

beer, soaking in the views and waiting for our fellow tourists to leave for the day.

Then, the island was transformed. Only a small group of local fishermen and the occupants of two other rooms at the inn could be found. As we settled into bed, night birds were just revving up. When the proprietor told us we would hear some birdsong in the night, I imagined they would sound like the adorable coqui in Puerto Rico. Instead, it was somewhat like a toddler screaming "Ow, ow, ow, ow, owowowowowowow!" while

SEE PORTUGAL ON PAGE 21

WEEKEND: TRAVEL



PHOTOS BY KRISTEN DE GROOT/AP

Skeletal remains of an estimated 5,000 people appear inside the Capela dos Ossos, a chapel built by Franciscan monks, in Évora, Portugal, on Sept. 20.

Portugal: Couple likens visit to a meal they barely had time to taste

FROM PAGE 20

standing by our bedside, all night long.

Being awake at the crack of dawn after a night of screeching birds had its benefits, though. We spent the morning hiking to the 17th century fort at the opposite side of the island, down a path lined with tiny succulents and bright yellow flowers.

Higher than a rainbow

After a few days back in the tourist crowds in Porto, we took the long way to Monsanto, near the Spanish border, choosing a route through the Parque Nacional da Serra da Estrela. It was our first rainy day on the trip, and winding switchbacks met terrifying wet dirt roads that hovered over sheep down the foggy mountainside. We passed by ski resorts and, during one break in the rain, found ourselves high above a rainbow.

Stopping at the hilltop village of Belmonte, we discovered a 12th century castle, a historic Jewish population and some of the best cheese of our trip. What we thought would be a basic lunch at a nondescript taverna ended up being a great meal at a shop that sold wheels of Serra sheep cheese made by the owner's cousin, and wine made by the owner himself. It was an afternoon stop that could easily have merited a few days' exploration.

A village built among boulders

We arrived in the late afternoon at our Airbnb just below Monsanto, a magical mountaintop village where residents built their abodes in and around massive boulders. The rain paused and we decided to hike the Roman road behind our inn up to the village. The rain didn't stay away long, however, and the walk back in the near dark was slippery on the ancient stones.

The caretaker of the inn suggested we explore the nearby village of Penha Garcia, where there is a castle, ancient water mills and fossils to discover. Our main objective, though, was the swimming hole nestled beneath the steep rocky hillside. Yet again, Google maps led us to what it deemed a road but was more of a gravel walkway flanked by donkeys under olive trees.

A kind man emerged and told us in perfect, British-accented English that we

were free to park in front of his red-tiled-roof stone home. The donkeys were happy to see us as we made our way to the natural pool fed by the Ponsul River.

We ate a few bites of our picnic lunch before plunging into the cold water and splashing under a waterfall, the only visitors there.

Vestiges of the Romans

Leaving Monsanto for Evora, we made a quick stop in Idanha-a-Velha, one of the oldest towns in Portugal, once prosperous and bustling with a long Roman history but now home to a population of a few dozen. It boasts a ruin of a Knights Templar tower, Roman city gate and walls, and a ghost town vibe.

We then descended into the Alentejo region, passing vineyard after vineyard. Cork trees dotted the vast grassland, and cows and sheep took in the shade beneath them. We stopped in Arraiolos, known for its hand-knitted rugs, and nodded at the women sitting and knitting outside their whitewashed homes.

In Evora, we opted for the sitting-and-eating type of tourism rather than the walking-around-exploring brand. We did take a journey up to the Temple of Diana and stood in line for the (somewhat creepy) chapel containing the bones of an estimated 5,000 people, including Franciscan monks, that were plucked from cemeteries.

But overall, we just enjoyed the vibrant city's vibes, and had the best meal of the trip at Restaurante Fialho. Under dark, wood-beamed ceilings, we had a lunch of presunto ham, grilled octopus, medallions of the famous local black pork and baked dogfish, served by bow-tie-sporting waiters.

Driving in the rain to catch our flight home, we talked about how we felt we had seen much of Portugal, but how in reality it was such a small slice of the country, and a tiny taste of each place we spent time in.

"It's like I was served the most delicious sandwich of my life, and I took one bite and I'm having to just get up and leave the restaurant," my husband said.

We agreed that we'll have to come back again to enjoy more of the meal.



Templo Romano, also known as the Temple of Diana, dating from the 2nd or 3rd century AD, in Évora, Portugal, on Sept. 20.



Friendly donkeys greet pedestrians on the way to the Fonte do Pego freshwater swimming pool in the village of Penha Garcia, Portugal, on Sept. 18.



A stone bridge crosses the Zêzere River in the Parque Nacional da Serra da Estrela near Valhelhas, Portugal. The couple went through the park en route to Monsanto.

WEEKEND: QUICK TRIPS



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL ABRAMS/Stars and Stripes

A visitor checks out a display of carnival hats and clothes at the Fastnachtmuseum in Mainz, Germany. It traces the history of carnival in the city from its 19th-century beginnings to the present.

A swell way to learn about carnival craft

Fastnacht museum in downtown Mainz shows its visitors the spectacle, history of the pre-Lent celebration in the city

BY MICHAEL ABRAMS
Stars and Stripes

Carnival, that crazy time before Lent, is celebrated in many parts of the globe. From Brazil to the Caribbean, from Nice to Venice and to German cities along the Rhine River, people party, dance and parade.

In Germany, it is known as the fifth season, and in Mainz, a carnival stronghold on the Rhine, a museum traces the city's carnival culture.

While some sort of carnival celebrations have been around for centuries, today's version in Mainz, where it's called Fastnacht, dates to the late 1830s, when a carnival association was founded.

It organized sitzungen, which are meetings with farce, fools' caps and medals, as well as the first Rose Monday parade. The Fastnacht speeches and the uniforms worn during the silly season were meant to mock the authorities in general and often the military in particular.

Over the decades, the Fastnacht celebrations grew, with more carnival clubs participating and the Rose Monday parade drawing hundreds of thousands of spectators.

The Fastnachtmuseum is housed in the basement of the Proviant-Magazin, a brick mid-19th-century military supply depot downtown.

Here you can see the uniforms worn over the decades and the different fools' caps worn by the clubs. In the first room, a selection of caps hang from the ceiling that you can try on for a selfie.

On display are a trio of Schwellkoepp, or swell heads. Made of papier-mache and worn on the shoulders with a hole to see

and breathe through, they have been a main feature of the Mainz Rose Monday carnival parade since 1927.

Thirty swell heads participate in Mainz Fastnacht, and all have names.

The organizers of the Mainz carnival parade have been selling plaques to help pay for the parade since 1950. Many are on display at the museum. At first, they were flat pins, but since 1971 they have been plastic figurines that are hung around the neck.

A selection of Fastnacht medals can also be seen. Originally meant more to mock the military, they have become quite ornate over the years.

The carnival meeting, "Mainz wie es lacht und singt" (Mainz how it laughs and sings), televised since the mid-1950s, is one of Germany's most popular shows. The museum shows snippets of it through the years.

One element of the Mainz carnival that can't be displayed at the Fastnachtmuseum, of course, are the large parade floats. But there is a flip notebook on display that presents planning sketches and the final products.

A fascinating object on display is a concertino fold booklet depicting the Mainz carnival parade of 1857. When unfolded, the lithograph is almost 21 feet long.

Next to it is a facsimile version of it. With the help of a wheel, visitors can scroll through the whole parade.

The museum is rather low-tech, and knowing some German helps. There is an English laminated info sheet that the museum employees, all of whom are volunteers, hand out as a guide through the exhibits.



Swell heads have been a main feature of the Mainz Rose Monday carnival parade since 1927. They are made of papier-mache and worn on the shoulders with a hole to see and breathe through. There are about 30 of them and all have names. This is Schorsch.



The Mainz Fastnachtmuseum is housed in the basement of the Proviant-Magazin, a mid-19th-century military supply depot.



Two fool's scepters from 1884 are topped with Kaspers, a German jester. They are among the items on display at the Mainz Fastnachtmuseum.

On the QT

Address: Universitaetsstrasse 2, Mainz, Germany.

Times: 11 a.m.-5 p.m., Tuesday to Sunday. Closed Monday.

Costs: Admission is 3 euros for adults, 1.50 euros for children up to 14, cash only.

Information: www.mainzer-fastnachtmuseum.de (German only)

Those who want to go beyond the museum experience can check out the real thing starting Jan. 1, 2024, with the New Year's Day parade at 11:11 a.m.

The fun continues in February with Weiberfastnacht, or women's Fastnacht, at 11:11 a.m., on Feb. 8, the children's parade at 2:11 p.m. on Feb. 10 and the parade of the Foolish Guards on Feb. 11.

It all culminates with the big Rose Monday Parade at 11:11 on Feb. 12. On Ash Wednesday, all the carnival fun is over.

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This concertino fold booklet on display at the Fastnachtmuseum depicts the Mainz carnival parade of 1857. When unfolded, the lithograph is almost 21 feet long.

WEEKEND: FOOD & DINING



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL SLAVIN/Stars and Stripes

Das Notstain overlooks the Vils River in the Bavarian city of Amberg, Germany. The restaurant offers seating on two floors as well as a bar area on the first floor.

Farm-fresh and delicious

Locavore entrees, cozy setting enhance the dining experience at friendly Das Notstain restaurant in Bavarian city of Amberg

By MICHAEL SLAVIN
Stars and Stripes

With temperatures in Germany heading toward freezer territory, the menu at Das Notstain in the Bavarian city of Amberg will warm you up with its farm-fresh dishes and cozy atmosphere.

The bar and restaurant take up two floors right next to St. Martin's Basilica and the Vils River.

In the summer, the outdoor seating lets you enjoy your meal with a nice view and sounds of the river.

In the winter, guests can cozy up in the warm, softly lit dining room.

Das Notstain is all about making sure customers know where the menu items come from. Local bakeries and butchers supply bread and meat, respectively, while the coffee it serves is roasted in Garmisch.

Prospective patrons should be aware that there is no food service during lunch. However, drinks are served throughout the day.

To start off the experience, my

dinner guest and I explored the wine selection and had the bar choose a delicious red for us.

I decided to try out a seasonal fitting appetizer, the pumpkin bruschetta. It provided a delicious introduction to the meal with a mashed potato-like consistency and hint of pesto.

Then we were on to the entrees, from which we chose two. The veal cordon bleu was the highlight of the evening. The dish was served with two medium-sized pieces of veal, wrapped up in cheese spiral and fried with a crispy exterior.

The "potato dippers" served with it were french fries but cut in a scoop shape to carry a little extra sauce.

Our other entree was the beef filet. For the 28-euro price tag, we received a steak that was no larger than 3 to 4 ounces.

Despite being cooked to a perfect medium-rare, it left me with a familiar feeling of mild disappointment, remembering the small, tougher cuts I've encountered in Germany.

The steak dish's saving grace was the side of potato puree with



**AFTER
HOURS
GERMANY**

Das Notstain

Address: Schiffgasse 5, Amberg, Germany

Hours: Monday, 9 a.m.-10 p.m.; Tuesday through Thursday, 9 a.m.-11 p.m.; Friday and Saturday, 9 a.m.-12 p.m.; Sunday, 9:30 a.m.-10 p.m.

Prices: Appetizers, 6-13 euros; entrees, 15-28 euros; desserts, 8-10 euros.

Info: www.dasnotstain.de

Michael Slavin

minced truffles.

Then it was on to dessert, which did not disappoint. The chocolate lava cake with vanilla ice cream and berry mix was absolutely delightful.

In addition, the friendly and attentive waitstaff and cozy surroundings were more than enough to make up for my quibbles.

slavin.michael@stripes.com
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The dessert menu at Das Notstain in Amberg includes chocolate lava cake with vanilla ice cream and a berry mix, shown above, and mango tapioca.



The cordon bleu at Das Notstain in Amberg can be ordered with veal or pork. It is served with french fries or potato salad.



The pumpkin bruschetta at Das Notstain is perfect for two people to share and comes with a delicious pumpkin mixture on ciabatta and a dash of pesto.



The beef filet is one of the more expensive main courses served at Das Notstain in Amberg. It comes with a side of potato puree and a plum sauce.

WEEKEND: QUICK TRIPS



PHOTOS BY CLAIRE JENQ/Stars and Stripes

Visitors walk down a dock Oct. 1 to Umi Farm, where they can catch fish to eat at Yokohama Hakkeijima Sea Paradise in Japan.

Thrilling aquatic encounters

Theme park offers roller coasters alongside up-close experiences with wild creatures

BY CLAIRE JENQ
Stars and Stripes

A day of amusement awaits on an island in Tokyo Bay. Yokohama Hakkeijima Sea Paradise is the perfect nearby day trip, or weekend getaway, for couples, families and friends to enjoy aquatic fun.

The park is a mere 30-minute drive from Yokosuka Naval Base. A large parking lot for visitors costs 1,500 yen (about \$10) on weekdays and 2,000 yen on weekends. It's a good deal for a park with no entrance fee.

Enjoy the picturesque views of Tokyo Bay as you cross the large bridge to the park. Visitors are met with a retro-looking merry-go-round, which was made at a specialty store in San Francisco, according to the Sea Paradise website.

With no entrance fee, the park provides vending machines where visitors can pay for individual rides near the attractions. Rides for smaller children, such as the Butterfly Rider and the Bubble Shooter, are 400 yen. The park's largest ride, the Surf Coaster Leviathan, costs 1,100 yen.

The pyramid-shaped Aqua Museum aquarium is the main draw at Sea Paradise. Kiosks here sell day passes for 5,600 yen (about \$37) for adults and 4,000 yen for children that give visitors access to all four aquariums on the island and one ride. Aquarium-only tickets are available for 3,300 yen for adults and 2,000 yen for children.

The stunning amount of sea life kept in the aquariums makes the price worth it. In addition to ocean fish, the aquarium keeps beluga whales, polar bears, walruses and penguins.

Two great white sharks swim ominously in one large, darkened tank. Strange-looking deepwater isopods and Japanese spider crabs crept gingerly across the floor in another.

Near the top of the aquarium is an outdoor section with red pandas, capybaras, prairie dogs and a Patagonian mara, a large rodent that looks like a cross between a hare and a capybara. On the same floor, visitors can watch dolphins, beluga whales and penguins perform at Aqua Stadium.



An Umi Farm Kitchen worker prepares freshly caught fish.

Dolphin Fantasy offers visitors a closer look at the park's dolphins by allowing visitors to walk through an aquarium tunnel. For an even more hands-on experience, make a reservation at the Fureai Lagoon to swim and pet dolphins, penguins and seals.

The final aquarium, Umi Farm, is on a floating dock in the bay. Visitors can reserve a time to fish in stocked areas. A strict rule prevents any waste: You may keep only what you will eat.

At the end of the dock are restaurants that have been specifically set up to process fish. Visitors can choose to either barbecue their catch themselves at the Seafood & Grill Yakiya or visit the more casual Umi Farm Kitchen to watch workers grill or fry it.

In addition to rides, aquariums and restaurants, there are gift shops, bumper cars, island tours and even a fish pedicure station.

An on-site hotel means your day trip can become a weekend trip, with plenty of amenities for your whole crew to enjoy.

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@ClaireJenq

On the QT

Directions: A half-hour drive from Yokosuka Naval Base, Japan. Hakkeijima, Kanazawa Ward, Yokohama, Kanagawa 236-0006

Times: Open 8:30 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. Monday through Friday; 8:30 a.m. to 10:30 p.m. Saturday and Sunday.

Costs: Park admission is free, with passes sold for individual attractions.

Food: A central food court and many restaurant options, including Hawaiian, Japanese and Chinese-themed eateries.

Information: 045-788-8888; Online: seapara-dise.co.jp/en/language/en/index.html

Claire Jenq



A large sea turtle swims inside the Aqua Museum aquarium.



A penguin swims playfully past Aqua Museum visitors.



Napping red pandas attract visitors at Yokohama Hakkeijima Sea Paradise.

Exploring the Beauty of the Pacific

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STARS AND STRIPES

WEEKEND: FOOD

Soup to soothe

Steaming pork meatball, tofu concoction common, popular in Singapore and China

BY ANN MALONEY
The Washington Post

What calms you when you're anxious? A blanket warm from the dryer? An intriguing book? How about a cozy bowl of soup?

I recently had a big decision to make and felt my anxiety level rising, so I decided to gather all three to take my mind off things. I chose the dish after skimming recipes in Sharon Wee's rereleased cookbook "Growing Up in a Nonya Kitchen."

The 470-page book, originally published in 2012, was updated and revised, then rereleased in 2023. It tells the fascinating history of the Peranakan Chinese people through Wee's own family's story of prosperity and struggle.

I caught up with Wee recently while she was on a trip from Manhattan, where she now lives, to the city-state of Singapore, where she was born and grew up, and was visiting family.

When I told her I — and others I've introduced the soup to — have been making it again and again, she immediately knew why: "It is soothing. It's something that is very common and popular in Singapore. So my mom would have cooked it. It's something we all grew up with."

"It's a very Chinese soup,"

Wee said, as she began describing how her culture, its food and its people came to be.

"The extraordinary Chinese Peranakan food culture comes from the convergence of Malay-Chinese food heritage," she said. Peranakans trace their ancestry from the first wave of Chinese immigrants to arrive centuries ago in Southeast Asia, particularly in Malacca in Malaysia. (In 1965, Singapore separated from Malaysia.)

As the Chinese moved into the area, they began to marry locals, and a prosperous community evolved with an emphasis on business development, architecture, jewelry, clothing and food.

The book's title comes from the honorifics associated with the women: Men were called babas and women nonyas, she said. Even the word nonya, derived from the Portuguese dona, itself illustrates the intermingling of cultures. The Portuguese also occupied Malacca, she said.

Wee has been on a mission for more than a decade not only to document, but also to preserve and teach people to appreciate the swirl of cultures that have influenced Peranakan Chinese food, including Malay spices and marinades, Chinese sauces and condiments, as well as dashes of Arab and Indian cooking.

The cookbook grew out of something many of us have dreamed of undertaking: compiling our mother's most popular recipes for the next generation.

As Wee dug into her own background and heritage, the project grew until "Growing Up in a Nonya Kitchen" became both a memoir and a cookbook.

As a fifth-generation nonya on both sides of her family, Wee feels compelled to ensure that fellow Peranakans and others around the world understand the culture's rich history: "There's an opportunity for this book to memorialize this community. I wanted [it] to do that."

For four months, she retested recipes, pulling in family and friends to help, adding step-by-step cooking instructions — and often photos — with more detailed technique explanations and guidance for those unfamiliar with ingredients.

She noted dietary restrictions and worked to cut the sugar in the "notoriously sweet" traditional desserts, noting that high cholesterol and diabetes are common health problems in Singapore.

For those who want to go deeper, she recommends books as well as what she calls "heritage restaurants" to visit.

The 10th anniversary edition of the cookbook was published in March.



REY LOPEZ/For The Washington Post

Pork Meatball and Tofu Soup is a comforting, nourishing bowl that honors Peranakan Chinese heritage.

Pork Meatball and Tofu Soup

4 to 6 servings

Total time: 35 mins

Make ahead: The pork mixture can be made up to 1 hour in advance.

Storage: Refrigerate for up to 4 days; gently re-heat over low heat.

Ingredients

For the meatballs:

1 pound ground pork

2 scallions, thinly sliced

1 tablespoon granulated sugar

1 tablespoon cornstarch or arrowroot

1 tablespoon light soy sauce (see note)

1 teaspoon ground white pepper

½ teaspoon fine salt

For the soup:

1 tablespoon neutral oil, such as canola

3 cloves garlic, thinly sliced

1 quart no-salt-added chicken broth

½ teaspoon fine salt

½ teaspoon ground white pepper

12 to 16 ounces silken tofu, cut into 1-inch cubes

Thinly sliced scallions, for serving

Chili crisp, for serving (optional)

Finely grated fresh ginger, for serving (optional)

Directions

Make the meatball mixture: In a large bowl, mix together the pork, scallions, sugar, cornstarch, soy sauce, pepper and salt until combined; do not over-work.

Set aside to let the seasoning incorporate into the meat, at least 15 minutes and up to 1 hour.

Start the soup: In a large saucepan over medium heat, heat the oil until it shimmers. Add the garlic and fry until light brown and fragrant, about 1 minute, adjusting the heat as needed.

Carefully pour in the chicken broth — it may splatter a bit at first. Season with the salt and pepper and stir to combine. Cover and bring to a gentle boil over medium-high heat.

Shape the meatballs and finish the soup: Meanwhile, roll the pork mixture into 1-inch balls and place them on a plate. Once they are all made, drop the meatballs, a few at a time, into the broth. Do not stir. Gently slide the tofu into the broth and, without stirring, bring the soup to a gentle simmer, adjusting the heat as needed, until the meatballs rise to the surface, about 5 minutes. (If you want to test the meatballs, the internal temperature should be 145 degrees and the meat slightly blush inside.)

Spoon the soup into bowls and garnish with scallions. Serve hot, with chili crisp and fresh ginger on the side, if desired.

Substitutions: Don't eat pork? Use ground fish or shrimp to make the balls. You can use bean thread vermicelli (tang hoon) soaked in hot water with spring onions for at least 15 minutes instead of tofu. Chicken broth can be replaced by vegetable broth.

Notes: Light soy sauce is paler, saltier and more savory than regular. You can substitute regular low-sodium soy sauce, to taste, but it will have an impact on the final result.

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We have the **Winners!**
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WEEKEND: FOOD



PHOTOS BY TOM MCCORKLE/For The Washington Post

“Wires” made of strips of black cookie dough and “bulbs” made of multicolored cookie dough make a holiday light design out of otherwise pedestrian sugar cookies.

Light effort needed for crunchy holiday treats

Pattern sugar cookies look fancy but don't require much extra work

BY ALANA ALLRED
Special to The Washington Post

A big part of me loves to be a little extra. I love baking that looks a little extra. That part of me that loves all things extra is at war with the part of me that doesn't always have time to make everything extra. I love making something that feels like minimal work with maximum results.

I have spent many hours decorating cookies, and I love it. However, I prefer dealing with something other than piping tips, many piping bags full of icing and then the cleanup.

The idea for these cookies came from scrolling videos of people that make clay designs. My curiosity led me to wonder whether I could do the same thing with cookie dough. Could I dye dough, put it on more dough, roll it out and have it turn out? I tried it out and was thrilled to find another shortcut for beautiful sugar cookies that feel a little extra.

I love this dough because it mixes up quickly and requires little chill time. The dough can handle adding small amounts of gel food coloring, making it perfect for this technique.

If you decide to make these cookies, I have two pieces of advice. First, make the shapes for your design smaller than you think you should, and be creative! The ideas for these cookies are endless. The designs range as far as your imagination.

Even the cutting out of shapes can be creative. For example, just one part of a cookie cutter might be what you need. The ears of a bunny cookie cutter can become petals for a flower.

Here's how to do a holiday lights scene, which is definitely the “extra” way to go. If you want something simpler, I also share how to make a simple geometric design with other basic shapes.



Cookies are cut in squares for the final big, colorful display.

Pattern Sugar Cookies

Make ahead: The decorated slab can be covered and refrigerated up to 1 day in advance. Freeze the unbaked cut cookies for up to 1 month, adding 1 to 3 minutes of bake time, or as needed.

Storage: Store in an airtight container at room temperature for up to 1 week or freeze for up to 1 month.

Where to buy: Hexagon cookie cutters and fondant or clay cutters can be found online and at baking supply stores. For our holiday lights design, we used a

small petal-shaped fondant cutter and AmeriColor soft gel paste food coloring.

Substitutions: Gluten-free? Use an all-purpose gluten-free flour blend, plus ¼ teaspoon xanthan gum. Vegan? Use dairy-free butter, but refrigerate the dough for at least 1 hour. If it gets too soft while working, refrigerate it for 10 minutes to firm up.

Note: If you want to make sandwich cookies, fill cooled cookies with your favorite buttercream. (Rolled scraps make for an ideal bottom.)

SEE RECIPE ON PAGE 27

WEEKEND: FOOD

Recipe: Different shades of food coloring and shaped cutters makes treats more festive, fun

FROM PAGE 26

Ingredients

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup (150 grams) granulated sugar
1 tablespoon finely grated orange or lemon zest (optional)

16 tablespoons (2 sticks/227 grams) unsalted butter, softened

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup (110 grams) packed light brown sugar

1 large egg

2 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoons vanilla extract

1 teaspoon almond extract

2 teaspoons baking powder

$\frac{3}{4}$ teaspoon fine salt

3 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups (440 grams) all-purpose flour, plus more as needed

1 teaspoon milk (any kind) or water, as needed

2 to 6 food dyes of your choice, preferably gel food coloring

Directions

Make the base dough: Position a rack in the middle of the oven and preheat to 350 degrees.

In the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with the paddle attachment, or in a large bowl if using a hand mixer, combine the granulated sugar and zest, if using, and mix on low speed until the sugar is moistened and the zest evenly distributed. Add the butter and brown sugar and beat together on medium-high until light and fluffy, about 3 minutes. Scrape down the sides and bottom of the bowl.

Add the egg and vanilla and almond extracts, and continue to mix on medium-high until just combined, about 30 seconds. Scrape down the sides and bottom of the bowl. Add the baking powder and salt and continue to mix on medium-high until well incorporated, about 1 minute.

Stop the mixer and add the flour. Start the mixer on low speed and slowly increase to medium once the flour begins to mix in. Mix until no streaks of flour remain, about 1 minute. If the dough looks dry, add the water or milk; the dough should stick together when squeezed between your fingertips.

Remove about one-fifth of the dough (200 grams); transfer it to a bowl and cover.

Place the remaining dough (about 800 grams) on a 12-by-16-inch piece of parchment paper, cover it with another piece of parchment of the same size, then roll the dough out into a $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch-thick rectangle about 9 by 12 inches. This is going to be your "canvas." Leave the top sheet of parchment on and set the dough canvas aside.

Divide and color the dough: Now it's time to dye the remaining 200 grams of dough into the desired colors for your design. If you are using liquid, as opposed to gel, food coloring, it is a good idea to have a bit of flour on hand to sprinkle on your dough if it gets too sticky.

To make a holiday light design: Divide the dough into five 40-gram portions or four 50-gram portions — one for each color. For example, you can make your lights yellow, red, green and blue, and dye one portion black for the cord. Or use yellow, red and blue for lights and green for the cord.

To make a simple geometric design: For a two-color design, divide the dough into 100-gram portions; for three-color, 66-gram portions; for four-color, 50-gram portions and so forth.

It's important not to overmix the dough as you're dyeing it, so avoid kneading. Instead, take one portion, make a small divot in the center and add a drop or two of food coloring. Fold the dough over to encapsulate the dye. Tear the dough in half and then stack the two pieces, squeezing them together. Repeat this process until the dye has been evenly incorporated. Every few tears, turn the dough a different direction to ensure you're working the dye into all the dough. Repeat with the remaining dough portions.

Cut out the shapes: Once the dough is dyed, it's time to cut the shapes you'll need for your design. Lightly flour the counter and rolling pin. Roll out the portions of colored dough to about $\frac{1}{8}$ -inch thick. It is easiest to cut out all the shapes you'll be using before placing them on your "canvas." Using shaped cutters, cut out your design elements, dipping the cutters in flour or dusting the counter and rolling pin as needed to prevent sticking. If desired, reroll scraps of the colored dough to cut more shapes.

For the holiday lights design: Use an oval or petal-shaped cookie cutter for the colored bulbs. Use a knife or pizza cutter on the black or green dough to cut long, thin strips for the cord, reserving some of the dough to help "attach" the lights to the cord later.

For the simple geometric design: Pick your shapes — you can use the same cutter for multiple colors or mix and match different shapes or sizes among the colors. Go for a polka dot design with circles of different sizes, pulled from a biscuit cutter set or other kitchen gadgets (the wide end of a pastry tip is perfect for small circles). Star cutters or snowflakes of multiple sizes work well.

As you work, transfer the shaped dough to a plate or piece of parchment paper to see what you have to work with.

Assemble the canvas: When all your shapes are ready, start building your masterpiece. Uncover the plain dough rectangle (your "canvas" from above) but leave it on the bottom parchment paper.

Move the cutout shapes around until you are satisfied with the design. Remember that both the shapes and gaps between them will spread as you roll, so don't be afraid to pack them close together. An offset spatula is great for placing and moving them.

For the holiday lights design: Lay the long strips of black or green dough on the canvas so they mimic strings of lights. Spread them evenly over the whole rectangle and add some loops for fun and whimsy, if desired. If they break, don't sweat it. Just piece them together to create continuous lines, as they will be smoothed over in rolling.

Transfer the light shapes onto the dough, placing the oval/petal shapes along the dark strands. You can do one color at a time or alternate between colors. Take very small pieces of black or green dough and set them on the ends of the lights adjacent to the cord to mimic the socket that connects the bulbs to the strand.

For the simple geometric design: Transfer the shapes to the blank canvas, spreading them evenly over the rectangle. You can do all the same color at once or alternate.

Roll, cut and bake the cookies: Cover your finished design with another clean piece of parchment. Using a rolling pin, roll the dough evenly in all directions until it is $\frac{1}{4}$ - to $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch thick and just about reaches the edges of the parchment. Slide the slab, still on the parchment, onto a large sheet pan and refrigerate for 5 minutes.

Line two large sheet pans with parchment paper. Transfer the sheet of dough on the parchment to the counter, trimming the edges as needed to form a neat rectangle (the scraps can be rerolled for multicolor bonus cookies). Use a 2- to 4-inch cookie cutter (any shape of your choice) to cut your cookies, placing them about 1 inch apart on the prepared sheet pans. Or simply use a sharp knife and cut into squares. Transfer the pans to the refrigerator for at least 5 minutes; this will help the cookies hold their shape while baking.

Remove from the refrigerator and bake one sheet at a time, 8 to 12 minutes, or until the cookies puff up, then start to deflate and their bottoms begin to turn golden brown. Let cool on the pan for 5 minutes before transferring to a wire rack to cool completely.

Take the leftover dough scraps and roll them together, cut them and bake. They make a fun, multicolor cookie, and nothing goes to waste.



PHOTOS BY TOM MCCORKLE/For The Washington Post

Dyeing the dough and folding the dye into the dough.



Rolling out different colors for the decorative shapes.



Cookie cutters or different kitchen implements can be used to make the shapes.



Place the decorative shapes on the plain dough.



Roll out the decorated cookies between parchment paper to integrate the base and design.



Refrigerate the cookies on the sheet pan before baking.

WEEKEND: MUSIC

'It's music, it's real, it's honest'

The War and Treaty set to perform at four bases this month

BY COLIN MCGUIRE
Stars and Stripes

Before the conversation starts, Michael Trotter Jr., one half of the Grammy Award-nominated country/Americana duo The War and Treaty, insists on offering a disclaimer: "From being in the military and the Army, Stars and Stripes has been one of my dreams to talk to," he says. "This is the first time we have talked to anyone from there, so thank you."

He comes by his appreciation for the armed services honestly. Not only did Trotter serve in Iraq as part of the U.S. Army, but he, along with the other half of The War and Treaty, his wife Tanya, is set to perform for the troops four times this month. Beginning Dec. 14 at Camp Casey in South Korea, their short slate of shows will take them to Camp Humphreys, South Korea, on Dec. 15, Kunsan Air Base, South Korea, on Dec. 16 and Naval Station Guam on Dec. 18.

We recently caught up with husband and wife to talk about how they inspire each other, their writing process, being excited to return to base, the importance of music in the military and, of course, how Michael might just be dreaming of one day being the next Bob Hope.

**SEE TREATY
ON PAGE 29**

Tanya and Michael Trotter, the married couple who perform as The War and Treaty, will play for service members in Korea and on Guam from Dec. 14-18. Michael Trotter is an Army veteran who served in the Iraq War.

Austin Hargrave



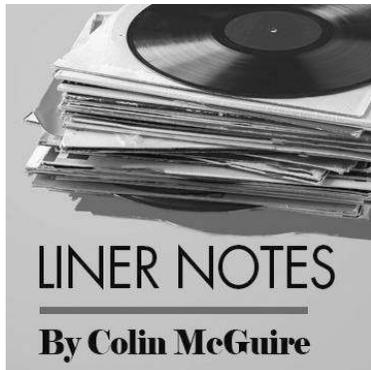
WEEKEND: MUSIC

Tour voting ends; Phish, Ringo add '24 dates

As the final touring update for 2023 commences, it feels like a good idea to remind everyone that Pollstar, the leading media outlet that covers this stuff and also provides a chart we outline each month here, has voting open for what they call the Major Tour of the Year. To vote, head to www.pollstar.com, and yes, the deadline is 8 p.m. EST today (Dec. 8). Among the finalists are, you guessed it, Taylor Swift's Eras Tour, Beyoncé's Renaissance World Tour and Morgan Wallen's One Night At A Time Tour. In a year where live music seemed more prominent than it has been in a long time, the way this shakes out could be a lot of fun to watch.

Or, well, who am I kidding? Taylor Swift is going to win this thing. But it's fun to dream!

Anyway, speaking of dreaming



and Pollstar, the most recent Live 75 chart, which the website curates, has a new addition this time around: RBD. The Latin pop group called it quits back in 2006, but with the news of their recent dreamy reunion, they top the list, which compiles worldwide active tours by average tickets sold for shows performed over the past 30 days.

In this case, RBD managed to move an average of about 17,000 tickets. Latin flavor dominated the top three spots on the chart as Peso Pluma (16,500) came in second while Enrique Iglesias/Pitbull/Ricky Martin finished third (about 14,000).

Ms. Lauryn Hill and The Fugees slipped in at No. 10 with a little more than an average of 12,000 tickets sold over the past 30 days — and that doesn't even come with a promise that any of their shows will actually happen. Hey-yo!

When it comes to newly announced tours, jam band stalwarts Phish announced last week that they will be the latest act to take residency at Las Vegas' infamous Sphere. The tour (or, well, mini-tour-ish-thing) will only last from April 18-21, but imagine the special effects that

will be in play for that one.

Keeping with the aforementioned Latin theme, hitmaker J Balvin announced last week that he will be hitting the road next year for the Good To See You Again Tour. Kicking off in April in Frankfurt, Germany, the European run will hit Switzerland, Italy, France and Lithuania before wrapping on June 5 in London.

Elsewhere, hard-rockers Avenged Sevenfold noted recently that they will continue their Life Is But A Dream Tour with Poppy and Sullivan King next year. That outing begins March 6 in Buffalo, N.Y., and concludes in New Jersey on March 31. In a neat wrinkle, the group will continue to use TicketPass, an event entry system that they created and is designed to airdrop a token to concert-goers in what they

said is “an environmentally-friendly blockchain.”

And then there's Ringo. The Beatles drummer announced last week that he will take his All Starr band back on the road in the spring. This time around, the cast will include Edgar Winter, Colin Hay and Gregg Bissonette, among others. The trek will kick off at The Venetian in Las Vegas on May 22 and it will stay there for six days before heading to Mexico City in June, where the short run will wrap on the sixth of the month. No word on how many dates Paul McCartney plans to join Starr for what would surely be a memorable (perhaps for all the wrong reasons) take on the Fab Four's latest single, “Now & Then.”

Hey. What's up with that music video?

Anyway, happy concert-ing!

Treaty: Singer looking forward to being back on base for 1st time

FROM PAGE 28

The following is edited for clarity and space.

I want to start with this upcoming string of performances. Will this be the first time you've been back on base, Michael?

Michael: Yes, it is. It's my first time.

Are you excited?

Michael: I'm feeling a lot of emotions. Excitement is one. Anxiety is another. I feel reverent because I know we're going at a time when troops really need to feel some love and some home — some kind of normalcy. So, to be able to go back and offer what I've learned and what I've done to the nation's greatest is a dream come true. It's emotional, too, because the holiday season isn't always a happy time for troops. For me, I remember the first Christmas I had after losing two battle buddies, I was at war and I thought about what their families were doing that year. They didn't have them to hold and they didn't have them to send gifts to. The ultimate sacrifice was paid, so there's a lot of reflection taking place. The one thing I feel more than anything is grateful.

This being your first time back on base, going back to entertain, can you talk about how it feels to go back to give something back?

Michael: It feels so surreal because I dreamed about this. I acted it out when I was sweeping the helipads in Iraq. The lights on the helipads remind me of the flood lights on the Ryman (Auditorium) stage (in Nashville). For me to return and share with the troops a dream come true feels really good. But also to come and share with troops that I was hav-

ing a hard time and I found the love of my life and she helped heal me and she became my caretaker — that's something I look forward to. We have a love story to share and it's in our music.

How important was music to you while you served? How important do you think these performances will be for the troops? Can you speak to the role music plays while serving?

Michael: My story is very unique. It's like God himself catered it for moments of despair, moments of disbelief, moments of shock, moments of feeling very depressed or forlorn. God gave me the gift of music to deliver to troops who feel like that, too. My first song after two individuals were killed in my unit in Iraq — Capt. Robert Scheetz and Sgt. Aaron Elandt — I was allowed to present my song during the memorial that we had out there.

My song brought a lot of healing for the troops. ... Music was providing a way to escape. It also provided peace and tranquility. Music saved my life and the war brought me music. It's the same music and the same songs that led me straight to my wife, so music has delivered everything good to me in my life. I'm a servant to music.

Was a career in music always something you wanted? Did you grow up singing?

Michael: Yes, it was something I always wanted. I did grow up singing. I come from a musical family. My grandmother played piano. My uncle was a great pianist and my mom and all her sisters sing, so once I learned I

could carry a tune, I definitely wanted to be a singer. Somewhere in the '90s, I actually wanted to be a rapper. I got influenced by Notorious B.I.G. and 2Pac, Busta Rhymes. I just wanted to be a rapper. Thank God I got some sense because I can't rap a lick. But the only thing greater than music to me is Tanya and our children.

I'm glad you brought that up. I've interviewed a lot of couples who have done music together in the past, but watching you guys perform, you look so in love. For you, what's it like to be able to share the music and the group with your wife? How important is the music to your relationship, love and family?

Tanya: I think the relationship is what makes the music the important part. The music is kind of the cherry on top to what we do every day in our home, with our family and our friends. It's an extension of who we are and what we do together. The people who listen to our music have a peek into the window of our lives. It's honest and what we do anyway. It just so happens we're on stage for 90 minutes sometimes and everybody gets to experience it. It comes from a very honest and vulnerable place.

You guys are associated most with country music, but there's so much soul in it, too. Would you categorize your music in any one form? Is it country? Soul? I even hear a little R&B in there.

Michael: Before we met, I used to be influenced by gospel. I used to be influenced by jazz, rock and roll, R&B, soul. You're probably tired of hearing me say this, but I'm influenced by the way I'm

loved. I'm loved by this woman and our love sometimes sounds like the sacredness of gospel, or the spirituality of the spirituals. Sometimes, our love has the storytelling of country music, sometimes, it has the heartbreak of blues. Sometimes, it has the sexuality of R&B or the guts of soul. Whatever it is, it's music and it's real and it's honest.

If you don't like to be boxed in, would you say the inspiration when you write is really just looking at each other? It feels like you're in such a zone when you perform together. It feels like there's nobody out there watching you and the rest of the world stops. Do you feel that yourself when you perform together?

Tanya: Yeah. I actually do (laughs). There are moments where we just get lost and we realize, “Oh, there's a crowd and they're watching us perform.” I think that's part of the relationship we have with our audience. They want to see that and we want to give that. It's honest and it comes from a pure place. We take those moments on stage. If we want to cry or reminisce on our journey and what we've come through, we do that. We take that breath and live in that moment. Sometimes, it feels like an out-of-body experience, but at the same time, we realize this is really our dream and we're living it. I think it's a good thing to be able to pause on stage and let people see and feel that moment with us.

How long ago did you decide you wanted to go over and play these shows and do this for the service members? I'm assuming

this is something you've wanted to do for a while now, right?

Michael: I have a name and that should give you a general idea for how long I've wanted to do this: Bob Hope. I'm just one of those kids who watched every year. The class, dignity, joy and moment he would bring to the troops. Robin Williams, Billy Crystal, Whoopi Goldberg, and there's so many others who do it now on a much lower scale, but to be bold, my intention is to one day pick up one of those mantles. And to be bold, be courageous and be loud about my love for the USO and our soldiers, our troops, our Marines, Navy members, Air Force and even Space Force. Whatever we got. This is truly the best of the best for us and our country — men and women who sacrificed for this country. Tanya and I are really truly honored to go on this journey and do this for the USO.

What is the thing about serving the country you can most apply to the music world?

Michael: My wife said something to me the other day, and since I met her in August 2010, she's been saying the same thing over and over again. She says I'm a servant. She said the greatest thing that anyone could ever do is be a servant, and that is something I actually learned in the military.

It's part of the Army core values. One of them is selfless service. It has impacted the way I write music. Whatever message you want to get out, we do it with our music.

That's the correlation I make between my military service and my civil service to our country.

WEEKEND: LIFESTYLE



iStock photos

Lake Xochimilco in Mexico City is the only remaining place where axolotls can be found in the wild.

Mexico invites you to adopt an axolotl

Public offered chance to virtually claim the salamanders as part of campaign to preserve species, restore its habitat

BY MARÍA LUISA PAÚL
The Washington Post

Hundreds of years ago, when the Mexicans established themselves in what would become the capital of the Aztec Empire, they encountered an alien-looking creature with a permanent grin and a crown of feathery gills. Fascinated, they named it axolotl — water monster — and revered it as a mischievous god who shape-shifted into an amphibian to elude sacrifice.

Since then, the salamander with a Mona Lisa smile has become an icon of Mexican culture and inspired countless researchers because of its capabilities to regenerate bits of its body. Though approximately 1 million of them can be found in labs and pet stores across the world, the axolotl (pronounced ack-suh-lah-tuhl) is on the brink of extinction in the canals of Lake Xochimilco in southern Mexico City, its only natural habitat.

In hopes of preventing the annihilation of a species with mystifying traits, ecologists at Mexico's National Autonomous University are giving the public the chance to virtually adopt an axolotl. For \$30, \$180 or \$360, donors can choose the sex, age and name of the little buddy they get to call theirs for a month, six months or a year, respectively. The axolotls stay in Mexico, but donors receive an adoption kit with an infographic, the axolotl's identification card, a certificate of adoption and a personalized thank-you letter.

The campaign also includes options to buy an axolotl a meal for \$10 or to fix up one of their homes for \$50. And for those wanting to splurge a bit more, participants can adopt the axolotl's refuge of chinampas — the artificial islands that dot Lake Xochimilco — for one, six or 12 months starting at \$450.

The funds will go toward building refuges for the axolotl and restoring its habitat, which has been devastated by the effects of Mexico City's urbanization over the last decades, said Luis Zambrano, an ecologist at Mexico's National Autonomous University.

"A species can't be a species without its habitat," Zambrano said.

Present-day Mexico City bears little resemblance to the ancient water world of Tenochtitlán. The Aztecs built their capital of palaces and pyramids atop an island in a giant lake, using a complex system of canals and dikes to



Axolotls are popular pets but almost extinct in the wild. The salamanders are both cultural icons and scientific wonders due to their ability to regenerate body parts.

prevent it from flooding. Farming was done in chinampas, rectangular plots of lands in the shallow lakes surrounding Tenochtitlán that were separated by canals, which helped filter the water. The axolotl, Zambrano said, thrived in this environment, and it quickly became a staple of the Aztec diet.

But then the Spaniards arrived and, in the 1600s, decided to drain the lake, leaving Mexico City resting atop its basin. Lake Xochimilco is the last remnant of the city's watery past — and the only remaining place where axolotls can be found in the wild.

Over the next several centuries, the city's expansion and growing population turned Lake Xochimilco into a shrinking, polluted matrix of canals throttled with hungry fish imported from other continents — both of which depleted axolotl populations. In the 1970s, Zambrano said, the Mexican government introduced African tilapia and Asian carp into the lake in an effort to create fisheries, but the fish began eating the axolotl eggs and young. And the water's diminishing quality has sickened the axolotls, which breathe through their skin.

When scientists in 1998 conducted their first census of the axolotl population, there were about 6,000 for every square kilometer in Lake Xochimilco. The last count, in 2014, showed there were only about 36 axolotls per square kilometer, Zambrano said.

"We went from 6,000 to 36 in less than 20 years," he said. "We need funds to conduct another census, but the outlook is grim. It's more than likely that they're nearly extinct."

Losing the axolotl in the wild "would be incredibly bad for both Mexican culture and the science world," Zambrano said.

In Mexico, images of the axolotl are ubiquitous. They grace murals and were chosen as Mexico City's official

emoji. They have figured in works by artist Diego Rivera and texts from poets and authors such as Julio Cortázar, Aldous Huxley, Primo Levi and Octavio Paz. Their likeness is even splashed across Mexico's 50-peso bill.

Apart from that, axolotls are a scientific wonder. For starters, the axolotl is the Peter Pan of the animal world. Even though amphibians typically go from egg to tadpole to land-roaming adult, the axolotl simply refuses to grow up, sticking to a life in the water, like a pseudo-tadpole.

"In biological terms, it's a really interesting creature because it rebuffs metamorphosis, and that's very attention-grabbing when it comes to understanding evolution," Zambrano said.

Axolotls have the remarkable capability of restoring lost body parts, from limbs to eyes to brains. That's made them a prime research subject in the areas of regeneration, aging and cancer. Axolotls have also helped scientists understand how organs develop in vertebrates, uncover the causes of the birth defect spina bifida and discover thyroid hormones.

"That's why there are so many of them in labs all over the world," Zambrano said.

The salamanders have also become beloved exotic pets — to the point that "there's claw machines in Japan that let you pick up an axolotl to take home," he added.

But even as the species is racing toward extinction in its own home, Zambrano, who has led the efforts to conserve Lake Xochimilco's axolotls for more than two decades, has not lost hope. He and his team are betting that the Pokémon-looking creatures could be saved by creating refuges for them in their native habitat. The plan involves chinampas.

The chinampas, he said, "are essential" to the efforts since they naturally help clean the lake's polluted water — not unlike, say, a Brita filter — and improve its quality. These plots of land are also a source of food and shelter, and can help the axolotls hide from the pesky herons that want to eat them.

Last year, when the adoption campaign first launched, it raised almost \$30,000, covering about 40 refuges. But to expand and continue to maintain them, the ecologists need about 10 times more funding, Zambrano said. So far, they've more than doubled the amount of donors compared to those of last year.

"We're in a very critical moment where we've been saying for the last decades that time is running out for the axolotl," Zambrano said. "But we can't just sit down and wait for the government to act."

"Like we say here in Mexico," he added, "todos tenemos que sacar al buey de la barranca" — we need to take the bull by the horns.

WEEKEND: TELEVISION

APPRECIATION

Norman Lear changed TV, American life

By DAVID BAUDER
Associated Press

In many American living rooms, the 1960s didn't really begin until Jan. 12, 1971.

That was the night the comedy "All in the Family" debuted, almost instantly changing television and American society with it. Creator Norman Lear, who died at 101 on Tuesday, was the man behind that transformation.

The series introduced the brash bigot Archie Bunker, his "dingbat" wife Edith, his feminist daughter Gloria and his liberal son-in-law Mike Stivic. From their house in the New York City borough of Queens, they co-existed loudly and watched the world spin uncontrollably.

Archie Bunker, portrayed by Carroll O'Connor, embodied the "American Way" — as most middle-aged white Americans understood it at the time — and watched in confused exasperation as "others" redefined it.

Coming out of a tumultuous decade of fundamental change, and smack in the middle of a contentious war overseas, these realities were hardly foreign to most Americans. They just rarely saw them reflected on television after dinnertime, after the nightly news was over.

He helped television come of age in the '70s

If not in its infancy, television was barely out of its adolescence at the time. Most people had only one set in their homes — my family had upgraded from black-and-white to color less than two years earlier — and viewers watched the same handful of over-the-airwaves channels. Television programmers — watched closely by network censors and the Federal Communications Commission — rarely tread on topics that risked upsetting anyone.

"Before 'All in the Family,' television comedy was a vast playground for witches, Martians and crazy ladies who constantly dressed in disguises or mistook their husband's boss for the milkman," Aljean Hermetz wrote in *The New York Times* in 1972.

"Relationships were relentlessly stapled out of cardboard and then wrapped in cellophane with professional-looking bows," he wrote. "The few non-plastic situation comedies were gentle and relatively melodramatic and contained no meanness."

Bunker was incredulous at a Black neighbor portraying Santa Claus — after all, he reasoned, everyone knew Santa was white,



CHRIS PIZZELLO, INVISION/AP

Writer, director and producer Norman Lear, pictured in 2020, who revolutionized prime time television in the 1970s with such topical hits as "All in the Family" and "Maude," died Tuesday at 101.



AP

"All in the Family" cast members, from left, Carroll O'Connor, Jean Stapleton and Sally Struthers pose with their Emmys on May 14, 1972. The hit show taught viewers to confront reality, and their differences, and find things to laugh about.

right? He reacted in shock when Sammy Davis Jr. kissed him on the cheek. England, he said, was a "fag" country — a word you wouldn't hear on network TV today. Even the sound of a flushing toilet was novel for TV then.

Menopause, miscarriage, marital spats — it was all fair game. Viewers learned to confront reality, and their differences, and find things to laugh about.

"I never thought of the shows as groundbreaking," Lear told the *Harvard Business Review* in 2014, "because every American understood so easily what they were all about. The issues were around their dinner tables. The language was in their schoolyards. It was nothing new."

The show was such a success, and so quickly, that in 1972 the liberal lead character in Lear's sitcom "Maude" was deciding to undergo an abortion — the year before the Supreme Court legalized abortion with the *Roe v. Wade* decision.

It wasn't without controversy. Lear asked *TV Guide* and other publications not to include "abortion" in their pre-show synopses. Two CBS stations in Illinois didn't air it. The network didn't want to air it, either, until Lear told them they'd have to find another show for their Tuesday night schedule.

He broadened the voices that were heard on TV

That was the power that Lear had at the time. By the 1974-75 season, he was behind five of the 10 most-watched programs. And across the 1970s, whether it was race or gender or single parenthood, Lear used that power to create other sitcoms that reflected worlds that had rarely, if ever, been seen on television before.

There was the junkyard owner memorably portrayed by comic Redd Foxx in "Sanford and Son" ("This is the big one, Elizabeth," he'd say, clutching his chest and pretending to have a heart attack). There was the struggling Black family in the Chicago projects in "Good Times" (with the "dy-no-mite" son portrayed by Jimmie Walker).

Most memorable of all was the striving Black family acclimating into a Manhattan "deluxe apartment in the sky" in "The Jeffersons," a series introduced each week by the unforgettable theme song "Movin' on Up."

Actress Bonnie Franklin showed viewers the struggles and triumphs of a single mom raising two daughters in "One Day at a Time," a series that made Valerie Bertinelli America's sweetheart. It was a run of creative and commercial success never truly duplicated — certainly not by Lear, who had his share of later strikeouts and, for a younger generation, became better known as a liberal activist.

The candor and comedy he brought to the airwaves in the 1970s sealed his status, however, and any television show with realism at its core owes Norman Lear a debt.

Lear lived long enough to see his work appreciated by those who didn't live through it the first time. "One Day at a Time" was remade from 2017 to 2020 with a Cuban family at its center. And Jimmy Kimmel lovingly helped produce televised run-throughs of some of Lear's classic scripts acted by current stars.

Somehow, it worked. The exercise proved the durability of his scripts — instead of sounding dated, how so much of what they discussed is still relevant today.

7 essential shows

'All in the Family' (CBS, 1971-79)
Prime-time TV was revolutionized by "All in the Family." The half-hour show dared to tackle politics and social ills in a comedy set in the cramped Bunker household, where bigoted, grousing patriarch Archie (Carroll O'Connor) laid bare America's changing values in the midst of the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War and women's liberation. (Watch on Freevee)

'Sanford and Son' (NBC, 1972-77)
Adapted from the British comedy "Steptoe and Son" in 1972, the U.S. version follows the scheming king of insults/catchphrases Fred Sanford (Redd Foxx) and his gentler, more conscientious son Lamont (Demond Wilson) as they attempt to run a junk business together in Watts. Fred's habit of feigning a heart attack — "I'm comin', Elizabeth" whenever things got tense — launched a thousand T-shirts. (Peacock)

'Maude' (CBS, 1972-78)
Spun off of "All in the Family," "Maude," starring the gravelly-voiced Bea Arthur, was the first sitcom that dared to set its story around a middle-aged, four-times-married feminist whose outspoken demeanor challenged sexist tropes of the day. The comedy also tackled such taboo subjects as abortion and sexual assault, changing the way women were represented on network TV. (Pluto TV)

'Good Times' (CBS, 1974-79)
"Good Times," a spinoff of "Maude," follows the family of Maude's housekeeper Florida Evans (Esther Rolle), her husband Henry (John Amos) and their three children, the most culturally resonant of which was J.J. (Jimmie Walker), a gawky artist who fancies himself a ladies' man. It is impossible to overstate the impact that J.J.'s catch phrase — "Dyn-o-mite" — had on the culture of the time. (Peacock)

'The Jeffersons' (CBS, 1975-85)
Long before "The Cosby Show" represented one of the few prosperous Black families on network television, there was "The Jeffersons," an upwardly mobile Black family that made their way from working-class Queens (where they were neighbors of the Bunkers) to the tony Upper East Side of Manhattan. Successful businessman George Jefferson (Sherman Hemsley) was often as intolerant as Archie Bunker, often referring to white folks in epithets, but his tirades were based on his own painful experiences of discrimination. (Pluto TV)

'One Day at a Time' (CBS, 1975-84)
Debuting when divorce was still a taboo subject, "One Day at a Time" centers around divorced mother Ann Romano, played by Bonnie Franklin, as she struggles to raise her teen daughters — fractious rebel Julie (Mackenzie Phillips) and smart-mouth jock Julie (Valerie Bertinelli). It was brilliantly rebooted in 2017 with a Cuban American family. (Original: Tubi, Pluto TV; reboot: Netflix)

'Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman' (syndicated, 1976-77)
Lear's ironic contribution to the Bicentennial Year was a syndicated, satirical nightly soap opera about an Ohio housewife, played with narcotized brilliance by Louise Lasser, whose life is mired in apathy, indecision and waxy yellow buildup. As underground as over-the-air TV ever got.

WEEKEND: HEALTH & FITNESS

The pain of waiting for physical therapy

Economic issues among the many reasons why there is a shortage of movement experts nationwide

By MARK KREIDLER
KFF Health News

At no point along his three-year path to earning a degree in physical therapy has Matthew Lee worried about getting a job.

Being able to make a living off that degree? That's a different question — and the answer is affecting the supply of physical therapists across the nation: The cost of getting trained is out of proportion to the pay.

"There's definitely a shortage of PTs. The jobs are there," said Lee, a student at California State University, Sacramento, who is on track to receive his degree in May. "But you may be starting out at \$80,000 while carrying up to \$200,000 in student debt. It's a lot to consider."

As many patients seeking an appointment can attest, the nationwide shortage of PTs is real. According to survey data collected by the American Physical Therapy Association, the job vacancy rate for therapists in outpatient settings last year was 17%.

Wait times are generally long across the nation, as patients tell of waiting weeks or even months for appointments while dealing with ongoing pain or post-surgical rehab. But the crunch is particularly acute in rural areas and places with a high cost of living, like California, which has a lower ratio of therapists to residents — just 57 per 100,000, compared with the national ratio of 72 per 100,000, according to the association.

The reasons are multifold. The industry hasn't recovered from the mass defection of physical therapists who fled as practices closed during the pandemic. In 2021 alone, more than 22,000 PTs — almost a tenth of the workforce — left their jobs, according to a report by the health data analytics firm Definitive Healthcare.

And just as baby boomers age into a period of heavy use of physical therapy, and COVID-delayed procedures like knee and hip replacements are finally scheduled, the economics of physical therapy are shifting. Medicare, whose members make up a significant percentage of many PT practices' clients, has cut reimbursement rates for four years straight, and the encroachment of private equity firms — with their bottom-line orientation — means many practices aren't staffing adequately.

According to APTA, 10 companies, including publicly held and private equity-backed firms, now control 20% of the physical therapy market.

"What used to be small practices are often being bought up by larger corporate entities, and those corporate entities push productivity and become less satisfying places to work," said James Gordon, chair of the Division of Biokinesiology and Physical Therapy at the University of Southern California.

There's a shortage of physical therapists in all settings, including hospitals, clinics and nursing homes, and it's likely to continue for the foreseeable future, said Justin Moore, chief executive of the physical therapy association.

"Not only do we have to catch up on those shortages, but there are great indicators of increasing demand for physical therapy," he said.

The association is trying to reduce turnover among therapists, and is lobbying Congress to stop cutting Medicare reimbursement rates. The

Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services plans a 3.4% reduction for 2024 to a key metric that governs pay for physical therapy and other health care services. According to the association, that would bring the cuts to a total of 9% over four years.

Several universities, meanwhile, have ramped up their programs — some by offering virtual classes, a new approach for such a hands-on field — to boost the number of graduates in the coming years.

"But programs can't just grow overnight," said Sharon Gorman, interim chair of the physical therapy program at Oakland, Calif.-based Samuel Merritt University, which focuses on training health care professionals. "Our doctoral accreditation process is very thorough. I have to prove I have the space, the equipment, the clinical sites, the faculty to show that I'm not just trying to take in more tuition dollars."

All of this also comes at a time when the cost of obtaining a physical therapy doctorate, which typically takes three years of graduate work and is required to practice, is skyrocketing. Student debt has become a major issue, and salaries often aren't enough to keep therapists in the field.

According to the APTA's most recent published data, median annual wages range from \$88,000 to \$101,500. The association said wages either met or fell behind the rate of inflation between 2016 and 2021 in most regions.

A project underway at the University of Iowa

aims to give PT students more transparency about tuition and other costs across programs. According to an association report from 2020, at least 80% of recent physical therapy graduates carried educational debt averaging roughly \$142,000.

Gordon said USC, in Los Angeles' urban core, has three PT clinics and 66 therapists on campus, several of whom graduated from the school's program.

"But even with that, it's a challenge," he said. "It's not just hard to find people, but people don't stay, and the most obvious reason is that they don't get paid enough relative to the cost of living in this area."

Fewer therapists plus growing demand equals long waits. When Susan Jones, a Davis, Calif., resident, experienced pain in her back and neck after slipping on a wet floor in early 2020, she went to her doctor and was referred for physical therapy. Two months later, she said, she finally got an appointment at an outpatient clinic.

"It was almost like the referral got lost. I was going back and forth, asking, 'What's going on?'" said Jones, 57. Once scheduled, her first appointment felt rushed, she said, with the therapist saying he could not identify an issue despite her ongoing pain. After one more session, Jones paid out of pocket to see a chiropractor. She said she'd be hesitant to try for a physical therapy referral in the future, in part because of the wait.

Universities and PT programs graduate about 12,000 therapists a year, Moore said, and representatives of several schools told KFF Health News they're studying whether and how to expand. In 2018, USC added a hybrid model in which students learn mostly online, then travel to campus twice a semester for about a week

at a time for hands-on instruction and practice.

That bumped USC's capacity from 100 students a year to 150, and Gordon said many of the hybrid students' professional skills are indistinguishable from those of students on campus full time.

Natalia Barajas received her PT doctorate from USC last year and was recently hired at a clinic in nearby Norwalk, with a salary of \$95,000, a signing bonus and the opportunity to earn more in incentives.

She's also managing a lot of debt. Three years of tuition for the USC physical therapy program comes to more than \$211,000, and Barajas said she owes \$170,000 in student loans.

"If it were about money alone, I probably would have shifted to something else a while ago,"

Barajas said. "I'm OK with my salary. I chose to do this. But it might not be the perfect situation for everybody."



WEEKEND: FAMILY



iStock

It is increasingly common to include dogs in human-centered activities like going out to eat.

A place for doggy and me

Consider your pup's comfort zone before going somewhere canine-friendly

By KELLY CONABOY
The Washington Post

In the months before our wedding, my husband and I were asked one question repeatedly. It wasn't about dress code, or food; it wasn't from a long-lost love about whether we wanted to reconsider our decision. It was: Will the dogs be there?

If there are some people in life who seem to have a singular personality trait, ours is that we love our dogs. So it came as a shock to all that no, they would not be attending the wedding.

It was hard to convince our friends and family that we left our shy dogs out of the day not because we'd hardened our hearts to them, but in fact because we love them. This is in part because it is increasingly common to include dogs in human-centered activities. Weddings, yes, but also daily pursuits like shopping or getting a coffee. A chain of movie theaters made headlines recently for offering dog-friendly screenings; there are restaurants with dog-specific menus and breweries that will bring a bowl of water and dog treats to your table.

While these little bits of canine inclusiveness tend to anger anti-dog curmudgeons, they make sense to me. Companion animals are rightfully considered part of the family to many. It's understandable that a person might want to spend time with his or her dog doing the activities that person enjoys. But dogs are individuals, and each has his or her own set of needs and boundaries. It is worth considering, before you take off for a pint at the dog-friendly bar, whether that activity will also be enjoyable for your particular sweet pup.

One reason a guardian might decide to bring a dog along is because they feel uneasy about leaving him or her home alone. Alexandra Horowitz, director of the Dog Cognition Lab at Barnard College in New York City, told me over email that this concern is valid.

"Most dogs are distressed at some level by being left at home," she says, for the reasons you might suspect — they're alone, they don't have anything to do, and they don't know when the situation will change.

"Dogs are captive to us, in a very real way," Horowitz says. "The world opens up for them when we're around — and can take them out, play with them, feed them, take them to socialize or run — and it closes for them when we're not." (This is especially true if they're crated when alone.) Because of this, it's helpful to consider their point of view, and adjust your actions accordingly; maybe working in small increments to get them used to your absence, and limiting your time away from them.

That doesn't necessarily mean bringing them along with you is the better option, though — at least not with

every dog, or in every circumstance. Horowitz says when considering whether to bring your dog with you to a space made for humans, you should think more about the dog than the space.

"I cannot ask my squirrel-obsessed puppy to sit still in Central Park," she says, "and neither would I expect her to be able to sit still for long periods at an outdoor cafe."

Similarly, a dog who is sensitive to noise would likely have trouble in a loud environment, and a shy dog would not be comfortable in a place where strangers may approach him or her.

But how can you tell what your dog is and isn't OK with? Jenny Efimova, dog trainer and founder of Dog-minded, says it's helpful to first observe your dog in a setting where you know he or she is comfortable — you'll likely see relaxed muscles, a relaxed face, a softly wagging tail. Pay attention to the situations that cause that body language to change. You might notice pinned-back ears, tense muscles, panting for seemingly no reason, barking or growling and pulling on the leash.

"Dogs are really good at letting us know how they're feeling," Efimova says. "But we tend to view behavior through a lens of convenience for us." It's important not to misinterpret signs of distress as "bad" behavior, or set your dog up to fail. If he or she is whining and pulling on his or her leash while you're trying to have a leisurely brunch, it's not likely that he or she is trying to ruin your outing; he is or she is attempting to communicate his or her needs.

It's important, too, not to rely on aversive tools, like shock collars, to attempt to control your dog's behavior in these situations.

"I know some people feel like these methods help open the dog's world," Efimova says, "but if the dog doesn't like something, it's not actually to their benefit to be in that environment." I know it sounds obvious, but it doesn't add anything to your dog's life to force him or her to endure a situation that causes him or her stress — even if it's a very cool bar, and all your friends' dogs are there, too.

In some situations, it might just be better for your particular dog to rest at home rather than join you in an activity. But even better than that is to find something you both enjoy. This might mean taking a leisurely, sniff-filled walk, going to the beach, taking a hike or scheduling a play date with a doggy friend he or she is comfortable with.

"Life is too short, and our dogs' lives are way too short," Efimova said. "So the more things we can do together that make our dogs happy, and make us happy, the better."

THE MEAT AND POTATOES OF LIFE

Lisa Smith Molinari



Abominable season for shopping returns

Like most military families struggling to climb the never-ending series of financial peaks along life's path, we've always been uneasy about money. Mortgages, car loans, school tuition, music lessons, credit card payments, repair bills, sports fees, application fees, grocery bills, insurance bills and all the other costs that encumber the typical military family, pile up into a seemingly overwhelming mountain of expenses to climb.

We trudge up each treacherous peak, wondering if we'll ever get out of debt, save enough for college and make it to retirement. We keep at it, believing that one day, we'll finally reach the summit and plant a flag signaling that our personal financial goals have been achieved.

After more than 30 years of marriage, we still haven't planted that flag. Every pay raise my husband received seemed accompanied by more expenses, so that our uncomfortable debt-income ratio never seemed to improve. As our household income increased, our lifestyle absorbed it without much notice, and we trudged on, never really finding that windfall of profit we'd been looking for all our lives.

We keep climbing from one crumbling financial ledge to the next, in an unending quest for the pinnacle of financial stability and freedom. Sometimes we think we've found a foothold, but something always seems to come along and knock us into another crevasse of debt. Our saboteurs aren't polar bears, mountain goats or the Abominable Snowman. The monetary enemies we've faced were roof leaks, transmission failures, tax assessments and college tuition bills.

And now, in December, we must take on the monster that wreaks its fiscal devastation upon us annually — the holiday shopping season.

"Now, kids, your father and I are NOT going to buy a lot of Christmas presents this year," I've told our three children every December since they were in middle school. Despite their "we've heard this before" eye-rolling, I've sincerely meant it every time. The problem: Once I get out into the frenzy of holiday shoppers, I lose my way. Despite careful budgeting and planning, I am bombarded by a blizzard of twinkle lights, eye-catching displays, irresistible sales, fuzzy slippers, cheese log samples, ingenious gadgets, two-for-one deals and unsolicited perfume spritzes.

I've never been a savvy customer — but rather, a "misfit shopper" — so, like the preacher's daughter at the frat party, I sometimes don't know when to stop and find myself easily manipulated into doing very bad things.

I show up at the mall armed with good intentions, a budgeted list of specific items and a plan to go home and cook an economical dinner. The next thing I know, I've overdosed on samples of all kinds. My husband and kids have called numerous times, wondering why I haven't come home yet. My automobile is stuffed to the moon roof with shopping bags, half of which contain items I bought for myself.

Woozy and confused, I chew the remnants of peppermint bark I vaguely recall buying, run through a drive-thru to pick up a bucket of chicken for the family and wonder when the avalanche of credit card bills will roll in.

What happened? Will I ever learn financial self-control and stay on course? Why am I always blinded by the blizzard of holiday shopping temptations?

With predicted increasing inflation, a mountainous mortgage and three demanding 20-somethings coming home for the holidays, I will, once again, try to resist the holiday shopping season's temptations. I must stick to my list, pay in cash and save some singles for the Salvation Army bucket.

I may not have Rudolph to guide me, but there's no need to cancel Christmas. This misfit shopper is determined to make it through the holiday spending blizzard of 2023 and keep on climbing. Onward and upward.

Read more at themeatandpotatoesoflife.com and in Lisa's book, "The Meat and Potatoes of Life: My True Lit Com." Email: meatandpotatoesoflife@gmail.com

WEEKEND: CROSSWORD AND COMICS

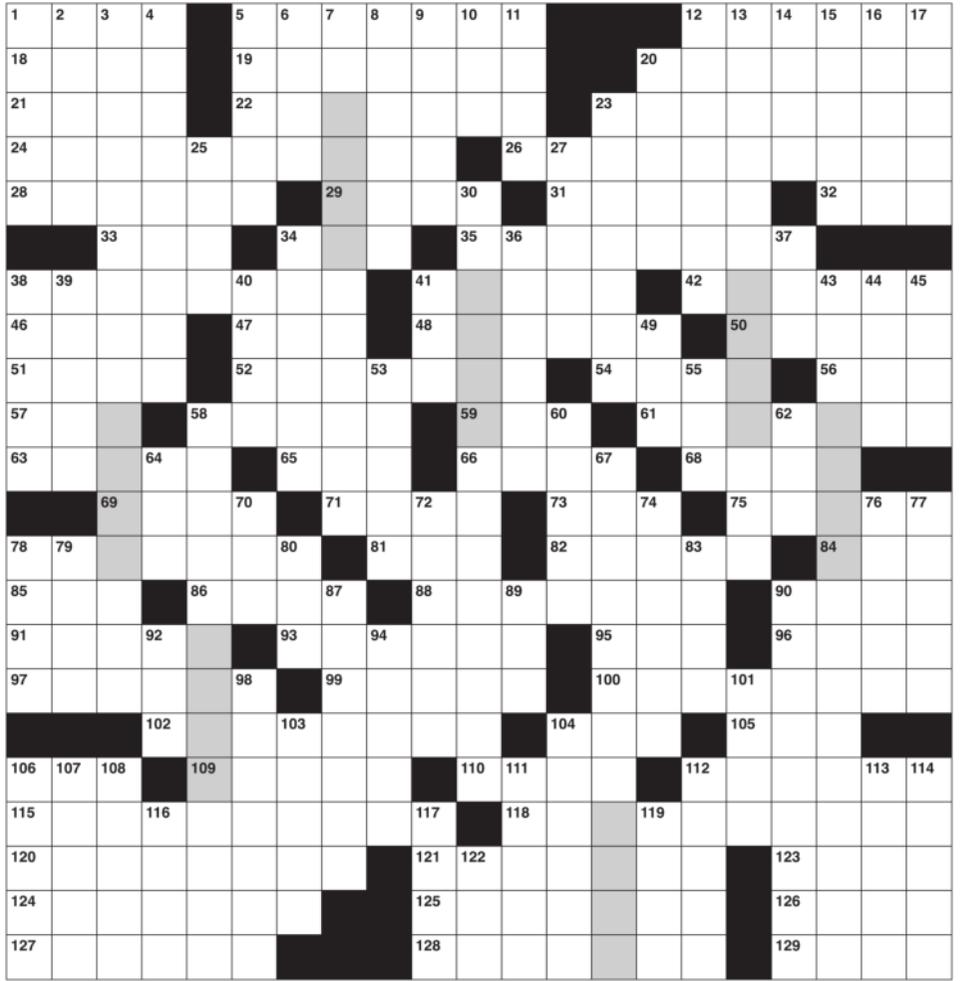
NEW YORK TIMES CROSSWORD

GROWTH SPURTS

BY ADAM WAGNER AND MICHAEL LIEBERMAN / EDITED BY WILL SHORTZ

Adam Wagner, of Oakland, Calif., is a creative lead at Patreon, a monetization platform for content creators. Michael Lieberman, of Washington, D.C., is a consumer-protection lawyer at Fairmark Partners. They're also each dads of fastgrowing toddlers, which is what inspired this puzzle. Adam sent the title to Mike, who sent back what became 3- and 13- Down . . . and they were off and running. — W.S.

- ACROSS**
- 1 Sweeties
 - 5 Heaven on earth, to the ancient Greeks
 - 12 International pizza chain founded in Brooklyn
 - 18 Pipsqueak
 - 19 "We're not ready to joke about this yet?"
 - 20 Caps that lack brims
 - 21 Apt name for a Whirlpool salesman?
 - 22 Trying to get a rise out of
 - 23 Gut
 - 24 Deserved
 - 26 "Don't believe one word of that!"
 - 28 Visibly scornful
 - 29 Reptile with a big bite, informally
 - 31 Surprise and delight
 - 32 Slip up
 - 33 One of the seven in "Se7en"
 - 34 Agcy. that oversees the Secret Service
 - 35 One's natural habitat
 - 38 Sequin-covered undergarment popularized by Lady Gaga
 - 41 Permitted
 - 42 Place to rest your head
 - 46 Musician Parks or Guthrie
 - 47 ___ cit. (footnote abbr.)
 - 48 They're just over two feet
 - 50 Lake on the Malawi-Mozambique border
 - 51 Subatomic particle
 - 52 Release, as a trailer
 - 54 Campus military grp.
 - 56 "Your" of yore
 - 57 "Monday Night Football With Peyton & ___"
 - 58 "The results _____"
 - 59 Japanese "yes"
 - 61 Showy flowers native to Mexico
 - 63 Thrills
 - 65 Political org. with a quadrennial convention
 - 66 Website with info about the stars
 - 68 Well, in both French and Spanish
 - 69 Get by
 - 71 "Top Chef" judge Simmons
 - 73 Bother, with "at"
 - 75 Classic name in wafers
 - 78 One who doesn't have a prayer?
 - 81 Producer of sketches, in brief
 - 82 Addis ___
 - 84 When doubled, fake laugh
 - 85 "Yellowjackets" network, for short
 - 86 Subscribe again
 - 88 Fox-hunting shout
 - 90 Where the proverbial buck stops
 - 91 Actress Hedren
 - 93 Mississippi city in a Neil Simon title
 - 95 Marathoner's wear
 - 96 World capital near the 60th parallel
 - 97 How a Broadway star might break out
 - 99 What a stiffed server receives
 - 100 Football rival of the Brigham Young Cougars
 - 102 20-sided shape
 - 104 Question of introspection
 - 105 Upper-left keyboard key
 - 106 Fertility-lab supply
 - 109 Most mountainous Caribbean nation
 - 110 Cry of faux-surprise
 - 112 French brothers
 - 115 Reasons to wear socks post-vacation
 - 118 Resort offering that might include a lift ticket
 - 120 Ones catching waves?
 - 121 "Impossible!"
 - 123 Poet Pound
 - 124 Behind
 - 125 One might improve a pupil's performance
 - 126 Hurl with gusto, in Gen Z slang
 - 127 One of a record-setting 3,234 for Sue Bird
 - 128 Wraps up in fabric
 - 129 Some old jets, for short
 - 9 1982 Stevie Wonder hit
 - 10 It's never free of charge
 - 11 Home-services website
 - 12 Fully divests one's stake
 - 13 Yao Ming, before joining the N.B.A.?
 - 14 Actress Taylor-Joy
 - 15 Search (through)
 - 16 Show again
 - 17 Blender brand
 - 20 Doozy
 - 23 Detector of nonsense, informally
 - 25 Toymaker Rubik
 - 27 Language that gave us "mulligatawny" and "pachouli"
 - 30 Peruvian road sign?
 - 34 Spoke monotonously
 - 36 English philosopher William of ___
 - 37 Go by air
 - 38 Shirley Bassey and Agatha Christie, for two
 - 39 Gloater's words
 - 40 Photo-editing option
 - 41 Midback muscle
 - 43 Reasons that South American furniture stores have super-long lines?
 - 44 Org. concerned with plant-based well-being?
 - 45 Methods
 - 49 Nursery purchase
 - 53 Historic quinoa cultivators
 - 55 Amount owed
 - 58 Things like "What do we want?" "Headache relief!" "When do we want it?" "Now!?"
 - 60 Best-case
 - 62 California congresswoman Barbara
 - 64 Fawn's mother
 - 67 Affectionate squeeze of an infant's bottom?
 - 70 Language suffix
 - 72 Altogether
 - 74 Setting for many Gauguin works
 - 76 The ___ Honors (annual picture-book awards)
 - 77 Black-and-white cookies
 - 78 Italian wine region
 - 79 Flimsy
 - 80 Where you might get into hot water
 - 83 Bubble tea
 - 87 Things that kids are encouraged to break
 - 89 Sass
 - 90 Items exchanged when a relationship gets serious
 - 92 Polynesian food
 - 94 Access an account
 - 98 Bit of soccer or hockey equipment
 - 101 Nickname for a muscly Disney protagonist
 - 103 Plucked instrument
 - 104 Start of a famous Kennedy quote
 - 106 Tennis's Naomi
 - 107 Roof toppers
 - 108 The opposition
 - 111 Yoga pose
 - 112 Destinies
 - 113 Everglades wader
 - 114 What tickets may afford
 - 116 Comedian Lydic of "The Daily Show"
 - 117 Virtual replications, for short
 - 119 North or south end
 - 122 One might be spotted on a farm



GUNSTON STREET



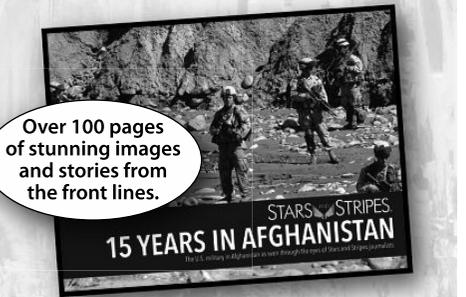
"Gunston Street" is drawn by Basil Zaviski. Email him at gunstonstreet@yahoo.com, and online at gunstonstreet.com.

RESULTS FOR ABOVE PUZZLE



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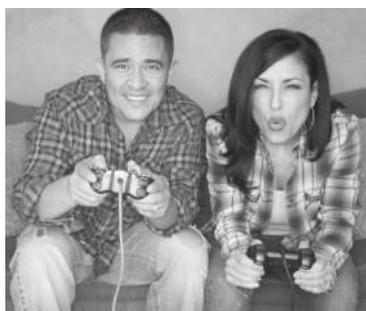
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2

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3

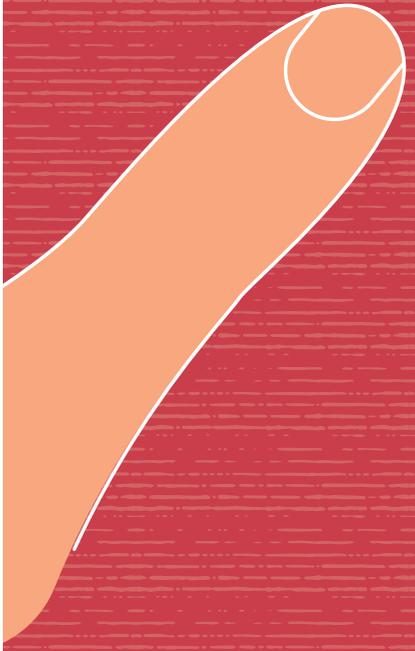
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*Postmark by Dec. 20, 2023 and Santa may have time to send a note in return!

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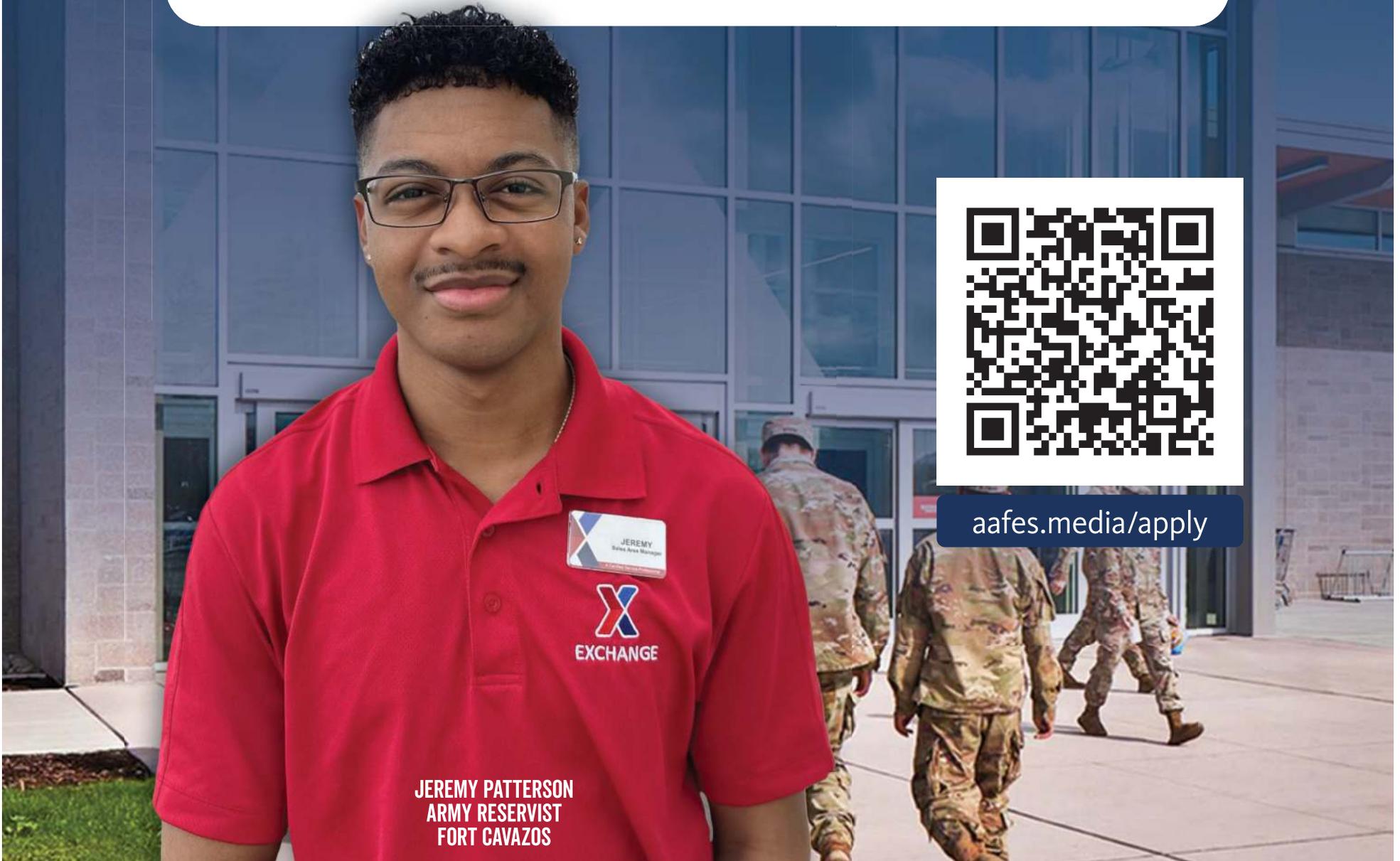


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Bizarro



Loose Parts



Eugene Sheffer Crossword

Grid for Eugene Sheffer Crossword with numbered squares.

ACROSS

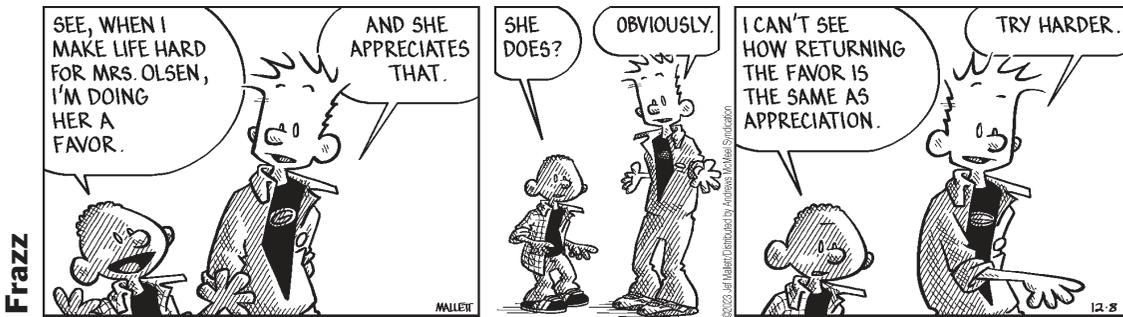
- 1 Peach center
4 Addams cousin
7 Humidor item
12 — Jima
13 Actress Long
14 Two-tone cookies
15 Noon, on a sundial
16 Goalies' protectors
18 Under the weather
19 Maine college town
20 "Frozen" snow queen
22 "— was saying ..."
23 Atlas pages
27 Airline to Sweden
29 "New World Symphony" composer
31 Capital of Belarus
34 Pisa's land
35 Like native llamas
37 Nursery cry
38 Bitty biter
39 Clean air org.
41 Bridge coup
45 Opera legend Beverly
47 Before
48 Humiliating fall
52 Berlin's country (Abbr.)
53 Early calculators

DOWN

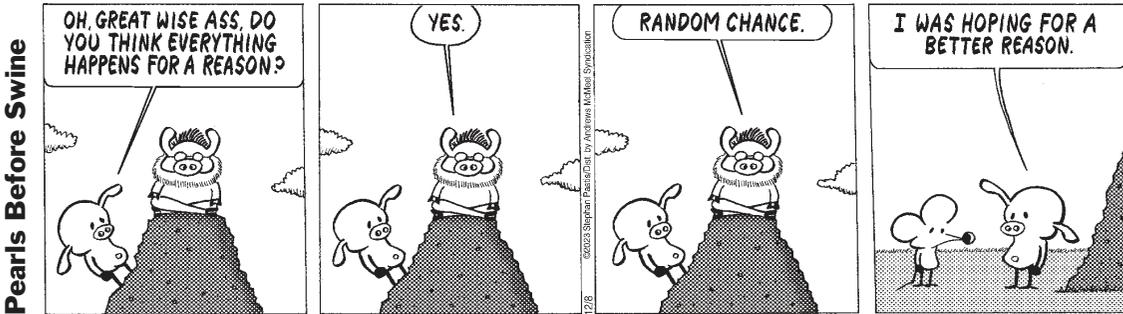
- 1 Sprite
2 Volunteer's words
3 Works hard
4 Data
5 Royal crowns
6 Mexican entrees
7 Crooner Perry
8 Nest egg letters
9 Some fridges
10 Fine, at NASA
11 Blog feed
17 Wife of Geraint
21 Plus
23 Fluttery insects
24 Altar in the sky
25 Bud
26 Cloud setting
28 Alias abbr.
30 By way of
31 Periodical, for short
32 Hostel
33 Secret-protecting doc.
36 Astronaut Armstrong
37 Brownie ingredient
40 Location
42 Permitted
43 Sports setting
44 Concert goods, informally
45 Roasting rod
46 Fr. holy women
48 Distant
49 Rushmore face
50 Upper limit
51 Green prefix

Answer to Previous Puzzle

Answer grid for the previous crossword puzzle.



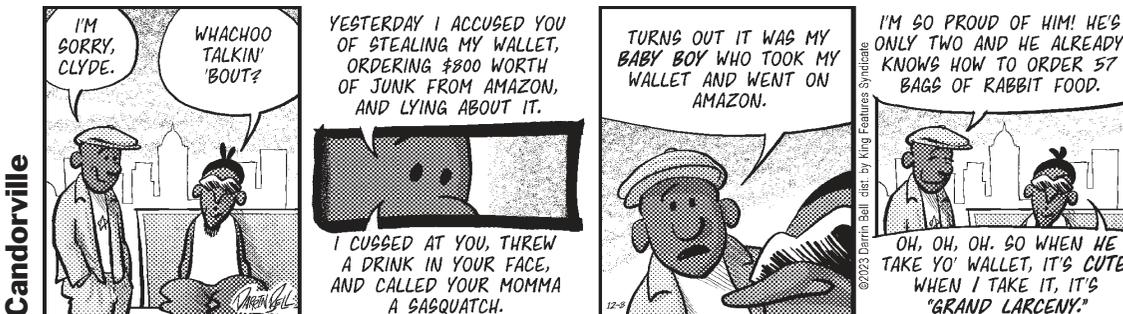
Frazz



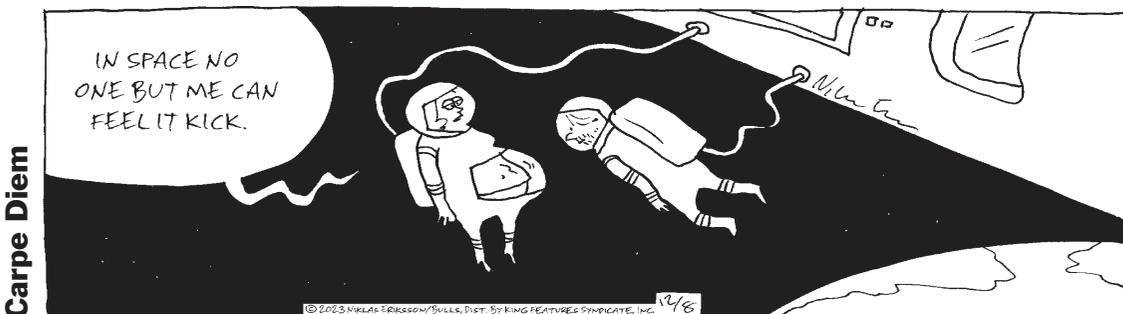
Pearls Before Swine



Non Sequitur



Candorville



Carpe Diem



Beetle Bailey

12-8

CRYPTOQUIP

NUFM KTS'G JFBIK IOZF
AT LBZF B DCSOG DABJA
IBSRUOMR, NUBA LORUA AUBA
JFCSOJF? AFM AOWZIFD.

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: MY UNCLE DISLIKES SWEETS BUT LOVES VEGETABLES, SO THIS YEAR WE'RE GETTING HIM A BIRTHDAY CUKE. Today's Cryptoquip Clue: C equals Q

Bizarro

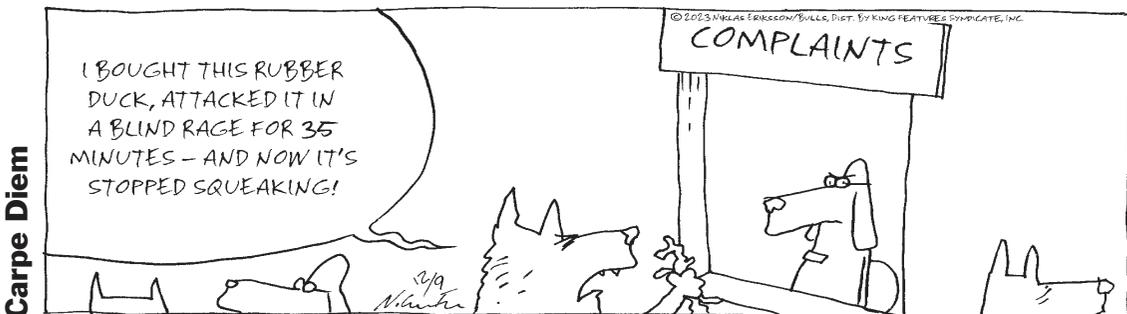
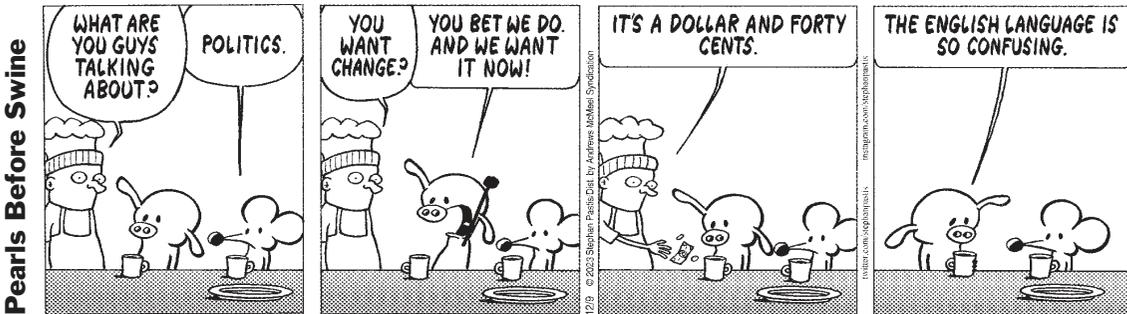


Loose Parts



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		



ACROSS

- 1 Search for gold
- 4 1920s art style
- 8 Sugar or starch, for short
- 12 "Hail!"
- 13 Human rights lawyer Clooney
- 14 KOA patron
- 15 "Unstoppable" singer
- 16 Three feet
- 17 Unctuous
- 18 "Person of Interest" actress who played a mathematician in 38-Across
- 21 Texter's guffaw
- 22 Pub pint
- 23 Esau's brother
- 26 NBC sketch show
- 27 Satchel
- 30 Shrek, for one
- 31 Owned
- 32 Extra-long
- 33 The "G" of LGBTQ
- 34 Police officer
- 35 Bargains
- 36 Priestly garment
- 37 Moving day rental
- 38 Oscar-nominated film about NASA
- 45 Vicinity
- 46 Gymnast Korbut
- 47 Granada gold

- 48 Genie's home
- 49 Prosperous period
- 50 Decks in the ring
- 51 Getting the job done
- 52 Crime lab fluids
- 53 GI entertainers

- 20 Right angle
- 23 Warm-up run
- 24 Turkish title
- 25 Sob
- 26 Potential syrup
- 27 Sheepish remark
- 28 Rocker Rose
- 29 USO patrons
- 31 Mingles
- 32 Diner handout
- 34 Cavs, on scoreboards
- 35 Explorer Vasco —
- 36 Fight extinction
- 37 Vitality
- 38 Angelic ring
- 39 Tehran's country
- 40 Actress Moore
- 41 Drifting ice
- 42 Video-streaming brand
- 43 Love god
- 44 Mediocre

DOWN

- 1 Bygone days
- 2 Athletic shoe brand
- 3 Close
- 4 Nine-to-five gig
- 5 Cybermessage
- 6 Kvetch
- 7 Seasoned vet
- 8 Witch
- 9 Rara —
- 10 Move, in Realtor lingo
- 11 — Mawr
- 19 Balm ingredient

Answer to Previous Puzzle

P	I	T		I	T		C	I	G	A	R		
I	W	O		N	I	A		O	R	E	O	S	
X	I	I		F	A	C	E	M	A	S	K	S	
I	L	L		O	R	O	N	O					
E	L	S	A		A	S	I		M	A	P	S	
			S	A	S		D	V	O	R	A	K	
M	I	N	S	K			I	T	A	L	Y		
A	N	D	E	A	N		W	A	H				
G	N	A	T		E	P	A		S	L	A	M	
					S	I	L	L	S		E	R	E
F	A	C	E	P	L	A	N	T		G	E	R	
A	B	A	C	I		C	U	E		A	N	C	
R	E	P	O	T		E	T	S		L	A	H	

12-9

CRYPTOQUIP

RM TNQ NDVIJUIA S PXRIM
 VCSPKXRCE VNHI AIURKIV
 MJNH SC SBBZI VPNJI, ONQZA
 TNQ DI SC RORPCIVV?

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: WHEN YOU'D REALLY LIKE TO MAKE A SQUID START LAUGHING, WHAT MIGHT THAT REQUIRE? TEN TICKLES.

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: E equals G

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Ernie Gates

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OPINION

Any way you slice it, war on Big Sandwich is crummy

BY GEORGE F. WILL

The Washington Post

Although not all worrywarts are progressives, all progressives are worrywarts. They believe that there are evermore things urgently in need of their supervision — things to ban or mandate or regulate to help society shimmy up the pole of progress.

Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., is progressivism incarnate. The former Harvard Law School professor should possess, if there were such, a Ph.D. in Advanced Worrying. She represents the cutting edge of modern fretting, forever anxious lest something, somewhere, escapes the government's improving attention. So she has Xed (tweeted, for those who are not au courant) her joy that the Federal Trade Commission recently preoccupied with the menace of Big Tech is turning its disapproving squint at Big Sandwich. (This delicious phrase is from the Washington Examiner's Tom Joyce.)

Roark Capital, a private equity firm, owns or otherwise supports various fast-food chains (Arby's, Sonic Drive-In, Jimmy John's, McAlister's Deli, Schlotzky's) that serve sandwiches. (Maybe. The government disagrees with itself about the definition of "sandwich.") Now, Roark reportedly plans to purchase the Subway chain for \$9.6 billion. The FTC evidently shares Warren's worry that this might create, what she calls, "a sandwich shop monopoly." Well.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines "monopoly" as the "exclusive possession or control of the trade in a commodity, product, or service; the condition of having no competitor in one's trade or business." But for the FTC-Warren posse, there are difficulties.

Can there be a monopoly in the provision of something that millions of parents make to put in their school-age children's backpacks? Something a 9-year-old can produce?

Subway is basically a brand. Its sandwich stores are small businesses owned by people who buy one or sometimes several franchises, and who benefit from the chain's national advertising.

Some Subway shops inevitably compete with nearby Jimmy John's shops or other sandwich sellers. Can a monopoly be riven by internal competitions, while surrounded by external competitors?

Sandwiches (Oxford dictionary: "an item of food consisting of two pieces of bread with a filling between them") seem to have been around long before the 18th century, when the fourth Earl of Sandwich, loath to leave a gambling table, was said to have snacked on meat that was sandwiched (as we now say) between pieces of bread. He, however, made these light meals fashionable, and today anti-aristocratic Americans eat billions of them annually.

Perhaps to inflate the specter of a sandwich shop monopoly, the FTC is considering diminishing the number of such shops by semantic fiat — by decreeing that a sandwich made of beef or chicken is not a sandwich if the meat is not served cold. Thousands of McDonald's and Chick-fil-A's would be defined out of the sandwich business. And scores of thousands of other shops selling hamburgers, and chicken or fish sandwiches would disappear from the calculations. The Agriculture Department, however, says that hamburger or chicken between bread is — drum roll — a sandwich.

America is so thickly planted with fast food

stores that in many places you cannot fling a brick without hitting one. In addition, there are about 43,000 U.S. food trucks, according to IBISWorld industry research, many of them selling what even the FTC would recognize as sandwiches. Most of New York City's approximately 13,000 bodegas (aka, corner grocery stores) sell them.

Sandwich vendors also compete with sellers of pizzas, tacos and items from Chopt, Panda Express, etc. Yet Warren surveys the crowded landscape of U.S. sandwich commerce and trembles about a potential monopoly.

Her evident belief — mystifying but actual — is that if Roark Capital buys Subway, competition in the sandwich market will somehow shrivel, leading "to higher food prices." She might not know that many states, including Massachusetts, forbid the owners of brands like Subway to dictate prices to franchisees. Their pricing is dictated, in part, by the proximity of many competitors.

By urging the FTC to devote resources to fending off a sandwich shop monopoly, Warren contributes to the public stock of harmless hilarity, making busybody progressivism more amusing than annoying. And she encourages the FTC to divert to Big Sandwich some meddlesomeness that might otherwise be used for more consequential mischief.

The current FTC's apparent belief, and Warren's, is that when an enterprise (Apple, Google, etc.) becomes big by satisfying many customers, these customers have created something worrisome. Hence the itch to combat the chimera of Big Sandwich, even though there is not, and can never be, any such thing.

US must do more to counter China's military buildup

BY WILSON BEAVER

The Heritage Foundation

Our National Defense Strategy identifies China as the primary challenge to the United States. To confront this threat successfully, our military needs more warships, aircraft and munitions. Now.

But the Biden administration's spending does not match its defense strategy. The president's Emergency Supplemental Request made this clear by asking for \$61.4 billion for Ukraine, but only \$5.4 billion for the Indo-Pacific. In addition, the administration has made no attempt to cut spending elsewhere in the budget to help fund any part of the supplemental.

There are many ways money can be saved within the Defense Department, from programs that could be cut altogether, to reforms that would make DOD spend money more efficiently. Non-defense spending from within research and development, politicized spending on climate change and DEI, and wasteful bureaucratic bloat are all examples of Pentagon funding that needs to be reallocated toward building actual military capacity.

While some of the money necessary to pay for the military systems we need to deter China can be found within the Defense Department's budget, there's far more available elsewhere — in the wasteful spending that occurs across the federal budget.

What should this money go toward? Virginia class submarines, for starters. These subs have been identified as one of the most important assets needed to deter China in the West-

ern Pacific. But they don't come cheap. In fiscal year 2023, they cost around \$3.4 billion each. (The cost varies depending on additional systems installed. Moreover, the cost per unit goes down if more than one is purchased at a time).

The new Constellation class of guided missile frigates are also crucial to the mission in the Indo-Pacific. They cost around \$1.1 billion each, depending on the same variables.

If Congress is serious about funding a military capable of deterring China, plenty of big-ticket items outside the defense budget could be cut and reallocated to real military capacity.

For fiscal 2024, the Biden administration requested \$3.9 billion for the Department of Homeland Security's climate resilience programs, \$10 billion in mandatory funding for a new First Generation Down Payment Assistance program to "help address racial and ethnic home ownership and wealth gaps," \$3 billion for the State Department's Green Climate Fund and Clean Technology Fund within the President's Emergency Plan for Adaptation and Resilience (climate change money for foreign countries), \$3 billion in Environmental and Climate Justice Block Grants, etc. etc.

This administration's Department of Homeland Security is paying \$2.5 billion to house illegal immigrants, while spending only about \$56 million to maintain family housing facilities for service members. That money would be better spent on submarines or frigates.

Within the Defense Department budget itself, for fiscal year 2024 the Biden administration requested \$5.1 billion to "mitigate climate

risk." Jamming this sort of non-defense, politicized spending into the defense budget is especially egregious. The department's mission is to protect American national security interests, and these wasteful initiatives distract the military from carrying out its core mission.

Clearly, the administration thinks some things are worth the money. They'll willingly request \$113 billion for Ukraine and many billions more to other countries all around the globe. They'll spend billions more on DEI and climate-change initiatives, and they'll reward politically aligned left-wing groups with generous grants paid for by taxpayer dollars.

If the administration can throw around this kind of money for these kinds of causes, why can't it find the funds needed to assure America's Navy and Air Force can counter the greatest military threat to our nation?

There's plenty more the U.S. could and should be doing to build a military manifestly capable of safeguarding the security of American citizens. The issue is a lack of political will, seriously misguided priorities and an astounding mismanagement of resources.

Today's U.S. military is stretched thin across multiple theaters and forced to spend billions on politicized initiatives that don't enhance its ability to effectively wage war in the interests of the American people. Funding should flow from strategy, and strategy dictates that the U.S. focus its military spending on capabilities relevant to deterring China: warships, aircraft and munitions.

Wilson Beaver is a senior policy analyst in the Center for Defense Policy at The Heritage Foundation.

SCOREBOARD

COLLEGE FOOTBALL

Schedule
Saturday, Dec. 9 EAST
 Navy (5-6) vs. Army (5-6) at Foxborough, Mass.

Bowl schedule
Saturday, Dec. 16 Myrtle Beach Bowl Conway, S.C.
 Georgia Southern vs. Ohio
Celebration Bowl Atlanta
 Howard vs. Florida A&M
New Orleans Bowl New Orleans
 Jacksonville St. vs. Louisiana
Cure Bowl Orlando, Fla.
 Miami (Ohio) vs. Appalachian St.
New Mexico Bowl Albuquerque, N.M.
 New Mexico St. vs. Fresno St.
LA Bowl Hosted Inglewood, Calif.
 UCLA vs. Boise St.
Independence Bowl Shreveport, La.
 California vs. Texas Tech
Monday, Dec. 18 Famous Toastery Bowl Charlotte, N.C.
 W. Kentucky vs. Old Dominion
Tuesday, Dec. 19 Frisco Bowl Frisco, Texas
 UTSA vs. Marshall
Thursday, Dec. 21 Boca Raton Bowl Boca Raton, Fla.
 USF vs. Syracuse
Friday, Dec. 22 Gasparilla Bowl Tampa, Fla.
 Georgia Tech vs. UCF
Saturday, Dec. 23 Camellia Bowl Montgomery, Ala.
 Arkansas St. vs. N. Illinois
Birmingham Bowl Birmingham, Ala.
 Troy vs. Duke
Armed Forces Bowl Fort Worth, Texas
 No. 24 James Madison vs. Air Force
Famous Idaho Potato Bowl Boise, Idaho
 Georgia St. vs. Utah St.
68 Ventures Bowl Mobile, Ala.
 South Alabama vs. Eastern Michigan
Las Vegas Bowl Las Vegas
 Utah vs. Northwestern
Hawaii Bowl Honolulu, Hawaii
 Coastal Carolina vs. San Jose St.
Tuesday, Dec. 26 Quick Lane Bowl Detroit
 Bowling Green vs. Minnesota
First Responder Bowl Dallas
 Texas St. vs. Rice
Guaranteed Rate Bowl Phoenix
 Kansas vs. UNLV
Wednesday, Dec. 27 Military Bowl Presented Annapolis, Md.
 No. 23 Tulane vs. Virginia Tech
Duke's Mayo Bowl Charlotte, N.C.
 North Carolina vs. West Virginia
Holiday Bowl San Diego, Calif.
 No. 16 Louisville vs. Southern Cal
Texas Bowl Houston
 No. 22 Oklahoma St. vs. Texas A&M
FCS playoffs
Quarterfinals Friday, Dec. 8
 Montana (11-1) vs. Furman (10-2)
Saturday, Dec. 9
 South Dakota St. (12-0) vs. Villanova (10-2)
 Idaho (9-3) vs. UAlbany (10-3)
 South Dakota (10-2) vs. North Dakota St. (10-3)
Semifinals
 South Dakota St.-Villanova-winner vs. Idaho-UAlbany-winner
 South Dakota-North Dakota St.-winner vs. Montana-Furman-winner
Championship Saturday, Jan. 7
 Semifinal winners
NCAA Division II playoffs
Semifinals Saturday, Dec. 9
 Harding vs. Lenoir-Rhyne
 Colo. Sch. of Mines vs. Kutztown
Championship
 Semifinal winners
NCAA Division III playoffs
Semifinals Saturday, Dec. 9
 Wartburg vs. North Central (III.)
 Randolph-Macon vs. Cortland
Championship
 Semifinal winners

PRO FOOTBALL

NFL
AMERICAN CONFERENCE
East

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Miami	9	3	0	.750	384	266
Buffalo	6	6	0	.500	328	227
N.Y. Jets	4	8	0	.333	171	251
New England	2	10	0	.167	148	254

South

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Jacksonville	8	4	0	.667	285	259
Houston	7	5	0	.583	281	249
Indianapolis	7	5	0	.583	300	296
Tennessee	4	8	0	.333	213	255

North

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Baltimore	9	3	0	.750	324	187
Cleveland	7	5	0	.583	258	245
Pittsburgh	7	5	0	.583	192	229
Cincinnati	6	6	0	.500	246	273

West

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Kansas City	8	4	0	.667	275	208
Denver	6	6	0	.500	263	302
L.A. Chargers	5	7	0	.417	275	258
Las Vegas	5	7	0	.417	202	256

NATIONAL CONFERENCE
East

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Philadelphia	10	2	0	.833	329	288
Dallas	9	3	0	.750	388	220
N.Y. Giants	4	8	0	.333	159	292
Washington	4	9	0	.308	261	395

South

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Atlanta	6	6	0	.500	226	240
New Orleans	5	7	0	.417	257	255
Tampa Bay	5	7	0	.417	233	245
e-Carolina	1	11	0	.083	191	313

North

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Detroit	9	3	0	.750	327	286
Green Bay	6	6	0	.500	258	243
Minnesota	6	6	0	.500	263	242
Chicago	4	8	0	.333	242	296

West

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
San Francisco	9	3	0	.750	352	189
L.A. Rams	6	6	0	.500	268	253
Seattle	6	6	0	.500	264	290
Arizona	3	10	0	.231	230	331

e-Eliminated from playoffs
Thursday's game
 New England at Pittsburgh
Sunday's games
 Carolina at New Orleans
 Detroit at Chicago
 Houston at N.Y. Jets
 Indianapolis at Cincinnati
 Jacksonville at Cleveland
 L.A. Rams at Baltimore
 Tampa Bay at Atlanta
 Minnesota at Las Vegas
 Seattle at San Francisco
 Buffalo at Kansas City
 Denver at L.A. Chargers
 Philadelphia at Dallas
 Open: Arizona, Washington
Monday's games
 Green Bay at N.Y. Giants
 Tennessee at Miami
Thursday, Dec. 14
 L.A. Chargers at Las Vegas
Saturday, Dec. 16
 Minnesota at Cincinnati
 Pittsburgh at Indianapolis
 Denver at Detroit
Sunday, Dec. 17
 Atlanta at Carolina
 Chicago at Cleveland
 Houston at Tennessee
 Kansas City at New England
 N.Y. Giants at New Orleans
 N.Y. Jets at Miami
 Tampa Bay at Green Bay
 San Francisco at Arizona
 Washington at L.A. Rams
 Dallas at Buffalo
 Baltimore at Jacksonville
Monday, Dec. 18
 Philadelphia at Seattle
NFL calendar
Jan. 13-15 — Wild Card playoff games.
Jan. 20-21 — Division playoff games.
Jan. 28 — AFC and NFC championship games.
Feb. 11 — Super Bowl 58 at Allegiant Stadium in Las Vegas.
Feb. 27-March 4 — Scouting Combine at Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis.
April 25-27 — NFL Draft in Detroit.

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

Wednesday's men's scores
EAST
 Brown 67, Rhode Island 64
 Bryant 67, Siena 51
 Canisius 87, Robert Morris 80
 Colgate 115, Northern Vermont-Lyndon 37
 Dartmouth 76, New Hampshire 64
 Duquesne 85, Marshall 72
 Fairfield 75, Yale 71
 Hofstra 62, Iona 57
 La Salle 62, Loyola (Md.) 61
 Maine 74, Boston U. 65
 Maryland 81, Penn St. 75, OT
 Morgan St. 92, UMBEC 80
 NJIT 80, Fordham 77
 Penn 111, FDU-Florham 57
 Pittsburgh 80, West Virginia 63
 Saint Joseph's 69, American 53
 St. Bonaventure 94, Niagara 60
 St. John's 85, Sacred Heart 50
 Stony Brook 81, Stonehill 63
 Temple 85, Bloomsburg 55
 Towson 81, UMass 71
 Vermont 73, Northeastern 71
 Wagner 62, Coppin St. 59
SOUTH
 Belmont 72, Lipscomb 71
 Clemson 72, South Carolina 67
 Davidson 62, Campbell 50
 Florida A&M 65, Presbyterian 60
 Memphis 85, VCU 80, OT
 Miami 97, LIU 49
 NC State 93, Md.-Eastern Shore 61
 San Francisco 73, Vanderbilt 60
 South Alabama 83, Mercer 62
 UCF 94, Jacksonville 52
 Wake Forest 76, Rutgers 57
 William & Mary 84, Old Dominion 79
 Wofford 81, Gardner-Webb 66
MIDWEST
 Ball St. 68, Detroit 65
 Cent. Michigan 71, Valparaiso 67
 Drake 75, Saint Louis 69
 Fort Wayne 70, S. Indiana 57
 Illinois St. 62, N. Kentucky 59
 Marquette 86, Texas 65
 Minnesota 76, Nebraska 65
 N. Iowa 78, Richmond 73
 Ohio St. 84, Miami (Ohio) 64
 SE Missouri 95, Harris-Stowe 45
 SIU-Edwardsville 78, Green Bay 69
 St. Thomas (MN) 75, Milwaukee 71
 Toledo 69, Oakland 68
 W. Illinois 80, Coe 58
 Youngstown St. 78, Ohio 72
SOUTHWEST
 Houston 75, Rice 39
 Houston Christian 95, SW Adventist 58
 N. Arizona 78, Abilene Christian 76
 Texas A&M 89, DePaul 64
 Texas Rio Grande Valley 76, Texas A&M-CC 74
 Texas Tech 87, Omaha 58
 Texas-Arlington 74, North Texas at Dallas 37
FAR WEST
 Arizona St. 76, SMU 74
 Cal St.-Fullerton 60, Pepperdine 55
 Colorado St. 90, Denver 80
 Long Beach St. 88, Life Pacific 66
 Nevada 80, UC Davis 68
 New Mexico 84, UC Santa Barbara 61
 Portland St. 104, Lewis & Clark 60
 Utah St. 108, San Diego 81
 Utah Tech 72, Cal Baptist 69
 Washington St. 86, UC Riverside 49
Wednesday's women's scores
EAST
 Albany (NY) 56, CCSU 37
 Boston College 95, UMass 57
 Bryant 63, Loyola (Md.) 54
 Columbia 76, Memphis 66
 Delaware St. 108, Wilmington (DC) 39
 Drexel 51, Marist 36
 Fairleigh Dickinson 86, Bloomfield 38
 Maine 79, Harvard 61
 Monmouth (NJ) 72, American 60
 New Hampshire 68, Stonehill 41
 Princeton 79, Quinnipiac 70
 Providence 51, Rhode Island 50
 Sacred Heart 57, NJIT 48
 Stony Brook 81, Yale 66
 Towson 68, George Washington 60
 UConn 90, Ball St. 63
 Vermont 62, Army 42
 Wagner 69, St. Peter's 67
SOUTH
 Alabama 88, Coastal Carolina 46
 Belmont 70, Lipscomb 46
 E. Kentucky 85, Miami (Ohio) 55
 ETSU 79, Charleston Southern 52
 Furman 124, Bob Jones 44
 Georgia 86, Troy 70
 Middle Tennessee 73, Tennessee 62
 Minnesota 76, Kentucky 57
 North Carolina 81, UNC-Greensboro 66
 Northwestern St. 59, Tarleton St. 51
 Presbyterian 68, Queens (NC) 60
 South Carolina 104, Morgan St. 38
 Tulane 90, New Orleans 63
 UNC-Asheville 88, Warren Wilson 33
 Virginia 78, Rider 51
 Virginia Tech 98, LIU Brooklyn 50
MIDWEST
 Cleveland St. 87, Niagara 56
 Detroit 62, W. Michigan 59
 Fort Wayne 57, Bellarmine 46
 IUPUI 81, Evansville 75
 Illinois 74, N. Kentucky 52
 Iowa 67, Iowa St. 58
 Kansas 79, Houston Christian 57
 Kansas St. 101, McNeese St. 39
 Missouri 81, Missouri St. 63
 Notre Dame 96, Lafayette 42
 Purdue 83, SE Missouri 57
 S. Illinois 77, SIU-Edwardsville 53
 Saint Louis 89, S. Indiana 53
 Toledo 69, Michigan 46
 UMKC 84, Bellevue 34
 Youngstown St. 53, Akron 52
SOUTHWEST
 North Texas 73, Ark.-Pine Bluff 66
 Texas 106, Long Beach St. 62
 Texas A&M 83, Lamar 51
FAR WEST
 Boise St. 87, CS Bakersfield 66
 Cal Baptist 78, Utah Tech 69
 Cal St.-Fullerton 77, Fresno St. 68
 Idaho St. 54, Utah Valley St. 50
 Montana 82, Loyola Marymount 68
 N. Arizona 96, Pacific 65
 Weber St. 57, Nevada 55

TENNIS

Montevideo Open
Wednesday
At Carrasco Lawn Tennis Club Montevideo, Uruguay
Purse: \$115,000
Surface: Red clay
Women's Singles
Round of 16
 Ylena In-Albon, Switzerland, def. Daria Lodikova, Russia, 6-2, 7-6 (4).
 Julia Riera (4), Argentina, def. Ipek Oz, Turkiye, 4-6, 6-4, 6-3.
 Robin Montgomery, United States, def. Martina Capurro Taborda (3), Argentina, 6-1, 6-3.
 Miriam Bianca Bulgaru (6), Romania, def. Eva Vedder, Netherlands, 3-6, 6-2, 6-2.
Open Angers Arena Loire
Wednesday
At Arena Loire Angers, France
Purse: Euro 100,000
Surface: Hardcourt indoor
Women's Singles
Round of 32
 Erika Andreeva, Russia, def. Nuria Parri-zas Diaz, Spain, 7-5, 6-3.
 Cristina Andreea Mitu, Romania, def. Anastasiya Soboleva, Ukraine, 4-6, 6-3, 7-5.
 Alize Cornet (8), France, def. Gabriela Knutson, Czech Republic, 7-5, 7-6 (1).
Round of 16
 McCartney Kessler, United States, def. Francesca Curmi, Malta, 6-4, 6-3.
 Dayana Yastremska (6), Ukraine, def. Raluca Georgiana Serban, Cyprus, 6-4, 6-3.
 Clara Burel (2), France, def. Mona Barthel, Germany, 6-2, 7-6 (5).
 Cristina Bucsa (3), Spain, def. Lea Boskovic, Croatia, 6-3, 4-6, 6-1.

DEALS

Wednesday's transactions
BASEBALL
Major League Baseball American League
BALTIMORE ORIOLES — Agreed to terms with RHP Craig Kimbrel on a one-year contract.
BOSTON RED SOX — Acquired RHP Justin Slaten from the New York Mets in exchange for minor league LHP Ryan Ammons and cash considerations.
KANSAS CITY ROYALS — Acquired RHP Carlos Mateo from Houston in exchange for RHP Dylan Coleman.
NEW YORK YANKEES — Acquired OF Juan Soto and Trent Grisham from San Diego in exchange for RHPs Michael King, Jhonny Brito, Randy Vasquez and Drew Thorpe and C Kyle Higashioka.
TEXAS RANGERS — Agreed to terms with RHP Kirby Yates on a one-year major league contract.
National League
COLORADO ROCKIES — Released RHP Connor Seabold.
LOS ANGELES DODGERS — Agreed to terms with RF Jason Heyward on a one-year contract.
NEW YORK METS — Agreed to terms with RHP Michael Tonkin on a one-year contract. Traded RHP Justin Slaten to Boston in exchange for LHP Ryan Ammons.
ST. LOUIS CARDINALS — Name Yadier Molina special assistant to the president of baseball operations.
FOOTBALL
National Football League
NFL — Suspended Indianapolis DL Al-Quadin Muhammad for six games for violating the league's performance-enhancing drugs policy.
ARIZONA CARDINALS — Signed WR Dan Chisena to the practice squad.
ATLANTA FALCONS — Designated DL La-Cale London to return from injured reserve to practice.
BUFFALO BILLS — Designated TE Dawson Knox and CB Kairi Elam to return from injured reserve to practice.
CAROLINA PANTHERS — Signed WRs Cam Sims and Jalen Camp to the practice squad.
CLEVELAND BROWNS — Designated CB Cameron Mitchell to return from injured reserve.
DALLAS COWBOYS — Reinstated TE Peyton Hendershot from injured reserve. Place TE Sean McKeon on injured reserve. Designated OT Matt Waletzko to return from injured reserve to practice.
DENVER BRONCOS — Signed LB Durrell Nchai to the practice squad.
HOUSTON TEXANS — Signed DB Adrian Amos and DB Kris Boyd.
LAS VEGAS RAIDERS — Designated DB Brandon Facyson and LB Kana'i Mauga to return from injured reserve to practice.
LOS ANGELES CHARGERS — Designated WR Josh Palmer to return from injured reserve to practice.
LOS ANGELES RAMS — Signed K Mason Crosby to the practice squad.
MIAMI DOLPHINS — Signed DT Justin Ellis to the practice squad. Released S Verone McKinley III from the practice squad.
NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS — Declined to activate OT Riley Reiff from injured reserve.
NEW ORLEANS SAINTS — Placed S Marcus Maye and DT Malcolm Roach on injured reserve. Reinstated LB Monty Rice off waivers from Tennessee. Signed DT P.J. Mustipher.
NEW YORK GIANTS — Re-signed QB Matt Barkley to the practice squad.
NEW YORK JETS — Placed TE C.J. Uzomah on injured reserve. Reinstated TE Kenny Yeboah from injured reserve.
PHILADELPHIA EAGLES — Waived LB Christian Elliss. Signed WR Greg Ward to the practice squad. Signed LB Shaquille Leonard.
SEATTLE SEAHAWKS — Signed RB SaRoderick Thompson to the practice squad.
TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS — Signed DT C.J. Brewer to the practice squad.
TENNESSEE TITANS — Signed P Ty Zentner and LB Jojo Domann to the practice squad. Promoted LB Otis Reese from the practice squad to the active roster.
HOCKEY
National Hockey League
ARIZONA COYOTES — Recalled D Patrick Koch and C Ryan McGregor from Tucson (AHL).
BUFFALO SABRES — Returned C Brandon Biro to Rochester (AHL). Acquired LW Eric Robinson from Columbus in exchange for a 2025 seventh-round draft pick.
CAROLINA HURRICANES — Recalled F Blake Murray from Florida (ECHL).
COLORADO AVALANCHE — Recalled F Oskar Olausson from Colorado (AHL).
MINNESOTA WILD — Loaned C Caedan Bankier to Iowa (AHL). Reassigned D Kyle Masters and RW Pavel Novak from Iowa (ECHL) to Iowa (AHL).
NEW JERSEY DEVILS — Reinstated D Brendan Smith after his two-game suspension.
OTTAWA SENATORS — Assigned D Donovan Sebrango from Belleville (AHL) to Allen (ECHL).
SAN JOSE SHARKS — Reassigned G Magnus Chrona from San Jose (AHL) to Wichita (ECHL).
TORONTO MAPLE LEAFS — Recalled G Martin Jones from Toronto (AHL).
SOCCER
Major League Soccer
FC CINCINNATI — Exercised contract options on D Ian Murphy and F Arquimedes Ordenez. Declined contract options on Ds Santiago Arias and Ray Gaddis, Fs Dominique Badji and Yuya Kubo and M Harrison Robledo.
ORLANDO CITY SC — Terminated M Mauricio Pereyra's contract.
VANCOUVER WHITECAPS FC — Signed M Sebastian Berhalter to a two-year contract.

COLLEGE SOCCER

NCAA Men's Tournament
Semifinals
Friday, Dec. 8
At Lynn Family Stadium Louisville, Ky.
 No. 5 West Virginia vs. No. 9 Clemson
 No. 2 Notre Dame vs. Oregon St.
Championship
Monday, Dec. 11
At Lynn Family Stadium Louisville, Ky.
 Semifinal winners

PRO SOCCER

MLS playoffs
Semifinals
Saturday, Nov. 25 Eastern Conference
 Columbus 2, Orlando City 0
 Cincinnati 1, Philadelphia 0
Sunday, Nov. 26 Western Conference
 Houston 1, Sporting Kansas City 0
 Los Angeles FC 1, Seattle 0
Conference Finals
Dec. 2-3
 Columbus vs. Cincinnati
 Houston vs. Los Angeles FC
Championship
Saturday, Dec. 9
 Conference Finals winners

GOLF

World rankings
Through Dec. 4

1.	Scottie Scheffler	10.69
2.	Rory McIlroy	9.13
3.	Jon Rahm	8.31
4.	Viktor Hovland	6.94
5.	Patrick Cantlay	5.92
6.	Xander Schauffele	5.73
7.	Max Homa	5.00
8.	Matt Fitzpatrick	4.80
9.	Brian Harman	4.51
10.	Wyndham Clark	4.25
11.	Tom Kim	4.08
12.	Tyrrell Hatton	4.02
13.	Tommy Fleetwood	3.93
14.	Collin Morikawa	3.90
15.	Keegan Bradley	3.67
16.	Jordan Spieth	3.65
17.	Brooks Koepka	3.45
18.	Cameron Young	3.37
19.	Jason Day	3.36
20.	Sepp Straka	3.36
21.	Tony Finau	3.30
22.	Sam Burns	3.29
23.	Cameron Smith	3.28
24.	Rickie Fowler	3.19
25.	Russell Henley	3.12
26.	Justin Thomas	3.07
27.	Sungjae Im	2.89
28.	Ryan Fox	2.85
29.	Kurt Kitayama	2.78
30.	Lucas Glover	2.77
31.	Sahith Theegala	2.76
32.	Ludvig Aberg	2.69
33.	Will Zalatoris	2.52
34.	Corey Conners	2.47
35.	Min Woo Lee	2.45
36.	Denny McCarthy	2.45
37.	Shane Lowry	2.39
38.	Emiliano Grillo	2.39
39.	Justin Rose	2.34
40.	Harris English	2.27
41.	Eric Cole	2.20
42.	Hideki Matsuyama	2.17

NHL

Still a ways to go with rebuild

Bedard living up to hype, but Blackhawks remain one of worst teams in the league

By JAY COHEN
Associated Press

Asked how he processes losing, Connor Bedard recalled one of his seasons with the Regina Pats — his junior hockey team in Canada.

He didn't have to look back very far. After all, the rookie center just turned 18 in July.

"I remember my 16-year in Reg, we didn't make playoffs and had a slow patch, kind of similar to what we've had right now just at the start of the year," he said. "It was pretty slow. We had a losing streak and stuff. It sucks. You never want to lose games."

"We know we're a better team than what our record shows. We just got to keep coming to the rink every day and being positive and trying to get better, and hopefully that shows in the win column."

While Bedard has lived up to the considerable hype he brought with him to Chicago, he can only do so much. The Blackhawks still look like a team at the beginning of a rebuilding project, albeit with a budding offensive star and a handful of promising defensemen.

Chicago has dropped four straight and 10 of 12 overall after Tuesday night's 4-3 shootout loss to Nashville. It is off to a 7-16-1 start after it was 7-13-4 through its first 24 games last season.

"Every guy in here wants to do well," forward Nick Foligno said. "I think that's the hard part is we're not getting results."

The biggest problem for Chicago is its lack of scoring punch,

even with Bedard in the fold. Heading into Wednesday's NHL slate, the Blackhawks ranked 30th in the league with 59 goals, and its power play was 29th at 10.7%. They have scored six times during their current slide.

The Blackhawks tried to address their lines in the offseason, bringing in veteran forwards Taylor Hall, Corey Perry and Foligno. But Hall is out with a season-ending knee injury and Perry was cut for violating team conduct policies.

Andreas Athanasiou, who had 20 goals and 20 assists for Chicago last season, is on injured reserve with a groin injury. Lukas Reichel, a first-round pick in the 2020 draft, is off to a disappointing start with two goals and four assists in 23 games.

"We've started out some games, we've had some good O-zone and sometimes a little bit too much on the outside," coach Luke Richardson said. "We want to make sure we're not just tossing pucks into the inside when we're not ready for it. I think we have to be a little more determined to get pucks to the net, and I think that starts at the back end shooting pucks more and a little quicker."

Of course, all is not lost for Chicago. Not with Bedard looking every bit the player the Blackhawks thought he would be when they took him with the No. 1 overall pick in the draft.

Bedard leads all NHL rookies with a team-high 11 goals and 20 points. From his awareness, vision and playmaking ability to his un-



CHRIS O'MEARA/AP

Chicago Blackhawks center Connor Bedard, the No. 1 draft pick, leads all NHL rookies with a team-high 11 goals and 20 points.

flappable demeanor in the face of enormous attention off the ice, he appears to be well on his way to becoming one of the league's biggest stars.

He has displays of frustration — like when he broke his stick and punched the back of the boards during a 5-1 loss at Detroit last week — but he seems to be able to

move on quickly.

"We're competitive athletes and that's going to happen," he said. "But for sure, you don't want to show too much. It's something maybe the last few games I could get better at, but everyone has their moments."

A smiling Bedard then remembered a time when he was "a bit of a baby" when things didn't go his way on the ice.

"But I was really young, so my parents just said, 'Stop,'" he said.

Beyond Bedard, the hope for the Blackhawks extends to a group of young defensemen led by Kevin Korchinski. The 19-year-old Korchinski, another first-round pick, has two goals and five assists in 24 games. He looks as if he could be a mainstay on Chicago's blue line for years to come.

In the meantime, the Blackhawks have been plagued by inconsistency in several areas — something they talk about a lot, but can't seem to translate to the ice.

"In order to move the needle to where we need it to, we've got to show sustained flashes. We've got to show that we can do that the whole game," Foligno said. "Even a whole period right now is what we need."

"It's there. It's like when your kid acts out," he continued. "You know they can behave, but they do the other thing."

Scoreboard

Eastern Conference

Atlantic Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Boston	24	17	4	3	37	81	59
Florida	25	15	8	2	32	77	66
Detroit	24	14	7	3	31	91	71
Tampa Bay	27	12	10	5	29	90	94
Toronto	22	12	6	4	28	76	74
Montreal	25	11	11	3	25	72	89
Buffalo	26	10	14	2	22	74	90
Ottawa	20	10	10	0	20	70	65

Metropolitan Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
N.Y. Rangers	24	18	5	1	37	82	66
Carolina	25	14	10	1	29	83	83
Philadelphia	25	13	10	2	28	74	70
N.Y. Islanders	24	10	7	7	27	69	79
Washington	22	12	8	2	26	52	65
New Jersey	23	12	10	1	25	85	88
Pittsburgh	25	11	11	3	25	74	66
Columbus	27	8	14	5	21	77	92

Western Conference

Central Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Colorado	25	16	7	2	34	90	73
Dallas	24	14	7	3	31	83	71
Winnipeg	24	14	8	2	30	77	66
Arizona	24	13	9	2	28	82	68
St. Louis	25	13	11	1	27	73	80
Nashville	25	13	12	0	26	80	80
Minnesota	23	9	10	4	22	75	82
Chicago	24	7	16	1	15	59	89

Pacific Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Vegas	27	17	5	5	39	89	64
Los Angeles	22	15	4	3	33	85	53
Vancouver	26	16	9	1	33	101	70
Calgary	25	10	12	3	23	73	87
Seattle	26	8	12	6	22	70	92
Edmonton	23	10	12	1	21	80	80
Anaheim	25	10	15	0	20	69	87
San Jose	26	7	17	2	16	52	106

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

Tampa Bay 3, Pittsburgh 1
Florida 5, Dallas 4
Vegas 6, St. Louis 3
Edmonton 6, Carolina 1

Thursday's games

Buffalo at Boston
Los Angeles at Montreal
San Jose at Detroit
Toronto at Ottawa
Columbus at N.Y. Islanders
Dallas at Washington
Tampa Bay at Nashville
Anaheim at Chicago
Carolina at Calgary
Philadelphia at Arizona
Winnipeg at Colorado
Minnesota at Vancouver
New Jersey at Seattle

Friday's games

Pittsburgh at Florida
St. Louis at Columbus
Minnesota at Edmonton

Saturday's games

Arizona at Boston
New Jersey at Calgary
Vegas at Dallas
Montreal at Buffalo
N.Y. Rangers at Washington
Nashville at Toronto
Ottawa at Detroit
Los Angeles at N.Y. Islanders
St. Louis at Chicago
Philadelphia at Colorado
Carolina at Vancouver
Tampa Bay at Seattle

Sunday's games

Florida at Columbus
New Jersey at Edmonton
Los Angeles at N.Y. Rangers
Nashville at Montreal
Washington at Chicago
Winnipeg at Anaheim
Minnesota at Seattle
San Jose at Vegas

Scoring leaders

Through Wednesday

	GP	G	A	PTS
Nikita Kucherov, TB	26	17	27	44
J.T. Miller, VAN	26	14	25	39
Artemi Panarin, NYR	24	16	21	37
Quinn Hughes, VAN	26	9	27	36
David Pastrnak, BOS	24	14	22	36
Cale Makar, COL	23	7	27	34
Nathan MacKinnon, COL	25	9	25	34
Elias Pettersson, VAN	26	10	24	34
Jack Hughes, NJ	18	10	23	33



JAY LAPRETE/AP

Beyond Bedard, Chicago's hope for the future extends to a group of young defensemen led by Kevin Korchinski, above. The 19-year-old, another first-round pick, has two goals and five assists in 24 games.

NBA

Scoreboard

Eastern Conference				
Atlantic Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Boston	15	5	.750	—
Philadelphia	13	7	.650	2
New York	12	8	.600	3
Brooklyn	11	9	.550	4
Toronto	9	12	.429	6½
Southeast Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Orlando	14	7	.667	—
Miami	12	9	.571	2
Atlanta	9	11	.450	4½
Charlotte	6	13	.316	7
Washington	3	17	.150	10½
Central Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Milwaukee	15	6	.714	—
Indiana	11	8	.579	3
Cleveland	12	9	.571	3
Chicago	8	14	.364	7½
Detroit	2	19	.095	13
Western Conference				
Southwest Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Dallas	12	8	.600	—
New Orleans	12	10	.545	1
Houston	9	9	.500	2
Memphis	6	14	.300	6
San Antonio	3	17	.150	9
Northwest Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Minnesota	16	4	.800	—
Oklahoma City	13	7	.650	3
Denver	14	8	.636	3
Utah	7	14	.333	9½
Portland	6	14	.300	10
Pacific Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
L.A. Lakers	13	9	.591	—
Sacramento	11	8	.579	½
Phoenix	12	9	.571	½
L.A. Clippers	10	10	.500	2
Golden State	10	11	.476	2½

Tuesday's games
In-Season Tournament quarterfinals
 Milwaukee 146, New York 122
 L.A. Lakers 106, Phoenix 103

Wednesday's games
 Memphis 116, Detroit 102
 Philadelphia 131, Washington 126
 Cleveland 121, Orlando 111
 Minnesota 102, San Antonio 94
 Brooklyn 114, Atlanta 113
 Houston 110, Oklahoma City 101
 Chicago 111, Charlotte 100
 Dallas 147, Utah 97
 Miami 112, Toronto 103
 Golden State 110, Portland 106
 L.A. Clippers 111, Denver 102

Thursday's games
In-Season Tournament semifinals
 Milwaukee vs Indiana
 L.A. Lakers vs New Orleans

Friday's games
 Atlanta at Philadelphia
 Detroit at Orlando
 Toronto at Charlotte
 New York at Boston
 Washington at Brooklyn
 Cleveland at Miami
 Golden State at Oklahoma City
 Minnesota at Memphis
 Chicago at San Antonio
 Houston at Denver
 Sacramento at Phoenix
 Dallas at Portland
 L.A. Clippers at Utah

Scoring leaders
Through Wednesday

	G	FG	FT	PTS	AVG
Embiid, PHI	17	184	176	562	33.1
Doncic, DAL	19	208	114	605	31.8
Durant, PHO	19	202	141	589	31.0
Fox, SAC	14	150	83	424	30.3
Antetokmpo, MIL	20	234	127	604	30.2
Gil-Alex., OKC	19	209	130	571	30.1
Curry, GS	19	169	120	554	29.2
Jokic, DEN	21	236	102	601	28.6
Mitchell, CLE	16	153	88	442	27.6
Tatum, BOS	20	194	103	552	27.6
Young, ATL	19	157	145	517	27.2
Haliburton, IND	17	158	74	458	26.9
Maxey, PHI	19	179	93	512	26.9
Edwards, MIN	18	161	96	463	25.7

AROUND THE NBA

Spurs, Pistons have long road ahead

By **TIM REYNOLDS**
Associated Press

There was so much promise six weeks ago. San Antonio was reveling in the debut of Victor Wembanyama, the No. 1 pick who arrived with amazing fanfare. Detroit had a new coach in Monty Williams — just two years removed from taking Phoenix to the NBA Finals — and a roster featuring five top-five draft picks from the last five years.

The Spurs started 3-2 and had a 21-point lead in the third quarter of their sixth game. The Pistons started 2-1, the only thing keeping them from a 3-0 start was a missed straightaway jumper by Cade Cunningham at the buzzer of their opener in Miami. So much promise, for both teams.

And nothing since. Nothing. As the inaugural NBA In-Season Tournament moves to the glitz and glamour of Las Vegas for its Final Four — capped Saturday by the awarding of a new trophy and the winning team's players splitting about \$8 million — the Spurs and Pistons are at the other end of the spectrum, already mired at the bottom of the league.

The Spurs have lost 15 in a row, just one away from a franchise worst amid a 3-17 start. The Pistons have lost 18 in a row, that streak and their 2-19 record at this point both already the worst in franchise history.

For his part, Wembanyama isn't showing any signs of worry or frustration. The way he sees it, the Spurs are coming to work every day, doing their job and moving closer to figuring things out.

"Everybody knows where we're going," Wembanyama said. "Most of the people here have been



The San Antonio Spurs' Victor Wembanyama and Zach Collins celebrate a play during the first half against the Atlanta Hawks on Nov. 30 in San Antonio. Despite the hype surrounding Wembanyama as the No. 1 overall pick in the draft, the Spurs have the second-worst record in the NBA at just 3-17.

through everything before. We're good. We're in good hands."

The Pistons are doing something that the NBA has never seen. Each of these 18 consecutive losses has come with Detroit having scored at least 100 points; no team has ever scored 100 points in at least 18 straight games and come away with exactly zero wins. The offense hasn't been the problem.

Lots of other things have. The

Pistons just finished the second-worst November in NBA history, going 0-15. Only Philadelphia has been worse; the 76ers were 0-16 in November 2015, part of a 1-30 start to a season where they finished 10-72.

"We have to have people that honor the organization and the jersey by competing at a high level every night," Williams said after a loss last week, tapping his finger firmly on the table where he was sitting for added emphasis. "Not talking about execution. Just competing."

The Pistons' reason for hope might be this: they don't get blown out too much. Of their 19 losses so far, 13 of them have come by 12 points or less.

The Spurs' reason for hope might be this: they have built big leads — they just lose them. They've lost games after leading by 10 points eight times already this season, lost four after leading by at least 18 points. It's typically just a three- or four-minute stretch where things go haywire.

"During those stretches," Spurs coach Gregg Popovich said, "either we don't score or our defense sucks."

Wembanyama said he's been through worse. He thinks a soccer team that he once played for lost more games in a row than the Spurs have. He was the goalie of

that team. He insists he was a good goalie. The losing streak might suggest otherwise.

"I swear it wasn't my fault," Wembanyama said.

He's been dealing with a little bit of hip soreness, his first official NBA injury issue. A few days off thanks to the tournament's knockout round — no teams played Sunday, only the quarterfinalists for the tournament were playing Monday and Tuesday — might make him feel better. Either way, the break gives both the Spurs and Pistons a little time to practice, work on things and figure out what's missing.

Detroit resumed play Wednesday and lost to Memphis. After that, the Pistons' next five games are all against teams with winning records. It's not an easy stretch. San Antonio also returned to the court Wednesday, losing to Minnesota. Defense has to be prioritized; the Spurs allowed 120 or more points 14 times in their first 19 games.

"The advice I get from great, successful people, it all revolves around the same thing," Wembanyama said. "They always tell me to take my time and to be patient, but at the same time to not lose focus on the goal. It's going to be hard. The season is very long. But that struggle every day is what makes us better."



Guard Cade Cunningham talks to Detroit head coach Monty Williams, who is just two years removed from taking Phoenix to the NBA Finals.

CARLOS OSORIO/AP

COLLEGE FOOTBALL

Mindset may be key for even Army-Navy matchup

By BILL WAGNER

The Annapolis Capital

Saturday's showdown is here.

Last week was about installing the game plan and preliminary preparation for the 124th Army-Navy Game. Game week is about dialing down on specific elements and getting players into the right mental mindset.

So, what is the right mindset, and how does one get his team to peak on the biggest stage?

"We just have to be the best version of ourselves. It doesn't take a miracle to win this game. It doesn't take playing outside of yourself," first-year Navy coach Brian Newberry said. "In fact, it's the opposite of that. It's about doing your job as best you possibly can and not letting the moment get to you.

"We don't have to get our guys up for this game. You just have to make sure they're level-headed and are in a good place mentally going into the game."

This will be the fifth Army-Navy Game for Newberry but his first as leader of the program after he spent the previous four preparing the defense as the coordinator.

Speaking to the media Monday, Newberry acknowledged his game day assignment has changed dramatically. He must now worry about decisions such as whether to go for it on fourth down, calling timeouts and clock management.

"There was a certain amount of pressure I felt as a coordinator calling the plays and making sure I put our guys in the best possible position to be successful. It's a different kind of pressure now. I have to make sure we're on point in all three phases," he said. "It's no more important to me now than it was. I wanted to win this game just as badly as a coordinator as I do as



Army (5-6) vs. Navy (5-6)

AFN-Sports

9 p.m. Saturday CET

5 a.m. Sunday JKT

a head coach. My approach and desire to win this game does not change at all."

This is the first time "America's Game" will be played in New England.

Gillette Stadium is home to the New England Patriots, whose legendary coach will not be an unbiased observer Saturday. Bill Belichick grew up around Navy football as his father was the longest-tenured assistant coach in program history.

Belichick has remained close to the Navy football program over the years. Newberry said this week that Belichick has agreed to address the Midshipmen after the



DANIEL KUCIN JR. / AP

Quarterback Xavier Arline is expected to start his fifth straight game for Navy on Saturday.

team dinner Friday night.

"Coach Belichick has always been very supportive of the program," Newberry said. "It's great to have a guy like that to reach out to for advice and he's glad to give it."

Army and Navy come into the contest with 5-6 records and very similar offensive statistics. The Black Knights rank ninth nationally in rushing offense (208 yards per game) while Navy is 13th (200).

The two option practitioners rank 128th and 129th out of 130 Football Bowl Subdivision schools in passing offense — to no surprise.

Both teams have struggled to score points, with Navy standing 119th nationally (18.3 points) and Army not much better at 108th (20.8). The Black Knights and Midshipmen are also at the bottom of FBS in total offense.

Senior Xavier Arline is expected to make his fifth straight start at quarterback for Navy, which is 2-2 with him under center. The Midshipmen are coming off a 59-14 shellacking at the hands of SMU, the American Athletic Conference champion.

Navy coaches spent less time than usual reviewing the SMU loss as Newberry's message to the squad was to "flush that game and move on."

"We can't have a hangover from that game. We can't let SMU beat us twice. I think our kids will bounce back," he said.

Army last played on Nov. 18 against Coastal Carolina. The Black Knights are riding a three-game winning streak that began with an uplifting 23-3 upset of Air Force in Colorado Springs.

Army is led offensively by junior quarterback Bryson Daily, who has amassed 817 rushing



DAVID ZALUBOWSKI/AP

Army quarterback Bryson Daily has run and passed for more than 800 yards this season after the Black Knights changed their offense.

yards and 859 passing yards. Coach Jeff Monken made a major decision during the offseason by scrapping the traditional triple-option offense.

Monken hired Drew Thatcher away from Nebraska-Kearney to install a different style of option offense that features shotgun formation and zone blocking schemes. However, Army dusted off the "flexbone" option against Coastal Carolina and rolled up 365 rushing yards.

Newberry expects to see a combination of Army's old and new offenses and noted that Daily functions equally well operating under center or out of the shotgun. He described the revamped offense the Black Knights employed this season as a "different way to run the triple [option]" with a focus on getting the ball to the perimeter more often.

"There are still triple-option elements within their offense. I think they're similar to us in that they're looking to evolve their offense and are trying to figure out the best way to do that with their

personnel," Newberry said. "You see a lot of similarities in what they're doing out of the gun to what they've done in the past under center."

Navy has already exceeded its win total from the past three seasons. Beating Army would substantiate Newberry's belief the program made progress this season, and mean the Midshipmen kept the Black Knights from winning the Commander in Chief's Trophy outright.

"There's no better momentum going into the offseason than beating Army. This is a season that hasn't gone the way we wanted it to or hoped it would, but a win in this game certainly makes you feel better about your season even if you didn't hit certain goals," Newberry said.

Navy leads the all-time series 62-54-7, an advantage created by a historic 14-game winning streak from 2002 through 2015. Army has won five of the seven meetings since 2016. Seven of the last nine games have been decided by seven points or less.

Proposal to pay some NCAA athletes praised, questioned

By RALPH D. RUSSO

Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — A day after NCAA President Charlie Baker made an aggressive and potentially groundbreaking pitch to allow some schools to pay their athletes, his proposal was met with praise, caution and questions from around college sports.

"I think Charlie has indicated his intent for that to begin a discussion," Southeastern Conference Commissioner Greg Sankey said Wednesday during an appearance at the Sports Business Journal's Intercollegiate Athletic Forum. "There's certainly a lot of content included from which to begin a discussion."

On Tuesday, Baker laid forth an aggressive and potentially groundbreaking vision

for a new NCAA subdivision at the very top of college sports in a letter he sent to the more than 350 Division I schools.

Baker said his proposal to allow the most highly resourced schools in Division I to pay athletes through a trust fund is just a starting point as he tries to shift the association to be more proactive than reactive.

"We need to be able to anticipate where conversations are going and to try to get this big, huge, diverse 180-committee with 2,000 members — like oh, my God! — to a place where they're talking about stuff that's common, and not just responding and reacting to other people's agendas," Baker said during his 30-minute session at the forum.

Baker's proposal would require schools that want to be a part of a new tier of D-I to

commit to paying their athletes tens of thousands of dollars per year on top of athletic scholarships.

He also suggested all Division I schools should bring name, image and likeness compensation for their athletes in-house through group licensing and remove limits on educational benefits schools can provide for athletes.

"Some people are going to say you're going too far and people will say but you're not going far enough," Baker said. "I promise you that's going to be where most of the dialogue on this will be in the short term."

Big 12 Commissioner Brett Yormark called Baker's proposal "directionally correct."

"We hired Charlie to lead and he's lead-

ing," Yormark said.

Baker said the proposal was formed from an amalgamation of conversations he has had with administrators and athletes from across college sports.

Sankey noted he did not see Baker's letter until it went out Tuesday.

Sankey said any attempt to reform college sports will be addressed in five arenas: the courts, Congress, state legislatures, conferences and the NCAA.

"All of those have to be part of the solution," Sankey said.

There are 133 schools in Division I football's highest tier, the Football Bowl Subdivision. Baker's proposal seems targeted at about half of the schools that compete in the five power conferences.

COLLEGE FOOTBALL/MLB

LSU's Daniels selected AP player of year

BY BRETT MARTEL
Associated Press

BATON ROUGE, La. — LSU quarterback Jayden Daniels is The Associated Press college football player of the year, the school's second winner in the past five seasons.

Daniels received 35 of the 51 first-place votes and 130 total points from AP Top 25 poll voters. The Heisman Trophy finalist finished comfortably ahead of Washington quarterback Michael Penix, who was second with 15 first-place votes and 97 points.

Oregon QB Bo Nix was third, with Ohio State receiver Marvin Harrison fourth and Oklahoma State running back Ollie Gordon II fifth. Nix received the other first-place vote. USC quarterback Caleb Williams, the 2022 AP Player of the Year and last year's Heisman winner, did not receive votes this season.

Daniels, Penix, Nix and Harrison are the finalists for the Heisman, which will be presented in New York on Saturday. The winner of the AP award has differed from the Heisman winner just twice in the past two decades.

The last LSU player to be named AP Player of the Year was Joe Burrow in 2019, when he also won the Heisman.

Daniels, a San Bernardino, Calif., native who transferred to LSU from Arizona State in 2022, has led the nation in total offense this season with 4,946 yards in 12 games (412.2 yards per game). He has passed for 3,812 yards, which ranks third nationally. His 40 TDs



MATTHEW HINTON/AP

LSU quarterback Jayden Daniels led the nation in total offense this season with 4,946 yards in 12 games (412.2 yards per game). He has passed for 3,812 yards, which ranks third nationally.

passing ties for first nationally with Nix, who has played in one more game than Daniels.

The 6-foot-4, 210-pound Daniels rushed for 1,134 yards and 10 TDs. His 50 touchdowns rushing and passing combined, along with a 2-point conversion on a passing play, has made him responsible for a nation-high 302 points.

As a youth athlete, his nickname was "Smooth," he said in an inter-

view with The Associated Press, "because it looks like I'm not running fast or running hard ... but I'm moving faster than what most people think."

As productive as Daniels has been as a passer, his elusiveness and breakaway speed as a scrambler have distinguished him. During a 52-35 victory over Florida, Daniels became the first Football Bowl Subdivision QB to pass for

more than 350 yards and rush for more than 200 in a game.

"His ability to run when things are not there is unique," LSU coach Brian Kelly said. "His speed, his durability, his toughness, puts him up there with the great ones."

Daniels rushed for touchdowns of 85 and 51 yards against Florida, and said the latter exemplified his instinctive approach to scram-

bling. He said he read a linebacker's eyes before darting behind him and then weaving his way to the end zone.

"It's just all instincts," Daniels said. "It's not something that I think about pre-snap."

His approach comes with risk and puts a premium on toughness.

A big and arguably late hit at Missouri briefly forced Daniels out of that game with a deep bruise in his ribs. He returned to lead LSU to a comeback victory, highlighted by his 35-yard scoring run. The rib injury bothered him for two more games.

"My pain tolerance is high," Daniels said. "I was able to go out there and deal with it."

LSU (9-3) was knocked out of contention for an SEC title when it lost to Alabama, a game in which Daniels spent most of the fourth quarter on the sideline with concussion symptoms after a penalized hit by linebacker Dallas Turner. Until that point, Alabama's defense had struggled to contain Daniels.

"That still burns me," Daniels said. "Obviously, we lost to a very good team, but I felt like it would have been a whole different story if I was in there."

Daniels said it's important to him to credit his team's role in any individual accolades he receives, from the offensive line to the running backs and his pass-catchers.

"Without them, I wouldn't be in a position like this where I was receiving any type of award," Daniels said. "That's my thing, is to make sure they feel a part of it."

Bound: Yankees have dynamic duo

FROM PAGE 48

up. New York went 82-80 last season, narrowly avoiding its first losing record since 1992, and finished 29th among the 30 major league teams in batting average.

Soto joins a Yankees outfield that projects to have fellow All-Star Aaron Judge in center and newly acquired Alex Verdugo in the other corner. Soto has a 1.274 OPS in nine career games in the Bronx.

"Soto and Judge are Gotham's new dynamic duo," agent Scott Boras said.

Yankees executives will travel to California to meet Monday with free agent Yoshinobu Yamamoto, a person familiar with the planning told The Associated Press, speaking on condition of anonymity because details were not announced. The 25-year-old right-hander was 16-6 with a 1.21 ERA this season for the Orix Buffaloes of Japan's Pacific League.

Soto, like Verdugo, adds a left-

handed bat to a lineup that was righty heavy for several seasons. Yankees lefties had 55 homers and 171 RBIs last year while righties had 164 homers and 479 RBIs, an imbalance for a team that usually takes advantage of Yankee Stadium's short porch in right.

"They were aggressive," Preller said. "They had a need and Juan is an incredible player and fit the need really well. When you have two teams that line up, and you have a team that's calling you consistently, you usually get a feel that this is something that has a chance to happen and hopefully it's a deal that works out for both sides."

San Diego appears to be slashing payroll by as much as \$50 million after flopping last season and missing the playoffs. The Padres also have a need for starting pitching after NL Cy Young Award winner Blake Snell, Michael Wacha and Seth Lugo became free agents.

Soto's relatively young age at free agency will be comparable to that of fellow Boras client Bryce Harper, who was 26 when he signed a \$330 million, 13-year contract with Philadelphia ahead of the 2019 season. In six major league seasons, Soto has a .284 batting average with 160 homers, 483 RBIs and a .946 OPS. He won a World Series title with the Nationals in 2019.

San Diego sent a bevy of promising prospects to Washington — including shortstop CJ Abrams and starting pitcher MacKenzie Gore — for Soto and first baseman Josh Bell. The Padres said the deal was worth it because they'd have Soto for three playoff runs. He helped the team reach the NL Championship Series in 2022, but the Padres underwhelmed last season despite also having stars Manny Machado, Fernando Tatis Jr. and Xander Bogaerts.

Wilson reported from San Diego.

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NFL

Ravens look stronger after bye week

Baltimore returns healthy, with bigger lead in AFC North

BY NOAH TRISTER
Associated Press

OWINGS MILLS, Md. — John Harbaugh admitted he was rooting against the Browns and Steelers last weekend. So in that sense, the Baltimore coach got his wish.

“Absolutely, you root against all the teams that are in your way,” he said. “So that’s what we did. We had a good day.”

The Ravens had their bye last week, and they returned in an even better position than before. Pittsburgh’s loss to lowly Arizona, and Cleveland’s to the Los Angeles Rams, left Baltimore with a two-game lead atop the AFC North. Kansas City and Jacksonville — two teams competing with the Ravens for the top spot in the conference — lost as well.

So if it wasn’t obvious before, it is now: The Ravens (9-3) have quite an opportunity down the stretch, starting with this weekend’s home game against the Rams.

“It comes with the same thing that we’ve been doing for the first 12 games,” receiver Odell Beckham Jr. said. “Finding ways to win football games, finding ways to be elite.”

The Ravens will be tested. After this game against Los Angeles (6-6), they finish the season against Jacksonville (8-4), San Francisco (9-3), Miami (9-3) and Pittsburgh (7-5).

Of course, two of those teams



ASHLEY LANDIS/AP

Baltimore Ravens quarterback Lamar Jackson is tackled by Los Angeles Chargers defensive tackle Sebastian Joseph-Day on Nov. 27 in Inglewood, Calif. The Ravens have a two-game lead in the AFC North.

now have big health concerns at quarterback after Trevor Lawrence of the Jaguars and Kenny Pickett of the Steelers sprained ankles.

It’s been that kind of season in the NFL. Pickett’s injury means Baltimore is currently the only team in the division with its No. 1 quarterback available at the moment. Ravens fans may not have much sympathy after losing star QB Lamar Jackson toward the end of each of the past two seasons.

“We don’t want to see injuries happen in the league. We want everybody to go out there and give it

their all, and when we play against teams, just have their best,” Jackson said. “But it’s part of the game. I went down last year, the year before. It happens in football.”

Not only has Jackson been available all season, but the rest of the Ravens appear to be coming out of the bye week in pretty good shape.

Of the players on the 53-man roster, only receiver Rashod Bateman (illness) missed practice Wednesday. Defensive tackle Justin Madubuike (concussion) and linebacker Malik Harrison (groin) were limited.

Cornerback Marlon Humphrey

(calf) was a full participant after missing two straight games. Tackle Ronnie Stanley (knee) wasn’t listed on the injury report at all.

By the time they take the field against the Rams, Baltimore will have played only one game in the previous 23 days.

“It’s been good for us. Our guys are in good spirits,” Harbaugh said. “The time off will be good for us physically and mentally as well. But it’s part of the National Football League. We have a big challenge in front of us Sunday, and that’s what everybody is focusing on.”

Last games crucial for Bears’ Fields, Eberflus

BY ANDREW SELIGMAN
Associated Press

LAKE FOREST, Ill. — Justin Fields isn’t sweating it.

The Chicago Bears’ quarterback knows a big decision looms about his future and is also sure of something else.

“If I’m here next year, if I’m not, football doesn’t define who I am as a person,” he said Wednesday. “My happiness will still be in the same place, will still be in God. And really just football-wise, life stuff in general, I think my faith in God, my hope in God is just so much more than anything that can be thrown at me on this earth.”

The final five games could go a long way toward determining whether the Bears stick with Fields and, for that matter, coach Matt Eberflus. If this stretch coming out of a bye is a final audition, it starts with a visit from the NFC North-leading Detroit Lions (9-3) on Sunday.

Fields comes in with 1,587 yards



ABBIE PARR/AP

Chicago Bears head coach Matt Eberflus greets quarterback Justin Fields as he walks off the field. Both Eberflus and Fields have uncertain futures in Chicago after this season.

passing with 12 touchdowns, six interceptions and a 92.3 passer rating that ranks 14th in the NFL. He has also run for 400 yards and a score.

Fields struggled in the early going, then missed four games because of a dislocated right thumb

just as he was starting to show growth as a passer. The season hasn’t exactly gone the way he hoped, and the Bears have some things to figure out.

For one, they have to decide whether to pick up his fifth-year op-

tion for 2025. Chicago could also be in position to draft Caleb Williams or Drake Maye with their own first-round pick or the one it got from Carolina in the trade for DJ Moore last spring.

Then there’s Eberflus.

At 7-22 in two seasons, he has the worst record of any Bears coach. But there has been progress.

The Bears have played .500 ball since an 0-4 start this year and might be 6-3 in their past nine games if not for two big collapses against Denver in Week 3 and Detroit three weeks ago. The defense — Eberflus’ specialty — has also made some big strides, going from 29th overall to 11th since a Week 5 win at Washington.

“Certainly you want to be optimistic, but you also have got to see who you are and where we can improve to go ahead and close those games out that we didn’t get done,” Eberflus said Wednesday. “And that’s every week in the NFL, right?”

On AFN



Los Angeles Rams (6-6) at Baltimore Ravens (9-3)
AFN-Sports
7 p.m. Sunday CET
3 a.m. Monday JKT



Philadelphia Eagles (10-2) at Dallas Cowboys (9-3)
AFN-Sports
2:20 a.m. Monday CET
10:20 a.m. Monday JKT



Jacksonville Jaguars (8-4) at Cleveland Browns (7-5)
AFN-Sports2
7 p.m. Sunday CET
3 a.m. Monday JKT



Seattle Seahawks (6-6) at San Francisco 49ers (9-3)
AFN-Sports
10 p.m. Sunday CET
6 a.m. Monday JKT



Detroit Lions (9-3) at Chicago Bears (4-8)
AFN-Atlantic
7 p.m. Sunday CET
3 a.m. Monday JKT



Buffalo Bills (6-6) at Kansas City Chiefs (8-4)
AFN-Sports2
10:25 p.m. Sunday CET
6:25 a.m. Monday JKT

NFL



ABBIE PARR/AP

Minnesota Vikings quarterback Joshua Dobbs (15) takes part in practice drills in Eagan, Minn., on Monday.

Vikings to stick with Dobbs after bye week assessment

By DAVE CAMPBELL
Associated Press

EAGAN, Minn. — Joshua Dobbs and the Minnesota Vikings finally had an opportunity to catch their breath after a whirlwind arrival, a storybook start and two buzz-killing losses before their bye week.

He's still the quarterback for now. Their job is to provide enough support to keep him in his starting role — while maintaining positioning for the playoffs that has taken a precarious turn.

Vikings coach Kevin O'Connell announced Wednesday that Dobbs will remain the starter this week, after he threw four interceptions — three of them off a variety of deflections — during a damaging 12-10 defeat at home to Chicago on Nov. 27.

O'Connell acknowledged after that game he considered benching Dobbs to give the offense a spark.

"The conversation was smooth and open," Dobbs said before practice. "I plan on making the most of this opportunity and bouncing back from the last time on the field."

O'Connell decided Dobbs was the best option for the game at Las Vegas on Sunday and that he deserved another start, but the coach left wide open the possibility of a future switch.

"Our offense and our staff's



Minnesota Vikings (6-6)
at Las Vegas Raiders (5-7)
AFN-Atlantic
10 p.m. Sunday CET
6 a.m. Monday JKT

ability to evolve and help Josh thrive is our plan," O'Connell said. "We're very confident in him."

The Vikings (6-6) have been scrambling ever since Kirk Cousins tore his Achilles tendon in the game at Green Bay on Oct. 2. Dobbs was a valuable find in a trade with Arizona, but the seventh-year veteran — trying to get up to speed on his third different playbook this season — has shown his limitations and vulnerabilities.

Off-the-mark throws are one thing. Six turnovers over the past two games — losses by a combined three points — are another. Over his first two games, both Vikings victories, Dobbs had no interceptions and two lost fumbles. He also totaled 110 rushing yards on 15 attempts in those games. In the past two outings, he took off 10 times and netted only 32 yards.

"Obviously it's a process when you come in and you're en-

trenched in a new offense very quickly and as they try to learn me and areas I'm able to thrive at, as well as me as I continue to learn the ins and outs of an offense," Dobbs said.

Soon after the Chicago game, Dobbs sent a text message to O'Connell with a request to review the film together. Quarterbacks coach Chris O'Hara joined them.

"There was a lot of growth moments for him in those discussions and for me as well," O'Connell said.

Nick Mullens will be the backup this week. He's still returning to full strength from a lower back injury that kept him sidelined for more than a month. Rookie Jaren Hall, who was the first post-Cousins starter before a concussion forced him out and sent Dobbs in at Atlanta, will be third string.

Dobbs will get a big boost from the return of wide receiver Justin Jefferson, who was activated last week from injured reserve. The 2022 AP NFL Offensive Player of the Year has missed the past seven games with a strained hamstring.

"He happens to be an extremely friendly target with his catch radius and his ability to do pretty dynamic things with the ball after the catch," O'Connell said. "We'll try to put together a plan that maximizes that."

Wilson: Broncos still ready for playoff push after Houston letdown

By ARNIE STAPLETON
Associated Press

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. — The Denver Broncos are aiming to go on another winning streak like the one that ended with a thud last week in Houston

At 6-6, the Broncos are still alive in the playoff picture but their margin for error is much slimmer after coming up short 22-17 to the Texans on Sunday, which snapped their AFC-best five-game winning streak.

Russell Wilson is coming off his worst game of the season, one in which he was picked off three times, underthrew receivers several times and bypassed a wide-open Jerry Jeudy for a walk-in touchdown and instead scrambled for the first down in a series that ended with a field goal.

Coach Sean Payton peppered his Monday comments with what many perceived as digs at his quarterback, including this nugget when addressing that play in which Jeudy was left wide open: "If you watch all of it, holy cow, there are about two or three of those plays."

Wilson took the opportunity at his weekly news conference Wednesday to remind everyone — maybe his coach, included — that the sky wasn't exactly falling on the Broncos (6-6).

"We've been 5-1 over the last six games," Wilson offered. "We can't forget that, too. We've got five games to go. We went 5-1. We've got a lot of confidence in this locker room in who we are and what we're going to do and how we can go about it. And so, I believe that's who we are over the past six games, and I believe we can be even better and that's the best part about it."

Maybe that was an inspirational message to his teammates, or perhaps it was a veiled retort to his coach.

Either way, the Broncos' loss to the Texans narrowed their path to the playoffs, where they haven't been since winning the Super Bowl in Peyton Manning's farewell game in February 2016.

Although they're 2½-point underdogs Sunday against the Chargers in Los Angeles, according to FanDuel Sportsbook, Denver should be favored in most of its remaining games.

Wilson said now is not the time to radically change anything on offense even though it's sputtered for stretches this season and again Sunday.

"I think we're closer than you guys may know, that's what I believe," Wilson said. "I mean, there's some plays in there that we could have had, we almost had. The second play of the game Courtland (Sutton) almost makes a big play for us. I mean, that's a 50-yard big play for us."

So, too, could have been Marvin Mims Jr.'s deep route if not for Wilson underthrowing him and the defender tackling him before the ball got there on a play that wasn't flagged.

"Maybe I put it out there another foot," Wilson said. "Jerry had another one, Jerry had a deep one where I had to get it out of my hand quickly, unfortunately. But he was going to be open."

"There's three or four plays in there that the game's completely different," Wilson added. "That's why when you watch the film you understand that there's a lot of great opportunity, a lot of good stuff. And I think we've just go to stay the course and trust."



ERIC CHRISTIAN SMITH/AP

Denver Broncos quarterback Russell Wilson runs for a first down as Houston Texans linebacker Christian Harris tries to tackle him. At 6-6, Denver is still just two games back in the AFC West.

SPORTS



Renewal of the rivalry

Army, Navy prepared to square off for 124th time » College football, Page 44



MLB

Bound for the Bronx

Padres trade Soto to Yanks in 7-player blockbuster deal

By RONALD BLUM AND BERNIE WILSON
Associated Press

NEW YORK — Juan Soto is headed to the New York Yankees in their first big move following the team's worst season in three decades.

They hope at least one more will follow. New York acquired Soto and Gold Glove center fielder Trent Grisham in a blockbuster trade with the cost-cutting Padres on Wednesday night. San Diego received right-handed pitchers Michael King, Jhony Brito, Randy Vásquez and Drew Thorpe along with catcher Kyle Higashioka.

It was the second monster deal involving the 25-year-old Soto in less than two years. The three-time All-Star slugger has one season of team control left and is likely to get a salary around \$32 million after batting .275 with 35 homers, 109 RBIs and a .930 OPS in his only full season with the Padres.

San Diego obtained Soto from Washington on Aug. 2, 2022, after he turned down a \$440 million, 15-year offer from the Nationals.

Padres general manager A.J. Preller said his team needed pitching and the swap gives San Diego young arms who will be with the franchise for several years.

"It's very difficult to make a deal where we're trading a player the caliber of Juan Soto, but if we did that we wanted to make sure we shored up a bunch of needs. We were able to get some depth, with quality," Preller said at a late-night news conference in Nashville, Tenn., where baseball's winter meetings were wrapping



Preller

SEE BOUND ON PAGE 45

Left fielder Juan Soto only spent one full season with the San Diego Padres after they acquired him from the Washington Nationals. Now he's headed to New York to play for the Yankees.

GREGORY BULL/AP

Spurs, Pistons still have a long way to go » NBA, Page 43

